Introduction

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Writing urban places with minor terms

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As we write these lines – during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, with the public life and infrastructure of European cities in lockdown – we are confronting a situation where personal, societal and spatial relationships are being fundamentally reconfigured. We once again come to realise how intricate are the relationships we establish with our built environment, and how much we take our attachments to urban places for granted. The coronavirus crisis also reminds us of other global crises, such as global warming and resource depletion, which sooner or later may strongly affect our living conditions.

Even aside from these global challenges, European cities and the ways people live in them have been changing rapidly in recent years, due to various simultaneous processes such as increasingly market-driven urban development, growing inequality, migration, segregation and surveillance capitalism. In order to act in this unstable urban terrain, spatial professionals such as urban planners, architects, landscape architects, heritage managers and policymakers may need to seek alternatives to conventional codes and models of spatial development. These univocal diagnoses and rigid planning methods, based on precise cost-benefit calculations and hypotheses regarding the predictable effects of architectural interventions, are no longer reliable or feasible, and often fail to

address specific social and spatial circumstances in urban places. This book is based on a strong belief that if we are to foster more socially inclusive and site-specific urban approaches, we need new ways to understand the particularities and complexities of each urban situation. Our aim is to move beyond essentialist or generalising metanarratives that have long dominated urban discourse, and to instead look for multiple, minor narratives that are specific to sites and communities, therefore allowing for a diversity of situated perspectives. A way to do this, we suggest, is to think carefully about the words we use to understand urban places. This *Vademecum* is intended to offer a set of concepts that may be useful to stimulate new approaches in planning, architecture, urban design, policy and other practices of spatial development.

The *Vademecum* has been compiled by an interdisciplinary group of European scholars connected through the European Union's (EU) Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action network Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City. This network focuses particularly on the potential of narrative methods for urban development in medium-sized European cities. The common interest of the group is to understand the urban as a complex and interim expression of culturally and historically situated social, material, spatial and temporal relations between people and their built environment. Our motivation to approach urban questions through narrative lies in the idea that urban cultures and urban narratives are intertwined: stories contain valuable information regarding citizens' socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations as much as they affect these forms of urban life. The network comprises scholars from a range of disciplines including literary and cultural theory, architecture, urbanism, sociology, art, digital studies, film and media studies, and we have taken this opportunity to collect a number of terms and theoretical concepts from the members of the network. We believe that concepts that have thus far been relatively unknown in common urbanist discourse may nonetheless prove useful for

the exploration of urban narratives and the writing of new stories.

The phrase *vade mecum* is Latin for 'go with me' (it derives from the Latin verb *vadere*, meaning 'to go'). In English, *vade mecum* has been used (since at least 1629) as a name for manuals or guidebooks that are sufficiently compact to be carried in a deep pocket. Today, the framework of the EU COST Actions is summarised in a companion document entitled *Vademecum*. Thus, the term 'vademecum' has migrated between different domains and changed its meanings along the way. This book is meant to be a positive projection and exploration of that term's usefulness in numerous contexts since the 17th century. We chose this term as a parameter for how we understand concepts as such: concepts are not stable, and processes of naming can themselves change and challenge the notions, understandings and even normative frameworks we carry with us.

Minor concepts

In this *Vademecum* we present a set of concepts that help us to explore new ways of thinking about and experiencing urban places, by introducing a diversity of concepts that might reveal blind spots in urban discourse or bring insights from one discipline to another. Different theoretical concepts are used in different discursive domains that deal with the urban landscape: they help to make sense of what happens in the city, but they also imply a specific outlook on the city. While they are useful tools, concepts inevitably create their own limited horizons. As the well-known phrase from psychologist Abraham Maslow's *The psychology of science* indicates – 'for a hammer, everything is a nail' (Maslow, 1966, p. 15) – in certain practices or discourses we have become overdependent on particular tools, or indeed concepts, and we fail to see other possibilities. This means that when we make use of particular concepts to illuminate particular phenomena or contexts, those concepts also always screen other phenomena or contexts from view. Moreover, some important notions easily migrate from

one field of knowledge to another: they are 'travelling concepts', a term used by cultural historian Mieke Bal. In her writings in the early 2000s, Bal studied concepts that were then important in many fields in the humanities – such as 'narrative', 'meaning' and 'myth' – to show how these notions changed when they travelled from one discipline to another (Bal, 2002). From the contributors to this *Vademecum*, who come from a broad range of disciplines and are based in different European countries, we have gathered a wealth of concepts that migrate and change their tunes when used in different settings. When it comes to the material context, architects and urbanists might discuss this process as a question of appropriateness in a given situation – of decorum – giving rise to the question: how can our understanding of urban places be enriched by the travels of theoretical concepts between different disciplinary and geographical locations? Moreover, how do concepts change when used in different geographical, cultural, disciplinary or linguistic contexts? We asked scholars from the Writing Urban Places network and beyond to contribute terms they considered relevant in their own fields and approaches to the study of urban places, and we have brought them together in this publication. The collection is not a finite project, but something more like a design exercise: the process of thinking, writing, discussing and editing these texts became the result itself, trying to map out the horizon of what 'minor' can mean within the concrete framework of the network.

