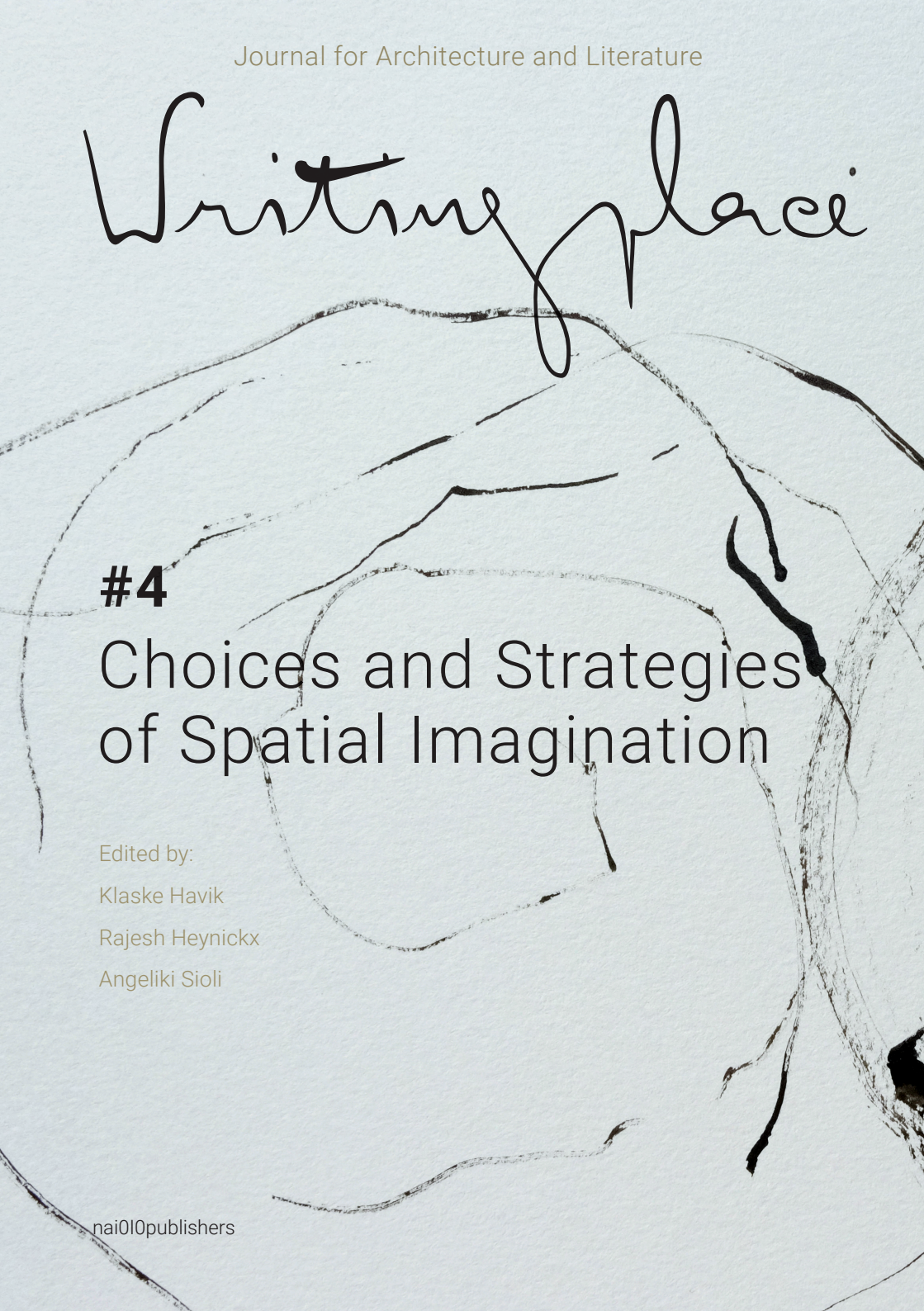


Journal for Architecture and Literature

# Writing place



**#4**

## Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination

Edited by:

Klaske Havik

Rajesh Heynickx

Angeliki Sioli

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# Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination

Klaske Havik, Angeliki Sioli, Rajesh Heynickx

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,'<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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'<sup>3</sup> or 'polygraphy'<sup>4</sup> 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 ≈ Buildings. Dissecting Transpositions in Architectural Knowledge (1880-1980)',<sup>5</sup> 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.

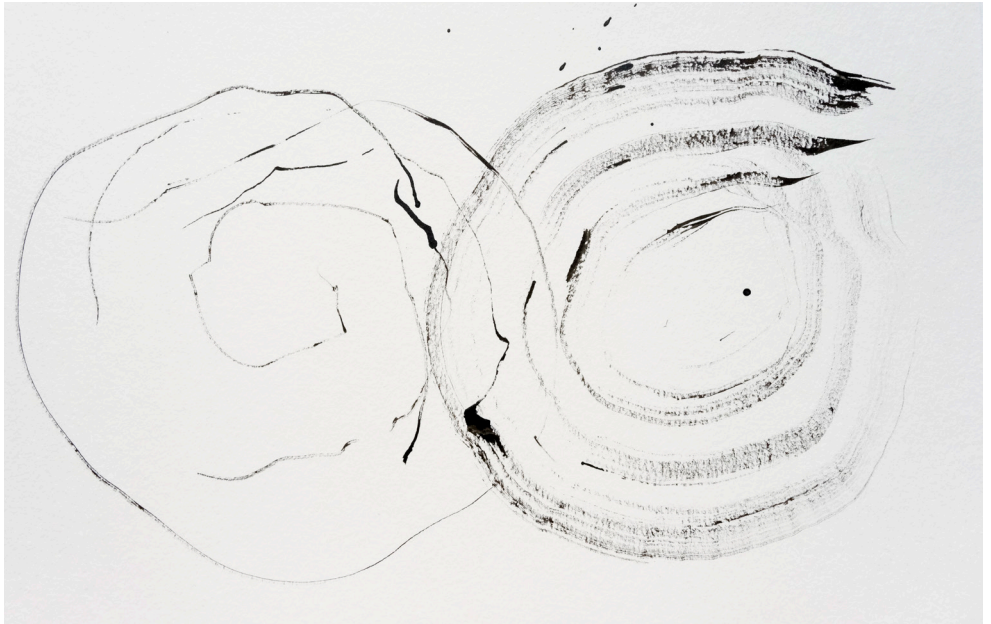
This fourth issue of *Writingplace* journal comes to an end with a piece presenting an insight in choices and strategies of imagination. Architect and educator Jorge Mejía Hernández sets off from the conviction that spatial imagination in architecture involves or envisions the technical knowledge necessary 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.

# TIMES & SPACES



# *The World and the Cave*

Imagination, Public  
Space and Politics  
with Hannah Arendt  
and José Saramago

Hans Teerds

1.

A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new, and this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start '*ab ovo*', to create '*ex nihilo*'. In order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed. Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and '*imagine*' that things might as well be different from what they actually are.<sup>1</sup>



Imagination is the very root of political action, German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt states in this quote. The ability to act depends on the human capacity to imagine how things can be different. The quote is taken from a text in which Arendt also addresses less heroic virtues, like the 'ability to lie', or the 'deliberate denial of factual truth' and even the 'capacity to change facts', which also depend on the capacity of imagination.<sup>2</sup> Even though the reflections on these latter human capacities, as part and parcel of the realm of politics, can be understood as topical for the current circumstances in Western political practices,<sup>3</sup> we leave them aside. Instead, this text proposes an attempt to dwell on an exemplary reading beyond the borders of the architectural profession by means of a comparative reading of Hannah Arendt's 1958 *The Human Condition* and the 2000 novel by Portuguese writer Jose Saramago. While this article, of course, can only offer a brief and initial reading of the two texts, it will nevertheless explore perspectives of public space, mass consumption and production, and craftsmanship that, I believe, highlight political aspects of architecture. Such a comparative reading of texts from outside the field of architecture, in which the fragments are brought together and understood against the background of buildings, constructions, spaces and cities, is a matter of imagination as well. Neither the fields of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural theory and theology, nor the fields of the arts offer immediate directions for design with regard to concept, type, form, structure and material. What these fields do offer is a challenge to think from different positions, which is, according to Arendt, necessary 'to understand what we are doing'.<sup>4</sup> Only if we are able to inhabit different perspectives, will we be able to understand the meaning of what we do.

Arendt's writings are well suited for such an undertaking, and make it possible to highlight the political aspects of architecture. She even presents her reflections in remarkable spatial and architectural terms. Even though these terms should be understood as mainly metaphorical, Arendt was well aware of the importance of such a spatiality in her writing. To think spa-

tially, she once wrote, is to think politically, since it is bound to the *world* and its inhabitants. It's 'deepest aim', she stated, 'is "to create a space" in which the *humanitas* of man can appear pure and luminous.'<sup>5</sup> Other artistic fields – such as, for instance, literature – are very capable of making such reflections even more tangible and can present them more incisively. Artists have the capacity to explore what developments in society, culture, economy, science and technology might mean for the future of the earth, life and society, by embodying them in images, stories and characters.

## 2.

Note how Arendt presents the faculty of imagination, in literally spatial terms, as the mental capacity to 'remove ourselves from where we are physically located'. The human capacity of displacement is also at the root of her own writings. Although Arendt has regularly been presented as a political philosopher, she rejected this term. Politics deal with the actualities of the world, with the hustle and bustle of the people that inhabit it. Philosophy, on the other hand, withdraws from these actualities and the world, in order to contemplate life and its structural questions. Instead of a strict philosophical approach, Arendt admired the writings of Walter Benjamin, whom she met in Paris when both were on the run from the Nazis in Germany, and whose writings she described as 'thinking poetically', his method as 'pearl-diving':

*... we are dealing here with something which may not be unique but is certainly extremely rare: the gift of 'thinking poetically'. And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.<sup>6</sup>*

Again, this 'method' is presented in remarkably spatial verbs, along the lines of imagination. The description imagines movement and replacement, change and removal: diving, wrestling, gathering, prying loose, carrying, delving.

Such a method seems to be productive in the field of architecture, too. Precedent analysis is part and parcel of the education of architects. It requires imagination to pick the right pearls, and to really understand what is valuable. More often, however, such undertakings end in rather formal, stylistic agendas for current practices.

### 3.

'Pearl diving' is an important characteristic of Arendt's writings too. In her work she does not present fixed theories with static concepts. Evoked by the present, she aims to think through (political) actualities, and revisit certain (ancient) concepts in the light of current developments.<sup>7</sup> Her work aims to understand, rather than grasp 'eternal truths'. For Arendt, this 'working-method' is a fundamental response to the experience of modernity. In her introduction to Benjamin's essays she writes:

*Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up with the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all. The Greek polis will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea – for as long as we use the word 'politics'.<sup>8</sup>*

It is of course not without reason that Arendt takes the term *polis* as an example: her own writings encircle politics, evoked by a sincere concern about the world and its inhabitants. Arendt's writings are therefore not just spatial in a metaphorical sense: she indeed goes back to the Greek *polis* in a very concrete way, and rereads this first origin of democratic organiza-

tion particularly through the lens of Aristotle. There is thus also a literal and concrete spatiality in her writings: it is rooted in cities, and is larded with spatial and architectural references, metaphors and concepts, such as 'public space', 'the space of appearance', 'the wall'.<sup>9</sup> These architectural terms can be seen as 'pearls', brought to the light of the present, to help us understand what has been lost over time, but is nevertheless still present in our language and still influences our ideas and ideals.

#### 4.

Whereas Arendt's aim is 'to understand', it requires another step and another position to mirror her findings in concrete images and future scenarios. Architects, as well as other artistic practitioners, have the instruments to do so. As a mirror to Arendt's book *The Human Condition*, I will use the novel *The Cave*, written by Portuguese novelist José Saramago. Even though their respective biographies are quite different, their ideas seem to intertwine. While Arendt distances herself from the field of philosophy, she of course has been immersed in this field: she studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers in Germany in the years before the Second World War. It is due to the experience of being excluded from public life (and excluded from university life) as a Jew in Germany in that period that she quit philosophy in favour of politics and public matter. It is through this active participation in public debates (for which she needed to learn to speak and write English quickly), through her thoughtful analyses of what had happened in Europe, and her stubborn reflections upon political actualities, that she became well-known. Saramago's biography represents what Arendt celebrated as the *vita activa*. He started his working life as a car mechanic, and worked as a civil servant before becoming an independent writer. As a writer, though, he did not live the *vita contemplativa*, but was actively engaged in the world as a public intellectual, political activist (as a member of the illegal Portuguese Communist Party) and editor of a newspaper.

## 5.

Like other novels in Saramago's oeuvre, *The Cave* is a political novel. In his stunning style without punctuation, he draws the end of the working life of potter Cipriano Algor against the background of what he regularly calls 'The Centre' – a huge building located in a city and increasingly absorbing that city in its interior.<sup>10</sup> The Centre is a shopping mall as well as an apartment building, both an office centre and a leisure dome. A new city within the city, where most visitors also work and live in this huge building. With the work of his hands, the potter cannot fulfil the requirements of the Centre (of predictability and interchangeability), while the Centre also forbids him to sell his product to other parties. He thus is forced to stop his pottery. Moreover, he is forced to move to the Centre too, to live there with his daughter and son-in-law.<sup>11</sup> This story is understood as a critical retelling of the famous Platonic parable of the cave, in which the philosopher is able to escape from the shadowy realm of the cave (the natural circumstances of life), live in the 'open air of ideas' (the good life of the *vita contemplativa*) and is hardly understood by his fellows when he returns and reveals the 'reality' out there. Arendt was very critical of this Platonic idea, which is at the root of the idea that withdrawal and contemplation is the highest form of the good life. *The Human Condition* is meant to propel the *vita activa*, the active engagement with the things of the world, as equally important.<sup>12</sup> Saramago's political critique reflects upon this active life too – and in line with Arendt, he addresses such topics as vanishing craftsmanship, comprehensive mass consumption and production, increasing bureaucratic organization and the loss of public space. As such, it contrasts craftsmanship with labour in environments of mass production and bureaucratic organization. In Arendt's famous terms, the distinction between 'labour' and 'work', the first being repetitive and cyclical, corresponding to the biological circumstances of life, the second producing an artificial world that lasts, which requires craftsmanship and responsibility.<sup>13</sup> *The Cave* offers a literary narrative that enlarges and magnifies Arendt's concerns about the loss of public space, and the loss of 'things' that mediate between people. Through its narra-



tive, *The Cave* offers a literary image that is positioned between Arendt's architectural metaphors on the one hand, and architecture's materialities, typologies, structures and formalities on the other.

## 6.

In both philosophy and architectural theory, Arendt is particularly known as being the first to propel the question of public space within the context of modernity.<sup>14</sup> Her term 'the space of appearance' has gained some attention in the field of architecture as well, for instance by architect and critic George Baird and architectural historian Kenneth Frampton.<sup>15</sup> For Arendt, appearance is the most crucial aspect of public space: public space offers the opportunity to appear among others. Through appearances, moreover, differences become visible, as they are revealed through 'words and deeds'. No one acts or speaks the same. Therefore, plurality is the condition of public space.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt, traces the idea of public space back to its classical origins: the agora in the Greek *polis* where 'free citizens' gathered as peers, in order to discuss actualities and the future of the city.<sup>17</sup> This view has raised critical responses, which I will not address here. An important aspect of public space is that it creates a common context for appearance, and as such is constitutive with regard to the realm of politics. For Arendt, appearance is also an important aspect of 'being human'.

*In ancient feeling the privative trait of privacy, indicated in the word itself, was all important; it mean literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man's capacities. A man who lived only a private life . . . was not fully human.*<sup>18</sup>

We can only understand this last remark if we see that a lack of public appearance not only meant to be deprived from the capacity to act and speak publicly, but it also meant a lack of seeing and hearing others, as well

as of being heard and being seen by others. One appears in the world, in a particular position. But it is through the mutual perspectives that are developed through 'the presence of others who see that we see and hear what we hear' that we can be assured 'of the reality of the world and ourselves'.<sup>19</sup> This concern with 'reality' is not simply a philosophical quest, but it also affirms one's own position in a world-in-common. From an architectural perspective, the idea that the world can be understood through the juxtaposition of numerous perspectives is obviously important. Moreover, it is important to see how Arendt intertwines the human experience of appearance with this assurance of 'reality'. This is not another metaphorical spatial term, but it embodies concrete and tangible experiences, wherein all five bodily senses are involved.

*In a world of appearances . . . reality is guaranteed by this three-fold commonness: the five senses utterly different from each other, have the same object in common; members of the same species have the same context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning; and all other sense-endowed beings, though perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity.*<sup>20</sup>

Note that appearance itself is not a static fact but a movement – a moment of transition from the private realm into the public eye. It is through this movement that the senses are addressed, that others and otherness, as well as the world-in-common is perceived.

Arendt evokes the image of appearance against the background of modernity, wherein a political community is replaced by a society of consumers, being engaged in the world by striving for leisure and entertainment.<sup>21</sup> It is this latter development that is prominent in *The Centre* too: the interior offers a variety of attractive, commercial leisure spaces, which absorb public life:

*The lift travelled slowly past the different floors, revealing a succession of arcades, shops, fancy staircases, escalators, meeting points, cafés, restaurants, terraces with tables and chairs, cinemas and theatres, discotheques, enormous television screens, endless numbers of ornaments, electronic games, balloons, fountains and other water features, platforms, hanging gardens, posters, pennants, advertising hoardings, mannequins, changing rooms, the façade of a church, the entrance to the beach, a bingo hall, a casino, a tennis court, a gymnasium, a roller coaster, a zoo, a racing track for electric cars, a cyclorama, a cascade, all waiting, all in silence, and more shops and more arcades and more mannequins and more hanging gardens and things for which people probably didn't even know the names, as if they were ascending into paradise. And is this speed only used so that people can enjoy the view, asked Cipriano Algor, No, at this speed the lifts are used as an extra security aid, said Marçal, Isn't there enough security what with the guards, the detectors, the video cameras, and all the other snooping devices, Cipriano Algor asked again, Tens of thousands of people pass through here every day, it's important to maintain security, replied Marçal.<sup>22</sup>*

The 'public spaces' of the Centre offer a variety of experiences, dispersion, exhaustion. More importantly, however, is that Saramago shows how such a leisure environment depends on prescription and control, the latter not only in the matter of safeguarding, but also as scripted experiences, perspectives, views, movements. This obviously is at odds with the plurality and freedom that Arendt draws as crucial to appearance. Control restricts the freedom to enter, and being encapsulated in a script reduces the possibility of interaction, to do things differently. As Algor experiences: '... going into the Centre just to look around is not, if you'll forgive the apparent tautology, viewed with friendly eyes, anyone caught wandering around inside empty-handed will soon become the object of special attention from the security guards.'<sup>23</sup>

The consequences of the loss of freedom is quite dramatically imagined by Saramago in the final chapters of the book, wherein a cave is found under the huge building. Indeed: *the cave of Plato*. It would not have been the Center, if they had not immediately seen a *business model* in it: 'Coming soon. Public opening of Plato's Cave, an exclusive attraction, unique in the world, Buy your ticket now.'<sup>24</sup>

As made explicit in the discovery of the cave, the reduction of life to scripts, commercial services and similarities leads to the loss of 'reality'. Things only can be seen from a single perspective. Even though this might create 'shared' experiences, these experiences are not plural, but repetitive. This creates a singular perspective rather than a common world wherein one can appear from a particular position. Public life in the Centre, despite its sensational and adventurous character, is in the end, imprisonment.

## 7.

With her reflections, Arendt offers an *understanding* of what the importance of public life might be. She does not, however, offer a formal or typological perspective for the design of public spaces. If her reflections were to be understood as directive to a particular architectural 'model', it would overestimate architecture as an instrument of political and public organization and arrangement, while architecture, at its best, can only offer (or disturb) the conditions under which public life can take place. Nevertheless, there is another entry into the field of architecture in *The Human Condition*, namely the argument that a 'world' is needed in order to enable and sustain the 'space of appearance'. Arendt attributes a specific meaning to the term 'world', distinguishing it from the word 'earth'. Earth stands for the natural circumstances of the globe, depicted by the cycle of nature. Even though the globe is the natural habitat, human beings cannot survive but by intervention in the earth through the construction of artefacts (houses, furniture, infrastructure) and by establishing institutions (for the human community). By doing so, they establish the 'world'.<sup>25</sup> For Arendt, therefore, 'artefacts'

are not just objects, they are politically relevant: they establish the artificial 'world', which enables human life as well as the life of the community. 'To live in the world,' Arendt writes in a famous quote, 'means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.'<sup>26</sup> Artefacts, in other words, offer an in-between that is held in common. Moreover, we not only have it in common with our contemporaries, but we also share the world among generations. 'If the world is to contain a public space,' Arendt writes, 'it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the lifespan of mortal men.'<sup>27</sup> The importance of the permanence of the world partly relates to the fact that 'things of the world' are not neutral atoms in space and time, but have a particular shape, history, materiality, tactility, or in short (again): appearance. It is through their particular appearances that they have the capacity to reify stories and (communal) narratives, to memorize actions of the past, and to make history present today – all to be valued from a political perspective.<sup>28</sup> Arendt stresses these aspects against the background of the increasing influence of mass production and mass consumption and their negative effect on the lifecycle of artefacts at the end of the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, mass production and mass consumption wipe out the artefacts' particular forms, the traces, and signs of handwork and craftsmanship. They disperse the relationship between maker and product, and deprive the labourer of responsibility by dividing the production process into small and repetitive activities. In *The Cave*, the potter, of course, stands for this close relationship between the maker and the work, and the wider scope of craftsmanship in local traditions.

*He rolled the block of clay backwards and forwards, pressing it and stretching it out with the heels of his hands, then he slapped it down hard on the table, squashing and squeezing, then started all over, repeating the whole operation, again and again and again, Why do you do that, his daughter asked him, So that*



*there aren't any lumps or air bubbles left inside, that would be bad for the work.<sup>30</sup>*

The Centre, on the contrary, is the commercial power that sweeps away traditional and personal craftsmanship and relationships in bureaucratic ways. The potter is one of the suppliers of the Centre – but not for long.

*They only took half of the shipment today, they say that fewer people are buying earthenware crockery, that some new imitation plastic stuff has come onto the market and that the customers prefer it. ... earthenware cracks and chips, it breaks easily, whereas plastic is more resistant, more resilient, The difference is that earthenware is like people, it needs to be well treated.<sup>31</sup>*

His practice cannot fulfil the requirements of the Center – or the requirements of the modern age.

*We have seen the very traditional way the clay is kneaded . . . we have seen that the kiln outside shows traces of an antiquity unforgiveable in this modern age, which for all its scandalous defects and prejudices, has had the goodness to allow a pottery like this to coexist with the Centre like that, at least up until now.<sup>32</sup>*

Indeed, not for any longer: his deliveries will be replaced by mass products, made in the Industrial Belt.

