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Learning From the European City in Absence

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A FOCUS ON PEDAGOGY



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LEARNING FROM THE EUROPEAN CITY IN ABSENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In this contribution I will share with you, challenged by the covid-19 pandemic, our attempts to adapt a course intended to experience and study the European city in real life, into an online format. I will first introduce the bachelor (undergraduate) course ‘Foundations’ and the role that the excursion has in the curriculum of architecture at TU Delft. Then I will discuss how the adaption to the pandemic situation in 2020 has resulted in different approaches within the course, and reflect upon them in the perspective of ‘travel pedagogies.

Foundations

The excursion to a European city is part of a series of four courses in the Bachelor curriculum in which the *Foundations of Architectural, Urban and Landscape design* are taught.¹ The *Foundations* series offers lectures on fundamental notions and seminars in which the students learn to work with analytical methods to study canonical precedents. The course thus provides students with tools to understand architectural projects, relate them to theoretical notions and to build up a disciplinary frame of reference.

As fourth module of this Foundations course, situated at the end of the second year in the Bachelor curriculum, the excursion to a European city trip is the closing highlight in which the physical world is experienced consciously through the lens of design. Simultaneously, this excursion is an important social event in the students formation: the collective experience in which students and teachers explore the city together is a long lasting memory and important reference.

In the course, the city is understood as a part of a manmade world over time, in connection to geographical conditions. Visiting a city shows how societies and identities are shaped by the past and raise the awareness of continuity and connectedness.²

To learn to observe and experience the city, the intentional excursion does not only take the students by the hand, but, at the center of the excursion – so to say at the center of this course - is a small on site research project which is prepared, carried out and processed by a small group of students. Of course, the second year undergraduates are still beginners who are in the process of learning what to look at and how to discover architectural and urban qualities in buildings and public space consciously. But, after studying precedents through analytical drawing and modelling in the previous Foundation Courses, we familiarize our students with other kinds of city observation techniques which are related to epistemological positions. The typo-morphological toolbox is expanded to phenomenological sensorial experience, the perspective of use and interaction between buildings and people, and, the city as a reflection of society over time.



Figure 1. Reshuffling trips to the European Cities through Covid 19 Virus April 2020

The city in absence

Less than one week before the Architecture Foundations 4 started, in March 2020, the Covid-19 virus deprived us from taking our 330 students and 26 tutors abroad, to the cities of Budapest, Torino, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Athens, Hamburg and Berlin. At the very last minute all booked travels had to be cancelled and the well prepared course, that was supposed to be taught by 26 teachers in group studio seminars, had to be converted into a full remote online version instantly. It turned out we were not allowed to take our students anywhere at all, not even in de Netherlands. The online platforms Zoom and Teams were installed and from this moment we –teachers and students, literally and figuratively were bound busy ‘behind the screen’ online. How could we deal with this sudden upside down perspective?

City immersion

The challenging question became if and how it was possible to approximate the original main learning objective of ‘city immersion’: the sensorial experience of place, scale, monuments, public life, backside, culture, food, nightlife and so on. Would it at all be possible to replace the experience of a city live into remote online?

Even if it became impossible to visit the cities, the original course structure was kept: students were divided over 7 European cities; each ‘city group’ was taught in 4 groups by 4 teachers; each representing a different domain: history, architecture, urbanism and heritage. We more or less kept the timeline in which the first two weeks are to prepare and inform, the third fulltime excursion week to experience the city and the fourth and fifth week to report, contextualize and reflect.

Usually the teams of city-teachers set a direction and students can bring in their own interests, within the framework of the set learning goals of the course. This allowed for the students to get acquainted with different perspectives on architectural and urban analysis, such as typo-morphological or the phenomenological approaches. Also in this case, we asked the teams of teachers per city to find their own solutions to this challenge.

HOW TO MIMIC THE REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE OF A CITY VISIT?

Some teachers relied on historical and typo-morphological research methods to study the representation of a specific building; in the lockdown situation they held on to a conventional academic literature study. Their student groups developed valuable and thorough papers, and asked the students to explain a project through an online on site presentation. In these cases, though the general learning goals were addressed, the approach did not compensate for the real-life experience of the city and the energy of the social event of a group excursion.

While the teams Berlin and Edinburgh decided to study the intended cities from home, making use of the available information to other than the real life visit; team Copenhagen decided to move back to a Dutch city completely and study projects designed by foreign architects in The Hague, in the expectation that student could at least individually visit the city and the studied projects.

The teams Athens, Budapest and Turin decided to add a Dutch city or situation, with the expectation that comparison of a city nearby supported the flawed version of the remote online experience.

