

Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places

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Writing place

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Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places

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Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places

Lorin Niculae, Jorge Mejía Hernández, Klaske Havik, Mark Proosten

This fifth issue of the *Writingplace Journal* examines different narrative methods, understood as procedures, techniques or ways of relating or recounting events, and how they can be used to appraise and imagine the city. The editorial process of the issue has been developed within the context of the EU-funded COST Action 'Writing Urban Places',¹ a multidisciplinary network of researchers who are interested in developing new narratives for the European city. By recognizing the value of urban narratives – stories rich in information regarding citizens' sociospatial practices, perceptions, hopes and ambitions – the network seeks to foster and preserve the democratic, and therefore inclusive, nature of the modern European city.

To fulfil those ambitions the Action operates on the basis of working groups, focused on different aspects of the relation between stories and cities. One of these working groups is dedicated to study this relation at a methodological level, by examining and evaluating the different narrative methods that allow urban stories to be shared and developed into urban and architectural strategies for mid-sized European cities.²

The work of this group is both analytical and projective in nature, as it evaluates existing methods that have been used to narrate the city, but also explores new methods that could be used to turn those narratives into possible urban and architectural futures. In the face of migration, the depletion of traditional forms of production, ageing or marginalized populations, and the rise of divisive and dissociative political initiatives, these possible

futures intend to offer citizens meaningful, appropriable and integrated built environments. Moving towards that intention, the group has collectively created a 'Repository of Methods',³ where key terms, novel ideas and useful references are collected, discussed, revised and put to test by cross-country, interdisciplinary teams of researchers. Part of the editorial team of this issue, and part of its content, comes from this working group.

The different methods studied in the following articles relate to urban and architectural narratives, understood as the spoken or written accounts of connected events that take place in and therefore constitute buildings and cities. The importance of these accounts in the fulfilment of the network's objectives lies in their ability to offer a distinct kind of understanding, seemingly unattainable by other means. Stories are not only excellent means with which to register a diversity of viewpoints, most importantly, they are unrivalled in their ability to generate empathy among human beings. In an urban setting, the viewpoints diversity and empathy offered by stories provide citizens, institutions and professionals who are responsible for the development of the built environment with indispensable instruments and methods for the individual exercise of citizenship, and for the collective construction of the city as the basis of that citizenship.

While urban narratives can be approached in many different ways, this issue approaches them from a methodological perspective. In other words, the articles collected here examine the methods that are or can be used to write, tell, read or understand these accounts.

The issue opens with an article by Esteban Restrepo, whose analytical method combines categories of architectural and literary analysis in order to study the aesthetical interactions and effects or architectures related in literary text. Using Franz Kafka's short story *The Bridge* as an example, Restrepo explains how the author's choices regarding the role, nature, tone and position of the narrator in the construction of the story – in terms of its

situation and the sequences it goes through – produce an unconventional, and in many ways illuminating understanding of architecture.

In the following article, Luc Pauwels and Ana Ryan Moloney develop an associative method that strives to interrelate written text and photographic image as means to produce a distinct portrait of the city of Limerick. The distinctness of this portrait is defined by circumstance, and shows how every city in reality consists of a myriad interwoven stories. Pauwels is a visual sociologist and registered parts of the city photographically on his first visit. Ryan Moloney, on the other hand, is a cultural geographer who teaches architecture in Limerick, and chose to revisit the same parts of the city photographed by Pauwels in writing. The conflation of their views, defined by the instruments and techniques each of them utilized to read and write the city, not only builds a bridge between their different understandings of Limerick; it testifies to the potential of proliferative but also syncretic media, as means to capture and communicate the complexity of the built environment.

Like them, architect Kristen Van Haeren brings together information from different sources in order to describe the different layers that constitute the urban context. Her article uses the anthropological method known as ‘thick description’, developed by Clifford Geertz, as a means to analyse a series of Danish residential housing estates, with particular attention to what are referred to as ‘welfare landscapes’. Contrary simplistic or univocal registries of the city, these ‘thick descriptions’ assemble photographic images with stories, demarcations of place, archival data, analytical findings and testimonies of human perception.

The next pair of articles examines the relationship between text and drawing in different ways. Carlos Machado e Moura and Luis Miguel Lus Arana’s contribution investigates the methods utilized to develop fictional architectures in the journal *L’ivre de Pierres*, published by French architect Jean-Paul

Jungmann between 1977 and 1983. According to both authors, the assemblage of a diversity of texts and images by Jungmann and the different authors who published in the journal offers us a rich vision of place, which is able to bring together the history of Paris, the symbols contained in its past, present and future architectures, the emotions those architectures generate in their inhabitants and the practices those inhabitants engage in.

Viktorija Bognadova's article, on the other hand, tries to bring together descriptive methods from poetry and drawing as a means to deal with what she refers to as 'unknowing'. Beyond analytical modes of thinking, Bogdanova's article promotes emotional awareness and imaginative empathy, using the literary work of Fyodor Dostoevsky and the etchings of 'paper architects' Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin as examples.

Closing the issue, we have used the quintessential narrative method – talking – to develop a long conversation with architecture historian and theorist Alberto Pérez-Gómez. One of the many valuable insights this conversation offers is a reminder of the importance of the narrative dimension of architecture, as a means to define place and to generate community via communication.

This definition of place, and this sense of community attained through discourse, brings us back to the ambitions we are jointly pursuing within the aforementioned network of researchers. Despite our practical focus on mid-sized European cities, we are fundamentally concerned with the ways in which stories are able to relate and recount our lives in relation to architecture and the city.

By talking to each other to challenge our beliefs, by bringing together poems and etchings to understand the ineffable, by using texts and drawings to project visionary architectures, by producing thick descriptions to capture context, by intertwining pictures and texts to bridge two radically different

cities that coexist within the same city, and by dissecting powerful stories in order to let architecture talk to us; the articles and the interview collected here remind us of the nature of the subjects we're dealing with.

Together, these texts coincide in their understanding of human beings, societies, stories, places, buildings and cities as fundamentally multifarious and complex. Knowing and understanding them will fortunately never be simple, a single method will never suffice. On the contrary, the texts collected here indicate that not only different methods, but interdisciplinary assemblages thereof are required to appraise and imagine our cities as environments that are meaningful, appropriable and integrative for each and every one of the citizens that inhabit them.⁴

1 writingurbanplaces.eu/.

2 writingurbanplaces.eu/about/team/wg-3-methodological-framework/.

3 <https://writingurbanplaces.eu/library/links/>.

4 These three topics – meaningfulness, appropriation and integration – as goals for the built environment, will be developed in the upcoming 6th issue of the *Writingplace Journal*, which will be published in the autumn of 2021.