*The ominous sight of those chimneys vomiting out columns of smoke made him wonder which one of those hideous factories would be producing those hideous plastic lies, cunningly fashioned to look like earthenware, Its just not possible, he murmured, you can't copy the sound of it or the weight, and then there is the relationship between sight and touch which I read about somewhere or other, something about eyes being able to see through*

*the fingers touching the clay, about fingers being able to feel what the eyes are seeing without the fingers actually touching it.*<sup>33</sup>

## 8.

Arendt's understanding of the 'world of things' offers a political understanding of what architecture *does*: it is to be understood as 'world-construction', which not only entails establishing the world, but also maintaining it. The patina of time and the traces of life enrich buildings and (public) spaces, and transform factual, material constructions into meaningful artefacts, to which the people that inhabit the world attach. On the one hand, this understanding offers an argument for a careful renovation, restoration and refurbishment of existing buildings, urban structures and cultural landscapes.<sup>34</sup> But on the other, it also draws a perspective on the architectural intervention: new buildings, too, in their very appearance, embody narratives, even before the patina of time enables attachment to them. Architecture is not just construction, but also has the capacity to bear narratives, memories, remembrances for both individuals and communities. Design requires the faculty of imagination, not simply to invent something new, but also to understand what this 'new' has to offer the world. From a political perspective, this particularly challenges the design of public buildings. With their presence and shape, public buildings embody ideas about the organization of the human community and thus expose what has been considered important for this community. As political philosopher Bonnie Honig argues: 'Public things are the infrastructure of democratic life, and they underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity, that, for the moment, still survive.'<sup>35</sup> But this conviction is not limited to public buildings. All interventions in the world do, in turn, shape that world-in-common. In *The Cave*, the building of the Centre in itself tells the story of the absorbing power of bureaucratic organization and the destructive power of aggregated commerce, security and entertainment on the city, landscapes, public life and local businesses. Introducing the Centre, Saramago stresses the 'extremely high wall, much higher than the highest of the buildings on either side of the

avenue' that seems to block the road, but that turns out to be the 'gigantic quadrangular edifice, with no windows on its smooth, featureless façade'.<sup>36</sup> The façade is not articulated in an architectural sense, and that is telling:

*With the exception of doors that open onto the outside, there are no openings to be seen, just impenetrable stretches of wall, and it is not the vast hoardings promising security that are to blame for shutting out the light or stealing the air from those living inside.*<sup>37</sup>

The exception is the apartment façade: 'this side of the building is peppered with windows, hundreds and hundreds of windows, thousands of windows, all of them closed because of the air conditioning inside.'<sup>38</sup> In an episode in which Algor drives around a construction site, where existing buildings are torn down to make room for the extension of The Centre, Saramago lets the potter reflect on this expansion. In an again powerful passage, Saramago notes how differences, remembrances and memory are impossible when the urban environment changes quickly, moreover, through such a blunt architecture:

*When he comes . . . in ten days' time, there will be no trace left of these buildings. . . . They will erect the three walls . . . and, after a matter of days, not even the most keen-eyed observer, viewing it from the outside, still less from the inside, will be able to distinguish between the new and old.*<sup>39</sup>

## 9.

At the very core of the profession or architecture there is always the inclination for intervention – what else is design than to imagine how 'things might as well be different from what they actually are'? Architecture, in other words, depends upon the same human faculty as political action: imagination. It embodies the freedom 'to change the world and to start something new in it'.<sup>40</sup> The application of this freedom, is not neutral – it stresses the political and ethical dimension of architecture. Buildings and spaces appear

in the world itself, as particular ‘objects’ with a particular shape, embodying narratives that, in turn, shape the world-in-common by directing and orienting the inhabitants. Architecture draws the outline of public spaces. It can do that in various ways: by offering a space that is strictly controlled and pre-scripted towards a strict and particular end, or by drawing the outlines of spaces that offer the freedom to appear, to appropriate and to occupy. It is in these latter ‘spaces of appearance’ that eventually ‘the *humanitas* of man can appear pure and luminous’.

- 1 Hannah Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics’, in: Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969), 5.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 3 Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 3.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 5.
- 5 Hannah Arendt, ‘Karl Jaspers, A Laudatio’, in: Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995 [1968]), 79.
- 6 Hannah Arendt, ‘Walter Benjamin. 1892-1940’, in: *Ibid.*, 205.
- 7 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 3; Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains.’” A Conversation with Günter Gaus’, in: Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954, Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 12.
- 8 Arendt, ‘Walter Benjamin’, *op. cit.* (note 6), 204.
- 9 These notions particularly are used in *The Human Condition*.
- 10 José Saramago, *The Cave* (London: Vintage, 2018 [2002]); José Saramago, *A Caverna* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2000).
- 11 Saramago, *The Cave*, *op. cit.* (note 10), 277-282.
- 12 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.* (note 4), 14-15, 226.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 7.

- 14 Cf. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, op. cit. (note 3), 89.
- 15 George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Kenneth Frampton, 'The Status of Man and the Status of his Objects: A Reading of *The Human Condition*', in: Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).
- 16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, op. cit. (note 4), 7-8, 220; Arendt's perspective, with plurality as its characteristic, is often described as agonistic. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has developed a slightly different view, called the discursive model. In this model conflict is not central, but the idea that consensus can be reached through a rational conversation and exchange of ideas. Cf. Seyla Benhabib, 'Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas', in: Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 87.
- 17 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, op. cit. (note 4), 28.
- 18 Ibid., 38.
- 19 Ibid., 50.
- 20 Ibid., 57.
- 21 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, op. cit. (note 4), 6, 131.
- 22 Saramago, *The Cave*, op. cit. (note 10), 231.
- 23 Ibid., 80.
- 24 Ibid., 294
- 25 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, op. cit. (note 4), 2.
- 26 Ibid., 52.
- 27 Ibid., 55.
- 28 Ibid., 95.
- 29 Cf. Kenneth Frampton, who at the end of the 1970s already discussed this perspective with regard to the field of architecture. Frampton, 'The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects', op. cit. (note 15).
- 30 Saramago, *The Cave*, op. cit. (note 10), 21.
- 31 Ibid., 21.
- 32 Ibid., 120.
- 33 Ibid., 16.
- 34 Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance', in: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006 [1961]), 208-210.
- 35 Bonnie Honig, *Public Things, Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 17.

- 36 Saramago, *The Cave*, op. cit. (note 10), 6.
- 37 Ibid., 81.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., 8.
- 40 Arendt, 'Lying in Politics', op. cit. (note 1), 5.

# *Fidelity and Freedom in the Theory of Adaptive Reuse*

Thinking with T.S. Eliot  
and Walter Benjamin

Koenraad Van Cleempoel

*Translation in poetry is akin to the work of bringing a building from a past existence into the present. This carrying over of meaning in poetry is recognized as work requiring inspiration equivalent to that of the original author, and so similarly, one might come to view restoration as an art equivalent to any other related to building. Restoration that is separate from the literal.<sup>1</sup>*

This essay attempts to explore the possibility of adding to an emerging theory of adaptive reuse of architectural sites by borrowing vocabulary that relates to the transposition between architecture and translation. I aim to



accentuate three aspects that seem relevant in both disciplines: (1) carrying over meaning with respect for (2) tradition and (3) craftsmanship. In these three aspects, the concept of negotiation returns. In the process of adaptive reuse, buildings often receive a new programme and this often entails shifts of meaning; hence the analogy with the art of translation. In addition to this negotiation of meaning, tradition is also a valuable lens through which to view this transposition between architecture and translation, in particular the dialectic process between fidelity and freedom, between respect for the tradition and the invitation to follow it, on the one hand, but at the same time the desire for freedom to interpret and translate that tradition. The same goes for craftsmanship, which will equally balance and negotiate between acknowledging existing possibilities while exploring new ones. Walter Benjamin's essay *The Task of the Translator* (1921) and T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) offer richness and accuracy to the growing vocabulary on adaptive reuse. I want to expand a discourse initiated by Rudolph Machado (1976)<sup>2</sup> – architect and chair of the Department of Architecture of the Rhode Island School of Design between 1978 and 1986 – and Fred Scott (2008)<sup>3</sup> – professor of interior architecture at that same school – by using concepts from literary criticism on the analogy between the art of translating literature and that of adaptive reuse in architecture. I will illustrate this with the remodelling of an 1859 prison into a Faculty of Law at the University of Hasselt in Flanders.

The complexity of the practice of adaptive reuse makes it a discipline in its own right, intersecting architecture, interior design, planning, engineering and conservation. But its body of theory is emerging and still raises foundational questions.<sup>4</sup> Often it seems caught between two rather general questions: Which programme is suitable for specific building typologies and how can relationships between the old and the new be created and formed? However, core issues related to adaptive reuse also address more fundamental questions: How can the material *and* immaterial legacies of the past be transmitted to the present and future? How can its narratives, traditions

and values be transferred? The creative and dialectic activity of 'translation' is considered here as a hypothesis that can provide fresh air to the debate. This debate is often narrowed down to two positions: to preserve heritage as much as possible by maintaining its 'authentic' formal appearance or to advance new architectural developments and a 'creative' dialogue with the past. Increasingly, heritage policies are challenged by this tension. This is particularly so in Europe with its enormous reservoir of protected heritage sites. For decades the common approach was to conserve protected monuments as much as possibly without necessarily considering the option to adapt them architecturally to a new function. By separating heritage from new development, there is a risk of it becoming a well-maintained museum frozen in the past. In this essay I would like to consider the possibility of addressing this apparent opposition by looking at the concept of translation as a metaphor.

### **Traduttore-Traditore**

Etymologically, the Greek *metaphorein* refers to 'transferring'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Latin *translatio* comes from *trans* (across, beyond) and *lātus* (borne, carried). So, from its linguistic roots, translation and metaphor both refer to *carrying over* or *transferring meaning* from one word or phrase to another – hence our interest in projecting this concept of transferring – or rather negotiating – of meaning of the host space in adaptive reuse to its new architectural programme. This also entails another, or extra role of the architect: that of mediator rather than that of white-sheet designer.

But this carrying over comes at a cost and implies consequences. There seem to be two ways to consider this action: as a betrayal or as a profit. The first position sees a *loss* of meaning turning the translator into a traitor, hence the well-known phrase: *Traduttore-Traditore*. This Italian word play or paronomasia refers to the challenges, or difficulties of translators to perfectly respect the original quality and meaning of the original text in the process of translation. What this first association between translator and

traitor could entail clearly surfaces in a collection of letters written by Italian Renaissance poet and satirist Niccolò Franco (1515-1570):

*In another corner, I see the translators, who just to show the common people, & whoever doesn't know, that they know two literatures, translate work from Latin into the vernacular. I see them pulling an ugly mug when they don't understand the author's text. I see them concentrating down to the grease of their beards to find a measly word in the shelter of commentaries. And because I seem them dying from all their labors at the very moment they begin, because of the enormous pity that comes over me from it, I can't help saying: my Esteemed Traitors, I you can't do anything but betray books, you'll slowly go shit without a candle.<sup>6</sup>*

The analogy between translator and traitor refers to the limited knowledge of Latin of some – so called – humanist translators. And that they are forced to rely on 'I refugii de I commentari' (the shelter of commentaries) because they fail to grasp the full meaning of the original source text. This is echoed in another Renaissance text: Henri Estienne's personal French translation *Apologie pour Herodoto* of his Latin original published in the same year 1566: '... qu'il me sembloit que j'avois bien occasion de dire comme l'italien, à-sçavoir qu'il n'avoit pas fait office de traduttore, mais de traditore ...'<sup>7</sup>

The other end of the spectrum heralds a more optimistic attitude towards the endeavour of the translator: not as traitors, but as an effort to *carry over* and to give a new, or refreshed life, purpose and meaning to the source. It comes closer to the German meaning of translation: *übersetzen*. Also stemming from the Latin *translatio* but transformed to *Översetzen* (fifteenth century) and then to *über* (over) + *setzen* (to set). A visual analogy in this respect is that of crossing a deep river where the banks are shallow enough for passage:

*A useful analogy is that of crossing a broad, deep, swift river. If one does not know how to swim, and does not have a boat, it is necessary to go up or down the bank of the river until a place is found which is shallow enough to serve as a ford. The time and effort spent walking along one side of the river is not only not wasted; it is absolutely essential in the crossing.<sup>8</sup>*

This metaphor meets well our intention to seek for a conceptual relationship between the act of translating language and the act of remodelling heritage sites. In what follows I would like to first focus on this analogy by rereading an attractive essay by Walter Benjamin.

### **Walter Benjamin on Translation**

In 1921 Walter Benjamin wrote *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzer* (*The Task of the Translator*), to be published in 1923 as the introduction to his German translation of Charles Baudelaire's collection of poems *Tableaux Parisiens*.<sup>9</sup> There are many ways to approach this beautiful essay and it is the least of my intentions to reduce it to my arguments related to adaptive reuse. But one must admit that if one would start reading it as if it was titled 'The Task of the Architect in Altering a Historical Site', his argument equally stands and the reflections offer unexpected richness. Here it must suffice to see the transposition in the opening of the essay:

*A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade.<sup>10</sup>*

Benjamin's own insertion of architectural metaphors in the last sentence makes it all the more legitimate for us to do the same, but in the other direction: from language to architecture.

His essay helps to refine the duality that characterizes the remodelling of existing architectural sites: a formal tension in finding an appropriate language (both linguistically and architecturally) to bridge the original with the newly *translated* condition and, secondly, a negotiation of the meaning, or sense between old and new. It seems as if Benjamin aims to soften this apparent tension. He recognizes that: 'Fidelity and freedom in translation have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies. This deeper interpretation of the one does not serve to reconcile the two; in fact, it seems to deny the other all justification.'<sup>11</sup> And if we would identify the translator with the architect, then Benjamin takes a very generous position in favour of creativity and freedom:

*Rather, freedom proves its worth in the interest of the pure language by its effect on its own language. It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of the pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language.<sup>12</sup>*

Or on the other side the spectrum, when freedom is overthrown by fidelity: 'A literal rendering of the syntax casts the reproduction of meaning entirely to the winds and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility.'<sup>13</sup>

For Benjamin translation is mostly an exercise of form – albeit of a rather sophisticated kind. To comprehend it as a form, he explains, one must go back to the original, 'for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability'.<sup>14</sup> Because the translation comes after the original, it actually marks the stage of a continued life

of the original. Here Benjamin develops a very valuable notion of a continued life of a work of art, of an 'eternal afterlife in succeeding generations . . . . Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its survival, has reached the age of its fame.'<sup>15</sup>

The first part of Benjamin's essay reflects more on the *formal* aspects of translation, on how a new stylistic language enters into dialogue intelligently with the older syntax. It is a balanced and erudite exercise of formal expressions. But towards the end, he unfolds concepts that align it even more fully with the practice of interventions in historical buildings. Moving from syntax to semantics, he introduces the metaphors of a broken vessel and that of a tangent to imagine the importance of *meaning* during the act of translation:

*Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.*<sup>16</sup>

*Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point – establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity – a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.*<sup>17</sup>

The case study of the remodelled prison that we will discuss later on, clearly shows this process of making both the original and the translation *recognizable as fragments of a greater language*. The former enclosed typology of the prison was changed into an open, urban-oriented faculty of law,

*touching the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense.* It shows us how memory can be a generous database as well as a selective process and how memory and oblivion are two essential conditions for architecture to negotiate with heritage.

### **Fred Scott on Poetry**

The series of essays by architecture critic Fred Scott in his *On Altering Architecture* (2008) presents a unique set of associations and reflections on adaptive reuse. It elaborates to a much greater extent Machado's intuition of infusing a theory of adaptive reuse with combinations and methods of various disciplines: art history, philosophy, literature, music – to name the most important. Scott's influential book explores the difficulties that interventional work encounters, in both theoretical and practical terms, and outlines how alterations of existing architecture can establish its legitimacy and success, or failure. In Chapter 5, 'Parallels to Alteration', he re-explores the earlier association between 'remodelling' and 'rewriting', but refines it elegantly to the translation of poetry. He refers to Kenneth Rexroth's lecture *The Poet as Translator*.<sup>18</sup> By replacing 'poet' with 'architect' in the following passage, we come close to our discourse on tradition as an active subject:

*The ideal translator, as we all know well, is not engaged in matching the words of the text with the words of his own language . . . So the prime criterion of successful poetic translation is assimilability . . . Translation can provide us with poetic exercise on the highest level. It is best to keep your tools sharp until the great job, the great moment, comes along. More important, it is an exercise of sympathy on the highest level. The writer who can project himself into the exultation of another learns more than the craft of words.*<sup>19</sup>

Scott understands the relationship between the reuse in architecture and the translation of poetry as one of 'carrying over meaning' through an act of sympathy. The comparison between translating poetry and adaptive reuse as an intellectual and creative process dealing with formal elements as well as meaning, seems valid. But there are two paradoxes. First, the condition of the source: the original poem remains intact and is left untouched, but the remodelled space is rebuilt layer upon layer, sometimes to such an extent that the original only appears in fragments – if at all. The original is encapsulated and integrated into an entirely new spatial situation. The second paradox deals with the immaterial status. A successfully translated poem *maintains* its original sense, which is, of course, the highest aim and challenge of the translator. In architecture, however, the adaptive reuse process normally entails inserting a new function, or programme, into the space that is to be altered. This process generates new meanings.

### **T.S. Eliot on Tradition**

The analogy between adaptive reuse through Benjamin and Rexroth's discourse on translation accounts for the intimate relationship between a given context – such as a poem or an existing space with layered meanings – and the creative moments of design (or translation) during which the key to the intervention is conceived. It is this relationship between tradition and creation that is of interest here. How are past and present interrelated in any creative process?

Albeit for another discipline – that of poetry – this creative movement through time is very precisely and elegantly described in T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' of 1919.<sup>20</sup> Reflecting on the particular relationship between a contemporary poet and the tradition of his discipline, he encourages young poets to study in depth the history and skills of their discipline. At the same time, however, he warns them not to copy these schemes. An engagement with the 'tradition' so he argues, should result in a historical condition operating as a compass for the future:



*... the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.*

Eloquently, Eliot continues on how this process operates in two directions, on how an intervention on the present also changes works of art in the past:

*What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The exciting monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.*

Young poets should not only dwell in the 'pastness of the past', but instead activate it for its presence. Here we are dealing again with the tension between syntax and semantics, between skill and meaning. The radical shift in programme from prison to a university faculty in our case study below not only dramatically altered the meaning of the site, but equally its relation to the city: from a closed enclave to an urban interior, an enclosed public space that serves as a place for social interaction and study. This design strategy served the programme and it helped to transform the negative connotation of the building. As in Eliot's essay, the architects did not dwell in the *pastness of the past*, but managed to modify it through a *historical sense* that is *timeless and temporal* at the same time. In discussing this case more in depth, I will stress how the architects' respect for the

tradition of their discipline combined with a specific reading of the existing structure on the site and its typology made them understand the possibilities of introducing a modern idiom embedded in the historical layers and ornaments.

### **A Remodelled Prison as Palimpsest**

One of the earliest attempts to create a proper theory of adaptive reuse was delivered by architect and theoretician Rudolph Machado in 1976.<sup>21</sup> His methodology was introducing metaphors from literary criticism because this discipline, so he argued, has a long tradition 'for discussing matters of *sense*'. Humbly, Machado refers to his essay as 'thoughts on remodelling as pre-theoretical suggestive material'.

But rewriting is not merely a formal exercise, it is not only about finding a new language for an old story. As discussed earlier, the issue of meaning is particularly relevant for adaptive reuse. Because remodelling a building usually implies adapting it to new functions that, then, create new meanings and new narratives for the site. Machado calls it a 're-semanticization: a different story is born, a new plot is composed out of the old words, a new interpretation has taken place'. It offers him an opportunity to also talk about the relationship between the past and the role that architecture can play in order to intervene – as a force – in this historical condition: 'The past provides the already-written, the marked "canvas" on which each successive remodelling will find its own place. Thus, the past becomes a "package of sense", of built-up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed, or suppressed (refused).'

An interesting example of adaptive reuse based on 'significance' and the 'already-written' canvas is noAarchitecten's remodelling of a former nineteenth-century prison building in Hasselt.

The original building was constructed in 1859, designed by Belgian-French architect and sculptor François Derré (1797-1888) and local architect Herman Jaminé (1826-1885) for 58 cells.<sup>22</sup> The site is located on the nineteenth-century beltway of the city. With its elevated brick walls and watchtowers on the corners, it is a clear landmark. Inspired by the typology of a panopticon; with its characteristic star-shaped appearance and central observation point, it is in fact a variation on this scheme. Instead of the typical central corridor with cells on both sides of each wing, in Hasselt the two rows of cells are positioned back to back in each wing with narrow corridors at the side. The idea was to isolate prisoners from one another even more harshly, giving them the chance to reflect upon their sins. At the centre was a chapel with furniture designed in such a way that the prisoners could not see one another, but only God's image at the central altar. The prison was operational until 2005 and hardly any structural changes were made throughout its history. The capacity of the prison was doubled in the 1940s by simply adding an extra bed to each cell.

The university of Hasselt acquired the site with the ambition to house part of its newly established faculty of law – as well as its desire to organize part of its activities in the historical centre of Hasselt. Faced with a challenge of the enclosed typology of the prison, the concept of noAarchitecten managed to convince the jury of the architecture competition because of the balanced and respectful manner in which it *translated* the prison into its new programme. Instead of erasing the strong enclosure, the walls were restored and the idea of an urban interior or small city emerged: a *Forma Urbis*.<sup>23</sup> Where the prison was originally conceived as a very functional infrastructure, noAarchitecten profoundly altered its atmosphere and meaning. The strategy entailed the blurring of the powerful and hierarchical plan of the prison by creating new spaces between the arms of the star-shaped building and by redesigning the central panopticon as an orientation point. This central hall with its new double height and generous staircase is like a gesture; it is the most representative space of the building.

