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Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

2023 ACSA/EAAE Teachers Conference, Educating the Cosmopolitan Architect

Citation (APA)

Sioli, A., & Cellucci, V. A. (2023). Poems in Space: A Poetry Masterclass. In *2023 ACSA/EAAE Teachers Conference, Educating the Cosmopolitan Architect: Teachers Proceedings* (pp. 336-341). ACSA Press.

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
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Poems in Space: A Poetry Masterclass

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Keywords: poetry, poetic techniques, storytelling.

Abstract: Engaging the poetry masterclass “Poems in Space: Eau de Cologne/sour theater” that took place in a master-level studio-course of architecture, this paper examines the role of poetry in exploring the stories of a place and in building students’ capacity for storytelling. The masterclass was a collaboration between an architect and a poet and built on pedagogical precedents that have looked into poetry and poetic language from an architectural perspective. The paper presents this theoretical underpinning and then proceeds to discuss the way the masterclass unfolded, both in terms of methodology and assignments.

A HAPPY COINCIDENCE

Architect Shigeru Bahn, in his lectures discussing his work around the world, recounts a meaningful student experience: the assignment to write a poem. It is usually briefly mentioned without further elaboration at the beginning of his presentations. I have seen this lecture in Athens and Montreal and both times this moment stood out to me. So during his recent lecture for the Faculty of Architecture and the Build Environment of TU Delft (where the authors both teach), I finally asked Shigeru Bahn to elaborate on this particular experience, one in which he reveals himself as an architectural student. all text after this point

The architect eagerly talked about his fifth-year course in Cooper Union, New York, with professor John Hejduk, who assigned his students to write a poem each week. Bahn shared that by following this course he discovered how “making a poem” resembles, on many levels, designing architecture. He explained that for him writing a poem starts by defining a structure and choosing words that could be repeated throughout the poem, in the same way that repetitive architectural elements appear throughout the structure of a building. Moreover, he talked about having to consider that words can have several different meanings, something that once again resembles architecture, as different elements can be used in many different ways or combinations.¹ His answer—which also revealed that he had never written a poem, even in Japanese—pointed towards the fact that poetry, like architecture, is a process—one of editing, discovery, and precision. As we further unpacked this statement with our

students, we agreed that sometimes inspiration reveals itself naturally but other times, you trust the process, knowing inspiration lurks in the practice.

The timing of Bahn’s lecture with our poetry masterclass “Poems in Space” could not have been more favorable, as it occurred right in the middle of it. Our students, who were present in the lecture, were already experimenting with poetry themselves as part of their first-year master level design studio. Even if they had doubts about writing poems instead of designing buildings in a studio course (not that they had expressed any to us), Shigeru Bahn’s words assured them of a greater purpose to our writing intervention.

MASTERCLASS “POEMS IN SPACE”

“Poems in Space: au de cologne/sour theater” was a ten-day poetry masterclass, part of the master level studio course “The Space of Words.”² The course was offered one time in the fall semester of 2022 at the master program of the Department of Architecture at Delft University of Technology. Its premise was to experiment with language as a tool of representation, imagination and design, instead of the more traditional visual approaches used in architecture. More specifically the students worked with language (in various forms from narratives, to poems, instructions, word games, etc.) and installations to explore sounds, scents, and textures of domestic spaces. After two years of strict confinement inside our homes because of the COVID19 pandemic, we thought we can look at the space of domesticity in a renewed way. Our perspective was a phenomenological one, focusing on the lived experience of the users, their perception of intimate and familiar environments and the memories connected to them

The masterclass focused exclusively on smells, scents and aromas of the domestic space. The role of the masterclass was not to teach architecture students how to write poetry; rather it was meant to educate them on how techniques used in poetry can be extrapolated in architectural writing and evoke experiential and emotional qualities of space. The poetry masterclass leader, Vincent Cellucci, was a practicing poet who has taught writing in art and design disciplines for many years. We decided that he will give students a crash course of poetry techniques



Figure 1. Coffee cups recycle bins (left) Noelle van Kouwen's installation (right) . Image by Noëlle van Kouwen.

focusing mainly on imagery and metaphor, connecting them with architectural writing (like manifestos) and presenting (oral language). Given that the manifesto, as a genre, is found in design too, it provided a neutral ground for students. He selected several short poems and the DADA Manifesto “3. Proclamation without Pretension” written by Tristan Tzara to introduce these poetic techniques and bold writing.³ This manifesto is where the courses’ subtitle, “au de cologne/sour theater,” was taken from as it was a powerful example of how presenting olfactory images and metaphors emit strong whiffs of meaning and criticism.