Other studios stepped away from the idea of excursion and narrowed the scope to a specific theme or method to experience the city, like the studio by Harm Scholtens which studied Gordon Cullen's notions concluded from the serial vision studies by developing similar series of descriptions and perspective drawings for Dutch urban situations.

Other studios compared and projected the intended city to a situation around the student's direct living environment. In Amy Thomas' studio, students made a visual atlas and an audio tour about a neighborhood in Athens in which stories and sounds from the city and home were integrated speculatively. For example, one of the results was a study of the immigrants neighborhood Prosfygika through a map of Amsterdam, provoking strangeness and wonder. A beautiful podcast was the result.

Another studio taught by Mikel van Gelderen challenged students to experiment how to analyze projects in the locked and empty city using improvisation and homely attributes to rebuild and represent projects. This resulted in inventive modes of presentation, such as a study of the configuration of housing types built of books and a project exhibition on the attic of a parent's house.

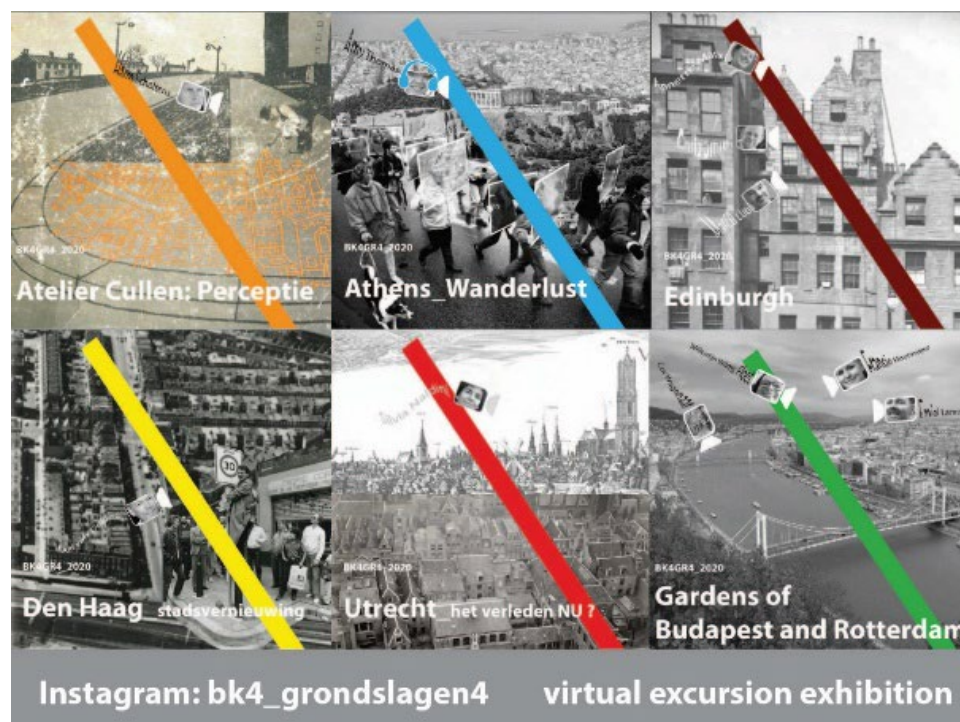


Figure 2. A selection of different approaches to study the city remote online composed by the author

City as a person

The final strategy I present here uses the idea of ‘city as a person’ to stick as close as possible to the idea of excursion, to imagine the city, mimic and invent as many actions as possible to experience the city alternatively and try to awake the feeling of city immersion. This group, that focused on Budapest, explored the use of remote online instruments in multiple ways.³

The city was walked in Google Street View: what usually is a 10 Kilometers straight section through the city that takes a day could be densified into two hours and for 60 focused students at once. But of course students and teachers missed movement, smell, sound, time and space to feel amazed, overwhelmed, or tired. And certainly, they missed the companionship that is generated through such an intensive collective walk in reality.

A theatre program was composed of music, dance and film in its best performances; explanations of the architecture and history of music in Budapest were included, which is impossible to combine altogether in real life. We also included local architects and city planners and invited them to join our online sessions. The Hungarian architect Zoltán Erő who designed the new Metro 4 line took us on an underground expedition from Budapest.

To behave like locals we collected a number of popular Hungarian television series with the help of a Hungarian academic colleague.⁴ We audio-recorded fragments from Hungarian novels.