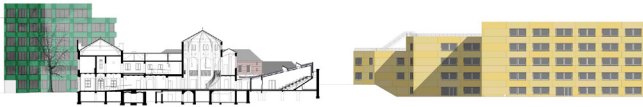


Fig. 1. Areal view of the prison building after the transformation.  
(Source: Hasselt University)

Fig. 2. Section through the prison transformed into a faculty  
building. (Source: noArchitecten, photo by Kim Zwarts)



Fig. 3. Centre of the panopticon after the transformation. (Source: noArchitecten, photo by Kim Zwarts)

Fig. 4. Green corridor, which gives access to the study cell and auditorium. (Source: noArchitecten, photo by Kim Zwarts)

The narrative and the place-making of the new programme is obviously very different than the original, but it seems fair to say that the design strategy echoes Eliot's advice for young poets to master the tradition in order to create something entirely new. The architects decided to restore the historical envelope of the prison in order to create an entirely new interior. They honoured Eliot's warning to escape from the 'pastness of the past' by breathing new life and meaning into the site. And by using and manipulating existing language in a creative manner with *a sense of the timeless and the temporal together*. Discussing 'ornament' in noAarchitecten's design methodology, architect and theoretician Stephen Bates refers specifically to this dialectic engagement with tradition as a means of weaving the past into the present, by stating that 'familiarity with old buildings leads to an understanding that the presence and richness to spaces comes not only from proportions, but also from the density of detail at the scale of the room and the hand'. He explains how noAarchitecten works:

*Within a modern idiom, they appreciate the need to add a layering of detail that many have originated from use and the evolved into an expression of ornament. In their work this is expressed in the modification of repeated elements or the sculptural handling of materials. At Hasselt the density of detail is developed from the manipulation of very ordinary elements: a hollow clay brick dividing rooms from the street-like corridor is laid to expose a pattern of flat and ribbed surfaces.*

It seems legitimate to link this analysis of architectural language to Benjamin's description of the translator's language: transparent and not covering the original, not blocking its light but allowing for a pure language reinforced by its own medium, *to shine upon the original all the more fully*. There is an interesting paradox in the design method: the original typology is reinforced in order to oppose its initial meaning: from enclosure to transparency; from separation to meeting and from isolation to accessibility. The central cylinder is opened up and the saturated daylight contrasts in a rather won-

derful way with the heavy arcaded walls surrounding the former panoptic centre. This architectural language continues in the patterns and surface structures of the interior. A collaboration with artist Benoît van Innis for the design and pattern of the floor tiles further refines this language and gives it a sublime quality.

The richness and depth of this architectural language – from the urban appearance to the refined interior details – helps to transform the contested meaning of the former prison. Here, the architectural language creates the conditions and the quality that can transform the contested meaning of the former prison. The architects added new layers and narratives. Both the original and the translation are *recognizable as fragments of a greater language*.

### **Conclusion**

I aimed at articulating a singular aspect of adaptive reuse: how it negotiates with the meaning of the site that is to be altered, as it changes from one function into another. This transition of meanings finds analogies in the act of translating poetry. The transposition relates to a methodology of empathy and memory. The case study of the old prison also dwells on this negotiation between fidelity and freedom, between syntax and semantics, between functionality and poetry. The chosen design strategy excels in understanding an original source in order to translate it with fresh attractiveness.

Altering heritage sites by remodelling the original space is often regarded as a conflicting enterprise, particularly in relationship to heritage policies, since 'new architecture' could conflict with the authenticity and heritage values of the historical site. This uneasy relationship is also contained within the vocabulary of architecture theory and conservation policies. By borrowing concepts from literature, I have tried to expand the notion of tradition and to pull it away from its singular association with 'authenticity'. T.S. Eliot's

reflection on tradition as a historical corridor that inspires contemporary artists is particularly valuable in this sense. It elevates tradition from its limited 'pastness' to its relevance to the 'presence'. This further echoes Walter Benjamin's reflection on 'Fidelity and Freedom' that I also associated with the creative intervention by a contemporary architect in a historical context. Like Eliot, Benjamin considers this delicate balance between new language for translating old texts as key. But as in architecture, he also recognizes that 'fidelity and freedom in translation' are regarded as 'conflicting tendencies'. Freedom, however, is necessary to 'liberate the language imprisoned in a work'<sup>24</sup> in order to re-create that work. The architectural strategy that noAarchitecten applied to remodelling the old prison in Hasselt illustrates this delicate dialectic between fidelity and freedom; *fidelity* towards tradition, typology and craftsmanship, but only because it generates *freedom* to create a new language, powerful enough to 'liberate' the original language.

- 1 Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 2 Rojas Machado, 'Old Buildings as Palimpsest: Towards a Theory of Remodeling', *Progressive Architecture* 11 (1976), 46-49.
- 3 Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, op. cit. (note 1).
- 4 See, for example, the introduction of Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 5 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott/Henry Stuart Jones et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 6 Quoted in Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019): 'Veggio in un altro cantone? I traduttori, li quali tal che mostrino al volgo, & a chi non sa, si sapere due lettere, traducono l'opere da la latina ne la lingua volgare. Veggo quadno per non intender bene il testo de glu autori, danno giù di mostaccio. Veggo quando distillano fino al grasso de le lor barbe per trovare un vocaboluccio ne i fugi de i commentari. E per che gli veggo morire con tutte le lor fatiche da quell'ora che le cominciano, per la pietà grande che me ne viene, non posso far che non dice: Ser Traditori miei, se non sapete far'altro che tradire i libri, voi ve ne anderete bel bello a cacare senza candela.'



- 7 '... so that I may well say with the Italian, that he performed not the office of a *traduttore*, but of a *traditore*, that is, that he played not the part of a *translator*, but of a *traitor* ...' Quoted in Ben Van Wyke, 'Imitating Bodies and Clothes: Refashioning the Western Conception of Translation', in: James St. André (ed.), *Thinking Through Translation with Metaphors* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 8 Originally in: Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 34. Quoted in Van Wyke, 'Imitating Bodies and Clothes', op. cit. (note 7).
- 9 Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 10 Ibid., 260.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Ibid., 261.
- 13 Ibid., 260.
- 14 Ibid., 254.
- 15 Ibid., 255.
- 16 Ibid., 260.
- 17 Ibid., 260-261.
- 18 Kenneth Rexroth, 'The Poet as Translator', in: William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck, *The Craft and Context of Translation* (Anchor Books, 1964), 29-49.
- 19 Cited in: Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, op. cit. (note 1), 79.
- 20 Published initially in 1919 in *The Egoist*, a London-based literary magazine for modernist poetry, and then re-published in 1920 in T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co, 1920).
- 21 Machado, 'Old Buildings as Palimpsest', op. cit. (note 2).
- 22 Described as case 15 in Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage*, op. cit. (note 4), and richly illustrated in *ibid.*
- 23 Stephen Bates, 'Staging Spaces: Observations on the Work of noAarchitecten', in: Christoph Grafe (ed.), *noAarchitecten*, in the series *North North West: Architectures from a European Region* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 2014), 9 (see also pages 81-104). This first monograph on noA's oeuvre was published on the occasion of the exhibition 'Encounters' at deSingel International Art Campus/ Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi), Antwerp, 2014.
- 24 Bullock and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, op. cit. (note 9), 261.

## CITIES & WORLDS



# *Forms of Utopia*

## The Social and Spatial Forms of *We* and *Metropolisarchitecture*

Jana Culek

*To form great masses by supressing rampant multiplicity according to a general law is Nietzsche's definition of style: the general case, the law is respected and emphasized; the exception, however, is put aside, nuance is swept away, measure becomes master, chaos is forced to become form: logical, unambiguous, mathematics, law.<sup>1</sup>*

The quoted sentence is the end of the *Metropolisarchitecture*,<sup>2</sup> a book on architecture and urban theory written by German architect Ludwig Hilberseimer in 1927. It is also a sentence that could perfectly describe the ideology of the One State, a fictional totalitarian, all-encompassing country described in the dystopian novel *We*,<sup>3</sup> written by Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1921.

Zamyatin's *We* and Hilberseimer's *Metropolisarchitecture*, a literary dystopia and a utopian architectural project, were both created in Europe within the same decade and respond to a similar historical condition. Both take on the topic of the development of urban society and its metropolis – a newly

created urban form that appears as a result of industrialization and as the beginning of the capitalist economic system. Both works examine the implications of mass industrial production, the use of new materials and structural systems, and the development of modern urban planning as the basis of their narratives and their creative proposals.

While *We* is one of the first dystopian novels of the twentieth century, and is considered to have had major influence on some of the more famous dystopias to follow, such as Orwell's *1984*,<sup>4</sup> *Metropolisarchitecture* it is an example of what could be considered a utopian architectural project. Although it is not the most famous example of that period like, for example, Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*,<sup>5</sup> it is relevant because the project's author, Ludwig Hilberseimer, openly states that his intentions for it, unlike those of other architects, were not to build according to his proposed plan, but rather to use it as a theoretical model and exercise.

### **Examining Social and Spatial Forms**

All utopian and dystopian works propose alternative realities that are based on slight or significant changes in the social and/or spatial environment. The aim of these changes is to either propose a better version of reality (utopias) or to play out the worst-case scenario through exaggerating one or several negative aspects of the present (dystopias). This is done by taking some of the basic building blocks of society and the built environment and changing them, questioning them and bringing them into connection with each other. In other words, utopias use various types of social and spatial forms and modify them in order to produce different results, which in turn reflect on the context they were created in. Sometimes the forms themselves are changed, and in some cases the way they relate to each other changes.

The aim of this text is twofold. While it examines the various social and spatial forms that are used in both examples in order to create and describe

the imagined worlds, it also explores the fact that, even though the two examples of Zamyatin and Hilberseimer are sometimes based on the same spatial forms, one author views his project as utopian while the other proposes a dystopian future. While Hilberseimer, a modernist architect, obvious follower of the functionalist school of thought, sees order, control, mathematics and industrial production as positive and extremely productive conditions for his work and for the development of society, giving his text a utopian note, Zamyatin views these same things as troubling and, in the long run, problematic. Zamyatin's main character, Δ-503, an engineer himself, who views the world through the structure of mathematical rules and equations, would probably be the first to congratulate Hilberseimer on his clearly structured and logical propositions. But Zamyatin questions this agenda. The dystopian form of *We* can almost be said to portray what would actually happen if the utopian project of *Metropolisarchitecture* would, indeed, become the only manifestation of the built environment, bringing along with itself the political ideology where the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the individual. While, in the case of these two examples, literature looks on concepts such as control, order, industrial production and standardization as oppressive when applied to the human population, architecture views the same concepts as productive methods of creating the urban environment.

Within the text I will perform a comparative formal analysis on both Zamyatin's *We* and Hilberseimer's *Metropolisarchitecture*, in order to recognize some of the differences and similarities in the futures these texts propose and how they propose them. In an attempt to avoid a traditional formal analysis of the texts, which, in the field of comparative literature, uses the method of close reading to interpret 'all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole',<sup>6</sup> I use a modification of the method proposed by Caroline Levine in her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Levine proposes to expand 'our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience',<sup>7</sup>

namely, to include the various bounded wholes, rhythms, hierarchies and networks that are described in the narrative and that are used to construct the fictional world. While examining forms in the way that Levine proposes<sup>8</sup> may be a non-traditional method in the field of comparative literature, this type of formal analysis is quite common in architectural research and can be identified as various contextual, typological and morphological studies. What I propose is a comparative method that brings together Levine's method with standard architectural typological research by also examining forms and patterns of the spatial experience that are described and used in the texts. Through this new, adapted method, I perform a comparative analysis that can examine utopian works from both fields (architecture and literature) on a social and spatial level with the same tools.

I use two types of forms identified by Levine – bounded wholes and rhythms – as a way of structuring the comparison both on the level of the individual texts and as a way of correlating them. By looking at these two types of forms I was able to distil common threads, investigate how the texts propose and generate a built environment, and how this environment is ideologically and critically charged.

### **The One State and the Metropolis: A Short Introduction We, Yevgeny Zamyatin, 1921**

We is a dystopian novel set in an undefined future, presumably on planet Earth.<sup>9</sup> Following a 'Two Hundred Years' War', the technocratic 'One State' is formed, representing the only civilized human society left on the planet. All the people of the 'One State' live in a single city enclosed by the 'Green Wall' – a glass wall combined with an electric current – meant to keep out the wilderness that has taken over the rest of the planet. The inhabitants – 'numbers' – live their extremely structured lives according to 'The Tablet of Hours' – a precise daily structure that is followed to the minute, day in day out and presented on individual 'Tablets' placed in every personal room. Indoctrinated from early childhood through various methods of propaganda

through the use of poetry and daily news, the 'numbers' are educated in the ways of the 'One State'. The ones that in some way disobey or object to this system are brought to 'The Benefactor', an eternal leader figure, who then subjects them either to torture through the use of the 'Gas Bell', or to direct death by 'The Machine'.

Even though the book provides various cultural and historical references, due to the author's origin and when the book was written, the strongest critique is that of the repressive regime of Soviet Russia. The book condemns the Russian communist political system through exaggerating it into a dystopian narrative set in an undefined future, and by bringing the political ideology to its extreme.

### ***Metropolisarchitecture, Ludwig Hilberseimer, 1927***

*Metropolisarchitecture*<sup>10</sup> is a proposal for a new approach to city planning and architecture that was created as a direct response to and critique of the negative effects that housing speculation and the capitalist system in general had on the development of metropolitan cities. It is a combination of architectural text and drawings that gives an overview of the conditions of the metropolis and proposes solutions that aim to better it. It is, however, as explained in the introduction by Richard Anderson:

*... neither a manual on urban planning nor an outline of modern architecture's origin. Rather, it is a meditation on the relationship between the two terms of its compound title: 'metropolis' and 'architecture'. It is as much an analysis of the conditions for architecture in the metropolis as it is a prescriptive theory of form.*<sup>11</sup>

Hilberseimer outlines in great detail the issues concerning today's metropolis such as uneven growth, the issue of growing traffic, the poor conditions in residential neighbourhoods, buildings and units. By looking at both the level of the city and the individual housing unit, Hilberseimer proposes a set



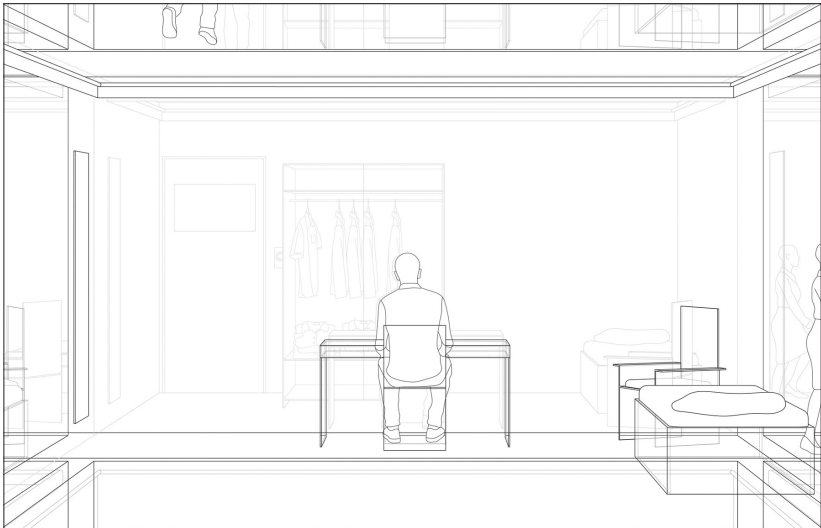
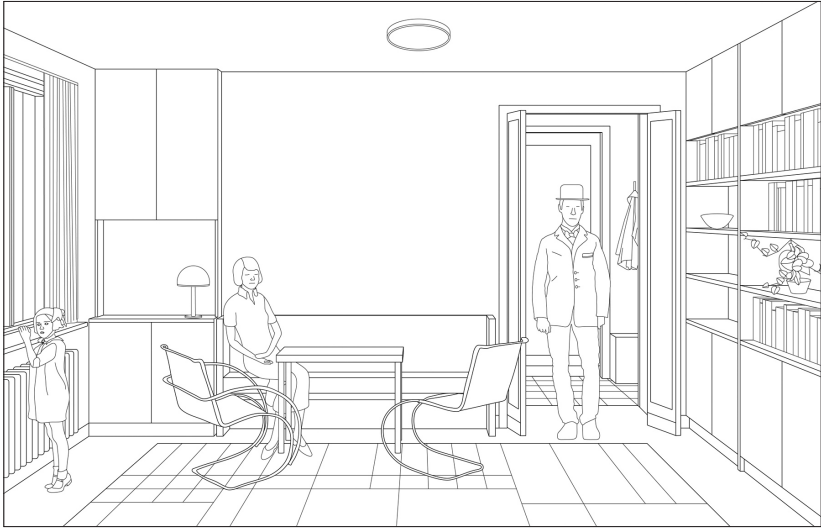


Fig. 1. Hilberseimer's individual unit – Digital drawing – Interior interpretation of Hilberseimer's Metropolisarchitecture apartment based on existing drawings and descriptions.

Fig. 2. Zamyatin's individual unit – Digital drawing – Interior interpretation of Zamyatin's One State room based on descriptions from the book.

Drawings by Jana Culek.

of approaches to overcome the issues he identifies with the aim of creating a better architecture and better city for the future. In his own words:

*The chaos of the contemporary metropolis can only be confronted with experiments in theoretical demonstrations. Their task is to develop, in the abstract, the fundamental principles of urban planning according to contemporary requirements. This will produce general rules that enable the solution of certain concrete problems. Only abstraction from the specific case is capable of revealing how the disparate elements that combine the metropolis can be brought into an order of dense relationships.<sup>12</sup>*

### **Bounded Wholes**

Although bounded wholes can exist in literature as both social and spatial forms, in the context of these two works, I will predominantly examine the spatial forms that are used to create and structure the imagined utopian worlds. They exist in various scales in both works and contain mostly the same elements imagined in different ways, namely the individual (as the only purely non-architectural bounded whole), the individual dwelling unit, the collective housing building, the city and its enclosure, and the city in regard to its surroundings. However, while the bounded wholes that appear in Hilberseimer's *Metropolisarchitecture* are all conducive to the utopian world he is creating, some of Zamyatin's bounded wholes are created to work directly against the totalitarian system of the One State.

### **The Numbers, the Rooms, the City, the Green Wall, the One State**

The world of *We* is structured by multiple levels of bounded wholes that serve to control each aspect of life of the individual inhabitants and unify them in the collective of the One State. On most levels, these wholes coexist, multiplying each other's effects.

The inhabitants of *We*'s One State – the numbers – are stripped of any individuality. Continuously living as single units, dressed in standardized

uniforms, they perform their daily routines according to a unified and constant schedule. Named as a combination of a letter and number, the inhabitants are seen as parts of a larger whole – the One State – a glass city that is separated from the rest of the planet by the means of the Green Wall. The main character and narrator, Δ-503, explains to the imaginary future readers of his memoir that:

*Man ceased to be a savage animal only when he built his first wall. Man ceased to be a savage man only when he built the Green Wall, when with that wall we isolated our mechanical, prefect world from the irrational, shapeless world of trees, birds and animals.<sup>13</sup>*

The Green Wall – an electrified glass dome – is used as a separation of the natural and artificial world. It keeps the wilderness out while containing the people within.

Like the Green Wall, all buildings within the One State are built of glass, and all construction is repetitive and standardized. Each room, the personal housing unit of each number, is the same as every other room. Bounded with glass walls, floors and ceilings, the rooms contain the Tablet (with the time schedule for each day), glass chairs, a desk, a cupboard, an armchair, a bed, a mirror. 'Sunshine is coming through the ceiling, the walls; sunshine from above, from the sides, reflected from below.'<sup>14</sup> The glass structure of the rooms creates a multiplying effect since one constantly sees all the surrounding rooms. In the same manner that multiple rooms form a larger housing unit, these housing units are also distributed uniformly throughout the city: 'I saw everything: the immutable straight streets, the glass of the roadways spurting out rays, the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent dwellings . . .'<sup>15</sup>

### **The Blinds and the Ancient House**

There are only two instances where the bounded wholes of the One State provide for a more enclosed, private and intimate function: the Ancient House and the individual room when the blinds are closed during a planned sexual encounter. Consequently, these two bounded wholes are also used in a disruptive manner towards the totalitarian system of the One State, since the privacy that they afford allows for insurgence.

The Ancient House is a relic from the times before the One State. It is the only building in the book described to have walls that are not made of glass, but of solid materials. However, as Δ-503 explains to us: 'The whole of this strange, fragile, blind structure is clothed all around in a glass shell: otherwise it would, of course, already have collapsed long ago.'<sup>16</sup> 'Our present-day glass – beautiful, transparent, eternal – was only there in the form of pitiful, fragile little square windows.'<sup>17</sup> The Ancient House is positioned on the very edge of the city, right next to the Green Wall. Bounded in non-transparent walls, it can also be seen as a metaphor for hiding and secrets, which was indeed also its purpose. In the basement levels of the house, inside hidden tunnels, the members of the resistance plot the uprising. The lack of interest in the house, due to its 'out-of-placeness' in the glass, transparent city and its non-transparent enclosure, allows for activities to go unnoticed. Interestingly, the Ancient House, which can also be seen as a point where the forgotten past and the newly constructed future briefly touch, is also the exact location where they again reconnect. Through a hole in the Green Wall, some members of the One State manage to exit to the world outside where they encounter what seem to be remains of the human population, but that have developed in a very different way to their own.

### **The Apartment, the Tenement Building, the City Block, the Metropolis**

Giorgio Grassi claims that Hilberseimer produced not just types of architecture 'but archetypes: the slab, the block, the high-rise building'.<sup>18</sup> Hilberseimer provides a model – a bounded whole – for various elements of the

city that can then be multiplied and distributed according to need. Hilberseimer explains how *'Metropolisarchitecture* is considerably dependant on solving two factors: the individual cell of the room and the collective urban organism'.<sup>19</sup> While the cell provides for the individual, the urban organism provides for the society. He continues:

*Individual apartments should be made more comfortable through technological means and are to be fully equipped in such a way that tables and chairs are the only moveable furniture an occupant requires. When moving to a new apartment, one no longer has to pack a moving van, but only one's suitcase.*<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the designs of the apartments themselves should be standardized. Hilberseimer proposes a plan for an apartment that has variations for 'three, four, five, six and seven inhabitants' and are, he explains, 'each based on identical spatial elements and satisfy the corresponding spatial requirements'.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from providing repetitive enclosures that can then be inhabited in a variety of different ways and can also be modified according to the needs of the potential users, the individual units also become a structuring element of the whole. Through applying methods of standardization at this minimal level, Hilberseimer proposes the multiplication of that method at the level of the entire city. Instead of kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms, one multiplies and arranges housing units, commercial buildings, office buildings, production buildings and various kinds of public buildings, which can all be adapted in scale and number according to the needs of the metropolis. Here, aside from the obvious bounded wholes of the architectural elements themselves, the architectural and urban system proposed by Hilberseimer also becomes a bounded whole that, when combined with the repetitional rhythms of structuring the metropolis, allows for variations and modifications within the system.