Overall, our approach was to try to avoid 'major' terms that are generally shared – such as 'public space', 'collectivity' or 'sustainability' – and to seek less obvious terms that may migrate productively among disciplines. We considered it fruitful to investigate the local, and possibly the alternative, the disenfranchised or the overlooked: the minor. Minor terms can be major within one frame of reference, or commonly used in ordinary language, but become minor when smuggled into the discourse of urbanism, and this is how we have approached the exercise here. We also chose to include

terms not only from academic realms, but also from professional, artistic or activist realms that address urban places.

The term 'minor' can be seen in the light of our ambition to look at the local and social specificity of urban places, and to challenge established discursive frameworks by giving voice to multiple actors in the debate. In our exploration of minor concepts, we refer to a number of sources where the idea of the minor has been discussed – particularly in relation to literature and architecture, two fields that our network brings together.

Minor literature, minor architecture

The term 'minor' is taken from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who used the term 'minor literature' in their book *Kafka*: *Toward a minor literature* (1975/1986). They describe the work of the author Franz Kafka, who lived in Prague and wrote in German as part of a German-speaking Bohemian Jewish minority. German was a minority language in Prague, but not in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which Prague belonged until it became the capital of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The literature Kafka wrote thus made a minoritarian use of the German language, altering it in the process. In this way, Kafka's writing transgressed the boundaries of mainstream literature, both in his choice of topics and in his actual use of language. In many cases, such minor literature – which comes from social groups who might be seeking alternatives to their marginal positions in society – offers imaginings of new potential situations: 'if the writer is in the margins or off to the side of his or her fragile community, that situation puts him or her that much more in a position to express another potential community, to forge the means of another consciousness and another sensibility' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986, p. 17). As literary theorist Ronald Bogue has argued, minor literature – i.e. literature written in the context of cultural and linguistic minorities – often involves a particular appropriation of language, as well as the construction of imagined alternative realities

(Bogue, 2003, pp. 91–114). Consequently, this raises the possibility that such specific and appropriative literary accounts of urban places might be useful in revealing those places' societal issues and architectural specificities. While Deleuze and Guattari apply the term to literature, in our understanding 'minor' can also relate to any form of discourse that creates its own discursive territory: not only literature, but also art and theory can be used in a minor way to challenge existing normative frameworks. Each theoretical domain develops a form of discursive language that is important to its interpretative task. The downside of such domain-specific jargon is that concepts may start to function as shibboleths – that is, words (or ways to pronounce or spell them) that are used to differentiate the members of a specific group from outsiders. In academic disciplines, a shibboleth can be a concept that allows someone to determine who is an 'expert' and has a right to speak with authority, and who is not and must therefore be explicitly or implicitly silenced. In some cases, discursive language becomes tribalist: it can only be understood by those in the same discursive tribe. It is this form of discursive hegemony that the notion of the minor allows us to challenge: one might be well versed in a specific domain, but the complexity of the city requires the conceptual complexity of different frameworks, including regional differences and sensitivities.

One can therefore argue that the use of minor concepts forces the researcher to pay extra attention to this messy, contextual and situated aspect of every urban analysis. A minor use of a majority's language implies, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, an 'underdevelopment', a 'willed poverty' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986, pp. 18–19). But it also enables an intensification of the language used: partial readings, and even misreadings, can be productive. Precisely such modifications to a major discourse create unexpected and intense encounters with other domains of knowledge, establishing strange hybrids, and offering possibilities to link theory with practice, politics and art.

Architect Jill Stoner has defined 'minor architecture' as architecture that emerges from the bottom of dominant power structures and works from the specific – that which is perceived as obsolete and celebrates contingency (Stoner, 2012). She writes that Deleuze and Guattari defined minor literature by coining three terms that are now so widely used as to have become major, at least in certain areas of cultural theory: 'deterritorialisation', 'politicisation' and 'collective enunciation': 'In architecture as in literature, these traits exist in multiplicities, as both figurative and literal mechanisms, as both acts and consequences. But such multiplicities are deceptively light; they do not produce an excess' (Stoner, 2012, pp. 3–4).