The intended Budapest onsite research project to be carried out by the students was centered around community gardens, a topical phenomenon to incite sustainable social inclusive and green healthy neighborhoods. These gardens were used as a vehicle for studying particular urban identities from the 19th century courtyard block tissue, until communist industrially produced *Plattenbau*, and European Union supported transformations of city center urban space created recently.

Because we expected students to be able to visit Dutch cities individually we also added Rotterdam as a city of investigation next to Budapest. In the excursion (week three in the five-weeks schedule) we assigned our students to move into the life of famous Budapest and Rotterdam civilians (as spitting images) who are in the collective memory of the city and imagine a series of activities on a Saturday. Imagining the city through city heroes allowed to bridge the real and the imaginary in a playful, but serious way: history; daily and public life are related to physical structures. Via the characters living in a particular place it is possible to question the city as a person itself, how residents interact with their city, like in literature.

The city heroes were all alive and living in the community garden study area. Amongst them important city planners, architects, captains of industry and also writers, painters, musicians, photographers and sportsmen. A provisional day-program and different kinds of observation techniques were assigned to practice; students were challenged to consult resources in Budapest to get their explorations done, like consult online real-estate agencies to select a proper apartment plan, read a local newspaper online, study expressions of communality like statues and murals online, consult the public transportation systems, cook Hungarian food.

Students teamed up in duo's that met over the day online to carry out joined tasks to enhance social interaction, peer feedback and fun. We tried to think of assignments in which training drawing skills and analyzing the city got together with creative and playful imagination.

Breakfast was imagined in a Bow Wow Window-scape of the apartment where the city hero lives, a Jan Rothuizen Softmap and a George Perec Species and Spaces inspired writing exercise were programmed; for 10 o'clock students had to set a fitness-detour around the house of the hero, to be documented through Gordon Cullen's serial vision and an Edmund Bacon's way of mapping sequences of visually connected urban space. For daily shopping at 11 they had to visit a local market hall, supermarket or convenience store within 20 minutes walking from home to be mapped using Venturi's Las Vegas strip analysis and a Delft method to split architecture and daily life. For noon they had to identify a pleasant sunny lunch setting in the nearest park, for which the hero from their

counter city was invited. In the afternoon students had to plan an activity 10 kilometers from home using public transportation only, transferring means of transport three times and documenting a complex transport hub.

Another assignment that turned out to be successful especially in social terms was a one-day design competition for a community garden fence, done in city-hero-groups.

Of course cooking Hungarian and visiting a Ruin-bar (a contemporary phenomenon in which buildings waiting for restauration are used for nightlife) were the excursion ended.

The presentations of all City hero life explorations at the end of the excursion week felt like being taken to Budapest.

One of the final outcomes of the course is a set of personal made Postcards, a medium par excellence to express personal attendance in the city. Every group of students showed their findings and interpretation of the studied site and buildings from a particular perspective visually and in text: architecture, urbanism, lived city and healthy city.

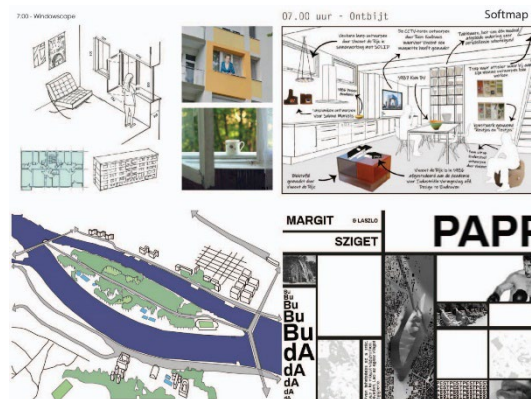


Figure 3. Virtual remote online excursion student work. Top left: Bow-Wow Window-scape breakfast scene by student Hein van der Helm; Top right: Rothuizen Softmap breakfast scene by student Ries Schouten; Bottom left: Postcard: Urban setting Margit Sziget by student Merijn Jansen using Palmboom; Bottom right: Postcard: Lived Margit Sziget by student Melati Veerman using Moholy Nagy

STRATEGIES TO STUDY THE CITY REMOTELY

To evaluate how teachers and students dealt with the Excursion course online I decided to make an online Instagram Exhibition [bk4_grondslagen4](#) in which a selection of the work is on display.

The shift to the remote online version unleashed creativity amongst teachers and students: new imaginary representations replacing the experience of the city appeared. Analyzing the program and results of 24 studios I found three valuable strategies or concepts to redefine site in a city in absence:

1. The city through home: improvisational analysis methods to imagine the city through creation like models, exhibitions and installations. Here questioning the outcome of the course was leading.
2. The absence of the city: In this strategy the site of investigation is studied by comparison, mimicking, layering and synthesizing with well-known equivalents. Here questioning the analysis method was leading.
3. The city as a person: imagination was based on ways of investigating and pretending the city via characters.