*Rational thinking, accuracy, precision and economy – until now the characteristics of the engineer – must become the basis of the new architecture. All objects must be complete in themselves, reduced to their ultimate, essential forms, organized reasonably, and led to their ultimate consummation.*<sup>22</sup>

## Rhythms

After identifying the elements which form Zamyatin's and Hilberseimer's utopian cities, I examine how rhythms are used in order to enforce these new spatial forms and how they lead to changes in the social functioning of these imaginary worlds. In juxtaposing how rhythms are used in these two works we notice the first major difference between architectural and literary utopias. While Hilberseimer's use of rhythm effects predominantly the spatial elements of his work, Zamyatin's use of rhythms also influences the narratives of his fictional inhabitants. However, even though *Metropolisarchitecture*, being an urban plan, lacks a narrative component focusing on the effects of the urban environment on specific members of its population, we cannot deny that the proposed rhythmic repetitions of its bounded wholes would not, indeed, produce such effects.

## The Tablet of Hours, Day of Unanimity, the Uprising, Infinity

The daily lives of the numbers in the One State are structured through the Tablet of Hours. A timetable that each holds in their room and to which they live their lives in a repetitive rhythm of sleeping, eating, working, walking, going to the auditorium. This constant rhythm is only interrupted by exceptions such as illness, or in the case of the main character Δ-503, by his initially involuntary participation in the planning of an uprising.

The uprising, as one of the main focuses of the book's story, is a long-lasting event that leads to a disruption in all the rhythms of the narrative. The main events of the uprising commence by the disruption of one of the yearly rhythms – the Day of Unanimity – when all the inhabitants of the One

State gather to vote for the Benefactor as their leader. Even though all are expected to vote in the same way, on that occasion, thousands of inhabitants dare to vote against him. However, since the narrative and the main character are based on mathematical logic, all these disruptions turn out to be only temporary, a mere part in a cyclic process of history.  $\Delta$ -503 explains to us again:

*Human history goes upwards in cycles – like an aero [flying car-like machine]. The circles are different – golden, bloody, but all of them are identically divided into 360 degrees. And so moving forward from zero: 10, 20, 200, 360 degrees – and zero again. Yes, we've returned to zero – yes. But for my mathematically thinking mind it is clear that the zero is completely different, new.<sup>23</sup>*

The cyclical rhythm of time comes into play in a number of points in the book, where the concept of repetitiveness and infinity is always adjusted by the characters to be able to grasp and explain to themselves the events surrounding them. Within the process of the revolution,  $\Delta$ -503 is confused, believing that 'their revolution', meaning the one of the One State, was the final one. I-330 explains to him otherwise: 'And whatever is this final revolution you are wanting? There is no final one, revolutions are infinite.'<sup>24</sup> The resolution of the narrative and its rhythmic return to the cyclical zero begins when  $\Delta$ -503 is confronted by his neighbour, who claims that he has discovered that there is no such thing as infinity, that the universe is finite. This event shocks the story back to its original, structured rhythm.  $\Delta$ -503 confesses his involvement, gives up his accomplices, subjects himself to a voluntary Great Operation and the One State starts returning to its status quo. The book ends with  $\Delta$ -503's last entry in his memoir, where he describes how 'on the traverse, the 40<sup>th</sup> avenue, it's proved possible to construct a temporary wall of high voltage waves. And I hope we shall prevail. More than that: I'm certain we shall prevail. Because reason must prevail.'<sup>25</sup> Through his use of rhythm and by focusing on the cyclical and repetitive

aspects of time and history, Zamyatin achieves several things. First, through the rhythmical repetition of bounded wholes he forms his imaginary world and makes it imaginable and therefore plausible. Second, through the rhythmic repetition of events in the lives of his characters, he depicts the rules that govern the imaginary One State and proposes the effects these rules could have on the population. And finally, by focusing on the cyclical and repetitive nature of rhythms and time itself, he challenges the reader to imagine both a grim future that is to come, a potential way to avoid it, and the inevitability of both.

### **The Drawings, Repetition of Forms, Designing the System, Utopia**

Critically reflecting on the way that capitalist speculation has, in his opinion, destroyed the metropolis, Hilberseimer proposes a return of 'new awareness of life that is not subjective – individual, but rather objective – collective'.<sup>26</sup> To apply that he works both on the level of the individual unit and on the level of the city – but, unlike his predecessors, he treats these scales with the same level of importance. In his opinion the role of the architect is to bring order and clarity to the chaos of the metropolis. And he does this by disrupting the causes of this chaos through applying consistent and repetitive rhythms.

Hilberseimer elaborates:

*It has yet to be made clear that in the construction of the metropolis one is faced with the organization of a new form with its own dynamics, which not only quantitatively but above all qualitatively differentiates itself from the city of the past.*<sup>27</sup>

To face this new city and approach it productively, Hilberseimer proposes a set of measures and approaches. The main issue to solve is the traffic network. This is solved by regulating and separating traffic according to types, he explains, 'so that each sort of transportation is allocated its own respective level'.<sup>28</sup> Pedestrian traffic is thus placed at the highest level, fol-



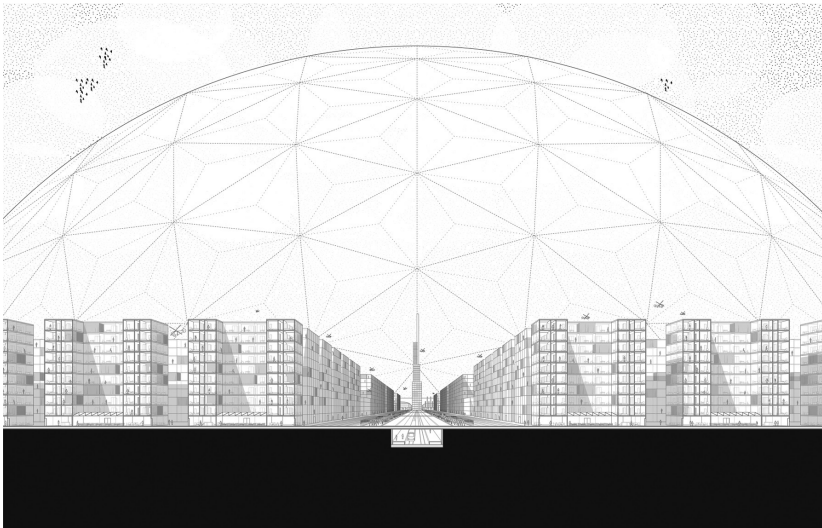
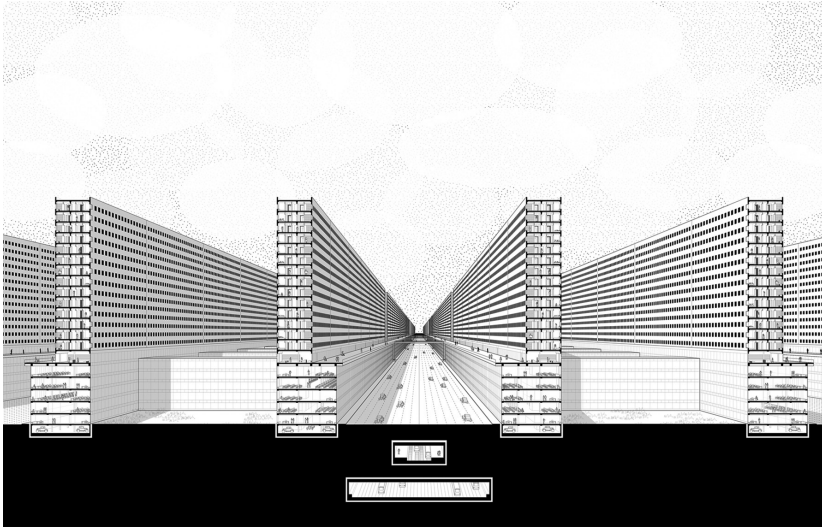


Fig. 3. Hilberseimer's street section – Digital drawing – Streetscape interpretation of Hilberseimer's Metropolisarchitecture apartment based on existing drawings and descriptions.

Fig. 4. Zamyatin's street section – Digital drawing –Streetscape interpretation of Zamyatin's One State room based on descriptions from the book.

Drawings by Jana Culek.

lowed by car traffic directly below, with city and long-distance trains placed in the underground. The second issue is the division of the city according to use. Hilberseimer proposes a division into residential, commercial and industrial quarters. In the city centre, the commercial and residential functions are stacked vertically on top of each other. He proposes that 'through vertical stacking of commercial and residential cities, paths between them will no longer be travelled horizontally but for the most part vertically – taking place indeed even within the building itself, eliminating the need to ever step onto the street'.<sup>29</sup> The third element in the cities is the placement of parks, green areas and water surfaces.

*The reduction of developed area achieved by building and population concentration also enhances the benefits provided to urban dwellers by increasing the open and park spaces. All schools, hospitals, and sanatoriums, as well as sports and leisure areas, are to be embedded within these green spaces.*<sup>30</sup>

In order to depict his proposal, Hilberseimer used drawings that accompanied his text. These drawings also played an important role in enforcing and visualizing the rhythms of his utopian proposal. 'The urban atmosphere evoked by his drawings for the High-Rise City is neither futuristic, nor dramatic, nor dystopian. Hilberseimer's images, especially in his early work, describe an urban atmosphere that is detached, harsh, precise, and subtly disquieting.'<sup>31</sup> It can be argued that this is due precisely to the rhythmic repetitions found on all levels of representation as well as the logic of application of his theory. On the drawings themselves, there is a lack of specificity. The only thing that is visible in the forms of the buildings is the rhythmic repetition of vertical levels, of identical square openings, of multiplied slabs, of repeating blocks. In most of his urban-scale drawings, these rhythmic forms are contextless. Their repetition either extends outside of the boundaries of the paper space, or they are presented without a drawn context, surrounded only by the white of the paper. This is, of course,

done intentionally. Viewing *Metropolisarchitecture* not as a manual but as a theorization of the development of both architecture and the metropolis, the drawings work to further confirm that Hilberseimer's idea was not to apply his designs to the development of the city, but rather his logic. The repetition of identical forms is a way of removing all focus from the buildings themselves and shifting it to the design of the system. As Manfredo Tafuri explains: 'Hilberseimer did not offer "models" for designing, but rather established, at the most abstract and therefore most general level possible, the coordinates and dimensions of design itself.'<sup>32</sup> And in these coordinates, rhythm is used as a structuring form that shapes Hilberseimer's utopian proposal.

## Conclusion

### Standardization and Repetition as a Way to Structure Society

Mathematical logic, rationalization, standardization and repetition of forms through rhythms on various levels structure the worlds of both Zamyatin and Hilberseimer. The world, the methods of work and the approach to design that Hilberseimer proposes in *Metropolisarchitecture*, in a way results in the world created by Zamyatin in *We*. Hilberseimer explains: 'The industrialization of production, the standardization of production processes, the typification of the products of production, and generalization to the point of universality are today the tasks of every industrial firm.'<sup>33</sup> And this is exactly what occurs in the One State:

*I [Δ-503] could see: in accordance with Taylor, with rhythmic speed, in time, like the levers of one enormous machine, people down below were bending, straightening, turning. Pipes were sparkling in their hands: with fire they cut, with fire they welded the glass walls, angles, ribs, brackets. I saw transparent glass monster-cranes rolling slowly along glass rails, and just like the people they obediently turned, bent and thrust their loads inside, into the belly of the 'Integral'. And this was all one: humanized, perfected people. This was supreme, stunning beauty, harmony, music . . .<sup>34</sup>*

And in *We*, this method produced what could be a city similar to Hilberseimer's :

*I [Δ-503] saw everything: the immutable straight streets, the glass of the roadways spurting out rays, the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent dwellings, the quadratic harmony of the pale blue ranks. . . . the convex ice-blue technical drawing of the city, the round bubbles of domes, the solitary leaden figure of the accumulation tower.*<sup>35</sup>

At the time of its creation, *Metropolisarchitecture* was considered to be a positive, utopian approach to city planning, but today we can pose the question of whether this level of control is productive for the metropolis, which changes and fluctuates on all hierarchical levels, within all bounded wholes and according to various different rhythms. The attempts to control both architecture and society through strict hierarchical structures has proven impossible and harmful in many attempts throughout history. Hilberseimer's *Metropolisarchitectur* can in some ways also be seen as an architecture and urban planning manual on which the city of *We* was built. Controlled from the cupboard in the individual room, through the repetitive design of the city, to the strict definition and delineation of the One State and its natural surroundings.

Even though *Metropolisarchitecture* was positively referenced throughout the twentieth century, Hilberseimer consequently condemned his own project by calling it 'more a necropolis than a metropolis' and a 'sterile landscape of asphalt and cement, inhuman in every respect'.<sup>36</sup> What we can conclude from these two texts is that it is very difficult to precisely define whether a novel or an architectural project is purely utopian or purely dystopian, especially from our current perspective. Both texts respond to their historical situations, in this case in different ways, but the way we read these responses today is also very much conditioned by our own cultural,

political, geographical and urban context. So instead of looking at these works as negative examples of the historical period between the two World Wars, we can look at them as productive experiments on how spatial and social forms of architecture, politics, culture and production affect society. Utopian and dystopian works in architecture and literature are both manifestations of an imaginary world and society that are informed by their historical realities and are created as a critique and response to the real world. They both propose an alternative to the status quo with the aim of rethinking, changing and, perhaps, bettering our futures.

- 1 Ludwig Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', in: Richard Anderson (ed.), *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays* (New York: GSAPP Books, 2012).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, translated by Hugh Aplin (Richmond: Alma Books Ltd, 2009).
- 4 George Orwell, *1984* (London: Vintage Classics, 2018).
- 5 Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* is a city plan for 3 million inhabitants, the logic and plan of which Hilberseimer debunks in the text of his proposal by pointing out a mathematical error that Le Corbusier made in calculating the square metres of space needed for pedestrian and car traffic. If calculated correctly, this would significantly lessen the amount of open and green spaces in the city, for which the project is best known.
- 6 Caroline Levine, 'Introduction: The Affordances of Form', in: Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 14-35.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Levine sees forms as 'political structures that have most concerned literary and cultural studies scholars: bounded *wholes*, from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation.'
- 9 Zamyatin, *We*, op. cit. (note 3).
- 10 Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', op. cit. (note 1).
- 11 Richard Anderson, 'An End to Speculation', in: Anderson, *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays*, op. cit. (note 1), 24.
- 12 Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', op. cit. (note 1), 112.
- 13 Zamyatin, *We*, op. cit. (note 3), 91.
- 14 Ibid., 42.
- 15 Ibid., 7.
- 16 Ibid., 26.
- 17 Ibid., 28.
- 18 Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'In Hilberseimer's Footsteps', in: Richard Anderson (ed.), *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays* (New York: GSAPP Books, 2012)
- 19 Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', op. cit. (note 1), 270.
- 20 Ibid., 125.
- 21 Ibid., 155.
- 22 Ibid., 268.

- 23 Zamyatin, *We*, op. cit. (note 3), 113.
- 24 Ibid., 169.
- 25 Ibid., 227.
- 26 Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', op. cit. (note 1), 265.
- 27 Ibid., 110.
- 28 Ibid., 112.
- 29 Ibid., 123.
- 30 Ibid., 130.
- 31 Aureli, 'In Hilberseimer's Footsteps', (op. cit. note 18), 335.
- 32 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, quoted in: Anderson, 'An End to Speculation', op. cit. (note 11), 62.
- 33 Hilberseimer, 'Metropolisarchitecture', op. cit. (note 1), 262.
- 34 Zamyatin, *We*, op. cit. (note 3), 81.
- 35 Ibid., 7.
- 36 Anderson, 'An End to Speculation', op. cit. (note 11), quoting Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Entfaltung unf Planungsideo* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1963), 20.

# Undefined Terrain

**Maria Finn**

A vacant lot in Malmö caught my attention from the train, and when I later visited the site I discovered a place that had been left to itself, and was therefore undefined and free of use. The area was covered with flourishing and wild vegetation, and frequented by all kinds of local users, for recreational as well as other purposes. Later I found a similar place in Copenhagen that was even larger, with a makeshift skateboard ramp but with vegetation that was no less wild, and which was also frequented by a wide variety of people. These sites today represent utopian spaces within the city insofar as they offer their visitors spaces that resist development. To establish my point of view, I have made a comparative reading of utopias that describe future cities that share the same appearance and qualities as these sites: *News from Nowhere* by William Morris (1890) and *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach (1975). But through these readings I have also found that when you are attempting to envision new ideas for the future, it is hard to let go of concepts that belong to the world you wish to leave behind.

## **Forgetful Nature**

*It is all about returning, again and again. It is also about finding a method for writing – and for filming. Your feet get tired, but it is necessary to return to discover the small differences. It is a matter not only of the place, but also of the routine. You get to know what to find there. The impossibility of*



*finding a way to categorize it is also liberating. After recurring visits, you recognize traces left by others. You also get to know other people who know the place. Utopia is a vision for the future, with unintentional remains from the present. Abandoned sites offer an ambivalent position between nostalgia for the past and visions for the future.<sup>1</sup>*

The quote above is taken from my film *Forgetful Nature*, which investigates the function of unregulated spaces in the city – in this case, two abandoned lots with unruly vegetation, frequented by local residents. I have conducted my research as an artist, with frequent visits to the sites to document changes and meet users. Every city contains spaces that have been shaped by oblivion, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. For me, green spaces that have been left to develop on their own have always had a special allure. They represent places without a language, since nobody has defined how they are supposed to be used. In a society where the structures that weave us together have come under pressure and are being replaced with a fragmented reality that consists of contradictory information and opinions, we need places more than ever where everybody feels that they fit in, and where we can meet without obligations.

In 2005, on the train on my way to Malmö, I spotted an area by the railroad track that was covered with fruit trees and high grass – too wild to be a garden, too disorganized to be a park – and I felt an urge to visit it. This part of Malmö is called Ellstorp. There used to be allotment gardens on the site, established for railroad workers; you can still find some on nearby Lundavägen. But the site that caught my attention, which I call the Ellstorp lot, situated between Idaborgsgatan and the railroad, is a large area that has been left to itself for quite some time. All the small houses were torn down when Jernhusen AB bought the area in the 1990s, but the company left the trees standing, and it only occasionally cuts the tall grass and flowers that cover the site. Over the years there have been many plans for the area, but nothing has really happened. In a proposal published by Malmö municipality in 2018,

there is a plan for the whole Kirseberg area, with the intention to create a whole new neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> The Ellstorp lot appears on many of the maps and pictures in the proposal, but is not mentioned as an area worth preserving. Instead, the municipality intends to create green corridors through some parts of the lot to establish a connection between Ellstorp Park and Östervärn station. A vacant lot represents a possibility that has not yet been realized but is still inscribed on the site. The place is waiting for a definition; until then, it defies characterization. Meanwhile, we as visitors can pass through it, and if we slow down, we can also reflect upon how we behave when we enter the unregulated. Years later, I discovered the Beauvais lot on Rovsingsgade in Copenhagen, a place with a similar story. Beauvais, a company that produces canned food, established a factory here in 1895, but production moved elsewhere in 1968, and later the old factory building burned down. In 1983 the area was acquired by the municipality of Copenhagen, which cleared the site; it has since been used for recreational purposes, with the encouragement of the owner, which has also constructed a basketball court here. Today the trees have grown tall, and the lot is covered with brambles and high grass, as well as flowers and nettles.

What struck me was my lack of language to describe the sensation of entering these sites. I had been interested for some time in William Morris's depiction of nature in his patterns, and when I read his utopian novel from 1890, *News from Nowhere*, I recognized a landscape similar to what I was trying to describe. At that time, Morris felt an urge to create his tale as a reaction against developments that he strongly disliked. *Ecotopia*, a novel by Ernest Callenbach from 1975, is a later influential text with sustainability as a core value. Although almost a century passed between these attempts to envision another kind of society, there are similarities that make one wonder if they reveal a deeper and recurring need. *Ecotopia* is a description of a society governed by principles other than consumerism, prioritizing responsible conduct towards the environment. In the novel, William Weston, a journalist for the *Times-Post*, is sent to Ecotopia to report on what is going



Fig. 1. The Beauvais Lot, Copenhagen, 2017.

on there. The young country consists of Northern California, Oregon and Washington, which 20 years earlier were all part of the United States. The narrative in *Ecotopia* is structured by alternating newspaper articles and notes from Weston's personal diary. The articles describe how the society is organized, and they cover everything from health care, education, family life, trade and architecture to scientific achievements. Weston's own notes reveal how he slowly gains respect and admiration for Ecotopia's achievements. What I would like to focus on here are the descriptions of the cities, and the green places in them. Weston writes his impressions of San Francisco:

*What I found when I had gotten over my surprise at the quiet, was that Market Street, once a mighty boulevard striking through the city down on the waterfront, has become a mall planted with thousands of trees. The 'street' itself, on which electric taxis, minibuses, and delivery carts purr along, has shrunk to a two-lane affair. The remaining space, which is huge, is occupied by bicycle lanes, fountains, sculptures, kiosks, and absurd little gardens surrounded by benches. Over it all hangs the most sinister quiet, punctuated by the whirr of bicycles and cries of children. There is even the occasional song of a bird, unbelievable as that may seem on a capital city's crowded main street.<sup>3</sup>*

This description shows some similarities with the current branding of cities as 'green', a strategy to make them appear more attractive for new residents as well as investors. But Weston also elaborates on another phenomenon: the established cities are broken up into smaller neighborhoods, like decentralized mini-cities. One of these, Alviso, has a population of 9,000 people that live within a half-mile radius of the transit station, and this area is also filled with green: 'But even this density allows for many small park-like places: sometimes merely widening of the streets, sometimes planted gardens. Trees are everywhere – there are no large paved areas exposed to the sun.'<sup>4</sup>

This seems to be an exemplary description of the 'green city', but it also depicts another ideal for the city: small-scale, lush, more like a park than cities as we know them. This is an appealing idea, but what is striking is how much it resembles Morris's vision in *News from Nowhere*, which is set in 2003 and occasionally looks back to the revolution of 1952.<sup>5</sup> For his entire working life, Morris was on a quest for alternatives to what industrialism had brought with it; for this purpose he rediscovered old techniques such as dyeing, weaving and embroidery, which then were employed to create new products for his firm. Morris was not a friend of industrialism, not only because of the poor quality of the goods it produced, but also because of how it affected cities and the countryside. After Morris had successfully established the leading interior design firm in Europe, his political interests increased, and he became a member of the Socialist League, getting involved in the publication of its journal *The Commonwealth*. It was for this journal that he wrote his utopian novel *News from Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest*, which appeared in installments between January and October 1890 and was published as a book in 1891. In the novel, the protagonist, William Guest, comes home from a meeting of the League and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he has time-traveled to the future. As he tries to get to grips with the societal changes, he avoids revealing the epoch to which he really belongs to the people he meets. One of these is Hammond, who is old enough to have experienced the period when the changes took place, and who tries to explain them to Guest:

*'The change,' said Hammond, 'which in these matters took place very early in our epoch, was most strangely rapid. People flocked into the country villages, and, so to say, flung themselves upon the freed land like a wild beast upon his prey; and in a very little time the villages of England were more populous than they had been since the fourteenth century, and were still growing fast. Of course, this invasion of the country was awkward to deal with, and would have created much misery, if the folks*

*had still been under the bondage of class monopoly. But as it was, things soon righted themselves.*<sup>6</sup>

This vision of a future England has some similarities with the mini-cities that Callenbach describes in *Ecotopia*. Another striking description of the changes, in this case in London, appears when Guest passes through the city, and his companion Dick points out Kensington Gardens, which Guest indeed remembers:

*Quoth Dick: 'This is Kensington proper. People are apt to gather here rather thick, for they like the romance of the wood; and naturalists haunt it, too; for it is a wild spot even here, what there is of it; for it does not go far to the south; it goes from here northward and west over Paddington and a little way down Notting Hill: thence it runs north-east to Primrose Hill, and so on; rather a narrow of it gets through Kingsland to Stoke-Newington and Clapton, where it spreads out along the heights above the Lea marshes; on the other side of which, as you know, is Epping Forest holding out a hand to it. This part we are just coming to is called Kensington Gardens; though why "gardens" I don't know.'*  
*I rather longed to say, 'Well, I know,' but there were so many things about me which I did not know, in spite of his assumptions, that I thought it better to hold my tongue.*<sup>7</sup>

Guest knows why it is called 'gardens', since he remembers Kensington Gardens as a huge London park, which has now been swallowed up by the woodland that the city has become. This is a fine example of the way in which cities in this future society have transformed to make way for a landscape consisting of small villages. But the similarities to Callenbach's descriptions in *Ecotopia* are striking, and reveal affinities between the two authors' respective visions. They both share a wish for another kind of environment: greener, but also on another scale – a decentralized model very far from the growing cities that we experience today. I find the blurring



Fig. 2. The Ellstorp Lot, Malmö, 2017.

between country and city that these narrations envision compelling, since I myself have sought out these kinds of places. And it is here that I see a link between the Ellstorp lot in Malmö, the Beauvais lot in Copenhagen and the cityscapes described in *Ecotopia* and *News from Nowhere*.