If the urban forms of contemporary capitalist urban structures feed off potentially endless growth, and thus have continuous lateral expansion as their main horizon of expectation, we may see minor terms as a way of counteracting that order of excess. That which is minor may creep in from behind the scenes, in places where we least expect it. Using, debating, arguing over and taking the minor terms of this *Vademecum* into these cities, we hope, may thus unveil some of these relationships. As Stoner writes:

The spatial conditions we are calling minor may already be close by, latent within our consumer objects, veiled by property relations. To tease them out is to think outside conventional visual paradigms, to resist the linearity of time and the seduction of progress. The study of minor architectures is itself a study in architectural kinships – but not those derived from geographical responsiveness (regionalism), aesthetic canons (style), or program-driven institutions (typology). Instead, it uncovers a shared spatial code that transcends conventional categories, ensuring that minor architectures will always operate through complex multiplicities. (Stoner, 2012, pp. 15–16).

A collective project

Deleuze and Guattari stress in their book that this notion of the minor is always political and related to a collective. The same goes for this *Vademecum,* which is in a real sense an assemblage of different domains, different voices. It is a collective enunciation of different forms of knowledge. As Stoner notes in her book *Toward a minor architecture*, Deleuze and Guattari begin another of their co-written works, *A Thousand Plateaus,* with the following statement: 'The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd'; Stoner goes on to state that 'they thus neatly write themselves out of the authorial superiority that characterizes the very philosophical tradition that they argue against' (Stoner, 2012, p. 76). It is from a similar place of concern and opportunity, that we have embarked on this book project as an experiment in bringing together a plurality of voices in very short texts on minor concepts – and as an experiment in co-writing, as in this introduction – with the goal of sharing and combining knowledge, thereby breaking apart the major narrative voice of the expert or authority in order to create a more differentiated one. We are aware that there is a fundamental but also potentially awkward gesture in making 'minor' the leading and thus even major term of a project, albeit with the aim of challenging the very notion of the major.

Of course, there is a paradox in our referencing two of the most famous male philosophers of the elitist and privileged French academic tradition – authors who brought their voices together to challenge the notion of the singular academic author, and indeed Western culture's understanding of the subject and subjectivity as major constructs. We also realise that since we are scholars who work with abstract theoretical knowledge, and who are part of a privileged international academic world, the discourse we evoke has to work very hard to establish real links with the surrounding world. Yet a main outcome of the *Vademecum* as an exercise is the way the terms and voices vacillate between major and

minor, abstract and concrete, situated and theoretical, practice and academia. As the Writing Urban Places network includes scholars and practitioners engaged in fieldwork in a variety of European cities, we hope this *Vademecum* will become a field guide to bring theoretical concepts into investigations in real urban places and to formulate other concepts based on the encounter with those places.

A field guide

It is our wish that the *Vademecum* should be used as a companion with which to explore the city. While the metropolis dominates much of contemporary urban culture in Asia and the Americas, Europe is predominantly populated by a relatively even spread of medium-sized cities (Dehaene et al., 2013). These cities are highly significant for European urban lives and narratives, but they seem to be minor in much urban writing, whether literary or scholarly (Benne , 2018). They have often been overlooked in mainstream urban discourse, which in past decades has foregrounded the metropolis and concepts such as 'the generic city' (Koolhaas, 1995/1997; Musch, 2001, pp. 2–8). However, the fact that medium-sized cities are often important regional centres, offering cultural, institutional and social facilities to a wider area, is an important starting point for our COST Action network. With this project we explore whether these minor terms could be taken into the field by means of this *Vademecum*, to inspire new perspectives on the intricate social and spatial conditions of urban places. We hope that the theoretical concepts collected in this *Vademecum* will inspire spatial professionals, researchers, students and communities to exchange knowledge, to engage with urban places and to discover and develop responsible approaches to current urban challenges.
From the beginning, the work in this project was envisioned to be an open and inclusive process where we could pool and build on the existing energies of the many participants in the Writing Urban Places network. Being a European group, we are able to draw on knowl-

edge not only from different disciplines but also from different geographical places, from Lithuania to Portugal and Croatia. The project of gathering minor concepts for writing urban places is a potentially endless endeavour. We hope that the *Vademecum* will inspire a continued exploration of how other minor concepts might contribute to our understanding of urban narratives in the future. Not aspiring to be a comprehensive list or glossary, this book lists the concepts alphabetically rather than thematically, allowing the reader to interrelate them in many ways. Selecting and combining terms has been an intuitive and shared exercise, and we editors thank all of the contributors to this publication for their time and dedication – and the EU's COST network funding for allowing us to meet in person as much as in writing. Our collaborative process ultimately produced precisely seventy seven minor terms, but this is an arbitrary number that may be revised, expanded or reduced in future work. It simply captures a particular moment in the ongoing process of sharing knowledge and perspectives that takes place within the network.

But if the *Vademecum* is to become operative as a field guide – and if the project is to be feasible as a book – we hope that you will welcome this positively incomplete selection that we have made, and that you will take it with you into concrete urban contexts, add other interesting minor concepts, and explore their potential to create change towards more responsible, socially inclusive and locally specific urban places.

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