Finally, it is remarkable that even though the limitation to internet was a challenge, it was also Internet that saved the course: Besides more and more information is available online, new ways to get to know the city via online sources were discovered in this course. Conventional sources for architectural research of the built environment were complemented by websites to investigate

ordinary life. Exploring online local resources confronted students with the organization of the city, but also the foreign language, sounds, images, signs and symbols to imagine how people inhabit their city are valuable; it incites and activates imagination to get to know the city as a place to live; this was addressed better than in previous editions of the course.

REFLECTION; KNOWLEDGE, IMAGINATION, EXPERIENCE

Imagining the city is at the heart of all three strategies to experience the city alternatively.

What do scholars say about the role of imagination in travel pedagogies?

Alain de Botton in *The Art of Travelling* opens the floor to voices stating imaginary traveling has many advantages: less hassle, pennywise, and it enhances creativity.⁵ But, his characters were all 19th century writers and painters, except for John Ruskin architect and art teacher around 1860 who encouraged everybody to discover beauty by close observation and drawing, no matter talent; and then, De Botton unfolds the myriad qualities and sensations of live traveling which cannot be replaced.

The extensive overview to conceptualize traveling and Architecture by Traganou and Mitrasinovic includes a section on ‘immobility and imagination’;⁶ they list multiple architects fascinated and influenced by foreign places they never visited, and furthermore, they draw attention on the common architects fascination for the imagined world like for Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* from 1972. As the explanation they quote Mark Wigley stating that architects are essentially foreigners: ‘architecture is precisely the act of turning the world into a foreign place that makes the local strange’.⁷ In other words, imagination is core business and is very valuable in the formation of architecture students.

Kay Bea Jones promotes a critical approach to traveling experience as a process to acquire knowledge from visual and spatial cognition.⁸ She attacks the common excursion practise of ‘confirming observations by authorities’ like architecture historians or critics and claims new meaning will only be defined and discovered if the process of seeing is related to real life: subjective, intuitive, imprecise, nonlinear, open; and, in the case of education: intentional, insightful and creative.

The strategies to imagine the city take pedagogical principles regarding explorative readings of the site as a place to be and live into account. However, studying from home is a static and amputated process; discoveries in the course are merely based on creative representations of structured exercises (which, by the way, is confirming that creation is knowledge based), not on experiential notions like distance, the unexpected, excitement, discovery, broadening horizons and so on.

So, despite all the effort in searching for innovative alternatives to experience the city online, and discovering the value of imagination, we cannot wait to go again. ‘In the real world there is always much more than to be imagined beforehand’.⁹

NOTES

¹ The BSc curriculum at the Faculty of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology offers a so called 'broadly oriented' program, preparing students for a MSc in several specializations: Architecture, Urbanism, Landscape Architecture, Geomatics. The BSc-series *Foundations of Architectural, Urban and Landscape design* is composed of four 5 ECTS courses taught in year one and two. All the four courses address 'notions' to communicate about architectural, urban and landscape design; its long term development; 'project knowledge'; and, skills to analyze these projects. The series *Foundations* is supervised by Prof. dr. ir. Klaske Havik; Foundations 1 and 2 are coordinated by dr. ir. MaartenJan Hoekstra; Foundations 3 and 4 are coordinated by dr. ir. Willemijn Wilms Floet.

² Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 57-59.

³ This studio was tutored by a team consisting of dr. ir. Willemijn Wilms Floet (Architecture) dr. Fransje Hooimeijer (Urbanism), ir. Emiel Lamers (Heritage) and prof. dr. Cor Wagenaar (History).

⁴ Regina Balla, BME Budapest.

⁵ Alain de Botton, *De kunst van het reizen* (Amsterdam: Amstel Uitgevers, 2002, 2009), 17-34.

⁶ Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrašinić, *Travel, Space, Architecture* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 10-11, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/lib/delft/detail.action?docID=438448>.

⁷ Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrašinić, *Travel, Space, Architecture* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 11, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/lib/delft/detail.action?docID=438448>.

⁸ Kay Bea Jones, "Unpacking the suitcase; travel as a process and paradigm in constructing architectural knowledge", in *The Discipline of Architecture*, ed. A.J. Piotrowski et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 127-157.

⁹ Alain de Botton, *De kunst van het reizen* (Amsterdam: Amstel Uitgevers, 2002, 2009), 21.

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