Both novels' utopian visions wish to create alternatives to the programmes of the day. But they simultaneously open up other questions concerning order and organization. Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* describes the change from premodern societies to their modern successors. If in previous times the governing of society could be likened to a gamekeeper who resides in the forest and keeps an eye from a distance on a society that reproduces itself year by year, with modernism another attitude replaced that of the gamekeeper, namely that of the organizer:

*The gamekeeper-like complacency would be a luxury one could ill afford. What was needed instead was the posture, and skills, of a gardener; one armed with a detailed design of the lawn, of the borders and of the furrow dividing the lawn from the borders; with a vision of harmonious colours and of the difference between pleasing harmony and revolting cacophony; with determination to treat as weeds every self-invited plant which interferes with his plan and his vision of order and harmony; and with machines and poisons adequate to the task of exterminating the weeds and altogether preserve the divisions as required and defined by the overall design.<sup>8</sup>*

Bauman's description of modern society as a garden culture is uncomfortable, since it makes us realize the degree to which we have accepted this order without questioning its methods. The gardener is a perfect metaphor, since it carries the positive aspects of the pleasant garden without revealing its underlying aggressive struggle against everything that does not fit the plan. With this in mind, I find it interesting that both Callenbach and Morris describe cityscapes that have disappeared and been replaced by forests.



The distinction Bauman makes between gamekeeper and gardener is important, since it exposes the shift from premodern to modern society. The park in the city as part of modernism was designed to serve specific purposes, either as a manifestation of power or for purposes programmed into a plan – usually educational, health or recreational purposes. If Morris wishes to resist industrialization, then Callenbach wishes to create an alternative to the consumerism to which industrialization has led. The descriptions of societies that consist of forests with small, decentralized communities bring to mind the premodern societies on which the gamekeeper kept a distant eye without interfering. In a sense, this is also what the Beauvais and Ellstorp lots represent, since they offer areas without a programme, with little interference, where visitors can experience an environment without coded messages – a rarity in the city. Here the owner acts as the gamekeeper, keeping a distant eye on developments, only intervening when order is disturbed by users claiming temporary ownership. When people try to occupy these places more permanently, they are asked to leave, to prevent other people from feeling insecure when they visit. But when we tread outside the preprogrammed areas and are confronted with decay and self-seeding plants, something else is at stake. Here we experience another sense of time, since everything is left with very little interference, representing a double movement: decay as well as growth. I would like to argue that these places offer a blank space where we can inscribe notions that we wish to redefine. When we enter, we leave something behind; and this is both liberating and bewildering.

What originally attracted me to these sites were their unregulated character, and a sense of escaping the pre-formulated. Most built environments in a city demand a certain behavior that originates from regulations that guide our conduct in public space, mirroring the social fabric of the society that we live in. Morris and Callenbach's novels are fantasies and dreams, limited by the rules set down by the societies that produced them. In both

novels, change is represented by a woman to whom the visitor is drawn, in Morris's version the girl, Ellen, is described as follows:

*But this girl was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of 'a young lady', but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise or please me.<sup>9</sup>*

Ellen represents the new world, and when the visitor at the end of the novel feels that his time in this imagined future is slipping by she is the last connection. But Morris's vision of the role woman should play in this society comes across as romantic and less radical than his other projections for the future. In *Ecotopia*, the visitor, Weston, is attracted to a woman called Marissa, who works on the reforestation that the country has put into effect since breaking from the United States. He slowly gets closer to her and in the end makes the decision to stay, since he has not only fallen in love with Marissa but also with her country. Fredric Jameson writes about *Ecotopia* in *Archaeologies of the Future*, his study of utopias and science fiction, where he describes how this ambitious vision for a future society yet contains details that alienate the reader instead of successfully convincing us of the advantages of his ideas:

*This is also the case, but on a higher anthropological and philosophical level, with that invention of Callenbach's which has always seemed to pose the greatest problem even for his most sympathetic readers, namely the all-male institution of the War Games, in which periodically the men revert to the most primitive weapons – clubs, bows and arrows – and let off steam assaulting each other physically in two opposing groups, sometimes with real casualties.<sup>10</sup>*

This displays a disturbing flaw in Callenbach's vision, revealing an unconscious desire far from the gender equality supposed to exist in this society. Women in these narrations represents the unknown, a space where you can project your fantasies, that in both novels are tainted by stereotypi-

cal thinking. To me, the sites offer a space in the city that allows me to escape these kinds of projections. By comparing *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia* I have wished to find a language that could describe the sensations that I find that the sites that I have explored offer the visitor, but I have also discovered how both novels struggle to find a balance between new ideas and old conventions. But if their ideas may have flaws, the descriptions of London and San Francisco taken over by greenery change the idea of what a metropolis should look like. And it is here that I recognize the qualities that I have found in the Beauvais lot, with its overgrown basketball court and brambles growing high, and in the Ellstorp lot, where the old fruit trees create an almost pastoral atmosphere together with wild flowers and remaining species from the previous allotment gardens. Places allowed to thrive without regulations used to be a part of a city's fabric, unexpected areas that challenged conventions and the usual order. To me these places become a utopia in reverse, since they represent what is left undeveloped instead of new ideas. I started this text with a quote from my film *Forgetful Nature* that documents the lots and the users of these places. I would like to end with another quote from the film that sums up my experience of interacting with the sites over a long period of time: 'My utopian space is a place that has been left to its own devices.' In our present situation, utopian thought does not necessarily need to imply that we construct new worlds, since the idea of instead leaving areas to develop without interference in an organic and unpredictable manner seems just as radical today.

- 1 *Forgetful Nature*, HD video, 13:34 mins, Maria Finn, 2019. <http://mariafinn.dk/category/video/>.
- 2 <https://malmo.se/Service/Var-stad-och-var-omgivning/Stadsplanering--strategier/Pagaende-oversiktsplanering/Oversiktsplan-for-sodra-Kirseberg-och-Ostervarn.html>. Accessed 2 October 2019.
- 3 Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Berkeley, CA: Banyan Tree Books in association with Heyday, 1975), 11.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 5 Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 208.
- 6 William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1993), 104.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 57.
- 9 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, op. cit. (note 6), 203.
- 10 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2007), 52.

## PLACES & CHARACTERS



# *‘Brasilia Is Blood on a Tennis Court’*

Julia Kristeva’s ‘Semiotic’  
and the Embodied  
Metaphors of Lispector

Kris Pint

*And when I think life is strange that’s where life begins, Clarice Lispector<sup>1</sup>*

## **Julia Kristeva and the ‘Semiotic’ in Architecture and Literature**

Phenomenology’s fundamental critique of contemporary architecture is well summarized by Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Eyes of the Skin* (1996):

*The inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of negligence of the body and the senses, and an imbalance in our sensory system. The growing experience of alienation, detachment and solitude in the technological world today, for instance, may be related with a certain pathology of the senses.<sup>2</sup>*

In Pallasmaa's opinion, architecture should be a sensuous polyphony, creating an experience of being-at-home, even in public places. If these sensual qualities are lacking, architecture becomes pathogenic.

However, psychoanalysis has argued that there is already something fundamentally pathological and unhomely in our subjective relationship to the environment, including the environment of our own body. Through the mediation of French poststructuralism, psychoanalysis influenced architecture criticism, Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992) being perhaps the most well-known example. In his introduction, Vidler writes:

*Following the lead of literary and psychological criticism after Lacan and Derrida, a number of contemporary architects have seized on this domain for their own study of domesticity and its discontents in projects that attempt deliberately to provoke disquiet and unease, to reveal the hidden terrors of the house.<sup>3</sup>*

I want to argue that Kristeva's concept of the 'semiotic' provides a kind of middle ground here. For her, this uncanny heterogeneity of the pulsional body is not only traumatic and violent, but can also act as a creative and necessary force in the creation and transformation of the human psyche, in its relationship to the environment.

With the notion of the 'semiotic', Kristeva refers to the way bodily affects and drives manifest themselves in meaningful structures, especially in language.<sup>4</sup> While the 'semiotic' does not belong to the system it quite literally embodies, it can only manifest itself through this system. In language, the semiotic can be found in rhythm, timbre, musicality: elements that are meaningless in the strict sense of the word, but reveal the presence of affects and drives. This presence can also become a transgressive, transformative force, when, for instance, grammatical or genre laws are



challenged. For Kristeva, literature is a discourse that especially allows for such transgressions of norms and expectations. In this way, literature offers both the expression of unconscious affects and drives and a protection against a too direct confrontation with these overwhelming affects. Literature, precisely because of its ability to express a pulsional, affective surplus, changes not only the 'normal' use of language, but also the subjectivities that derive their symbolic identity from language. Literature becomes an exploration of the borderlands of our subjectivity, of the entanglement of bodily sensations and textual structures in relation to the environment. As such, literature is a discourse that can transform the fixed framework that defines not only the identity of the writer, but also of the reader.

For Kristeva, the problem with contemporary technocratic, economic and scientific discourses with which one can make sense of one's environment, is that they lack this 'semiotic' dimension. This generates not only a pathology of the senses, but also a pathology of sense. No longer 'embodied', these discourses lose their sublimating function, are no longer able to express the fantasies and affects of a pulsional, desiring body. When these unconscious and sometimes extreme affects cannot be 'sublimated' in a meaningful symbolic order, they come back to haunt the self in threatening, repulsive, limiting experiences; confronting the self with a not-me that is not clearly defined and not really separated. Julia Kristeva called this the 'abject'.<sup>5</sup> Repressed on the discursive level, these desires and affects return in mute symptoms of senseless (auto)destruction.<sup>6</sup>

In her work, Kristeva considers literature as a discourse that is able to express these overwhelming affects of aggression, melancholy and abjection. We could relate this to the affective expressiveness of music. One might think here of commuters' earphones, providing a private emotional soundtrack to counter the grey neutrality of public transport and public buildings. But can architecture fulfil the same function as music and literature: a system to express the semiotic? And if we understand the cathartic



Brasilia, near the National Congress. Photo by Josue Martins Soares Filho, 2015.  
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necessity of sad music, or sad stories, can we learn to appreciate sad architecture for the same reason?

To try to answer that question, we will turn to what is often dismissed as one of the failures of modernist urbanism: Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, officially inaugurated in 1960. The competition for the design of this completely new city, to be built from scratch in the inlands of Brazil, was won in 1956 by Lucio Costa. Costa's *plano piloto* consisted of a residential and a monumental axis that seen from the air looks like a bird, or an airplane. Architect Oscar Niemeyer would design the most iconic buildings of the new city, like the National Congress and the Cathedral. The city was built in line with the functionalist principles of modernist urban planning laid down by the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) and Le Corbusier's *Athens' Charter*. But the utopia of a bureaucratic, classless, modern society quickly clashed with the actual segregation, where the lower classes lived in satellite cities, commuting to the city centre. Niemeyer's taut modernist design also ignored the dry, hot climate. The city was completely designed for motorized transport, with wide avenues and highways, but without the smaller streets and street corners so typical for the scale of pedestrian urban life. Soon, Brasilia would become a symbol of the failure of modernist urbanism.<sup>7</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Eyes of the Skin* presented Brasilia as 'the modern city of sensory deprivation'.<sup>8</sup>

As Williams argues, the fatal blow to the image of Brasilia came after the military coup of 1964: the capital became the symbol of the bureaucracy and control of a military regime. The layout of the city, as well as its distance from cities like São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, proved beneficial to the military dictatorship. In *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (1989), James Holston compared the utopian ideals with actual city life, such as the impact of this 'death of the street' as he called it.<sup>9</sup> And in his influential BBC-documentary *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes, with

his unsurpassable sarcasm, would describe Brasilia as 'miles of jerry-built Platonic nowhere infested with Volkswagens'.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the modernist 'failure' became UNESCO World Heritage in 1987, and Niemeyer's impressive buildings are still part of every historical overview of twentieth-century modernist architecture. No doubt Brasilia is an interesting case study, both for architecture theory and anthropology. But literature, too, offers an alternative way of exploring this extraordinary urban landscape, a dream (or a nightmare) come true.

### **Clarice Lispector and the Metaphors of a City**

In 1962, Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector visited the new capital, and in 1974, a decade after the military coup, she returned. She gave an account of both visits in a text simply called 'Brasilia'.<sup>11</sup>

Clarice Lispector was the child of Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine who had (barely) survived the pogroms after the Russian revolution. During such a pogrom, her mother was raped and infected with syphilis. In his biography, Moser argues that Clarice Lispector might very well have been conceived based on the superstitious belief that a pregnancy could cure the disease, which of course it did not.<sup>12</sup> Clarice's mother eventually died a gruesome death when she was just a child. It is thus not surprising that the confrontation with a mysterious, overwhelming and sometimes violent universe is an important theme in her work, giving it that sense of 'magical realism' so typical of South-American literature.

Helène Cixious's remark about Lispector's writing – 'Rather than a narrative order there is an organic order'<sup>13</sup>– also holds true for 'Brasilia'. The short story lacks any clear narrative order or plot, and indeed works as an organic texture, structured by the recurrence of specific motives. The text is critical of Brasilia: the dominant affect in the text is fear, and Lispector, too, mentions the disturbing lack of corners ('I swear I didn't see any corners. In

Brasilia the everyday does not exist',<sup>14</sup> and subtly refers to the dictatorship when she describes being frisked at the airport<sup>15</sup>). But overall, her opinion of Brasilia is far more ambiguous. When she calls it 'an abstract city',<sup>16</sup> this is not meant as a reproach in line with Robert Hughes' comments. For in Lispector's poetics, 'abstract' is not negatively connotated: 'What is called abstract so often seems to me the figurative of a more delicate and difficult reality, less visible to the naked eye.'<sup>17</sup>

Precisely because of its abstract nature, Brasilia invites Lispector to try and describe this 'delicate and difficult reality' that the city evokes:

*Brasilia is risky and I love risk. It's an adventure: it brings me face to face with the unknown. I'm going to speak words. Words have nothing to do with sensations. Words are hard stones and sensations are ever so delicate, fleeting, extreme.*<sup>18</sup>

But, as Lispector remarks elsewhere, while words might have nothing to do with sensations, they are nonetheless a way to explore reality: 'Writing is the method of using the word as bait: the word fishing for whatever is not word.'<sup>19</sup> Remarks like these reveal the influence of Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism: the belief that as the world was created by letters, the arrangement and rearrangement of words has a spiritual, cosmic dimension. It is no surprise then that throughout Lispector's text, Brasilia appears both as an artificial linguistic construction and an actual place, in an impossible, but persistent attempt to bridge language and sensation.

The stylistic figure Lispector mostly uses as 'bait' is the metaphor. While sometimes regarded as a mere ornament of communication (including architectural communication), a metaphor is more than just an implicit comparison, based on certain similarities. Metaphorical language is in fact a powerful, embodied way of engaging with the environment, connecting different domains of experience and cognition. As Lakoff and Johnson have



Brasilia's central axis. Photo by Julien Vandeburie, 2004. Licensed under CC BY-SA.

demonstrated in their *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), metaphors are at the root of our conceptual thinking, linking concrete bodily experiences to more abstract conceptualizations.<sup>20</sup>

Literary, poetic language strengthens and entangles this embodiment even more. Kristeva interprets metaphors as an example of how the semiotic operates in language: based on primary psychic processes of condensation and displacement, metaphors challenge fixed meaning, travelling not only between fields of knowledge, but also, synesthetically, between different fields of perception and affection. Metaphor is language in movement. The identification that a metaphor implicitly offers (X is defined in equation to Y); is at the same time a radical form of othering (X becomes Y, which in turn also changes). A metaphor is thus always a form of reality transformation, especially in literary metaphors, where the ground of comparison is not always obvious. This transformation not only involves the objects or people that are expressed in metaphorical language, but also the body of the one who uses them. Metaphors blur the clear distinctions between words and senses, but also between I and not-I. For Kristeva, metaphors go back to that moment of primary identification with a first non-I, a moment where the clear borders between I and not-I are not yet fully established. It is the moment the infant starts to identify with visual and auditory rhythms, patterns, borrowing from them a first structuring in the chaos of impressions, affects, drives.<sup>21</sup> Because the metaphor can, simultaneously, be and not be the sign for whatever element it refers to in reality, it allows for a relationship with this very reality that is either not yet (for the child), or no longer (for the writer), understood within the strict binary oppositions of language. Fernanda Negrete argues that Lispector's work 'involve[s] non-oppositional modes of relation that blur the ego-sustaining distinction between bodies and entities in favor of an uncanny intimacy'.<sup>22</sup> The metaphor is indeed the ideal linguistic instrument to express such an uncanny, intimate relation to the environment. This holds especially true for Lispector's description of Brasilia, for which she uses plenty of synesthetic metaphors, very often link-

ing visual to auditory sensations. Brasilia has a 'visual silence that I love',<sup>23</sup> or: 'It is a high-high-high-pitched violin. It needs a cello.'<sup>24</sup> Lispector not only compares Brasilia to music, but also to the sound of her typewriter going 'click-click-click',<sup>25</sup> blurring the act of writing with the act of experiencing a city. The metaphor gets even more complicated when the sound of the typewriter becomes that of a walking cane: 'Brasilia is the ghost of an old blind man with a cane going click-click-click.'<sup>26</sup>

In another constellation of metaphors that organize the text and conflate writing with dwelling, Lispector compares Brasilia to a language. A strange language, at the same time incomplete – 'It has no nouns. It's all adjectives.' 'Brasilia is XPTR is. . . as many consonants as you like but not a single vowel to give you a break.'<sup>27</sup> – and rigidly structured: 'It is too grammatical for my taste. The worst thing is it demands grammar *but I don't know, sir, I do not know the rules.*'<sup>28</sup> We can relate this to the Kabbalistic influences in Lispector's poetics. The lack of written vowels is not unlike Hebrew, where these are only inserted while reading: a beautiful metaphor for the interaction of the semiotic (the body) and the symbolic structure (the city of Brasilia).

Not only the borders between the text and the real city are blurred, but also those between the narrator and the city, creating indeed a truly 'uncanny intimacy'. The narrator projects herself onto Brasilia, like when she describes the city as 'the image of my insomnia . . . my insomnia is neither pretty nor ugly, my insomnia is me myself, it is lived, it is my astonishment. It is a semicolon'.<sup>29</sup> The 'semiotic' volatility energizing the language also becomes evident in the way Lispector's metaphors evolve and resist any fixation. Like when she juxtaposes her visit to Brasilia with a banal visit to the dentist. This opens up a whole series of metaphors within the same field of reference, but from a logical point of view each metaphor excludes the others: 'Brasilia has no cavities',<sup>30</sup> 'Brasilia smells like toothpaste',<sup>31</sup> 'Brasilia is a chipped tooth right in front',<sup>32</sup> 'Brasilia is a dentist's metal tool'.<sup>33</sup>



In another set of metaphors focusing on the mouth, the same shifting identification happens: 'Oh how I smoked and smoked in Brasilia! Brasilia is a Hollywood-brand filtered cigarette.'<sup>34</sup> This is a metaphor that at first sight seems logical. After all, we can say that we 'inhale an atmosphere' of a specific place, and the reference to Hollywood connotes the exquisite, unreal nature of Brasilia. But then she personifies Brasilia: 'Brasilia uses a diamond-studded cigarette holder.'<sup>35</sup> From the smoking woman 'inhaling' Brasilia, Brasilia itself becomes a woman who smokes (What? Her inhabitants, visitors?). The metaphor gets even more complicated, when the reader recalls earlier references to smoking in the text, where Lispector alludes to the typical lack of street corners in Brasilia: 'If there are no corners, where do the prostitutes stand smoking?'<sup>36</sup> and: 'Will smoking be banned? Will everything be banned, my God?'<sup>37</sup>

The same disorientation occurs in another set of strange metaphors that return throughout the text, in which she compares Brasilia to a tennis court.<sup>38</sup> Again, the poetic metaphor makes sense, as we understand the ground for comparison: the grid, the lines, the neatness, the flatness of the area can all indeed be associated with a tennis court. But then the metaphor becomes surreal: 'Didn't I say that Brasilia is a tennis court? Because Brasilia is blood on a tennis court.'<sup>39</sup> A bit further: 'Remember how I mentioned the tennis court with blood? Well the blood was mine, the scarlet, the clotting was mine.'<sup>40</sup> Underneath all these metaphors, from the dentist ('drilling'), to the smoking ('burning'), to the tennis court ('bleeding'), intrusive violent actions are suggested. And it cannot be distinguished whether this violence comes from the narrator or the city. At one point, Brasilia is the place 'where my ice-cold crimes find space',<sup>41</sup> inducing a sense of guilt: 'Why do I feel so guilty there? What did I do wrong?'<sup>42</sup>

Some pages later, the adjective of 'ice-cold' is used again, but now to describe not the crimes of the guilty writer, but those of the guilty city: 'I'm going to get you, Brasilia! And you'll suffer terrible torture at my hands! You annoy me, o ice-cold Brasilia, pearl among swine. Oh apocalyptic one.'<sup>43</sup>

'Above all you are the guilty one, Brasilia. However, I pardon you. It's not your fault you're so lovely and beautiful and poignant and mad.'<sup>44</sup> It is these elusive metaphorical fields that make 'Brasilia' such an extraordinary reading experience: both the subject (the writer) and the object (the city) are in a constant flux of identification and alienation. The borders between I and not-I, between inner and outer, become permeable. Is Brasilia outside or inside Lispector? 'So here is everything I vomited up',<sup>45</sup> she bluntly begins the account of her visit in 1974.

This uncertainty provokes a sense of abjection, of fear, which runs as an affective refrain throughout Lispector's text: 'It was built with no place for rats. A whole part of us, the worst, precisely the one horrified by rats, that part has no place in Brasilia.'<sup>46</sup> 'I am drawn here by whatever frightens me in myself.'<sup>47</sup> 'I have a panicked fear of it.'<sup>48</sup> Until the very last sentence, which simply reads: 'I'm utterly afraid.'<sup>49</sup>

As Kristeva argues, a sense of abjection and anxiety appears whenever the subject feels his identity as a separate being threatened, and the risk of disappearing in an amorphous reality emerges: 'If they took my picture standing in Brasilia, when they developed the photograph only the landscape would appear.'<sup>50</sup> In the same way the narrator feels like she's dissolving into the landscape, she seems to disintegrate into language: 'I am no more than phrases overheard by chance.'<sup>51</sup> In the trajectory of this text, the writing subject loses its fixed, delineated position from which to approach reality: meaning becomes fluid and the binary oppositions are deconstructed, especially the opposition between life and death. At one moment, Brasilia is even suggested to be the afterlife: 'I died, one day I opened my eyes and there was Brasilia.'<sup>52</sup> But in another part of the text, Brasilia stands for the exact opposite, the impossibility to die: 'In Brasilia there is practically nowhere to drop dead',<sup>53</sup> and later, Brasilia is suddenly a murderer: 'I died. I died murdered by Brasilia.'<sup>54</sup>

What Kristeva writes about the poetry of Baudelaire can *a fortiori* be used for Lispector's prose: 'The atomized Self can only be centered or written as *metaphor*. Conveyance. *Metaphorein*. Not a transfer toward an object but "levitation", lifting the self toward an invisible Other.'<sup>55</sup> And just like with Baudelaire, in Lispector's work this 'invisible Other' is given religious overtones. For Kristeva, literature indeed becomes a substitute for a religion that is able to welcome these affects of aggression and desire, providing them with an imagination, an expression in a secular society. Precisely because of the sense of self-loss both experiences evoke, the sense of abjection is similar to the sublime ecstasy of a mystic experience. For Lispector, this mystic experience is not grounded in some kind of transcendental realm, but immanent to life itself. It is the same ambiguous religious sentiment that is also present in her text on Brasilia. The topic of destructive aggression and death, which is implicitly and explicitly present in the text, is only one part of a very ancient mythological topic, where death often implies rebirth: the self needs to be destroyed in order to transform into another mode of existence. In Lispector's Brasilia we find a cryptic remark about God in which the grammatical transgression echoes this mystical transgression: 'Oh how I love you and I love so much that I die you.'<sup>56</sup>

This mythical archetype of death and rebirth helps to better understand some obscure sentences: 'Why haven't they erected right in the city center a great white Egg? It is because there is no center. But it needs the egg.'<sup>57</sup> Or other references to fertility and (re)birth: 'Pure protein, you are. You have fertilized me.'<sup>58</sup> 'Warning: there is sperm in the air.'<sup>59</sup> A bit further in the text, this theme gets its most explicit formulation: 'Brasilia is an orange construction crane fishing out something very delicate: a small white egg. Is that white egg me or a little child born today?'<sup>60</sup>

So, while there is a sense of mutual aggression in Lispector's relationship with Brasilia, the city offers at the same time a chance for existential transformation, like when she identifies herself with the interior light in Niemeyer's famous cathedral: 'I am completely magical and my aura is bright blue

just like the sweet stained glass in the church I mentioned. Everything I touch, is born.<sup>61</sup>

### Literature as 'Liminal Phenomenology' in Architecture Criticism

Of course, at first sight, Lispector's surreal and bizarre imagination seems to reveal more about the obsessions of the writer – both the theme of motherhood (linked to a sense of guilt and crime) and that of the egg frequently appear in her work<sup>62</sup> – than about Brasilia. By mixing private obsessions into her account of Brasilia, it is clear that she deforms the actual city. But giving an objective, neutral analysis of a specific place is of course not what literary discourse has to contribute to architecture criticism. Using literature as a supplementary form of epistemology reveals less obviously aspects, because it allows personal affects, emotions and associations to fully resonate. So when Lispector writes about a 'religious atmosphere I felt from the first instant, and that I denied',<sup>63</sup> this is more than just creative freedom, it is rather, perhaps, a thematic counterpoint to the rationalist, secular worldview generally associated with Brasilia. For the religious atmosphere she detects was actually there from the beginning. James Holston mentions a new spiritist cult emerged during the construction of Brasilia, the *Valley of the Dawn*.<sup>64</sup> While the design of Brasilia celebrates modern and fast forms of actual transportation (cars, of course, but also – given the form of the *plano piloto* – the airplane), it is fascinating to see that a very ancient form of spiritual transportation – the soul flight during an altered state of consciousness – was also performed in contemporary animistic rituals. But as Holston makes clear, these new forms of animistic practices used the contemporary scientific, technological and bureaucratic discourses of the modern state. As a case study, Holston discusses the ritual of a trial that 'mimicked the juridical system', staging a performance of guilt and redemption. It is fascinating to notice that this topic of judgement also runs as a thematic thread through Lispector's text, for example in the following, paradoxical sentence: 'I treat the Judge well, a judge is Brasilia. But I won't sue Brasilia. It hasn't wronged me.'<sup>65</sup>

For Holston 'secularisation does not exclude sacralisation'.<sup>66</sup> He compares the spiritist cult to the messianistic aspirations of Brasilia itself, its modernist desire to renew the order to change society and create a better future. In a similar vein, Jonas Staal argues that the dream of social engineering that led to Brasilia resonated with earlier, more religious, visions. Most notably by Don Bosco, who had a 'holy dream' about a Promised Land in the inlands of Brazil.<sup>67</sup> Staal compares the urban design of Brasilia with another spiritist movement, *Nosso Lar*, and just like Holston, points out the remarkable similarities between the design philosophy of the actual city and the virtual spiritual city. Sometimes, the actual and the spiritual space coincide, even. This is most remarkable in Niemeyer's Congress building, which for some believers started to function like a contemporary Stonehenge: 'to the moment every year when the sun rises between the twin towers of the Congress building, a moment now freighted with alleged mystical significance.'<sup>68</sup>

For Holston, this kind of religious imagination is far from a backlash, a reactionary response to the secular modernity of which Brasilia seems to be the urban incarnation. For him, both Brasilia and the spiritist movement developed in Brasilia are 'versions of the same paradigm of modernity.'<sup>69</sup> As he argues, these religious movements 'on the margins of the modern state can articulate a critical imagination for their members. They can open people's minds to fundamental conflicts at the heart of modern society and offer languages, concepts, techniques, intellectual passion, and confidence to engage them.'<sup>70</sup> They help their followers 'to acquire a new sense of self, a new structure of thought, feeling, and practice.'<sup>71</sup> Holston's remarks could also be used to describe the role of literature as a modern, secular religion, especially in regard to Lispector's work. Her modernist writings can be seen as another 'version of the same paradigm' to which Brasilia also belongs, an experimental search for 'a new sense of self, a new structure of thought, feeling, and practice'. And while religious dis-

course runs the risk of becoming sectarian and bigoted, literature remains always explicitly fictional, textual.

It seems that in its critique of modernist architecture, the phenomenology of architecture risks downplaying the ethical programme of modernism as a quest for the unknown, unexplored domains of human experience. Lispector's work makes clear that architecture, just like any other cultural artefact, can be an inspiration for such an experimental quest. Her text provides, to use the same term with which Holston defines the spiritist movement, a form of 'critical imagination' that challenges the implicit frames of thinking, feeling and perceiving.

Lispector's literary modernism is also a form of phenomenology, revaluating sensual and affective experiences – but it is a 'liminal phenomenology', as Marder calls it.<sup>72</sup> Precisely by taking into account the workings of the semiotic in language, Lispector's writing engages in an intense, extreme relationship with the environment. It can then grasp something of this 'delicate and difficult reality' beyond the normal frames of interpretation. Obviously, Lispector's 'Brasilia' is a textual construction, a dust bowl of metaphors in which the borders between body and city, self and other, fantasy and reality become blurred. But it is precisely this kind of experimental writing that generates new insights into the spatial experience. Lispector's work shows that, in order to translate them into good architecture or urbanism, the phenomenology of architecture should not only focus on experiences of sensual and emotional well-being. Her writing urges us not to forget the transgressive, violently affective relationship bodies have with the built environment. Failing to do so would otherwise lead the phenomenology of architecture to make the same mistake the modernist urbanists made: repressing crucial aspects of the human experience.

- 1 Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (New York: New Directions, 2012), 76.
- 2 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 17-19.
- 3 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), x.
- 4 See: Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 5 See: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 6 See Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
- 7 Kenneth Frampton, quoted in: Richard J. Williams, 'Brasilia after Brasilia', *Progress in Planning* 67 (2007), 301-366: 303.
- 8 Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 43.
- 9 James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 10 Robert Hughes, quoted in: Paul James, *Urban Sustainability in Theory and Practice: Circles of Sustainability* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2015), 10.
- 11 Clarice Lispector, *Complete Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 571-600.
- 12 Benjamin Moser, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28.
- 13 Hélène Cixous, quoted in: Irving Goh, 'Writing, Touching, and Eating in Clarice Lispector: Água Viva and A Breath of Life' *MLN* 131 (2016), 1347-1369: 1351, n7.
- 14 Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 576.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 584.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 576.
- 17 *Ibid.*, xxii. Quoted by Benjamin Moser in his introduction.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 592.
- 19 Lispector, quoted in: Goh, 'Writing, Touching, and Eating', 1352, n9.
- 20 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
- 21 Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 333.
- 22 Fernanda Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life with Clarice Lispector', *Humanities* 7/55 (2018), 1-18: 5.
- 23 Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 573.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 584.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, 585.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 591, italics in original.

- 29 Ibid., 571.
- 30 Ibid., 577.
- 31 Ibid., 578.
- 32 Ibid., 584.
- 33 Ibid., 590.
- 34 Ibid., 592.
- 35 Ibid., 594.
- 36 Ibid., 578.
- 37 Ibid., 580.
- 38 Ibid., 576
- 39 Ibid., 581.
- 40 Ibid., 587.
- 41 Ibid., 573.
- 42 Ibid., 581.
- 43 Ibid., 583.
- 44 Ibid., 586.
- 45 Ibid., 575.
- 46 Ibid., 572.
- 47 Ibid., 573.
- 48 Ibid., 581.
- 49 Ibid., 598.
- 50 Ibid., 573.
- 51 Ibid., 577.
- 52 Ibid., 571.
- 53 Ibid., 581.
- 54 Ibid., 590.
- 55 Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 336, italics in original.
- 56 Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 587.
- 57 Ibid., 581.
- 58 Ibid., 582.
- 59 Ibid., 583.
- 60 Ibid., 592.
- 61 Ibid., 596.
- 62 See: Moser, *Why This World*, 275 ff.
- 63 Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 575.
- 64 James Holston, 'Alternative Modernities: Statecraft and Religious Imagination in the Valley of the Dawn', *American Ethnologist* 26/3 (2000), 605-631.
- 65 Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 698.



- 66 Holston, 'Alternative Modernities', 612.
- 67 Jonas Staal, *Nosso Lar/Brasilia: Spiritism – Modernism – Architecture* (São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro: Capacete & Jap Sam Books, 2014), 57.
- 68 Bellos, quoted in: Williams, 'Brasilia after Brasilia', 334
- 69 Holston, 'Alternative Modernities', 606.
- 70 Ibid., 627.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Michael Marder, 'Existential Phenomenology According to Clarice Lispector', *Philosophy and Literature* 37/2 (2013), 374-388: 375.

# *She Always Forgot That the Earth Is Damp*

Louise Bourgeois'  
Subjectivity, City  
and Language

**Maria Gil Ulldemolins**

There is a specific work of art in Louise Bourgeois' vast and varied trajectory that arguably marks a before-and-after moment in her development as an artist. In 1947, after some experimentation with engravings, she designed a little book consisting of nine parables and nine corresponding prints, titled *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. The book is a proto-site that immediately precedes Bourgeois' sculptural and architectural work. The significance of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* as a 'a small whilst pivotal artwork'<sup>1</sup> that would influence her evolution towards three-dimensional work, has been established,<sup>2</sup> as have her recurrent architectural references. Her capacity and prolificity as a writer has not gone unnoticed,

either. Nonetheless, the question of how Bourgeois manifested a physical and emotional city, with special emphasis on her written work, remains unapproached. This paper attempts to tackle that.

### **New York, Interior: From Housewife to *Femme-Maison***

From late 1938, Bourgeois found herself immersed in domesticity in her adoptive country, the United States. The double isolation of becoming a wife and mother as well as a foreigner, offered a narrow field of opportunity for her work. Karen Koehler explicitly states in 'Louise Bourgeois: Architecture and Autobiography', that: 'She struggled to find a balance between domestic expectations and her work as an artist.'<sup>3</sup> The idea of the housewife, of the hybridity between subject and space, emerges from this period. Bourgeois' anthropomorphic buildings eventually became ubiquitous through her career. Her *Femme-Maisons*, female bodies with architectural heads and/or torsos, are contemporaneous to *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, 1946-1947; although at first always realized in paintings, Bourgeois' earliest choice of medium.

As much as the book as a finished project is especially significant to understand Bourgeois' artistic evolution – what Mignon Nixon in *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* suggests 'represented a kind of beginning'<sup>4</sup> – she had already grown interested in printing processes before that. This enabled her to choose whether to work from home:

*In the second half of the 1940s, Bourgeois spent time at Atelier 17, the print workshop of Stanley William Hayter . . . It is not known precisely which prints she made at the workshop since she also worked at home on a small press.<sup>5</sup>*

Her day-to-day life at the time was full of caring for her young family, in addition to still reckoning with the family and memories she left behind in France. She often used printing techniques to explore themes involving

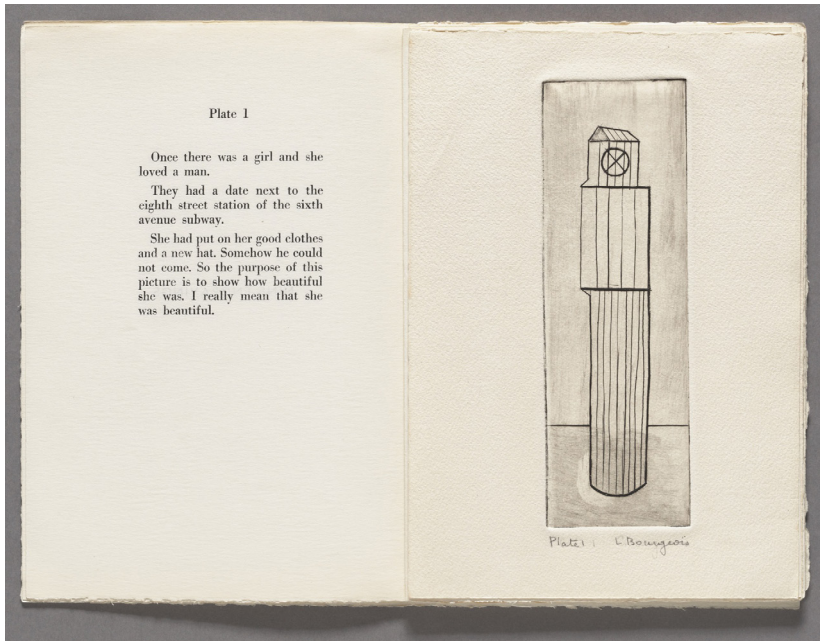


Fig. 1. Louise Bourgeois. *He Disappeared into Complete silence*, Plate 1.  
 © Louise Bourgeois Trust / SABAM Belgium 2020. Photograph obtained via the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Temporary Deposit The Easton Foundation, New York, 2014).

interior scenes: 'Though Bourgeois most often depicted daily activities during the 1940s, she occasionally introduced people from her earlier life.'<sup>6</sup> The resulting greyness in the images only adds to the ambience of the small rooms. While these were self-standing images, they begin to have textual references, too. A caveat exploring the precursors to *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* may afford insight into how much she had grown as an artist by then, but what is more pertinent here is how she developed her conception of subjective spatiality.

There is, for instance, *Escalier de 63*, 1939. The title is directly biographical, her first American address (yet, notice the use of French). It 'references the stairs at 63 Park Avenue. Louise Bourgeois lived at that address with her husband, Robert Goldwater, from the time of the artist's arrival in New York on October 12, 1938 until September 1939'.<sup>7</sup> Even though it is figurative, there is a tense sense of otherness. The woman climbing the stairs (who looks very much like the artist herself at the time) is physically removed from a group, and they stare at each other as she climbs further, alone. Given that these are prints, there is more than one copy of the image. A 'second impression is inscribed "escalier de 63 – to Babette / Tout le monde voit qu'elle est belle",<sup>8</sup> adding a textual narrative that, compared to *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, has a closer relationship with the print. Still, the text already points to a difference, the main figure is beautiful enough to attract the attention of neighbouring characters; and this suggests an estranged relationship, with them cluttered on another level, limited to a mute exchange. All, in the briefest sentence. Bourgeois said of one of her first *femme-maisons*: 'She is dignified, but she is alone . . . she has no companion.'<sup>9</sup> The same could be applied here, the positivity of her beauty is confronted, if not overtaken, by her aloneness. Babette, to whom this is dedicated, is, anecdotally, a writer, 'Babette Deutsch (1895–1982) . . . a poet, novelist, and critic'.<sup>10</sup>

Also worth of consideration is a later print, *Youth*, 1941-1944. There is another geometric interior, this time with some niceties like the patterned rug, the big window, the flower vase, the unmatched chairs. But even in this space, kinder than the previous staircase scene, the female figure is elsewhere, physically present but different. She is white, while the other two figures, males, are in shadow. She has her eyes closed, and is bent inwards, closing herself off. Her limbs almost disappear into the chair, and her lighter body echoes the wall or door opposite her. Even the figure in the middle, who is reading seated on the edge of the back of a wicker chair, seems more comfortably engaged with the space and other elements and characters than she does. In pencil, below, it reads: 'I am looking at you and you do not see me.' Bourgeois does not limit her textual intervention to a title, then – she is actively engaging in written storytelling, playing with a hybrid of artistic description and diaristic confession. There is an increased sense of alienation, it borders on confrontation, even. The placid room is the mundane setting to emotional turmoil. Designed for contentedness, it only highlights the little miseries of family life, the "tiny tragedies" of human frustration'.<sup>11</sup> 'These are people I like,' claimed Bourgeois about this work, 'this is a family that is locked together, but totally isolated. They try to communicate, but they get nowhere.'<sup>12</sup> She added: 'She is desperate here because she listens, but perceives that she's not hearing.'<sup>13</sup> She has moved from physical isolation to emotional, relational alienation.

### **'Then all came and had a good time': Built Stories**

Bourgeois claimed that the first three plates of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* dealt with 'architectural idealism',<sup>14</sup> and the following ones with 'realism . . . The mood starts out very fine, but it declines . . . it goes down and down.'<sup>15</sup> The emotion-architecture connection is undeniable. Nonetheless, the artist also stated that her 'skyscrapers are not really about New York. Skyscrapers reflect a human condition'.<sup>16</sup> The buildings in her work are therefore not meant to depict the reality of the built city, but that of the city dweller. Architecture is used to express subjectivity. This is a clear evolu-

tion of the earlier prints, where subjects were recognizably human. In *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, the characters have morphed into architectural structures, they are not contained, framed, but instead embodied, incarnated. The book deals with subjectified buildings, or built subjects.

As suggested earlier, the timing of these building-beings is crucial. Koehler points out that Bourgeois, in moving from France to the United States, changed identity, home and country:

*Her relationship to her homeland and to the concept of home was dramatically transformed by her relocation, while her troubled relationship to 'the house' as an image emerged in the art she began to make after she was transplanted to New York. Once in New York, buildings played a crucial role in the work of Bourgeois.<sup>17</sup>*

Referring to Bourgeois' installations, Koehler highlights the performative aspect that emerges from having an embodied discourse in space: 'Translating any story into an architectural structure automatically brings the performative, the experiential, into the equation – particularly those structures that do not just look like buildings, but perform as buildings.'<sup>18</sup> Although those works are much more mature, the same instinct is at play already in *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, albeit in a more naive or literal way: these are performing buildings.

In this work of art, towering structures often stand in groups preserving an uncomfortable sense of immediate space, not coming together but pulling apart. This psychological weight transferred to architecture would eventually become a typical Bourgeois strategy, easily melting into her biographical narratives. Koehler sustains that for the artist architecture is not just a theme, but 'a vital method of storytelling'.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Briony Fer elaborates that 'arguably all of Bourgeois's work, even when it does not explicitly refer to architecture, is powerful attached physically to the house as the site

of infantile experience'.<sup>20</sup> Doug Haynes also touches on a similar note, when he discusses Bourgeois' surrealist gendered influences, and her attempt to transcend them. He remarks not only on the 'infantile experience', but the girl-child experience: 'The public world of architectonic forms – always a site of certain male freedoms, a public sphere – with a memory landscape conjuring the dark interiors where the girl-child learns her place.'<sup>21</sup> Whether it is in these illustrations and tales of buildings-characters, or her later Cells masterpieces, a real sense of dwelling in a complex, embodied and, often, gendered realm of emotion is present.

*He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is not only related to Bourgeois' adoptive city, New York, in its inspiration – it had a city-based *raison d'être*. In Bourgeois' own words, it was designed 'for exposure',<sup>22</sup> as a portfolio. While this could be regarded as a reason to classify it as a 'lesser' work, downplay it as a commercial manoeuvre, it can also be seen as an event, the moment Bourgeois attempted to make herself seen in the New York artistic milieu. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is the moment she came out to declare herself as an artist and further her career. Far from being anecdotal, having this sentiment in mind adds a layer of gravity to the isolation palpable in the brief texts and 'faux-naive' images.<sup>23</sup>

Needless to say, the book as it is known now was an iterative effort. Different plates were considered, and so were different parables. Bourgeois obsessed on the structural, technical and social requirements of the work and, as a result, 'her final decisions regarding the sequence of plates, and the pairings of images and particular texts, were made in great haste'.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the texts and images were conceived independently, and with alternative options. Bearing this in mind can nuance how one reads the work, and avoid the pitfall of over-attaching the visual narrative to the textual. They build on each other rather than depend on each other.



The success of her endeavour is considered minimal. Although Alfred H. Barr, a friend of the artist, did buy a copy for the MoMA's collection,<sup>25</sup> this 'enormous effort',<sup>26</sup> the book edition, was never completed, and its distribution was limited.<sup>27</sup> Bourgeois kept the project and its alleged failure so close to her heart that she took it back up in the 1980s and 1990s, and a brand new edition finally saw the light in 2005.<sup>28</sup> Such dogged insistence in the project can only signify the importance it must have had for the artist personally, making it a life-long obsession.

### Getting Hold of Yourself: Textual Subjectivity

'The subject,' suggests Catherine Belsey, 'is in first place the subject of a sentence, the agent of a verb . . . But at the same time the subject is *sub-jected* to the meanings and sentence structures that language permits.'<sup>29</sup> The sentiment resonates in the theories developed by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who states that language makes subjectivity possible.<sup>30</sup> Linguistic structure not only subjects the subject, but also becomes an architecture of meaning, a non-tangible field for this subject to develop. The parables in *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* are not mere accessories to her images, they create a friction by being juxtaposed, and in doing so, create an aesthetic and architectural experience themselves.

Fer establishes that these dissonances, what she calls paradoxes, are 'typical of Bourgeois'. In this case specifically she points at how 'the powerful sense of interiority in the etchings is often a function of the template skyscrapers' blank exteriors'.<sup>31</sup> Inner space (that girl-child originated sense) permeates the outer space and structures. For example, in Plate 8, there is 'an American man who had been in the army' (reminiscent of the artist's father returning from the war when she was a child, the origin of many of her themes). His sickness is in an ear, which 'became almost hard' – the body is solidifying, becoming more building-like. The 'bone of the skull' behind this troubled ear 'was bored'. The bodily part acquires an affect. This sick man, his solidifying ear, and his bored skull, though, are not alone, a

'friend' appears in the story, and the friend is communicative: 'He heard the voice of his friend twice.' But as is typical in this collection, the communication is cut short: 'The middle ear grew completely hard and he became cut off from part of the world.' The odd sense of interiority (the sickness, the inner body, the boredom, all occurring in an inner space) ends up overpowering the other, outer world, taking over.

Hilary Robinson, in her article 'Louise Bourgeois's Cells: Looking at Bourgeois through Irigaray's Gesturing Towards the Mother', touches further on the idea of gendered space, by using philosopher Luce Irigaray's theory of how gender, language and space relate to each other. According to Irigaray, children, and specifically girls, 'enter language by producing a space, a path, a river, a dance and rhythm, a song . . . Girls describe a space around themselves rather than displacing a substitute object from one place to another or into various places.'<sup>32</sup> Bourgeois' personal story is intimately tied to her family homes, to her two countries, and her constant effort to take space in both. This, in a way, informs all of her three-dimensional work. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is, too, an effort to explore how to make one's space, and the risks of not succeeding. The man in Plate 5, for instance, gets literally decapitated when his body, his emotion and his built environment clash: 'Once a man was waving to his friend from the elevator./ He was laughing so much that he stuck his head out and the ceiling cut it off.' Nixon finds even another connection to this notion of making one's space, by suggesting that, in this plate, Bourgeois is directly alluding to a dream scene in 'Breton's 1924 manifesto',<sup>33</sup> and in doing so redefines her reference (and disavowal) of the Surrealist movement.

These 'schizo-stories',<sup>34</sup> in Rosalind Krauss's words, are personal and architectural, yes, but also an ode to language itself. Although for Nixon the parables denote 'a flat, affectless tone' that 'underline[s] the futility of expression, the emptiness of speech'<sup>35</sup> and, again, 'describe the breakdown of language and the extinction of speech',<sup>36</sup> this collection can be regarded

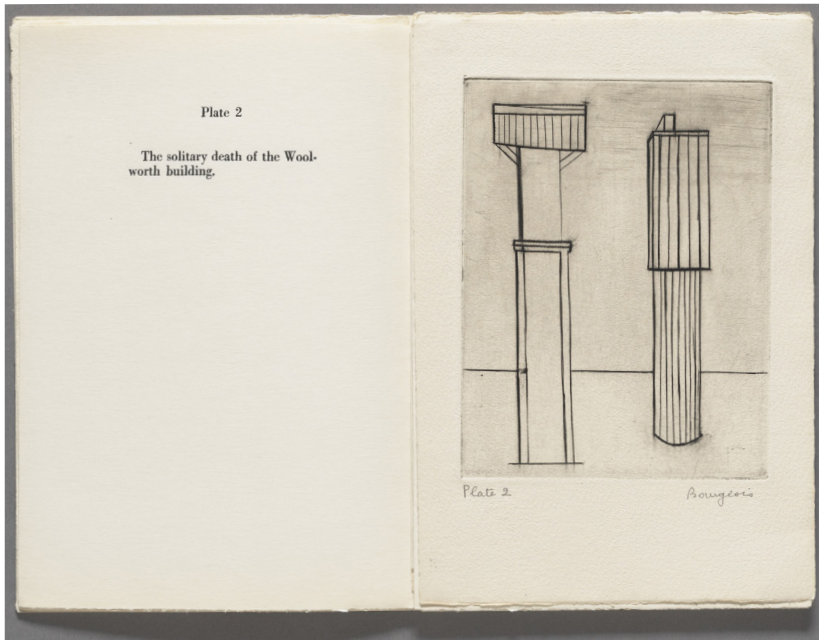


Fig. 2. Louise Bourgeois. *He Disappeared into Complete silence*, Plate 2.  
© Louise Bourgeois Trust / SABAM Belgium 2020. Photograph obtained via the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Temporary Deposit The Easton Foundation, New York, 2014).

as proof that at this point in Bourgeois' life and career, written language is a form of freedom. It is significant that, in this period of her life, she chose to put out written work. She herself made it clear:

*This is about survival . . . about the will to survive . . . I love language. I have fun with the English language because of the loving permissiveness of my family. When inspiration would come I would write one [a parable such as 'He Disappeared into Complete Silence, The Puritan' (1947/90), or 'She Lost It' (1947/92)]. I didn't do them all at once . . . You can stand anything if you write it down. You must do it to get hold of yourself. When space is limited, or when you have to stay with a child, you always have recourse to writing. All you need is a pen and paper. But you must redirect your concentration . . . Words put in connection can open new relations . . . a new view of things.<sup>37</sup>*

Words gave her the space New York was slow to offer.

Bourgeois' reputation as a writer or, at least, an artist with a writing practice, has briefly been mentioned earlier. Koehler revisits the artist's archives and ties these private texts to her architectural obsession: 'From skyscrapers to courtyards and interiors mysteriously packed with dressers, tables, and chairs, there is no question that there is an actual role that architecture played in her writing therapy.'<sup>38</sup> *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* achieves a sense of universality through converting personal fears into parables. Of Bourgeois' 'architectural sculptures', Koehler writes that they may not be regarded 'simply as translations of originating texts (events, dreams, or memories)',<sup>39</sup> as in spatial translations of the artist's words. Rather, she suggests, the architecture can be seen as 'forms that let the art turn back into the writings'.<sup>40</sup> In this book-shaped work of art, being much earlier, the complexity of this process is still being worked out, it is more literal. Nonetheless, it still manages to 'turn back' to her insights and experiences as a young, foreign woman.

That said, Mieke Bal warns, in *Lousie Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*, against mistaking 'Bourgeois the artist' for 'Bourgeois the person'. Specifically, she believes the clear-sighted, biographically and psychologically aware comments of Bourgeois the person are not to be used as critically valid:

*Bourgeois the artist 'explains' why the statements of Bourgeois the person, serious and to-the-point as they are, cannot, must not, stand in for a critical engagement with her work. They are just additional narratives that change as they travel through time.*<sup>41</sup>

While an awareness of Bourgeois' self-spinning narrative indeed requires a certain distance between the work and her own ongoing commentary, having a first-hand account of her insight can only be valuable. Additionally, it is the reverse situation, Bourgeois the artist 'explaining' Bourgeois the person that is found in these nine parables, and the universality of how she transforms her experiences into words and images is precisely what makes her such an iconic and essential artist.

In Plate 4, for instance, an empty building with three floors, plus an attic, is pulling apart from what looks like an electricity pole. In the middle floor, a knot of hair, or a burst of flames, or the idea of someone, stands in the middle of the room, static but containing movement, like a .gif, like fire, like anxiety (reminiscent, again, of Irigaray's little girl). The floors do not seem to connect to each other, further mobility is impossible. Nixon highlights this plate, indicating that it is 'as far as *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* comes to describing an inside space, to articulating an analogy between interiority and the self'.<sup>42</sup> On the left, a story about the rarity of sugar 'in the mountains of Central France forty years ago', a sky-scraper-free setting. The main character, 'a little girl that I knew when she was my mother', a hindsight anachronism in the intimacy of Bourgeois' voice. The girl would find the sugar so precious she'd dig a hole for it in the earth, to hide it and

preserve it. 'She always forgot that the earth is damp', Bourgeois deadpans, not without affection. The contrariety of being a subject, being destroyed because of being loved; damaging when protecting, alienated when opening up – all in the gap left between image, place and language.

The metaphorical space the text provides, be it a private diary or the fables concerned here, indicates that subjectivity needs an actual site, a structure or a construction that can support the contradiction and instability. Nixon echoes this idea: 'For Bourgeois, fantastic reality arises not in the unconscious mind, but through a bodily unconscious.'<sup>43</sup> What is more, part of what makes Bourgeois' work so powerful is how she evidences how a site comes alive when seen through embodied subjectivity, too.<sup>44</sup>

Kristeva, in fact, signals subjectivity as an architecture in itself:

*Think that a living being is not merely a structure but a structure open to its surroundings and other structures; and that interactions occur in this opening that are of the order of procreation and rejection, and that permit a living being to live, to grow, to renew itself.*<sup>45</sup>

Language regarded as a structure that allows for subjectivity, subjectivity as a structure that spews language. But *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is not only the site of an emerging, struggling subjectivity. It is a site of an encounter with others. Kristeva actually remarks that her 'concern lies in the other, what is heterogeneous, my own negation erected as representation'.<sup>46</sup> She continues:

*This heterogeneous object is of course a body that invites me to identify with it . . . and immediately forbids any identification; it is not me, it is a non-me in me, beside me, outside of me, where the me becomes lost.*<sup>47</sup>

Kristeva's theory could describe each and every one of the fables in the book, the sick soldier, the elevator greeter or the mother and son in Plate 9, who become estranged because, despite the profound love of the mother, the son was interested 'in something else'. Besides what looks like a depiction of dark rain and thin, tall structures, the longest of which bends into attention to its right; the text ends: 'Later on she died but he did not know it.' The subjects are not only lost to themselves, but to each other. As far as these objectual-bodies Kristeva describes, she continues: 'This heterogeneous object is a body, because it is a text.'<sup>48</sup> A subject is a language, a story, and *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is Bourgeois explaining herself to New York, where she is becoming, simultaneously site and part of who she is to be.

### **Once There Was a Mother: Conclusion**

*He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is a unique opportunity to study two essential aspects of Bourgeois' work: writing and architecture. As is customary, her work is self-reflecting, and she does not shy away from further commenting on her original intentions and circumstances. This small publication not only vaticinates her foray into sculptural and otherwise three-dimensional pieces, it also ties her writing to both intimate and public spheres of her creative practice. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* already presents the subjective complexity that is further developed in Bourgeois' career. Her experience as an embodied subjectivity seamlessly blends art history, affect, relational issues, psychological literature, contradiction and paradox, the built environment, and, even, a sense of humour. She is capable of describing New York and, at the same time, herself, through all of these lenses, achieving a personal-to-universal collection of narratives.

- 1 'He Disappeared into Complete Silence: Rereading a Single Work by Louise Bourgeois', *e.flux* (13 October 2011), available at: [www.e-flux.com/announcements/35014/he-disappeared-into-complete-silence-rereading-a-single-work-by-louise-bourgeois/](http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/35014/he-disappeared-into-complete-silence-rereading-a-single-work-by-louise-bourgeois/), accessed 19 August 2019.

- 2 'Louise Bourgeois: He Disappeared into Complete Silence', MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/collection/works/15383](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/15383) , accessed 19 August 2019.
- 3 Karen Koehler, 'Louise Bourgeois: Architecture and Autobiography', *Art in Translation* 10/1 (2018), 129.
- 4 Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2008), 84.
- 5 'Montée Difficile', Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/objbytech/objbytech\\_tech-2034956\\_sov\\_page-16.html](http://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/objbytech/objbytech_tech-2034956_sov_page-16.html), accessed 19 August 2019.
- 6 'Youth', Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/allworks/allworks\\_sov\\_page-56.html](http://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/allworks/allworks_sov_page-56.html), accessed 19 August 2019.
- 7 'Escalier de 63', Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/compositions/compositions\\_id-4961\\_sov.html](http://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/compositions/compositions_id-4961_sov.html), accessed 19 August 2019.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 'Femme Maison', Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/compositions/compositions\\_id-4358\\_sov.html](http://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/compositions/compositions_id-4358_sov.html), accessed 19 August 2019.
- 10 'Escalier de 63', op. cit. (note 7).
- 11 Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1999), 66.
- 12 'Youth', op. cit. (note 6).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 'Plate 1 of 9, from the illustrated book, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*', Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MoMA. Available at: [www.moma.org/s/lb/collection\\_lb/objbytheme/objbytheme\\_themeid-2033798\\_sov\\_page-59.html](http://www.moma.org/s/lb/collection_lb/objbytheme/objbytheme_themeid-2033798_sov_page-59.html), accessed 19 August 2019.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, 'The Interrelations between Printmaking and Psychoanalysis in Louise Bourgeois's Work', *Arte Fuse*, available at: <https://artefuse.com/2017/09/05/louise-bourgeois-pink-days-blue-days-at-gordon-gallery-125159/>, accessed 19 August 2019.
- 17 Koehler, 'Louise Bourgeois', op. cit. (note 3), 117.
- 18 Ibid., 126.
- 19 Ibid., 112.
- 20 Briony Fer, 'A History of the Night', in: Emily Wei Rales and Ali Nemerov (eds.), *Louise Bourgeois: To Unravel a Torment* (Potomac, MD: Glenstone Foundation, 2018), 15.



- 21 Doug Haynes, 'She Disappeared into Unhappy Consciousness: Louise Bourgeois and the Baths of Surrealism', in: Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (eds.), *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 104.
- 22 Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2007), 315.
- 23 Haynes, 'She Disappeared into Unhappy Consciousness', op. cit. (note 21), 100.
- 24 'Plate 1 of 9, from the illustrated book, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*', op. cit. (note 14).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Catherine Belsey, *Postructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.
- 30 Dani Cavallaro, *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 78.
- 31 Fer, 'A History of the Night', op. cit. (note 20), 15.
- 32 Hilary Robinson, 'Louise Bourgeois's Cells: Looking at Bourgeois through Irigaray's Gesturing Towards the Mother', *n.paradoxa* 3 (1997), 24.
- 33 Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, op. cit. (note 4), 91.
- 34 Krauss, *Bachelors*, op. cit. (note 11), 68.
- 35 Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, op. cit. (note 4), 88.
- 36 Ibid., 84.
- 37 Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, op. cit. (note 22), 49.
- 38 Koehler, 'Louise Bourgeois', op. cit. (note 3), 129.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 44.
- 42 Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, op. cit. (note 4), 88.
- 43 Ibid., 94.
- 44 I owe this reversed perspective to my supervisor Kris Pint.
- 45 Julia Kristeva in Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York/London: Routledge, 2004), 41.
- 46 Ibid., 25.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.

## CHOICES & STRATEGIES



# *Writing, Filming, Building*

## Using a Taxonomy of Moviegoers to Appraise Spatial Imagination in Architecture

Jorge Mejía

Spatial imagination, understood as our ability to advance visions of possible futures for the built environment, is a fundamental quality of architecture. It is obviously not an exclusive quality – several other disciplines in the arts and sciences share it. A writer can tell a story that takes place in a city that does not yet exist, an environmental scientist can evaluate that city's expected impact and performance, a politician can argue for its capacity to articulate citizens' needs and hopes. Unlike other disciplines, though, architecture is distinct in the sense that it brings together spatial imagination with the technical apparatus required to actually materialize the built future it predicts. Even if this materialization remains hypothetical, every architecture one can think of evaluates an existing spatial condition, explores ways to turn it into something else, and specifies a way to do so by using a set of known instruments and methods. In that sense, one can argue that unlike

other professions, architecture produces visions of possible futures for the built environment that are simultaneously *telic* and *technical*.<sup>1</sup>

Oftentimes, though, it would appear that we tend to take the awesomeness of this simultaneity for granted. Completely habituated to buildings and cities, we seldom allow ourselves to be marvelled by the miracle that is our ability to materialize spatial thoughts. We can praise exciting futures much more than we appreciate the technical sophistication and ingenuity required to embody them; we can be seduced by our conceptualization of built space more than by the logics and processes that lead to its construction.

Against this imbalance I perceive between our interest in buildings and the little attention we give to the means used to attain them, I have developed this article, as an approach to the technical rudiments of spatial imagination in architecture, based on analyses of works of art from another discipline. Transactions among disciplines, or the use of instruments and methods from a particular field to appraise or practice another, are a valuable source of knowledge. They can challenge conventions, refresh stagnant discussions, and offer new perspectives from which to reframe old problems within a human activity by adopting or adapting the traits of another.

In order to reflect on the means the architect uses to materialize spatial imagination, I will discuss a little-known text that has allowed me to understand the role of technique in an architect's work, and its importance in the way we study and discuss architecture. The text itself is an exchange between disciplines: as an architect I have obtained valuable knowledge from the work of a literary author, whose study of cinema demonstrates how the technical analysis of an artist's choices can produce valuable operative knowledge for further artistic action.

The writer Andrés Caicedo was born in Cali (Colombia) in 1951. Before taking his life at the age of 25, he published a couple dozen stories,<sup>2</sup> a few plays<sup>3</sup> and screenplays, and a seminal urban novel.<sup>4</sup> Overall, his writing tried to capture the intense transformations and conflicts that defined his city. Caicedo's Cali lies tense between the 'Little North' of the whiter, Americanized better-offs (including himself and his upper-middle-class family), and the vast South of the mestizo working classes. His stories unfold amid descriptions of run-down villas, breezy boulevards, sombre bars, modern apartments, stern catholic schools, neighbourhood parks and other architectures that both shape and characterize the urban environment of Cali and its inhabitants.

Certainly, reflecting on architecture and on the particularities of its development in contemporary Latin American cities based on Caicedo's stories seems like a fascinating task. In this article, though, I have chosen to focus explicitly on his study of the technical aspects of art, not on the backdrop for his stories. For this reason, I will not discuss here his literary descriptions of architecture and the city, but will rather reflect on his analysis of cinema as a means to obtain knowledge that can be used to write, and in our case, design and build.

Besides being a prolific writer, Caicedo was literally addicted to cinema. He was an acute movie critic, acted and collaborated behind the scenes in a couple of movies, founded and ran the Cine Club de Cali, and published the periodical *Ojo al Cine*.<sup>5</sup> From the posthumous collected edition of that periodical,<sup>6</sup> I would like to refer to a small piece, transcribed from the lecture 'Especificidad del Cine',<sup>7</sup> in which Caicedo developed two basic arguments. The first is that cinema is a unique artistic discipline, which deals with discernible questions based on a set of instruments and methods that are specific to that discipline and allow anyone practicing it to carry out their intentions by making concrete choices through equally concrete strategies. The second is that that specificity, and the particular choices and strate-

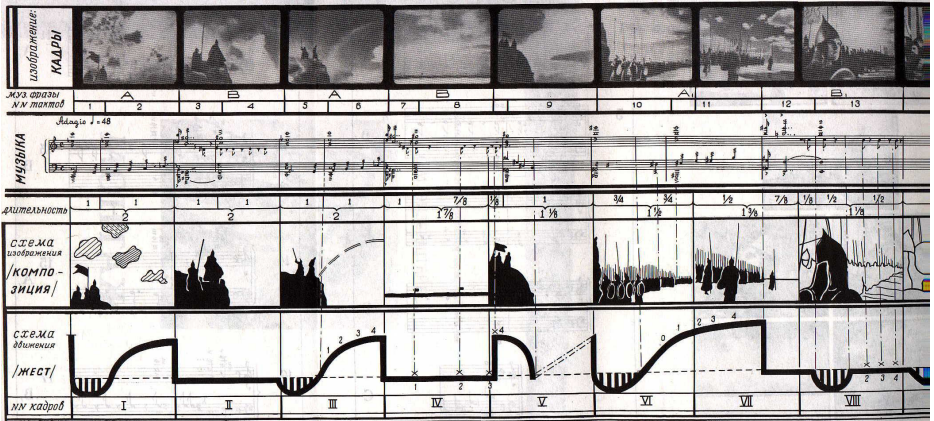


Fig. 1. Structure of a scene in Sergein Eisenstein's film "Alexander Nevsky" (1938).

gies it entails, are not evident or important for most people who enter into contact with a movie, but are crucial for anyone engaging with films with the intention to actually make them.

The first of these arguments, for the specificity of cinema, is aided by a disciplinary transaction between writing and film. As a writer, Caicedo explained the process of moviemaking by comparing it to the process of literary writing. 'A film,' he said, 'is *written* on the screen, and in two dimensions. The cinematographic unit is called a shot,<sup>8</sup> that equates to the *word*, the *phrase*, or even (in the case of the shot sequence<sup>9</sup>) the *chapter*.'<sup>10</sup>

This transaction between writing and cinema suggests that every artist relies on a series of elements, assembles those elements into simple configurations, and then into complex forms, but it also recognizes that different kinds of artists operate, not with just any elements, configurations and forms, but only with those that are inherent to their own art. Words turn into phrases and then into chapters, in a process that is characteristic to literature, granted that words and phrases can be used for general communication, but it is only in literary language that they take the form of the chapter. Caicedo's disciplinary transaction between writing and cinema equates words to shots, phrases to scenes and chapters to sequences; registering similarities but also differences between the disciplines these items are part of.

The second argument developed by Caicedo in his lecture observes that the elements that characterize an artistic discipline, and the ways in which they are assembled into works of art, is not evident or relevant to most people, but is crucial to anyone engaged with artistic practice. To develop that argument Caicedo unfolded a taxonomy of moviegoers, which draws a series of conceptual transpositions between the different relations that people can establish with film. 'Among the thousands of spectators that flood movie theaters,' he argued, '[is] the average *petit-bourgeois* spectator, who goes to



the movies twice a week, after work, always with someone.<sup>11</sup> This basically refers to folks who perceive films as entertainment.

Following, Caicedo described another group of spectators, now extinct by the demise of the large or periphery movie hall.<sup>12</sup> He described them as:

*Lumpen, who go through the entire everyday program at poor neighborhood theaters, usually in areas of criminality; take refuge in the movies to avoid work, come in at two in the afternoon, see the whole program twice, sleep, and leave at night to go home and sleep some more.<sup>13</sup> . . . [they] judge movies in relation to the practice of their reality, which is cruel and dangerous. Thus, their sabotage and heckling of great movies, etc.<sup>14</sup>*

Caicedo tagged a third kind of moviegoer, familiar to anyone who frequents artistic environments, as the 'intellectual, university formed spectator, who recognizes in cinema a powerful form of expression and ideological penetration, and that prefers, given the choice, films by lauded directors: Fellini, Buñuel, Pasolini, Bergman and left wing Italian movies.'<sup>15</sup>

'More often than not,' Caicedo noted, this spectator 'tries to decipher or interpret a message in a movie by Bergman, without noticing that by interpreting a film he is really disarming it in order to assimilate it to his reality, which is often poor and colonized and penetrated.' In similar terms, 'the Marxist (version of this) spectator judges films in relation to their coincidence with his theory of reality. If the film coincides with that theory, it is progressive, and therefore good.'<sup>16</sup>

[This] man of letters goes to the movies, most of the times, to broaden his general culture. He judges movies according to the importance of the 'topics'. Oftentimes he decides to become a movie critic, praising or condemning the results of a movie, never the different alternatives that were

available to the director, and the reasons why that director chose only one among them: the right one.<sup>17</sup>

Caicedo reacted to intellectual spectators' neglect for technique. Against their attempts to decipher and interpret messages in the projected movie, rather than to study the director's choices and strategies, he advanced a fourth kind of spectator: 'The professional moviegoer, interested in cinema as structure and trained to read the assembly and direction of images.' This spectator, Caicedo noted:

*... knows that a zoom lens<sup>18</sup> eliminates perspective and therefore groups different elements beautifully within a frame, providing the ideal writing to show a couple of lovers holding hands on a beach, or a couple of lovers who have not seen each other in 20 years run to embrace each other, and run and run and yet appear not move forward.*

Based on such technical analysis, Caicedo saw how the professional moviegoer:

*... learns that aside from Visconti's use of the zoom lens (and the actual act of zooming) to penetrate the reality of a suffering person, the excessive use of this instrument usually ends up in bad writing. This spectator also recognizes that a short lens will give perspective or depth to a field, allowing two separate subjects within a frame to undergo a moment of agitation that links them (granted that they are both within focus). This is all because in cinema, distances between different shots, as choices, are worth as much as the noun and the adjective. The use of slow motion will give poetry to the composition. The use of fast motion will add a 'burlesque' note. If the camera comes very close to the face of an actor, it tells us that that actor is thinking something important, or is ready to tell a story, and given this case, a close-up will be followed by a blurring of the image and then by a flashback. This blurring also gives the image a poetic tone in*

*relation to the passing of time, while fading to black indicates the end of a chapter and temporary ellipsis.<sup>19</sup>*

Beyond the entertainment, sabotage or ideologies that characterize other spectators, Caicedo's demarcation of the

*. . . professional moviegoer tries to capture, in that definitive and autonomous form that is the film during its projection, the moment of the 'mise-en-scène', or the relation between the movements of the camera and the actors created by the director as he films.<sup>20</sup> . . . the professional moviegoer will try to foresee possible clusters of writing (in the movie), or the punctuation of the following phrase, which will lead him to imagine the space beyond the frame, at the moment of filming. He learns, thus, to see not only the filmed object but the invisible: the camera.<sup>21</sup>*

It is this ability to analyse a work of art by focusing on the instruments and methods required to achieve it; this aim to recognize the technical process leading unequivocally to the perceived end result, that fit within my initial observations regarding the simultaneously telic and technical nature of the discipline of architecture. Paraphrasing Caicedo, a film is not only written on a script – a movie's *telos*. It is also, and fundamentally, developed through a series of actions (staging, lighting, framing, shooting, editing) that depend on a particular *technique*. His recognition of this technique as the *sine qua non* of professional practice has been extremely useful to me, not only to clarify my role and responsibility as an architect, but also to establish clearer communication with others, especially in an educational setting.

It is never easy to understand or explain how someone can envision a defined or delimited space, and can then turn that vision into a physical presence. Based on Caicedo's dissection of a movie into a series of actions and decisions that can be analysed, I am convinced that the adoption of our own version of the professional moviegoer's approach is key to appraise spatial imagination in architecture.

This conviction springs from two very different formative experiences. At an early stage of my education I was trained in a radically modernist understanding of architecture as an artistic discipline, based on a modern European definition of art as original, meaningful creation by individual authors. This understanding implied a rather blurry explanation of the way telos, that vision of a possible future of the built environment that I mentioned earlier, actually turned into a built object. Dissociated from technique, the crystallization of architectural thought was instead attributed to genius, or the ability of a few exceptional individuals to interpret supposed spirits of time and place accurately through built form. True: there was room in this interpretation for everyone to learn about materials and construction processes, and eventually anyone could build by mechanically copying known forms and employing known building methods; but that was certainly not architecture, just plain uninteresting construction.<sup>22</sup>

Fitting Caicedo's taxonomy, our teachers sometimes adopted the role of lumpen moviegoers, trashing the work of local adversaries or global celebrities from their own cruel and dangerous reality; but for the most part they acted as intellectual spectators, who explained and judged buildings in relation to that same reality – always poor and colonized and penetrated, and often Marxist too. They expected us to do good architecture, just like Fellini, Buñuel, Pasolini and Bergman did good movies, but absent the link between telos and technique, the way in which that was supposed to happen remained mysterious.

Caicedo's outline of an analytical theory of cinema came to my attention at a later stage of my education, marked by the study of analytical theories of architecture which were formulated as a reaction to the superstitious basis of modernist architecture I just described.<sup>23</sup> These analytical theories recognized the whole built environment and the entire history of architecture as a vast repository of means that have been utilized by many architects to link telos and technique. The only condition to access and use those means

is the adoption of what Caicedo described as a professional attitude, from which buildings, movies and books are understood as visions of possible futures in their fields, together with the means required to get there.

Caicedo's taxonomy of moviegoers suggests that, as happens with film, different publics interact with an architectural presence in different ways. Lumpen vandalize, average users of architecture are entertained (verbatim: *inter + tenēre* = being held within) by, and intellectuals interpret buildings in relation to their ideology. Professional architects, on the other hand, aim to identify the choices and strategies that lead from spatial imagination to the physical presence of those buildings, interested as they are in learning how to eventually make them themselves. In order to do so they try to reconstruct their *mise en scène* – their process of becoming – and try to see the invisible: a pen or CAD program that traces a buildable project, layer upon layer of decision making, like a camera that congeals the choices that support what is projected on a screen.

Like movies and novels, the process of becoming of every architecture implies choices and strategies, from which the architect must choose one: the right one. In Caicedo's terms, the professional architect, interested in the built environment as structure and trained to read the way in which architectural elements have been assembled, knows that a column defines space without dividing it, and therefore provides the ideal writing to mediate between spaces with different gradients of public activity. Based on such technical analysis, he understands that aside from Islamic architecture's use of the column (and the resulting hypostyle typology<sup>24</sup>) in vast spaces of complex public interaction, the excessive use of this element usually ends up in bad writing. The architect also recognizes that a blank wall will provide perspective or depth to a field, allowing spaces that enter in contact with it to become virtually linked (granted that they remain in proportion to the wall).<sup>25</sup> This is because in architecture, the sizes of and the distances between different elements, as choices, are worth as much as the noun and

the adjective. The use of reflective surfaces will give poetry to a composition.<sup>26</sup> The use of sharp contrasts in colour will add a 'picturesque' note. If windows are arranged symmetrically, they will tell us that the building they are part of has a special dignity to it, and given this case, will most probably also distance itself from the ground by standing on a plinth. This higher vantage point can also give a building a poetic tone in relation to its surroundings, while a simple change in the direction of pavement can indicate the end of one space and the beginning of another.

In order to appraise the rudiments of spatial imagination in architecture, as I have tried to do here, our use of interdisciplinary transactions has proven fruitful; not only to unlock potential knowledge from one discipline and make it available for another, but also to identify or conceive possible methodologies that can render this knowledge operative. Caicedo's lecture illustrates how the growth and development of knowledge in any artistic discipline, as well as the architect's ability to produce the built environment, benefit from an understanding of art that balances process and product, means and ends.

- 1 Marx Wartofsky, 'Telos and Technique: Models as Modes of Action', in: Stanford Anderson (ed.), *Planning for Diversity and Choice: Possible Futures and Their Relation to the Man Controlled Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 259-274.
- 2 Among the different collections of these stories: Andrés Caicedo, *Destinitos Fatales* (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1984).
- 3 Andrés Caicedo, *Teatro*, edited by Sandro Romero Rey (Cali: Universidad del Valle, 2017).
- 4 Andrés Caicedo, *¡Que Viva la Música!* (Bogotá: Colcultura, 1977). The novel was recently translated by Frank Wynne as *Liveforever* (London: Penguin, 2014).
- 5 Meaning both 'eye on cinema' and 'attention to cinema'.
- 6 Andrés Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, edited by Luis Ospina and Sandro Romero Rey (Bogotá: Norma, 1999).

- 7 Andrés Caicedo, 'Especificidad del Cine', in: *Ibid.*, 27-34. A group of students from the local Universidad del Valle, organized as a group of 'aesthetic studies', requested this lecture from the Cine Club de Cali, which was delivered by Caicedo in 1973 (precise date not known).
- 8 Caicedo used the Spanish *plano* or plane, which makes sense of his idea of this unit operating in two dimensions of Cartesian space.
- 9 In Spanish, *plano-secuencia*.
- 10 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 32.
- 11 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 30.
- 12 The radical transformation in the location, size and internal configuration of movie halls (from the large neighbourhood or city-centre theatre to the multiplex compound in a mall) offers interesting research possibilities regarding the mechanisms of social control in architecture.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 18 In Spanish: *tele-objetivo*.
- 19 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 32.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 22 'A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.' Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 23.
- 23 With strong bases in Italian neo-rationalism, aside from the best known architects (Rossi, Grassi, Muratori, etcetera) this formative period owes much to the Master in Architecture programme at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and the in-depth study by Carlos Martí Aris, *Las Variaciones de la Identidad: Ensayo sobre el tipo en arquitectura* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1993).
- 24 For example, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba.
- 25 For example, the colourful blank walls in the architecture of Luis Barragán.
- 26 Cf. Josep Quetglas, *Fear of Glass* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2001).

## BIOGRAPHIES

## Editors

**Klaske Havik** is professor of architecture, Methods of Analysis & Imagination at Delft University of Technology. She studied architecture in Delft and Helsinki and literary writing in Amsterdam. She has developed a distinct research approach relating architectural and urban questions (such as the use, experience and imagination of place) to literary language. Her book *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (2014), based on her PhD research, developed a literary approach to architecture. She initiated the platform *Writingplace* and organized the international conference *Writingplace: Literary Methods in Architectural Research and Design* in 2013. The book *Writingplace: Investigations in Architecture and Literature* appeared in 2016. Klaske Havik is editor of *OASE, Journal for Architecture*. Havik's literary work has appeared in Dutch poetry collections and literary magazines.

**Rajesh Heynickx** is a professor in Architectural Theory and Intellectual History at the KU Leuven. He has published articles in *Modern Intellec-*

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**Angeliki Sioli** is assistant professor, Chair of Methods of Analysis and Imagination, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment Delft University of Technology. She is former assistant professor of architecture at Louisiana State University, USA, and a licensed architect in Greece. She has taught courses at University Tec de Monterrey in Mexico and McGill University in Canada, where she completed her PhD in history and theory of architecture in



2015. Her research seeks connections between architecture and literature in the public realm of the early twentieth-century European city while also looking into pedagogical aspects of architectural education. It has been published in a number of edited books and journals, as well as presented at interdisciplinary conferences. It also appears in the book she recently co-edited titled *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience* (Routledge, 2018). The volume touches on the interdisciplinary field of architecture and literature and was the outcome of the international symposium of the same name she co-organized in Athens, Greece in 2015.

### Authors

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**Hans Teerds** is architect and urban designer. He currently works as a scientific assistant at the Institute for Architectural History and Theory (gta) at the ETH in Zurich. In 2017 he defended at the Delft University of Technology his dissertation *At Home in the World*, a study of the public and political aspects of archi-

itecture, as they can be understood from the written oeuvre of the philosopher Hannah Arendt. Teerds is a member of the editorial board of the journal *OASE*, and together with Tom Avermaete and Klaske Havik published the anthology *Architectural Positions, Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (2009) and with Johan van der Zwart *Levend landschap, Manifest voor stad en land* (2012).

### Abstract

Imagination, Hannah Arendt argues, is the human capacity to mentally remove oneself and see things from a different perspectives. It allows to imagine how things can be different. As such, this capacity is as much the source of political action as well as of architectural design. Architectural imagination - as well as understanding - might flourish when fed by perspectives from other professional fields, like philosophy, social sciences, theology, as well as other artistic fields, like literature, painting, and sculpture. In this paper, Hans Teerds proposes an exemplary reading beyond the borders of the architectural profession by means of a comparative reading of Hannah Arendt's 1958 *The Human Condition* and the novel *The*

*Cave* (2000) by the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago. By reading them together, this paper explore perspectives upon public space, mass consumption and production, and craftsmanship, which, highlight political aspects of architecture.

**Koenraad van Cleempoel** lectures in art history and architectural history at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts in Hasselt University (B). He graduated from the Warburg Institute studying Renaissance astronomy in relation to material culture. In 2017 he ran a seminar ‘Materialised Knowledge’ at the Art History department in UC Berkeley. His current teachings and research in Hasselt (B) deal with theoretical aspects of adaptive reuse; in particular the fragile continuity between past and present, for example by looking at contemporary interventions in heritage sites. In 2019 he co-authored with Bie Plevoets the book *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Environments. Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (Routledge). He coordinates the research group Trace that is also running a master program on aspects of adaptive reuse. Iconography in relationship to changing

meanings in remodeled buildings is his current research project.

### **Abstract**

This essay contributes to the emerging theory of adaptive reuse of architectural sites by borrowing vocabulary that relates to the transposition between architecture and translation. Three aspects seem relevant in both disciplines: (1) carrying over meaning with respect for (2) tradition and (3) craftsmanship. In the process of adaptive reuse, buildings often receive a new program entailing shifts of meaning; hence the analogy with the art of translation. In addition to this negotiation of meaning, an attitude to tradition is also a valuable lens to approach this transposition between architecture and translation. In particular the dialectic process between fidelity and freedom. Walter Benjamin's essay *The Task of the Translator* (1921) and T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) offers richness and accuracy to the growing vocabulary on adaptive reuse. The essay illustrates this argument by looking at the remodeling of a 1859 prison into a Faculty of Law of the University of Hasselt in Flanders. The case study wants to illustrate this process of making both the original

and the translation *recognizable as fragments of a greater language*. The enclosed typology of the prison was changed into an open, urban-oriented faculty of law. It shows us how memory can be both a generous database as well as a selective process. How memory and oblivion are two essential conditions for architecture to negotiate with heritage.

**Jana Culek** is an architect, urban planner based in the Netherlands. She is currently a PhD researcher with the Chair of Methods and Analysis at the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, studying utopia as a critical and speculative method in architecture and literature. She graduated as an architect and urban planner from the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb, followed by a postgraduate master program at the Berlage Center for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Urban Design. Her Berlage thesis project “A Flat Tale”, in which she investigated Dutch architecture and visual culture through various forms of correlations between drawings and text was subsequently published, presented and exhibited on various platforms including the *Drawing*

*Futures* (UCL Press, 2016) book and conference and the *Archifutures Vol.3 – The Site* (DPR Barcelona, 2017) publication. Aside from her academic work, Jana Culek is also a practicing architect. After working for several years at KAAAN Architects, she started her own Delft based office-Studio Fabula through which she has developed a number of acknowledged and award-winning projects. She employs her research and interest in architectural narratives, representation and the relationship of text and drawings as a catalyst for her design work.

#### **Abstract**

“Forms of Utopia” is part of a larger research investigating critical and speculative methods used in architectural and literary utopian and dystopian works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It presents one of several case study pairings featuring a work of architectural and literary fiction, which were created within a similar historical and societal context and which deal with similar issues. The text investigates and juxtaposes two fictional worlds created in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Ludwig Hilberseimer’s architectural proposal *Metropolisarchitecture*, and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s literary

work *We*. Taking into consideration various issues which arise while examining works from two different fields, a comparative method was devised which combines approaches taken from both the literary and architectural field. The developed method is based on a combination of Carline Levine's approach proposed in her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton UP, 2015) and an architectural typological analysis. By using this method, the text examines various forms and patterns of spatial and social experience which are described in the works and through which the utopian and dystopian worlds are structured. Focusing on two main types of forms identified by Levine – namely bounded wholes and rhythms – the text distills common threads, investigates how the authors propose and generate a built and social environment, and how this environment is ideologically and critically charged. While examining the various social and spatial forms which are used to build both fictional worlds, the text also explores the fact that, even though the two worlds are sometimes based on same spatial forms, one author views his project as utopian while the other proposes a dystopian future.

**Maria Finn** is a visual artist involved in practice-based research that investigate undeveloped green urban areas and landscape, as well as the relationship between literature and film. Her artistic practice explores how the surrounding environment define our behavior, and revolves around fiction, time and landscape. Many works are based on, or refers to existing fiction, often complemented with her own texts. By translating between different media, new stories are established that both complement and question the original material. Fragmented stories are presented in scenarios that convey mental states and subconscious processes, with landscape and pattern as recurring motifs. Significant for her practice is an inter-medial approach that involves several different media such as photography, drawing, wall drawing and video.

### **Abstract**

In a period when cities are getting denser while simultaneously adapting to climate change, green urban spaces have come into focus. The green city has become a persuasive new brand, and I have studied sites that have been left undefined for years, thereby provid-

ing areas with unruly and wild vegetation that anybody is welcome to use for recreational purposes. Ideas about making cities greener are not new, and there are well-known examples in utopian fiction that describe whole cities that have the same appearance as the vacant lots I have documented and filmed: the Ellstorp lot in Malmö, and the Beauvais lot in Copenhagen. In *News from Nowhere* by William Morris, large areas of London have turned into forest; in *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, San Francisco is covered with large, park-like, car-free boulevards. These examples open up for change with the intent to create not only sustainable societies but also more equality. Women in these narrations represents the unknown, a space where you can project your fantasies, that in both novels are tainted by stereotypical thinking. To me, the sites offer a space in the city that allows me to escape these kinds of projections. But I also consider these places a utopia in reverse, where the undeveloped green space resists gentrification. Instead these sites offer valuable qualities in their function as unprogrammed areas with a rich vegetation that anybody can enjoy, adding biodiversity and inclusion to the city.

**Kris Pint** is associate professor of cultural theory and artistic research at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University (Belgium). His research focuses more specifically on how literature, interior architecture and visual arts help explore alternative possibilities of living, dwelling, and knowing.

### **Abstract**

In this article, I want to argue that literature can function as a supplementary form of knowledge in architecture criticism. The phenomenology of architecture often uses literature as an ideal instrument to gain knowledge about the built environment, revealing the subtleties of architectural memories, sensations and affects. However, Julia Kristeva's take on literature provides a more radical interpretation of the literary experience as a limit-experience. Kristeva's notion of the 'semiotic' allows for a use of literature that critically rethinks the phenomenological relation between the body and architectural structures. It also allows to explore other, more associative ways of writing about architecture. I will discuss Clarice Lispector's literary, experimental and embodied account of Brasilia as a possible inspira-

tion for such an approach. I will focus on the metaphor as a way in which the semiotic can express itself in literary language, challenging fixed interpretations and connecting different fields of perception and affection.

**Maria Gil Ulldemolins** is an artistic PhD candidate in the Architecture and Art faculty of Hasselt University, Belgium. Her research focuses on the secular survival of Catholic images and narratives; using the depictions of swooning Virgins as a recurrent figure to anchor an intimate exploration of collapse. She recently co-founded, together with Kris Pint and Nadia Sels, *Passage*, a research project and peer-reviewed journal for creative-critical, autotheoretical academic work.

### Abstract

French artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) moved to New York, where she would reside the rest of her life, immediately after her marriage, in 1938. As a newcomer, a new wife, and a new mother, Bourgeois spent the first few years of her American life trying to balance domesticity and artistic practice. She resorted to producing prints, which afforded her certain flexibility compared

to other medium. In 1947, Bourgeois created a small, printed booklet of illustrated parables, *He disappeared into complete silence*. This project, originally conceived as a way of inserting herself into the creative fabric of the city, proved to be a pivotal point for the artist. In it, Bourgeois presents a cast of anthropomorphised buildings, revealing a relationship between architecture and pathos. Bourgeois' architectural characters have been well-studied. This essay, though, wants to emphasise the way architectural and personal affect are explored in Bourgeois' texts for the booklet, and the way the artist juxtaposes visual and textual language.

**Jorge Mejía Hernández** graduated as an architect in Colombia, and received a PhD from TU Delft, where he teaches design studios and researches with the section *Methods of Analysis and Imagination* as an assistant professor. He is a member of the Delft/Rotterdam-based research group *Architecture Culture and Modernity*, where he supervises PhD candidates from the program *Architecture and Democracy*, and also acts as science communications manager for the EU-funded COST action *Writing Urban Places*:

**New Narratives of the European City.** Mejía participated in the design of the **Balcony** exhibition, part of the **2014 Venice Biennale**, and designed the **San José de Castilla** high school in Bogotá, built in 2011.

### **Abstract**

How do we envision possible futures for the built environment? What allows us to imagine spaces that do not yet exist? While superstitious approaches to these questions often explain spatial imagination as an ineffable or arcane process, this article advances a simple description of how built space can be understood, envisioned and ultimately produced.

The analytical approach developed by the writer Andrés Caicedo to explain how professional film makers approach a movie, and the differences between their approach and that of the general public, are used to illustrate how architects can also confront built space professionally, with an operative intention. Both in the film arts and in architecture, it is argued here, the technical understanding of what exists, and how it has been produced, is indispensable to imagine what might or should be.

By using methods obtained from litera-

ture and cinema to illustrate the relation between architecture's telos, or its ability to advance visions of possible futures for the built environment, and its technique, or the instruments and methods required to achieve those visions, the article makes a strong case for the utility of interdisciplinary analyses for artistic practice.

## COLOPHON

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#4 Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination

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