POETRY FOR ARCHITECTURE

As a collaboration between an architect and a poet, this masterclass was built on pedagogical precedents that have looked into poetry and poetic language from an architectural perspective. A few such examples, forming a foundation for our work were: the work of Ciudad Abierta in Chile, a School of Architecture founded by architects and poets in the 1950s and still educating future designers;⁴ John Hejduk’s fifth-year course for poetry writing, at Cooper Union in the 80’s and 90’s, which architect Shigeru Bahn partook of;⁵ the post professional “History and Theory” program at McGill under the influence of Alberto Pérez-Gómez (that until 2020 was concerned with the reconciliation of ethics and poetics in architectural practice);⁶ the pedagogies of the Chair of Methods of Analysis and Imagination at TU Delft’s Department of Architecture, where interdisciplinary connections with the literary world (with poetry being one of foci) are regularly tested within the context of the studio;⁷ and the communication, writing, and active learning pedagogy developed and underpinned by Cellucci’s previous work at the Communication Across the Curriculum (Cx) Program at the College of Art and Design of Louisiana State University, where he taught design students how to use written language (poetic methods and manifestoes included) to communicate their work.⁸

Alongside these precedents, theoretical voices from the field of poetry and architecture alike, grounded our poetic intervention,

vouching for the way poetic language can help us see the world around us (and the built environment in particular) in a rich and textured way. As the poet Octavio Paz explains in his work *The Bow and the Lyre* (1973), by liberating language from its everyday prosaic use, and allowing words to recover their original nature, their plurality of meanings—that is to say the possibility of meaning two or more things at the same time—poetic language and poems are a revolutionary action by nature: they reveal this world and create another.⁹ Jill Stoner, an architect who studied poetry before changing fields to architecture, reminds us in her book *Poems for Architects* (2001) that “poems do not occupy space; they create it.”¹⁰ She argues that “modern poems are food for design” and connects this to architecture by arguing that “both modern poetry and modern architecture have professed to relinquish the function of storytelling,”¹¹ reminding us that the majority of architects nowadays do not storytell anymore. Architectural theoretician Alberto Pérez-Gómez has many times addressed this in his work as well, pointing to the disconnect of architecture and storytelling along with the negative consequences of this reality. He argues that the reduction of buildings to pragmatic institutional shelters, their transformation into tools of political domination, technological efficiency, or economic gain were an obvious consequence of a mentality that rejected poetry as a legitimate form of knowledge and denied the importance of storytelling for man in coming to terms with the ambivalence of life itself.¹² Restoring the possibility for storytelling was paramount to us in the framework of the masterclass. Our masterclass intended to foster architectural students’ capacity for poetic storytelling, a storytelling that explores and highlights the lived experience of place and depends on poetry’s use of concrete imagery that appeals to our senses directly.

POETRY IN ACTION

We started by noticing different language types (e.g., abstract, concrete) and defined the differences between abstract and figurative language relying on the concrete, explaining the capacity of the latter to appeal to our experiences and capture



Figure 2. Price tags attached on collection chairs. Image by Maja Liro.

our imagination more vividly. We continued by looking at poetic or techniques (e.g., juxtaposition, personification), identifying them and discussing how they can connect to architectural storytelling. We talked about imagery (meaning the elements of a poem that invoke the senses in order to create a mental image) and explored the potential for imagery in an architectural description of space. We tested for example how students can create an evocative and sensorial description of an imagined space appealing to the audience's senses and emotions. We focused on metaphors. We discussed how by connecting two similarly unconnected elements or notions, and thus creating one, we can open up imaginative possibilities for spatial thinking. We examined how metaphors in language could serve as a design tool that envisions unexpected combinations of spaces, programs and materials, in ways that can forward our architectural sensibility.

Connecting these notions tighter with a focus on smell and olfactory spatial qualities, we invited the students to envision spaces where smells and tastes are dominant, like for example their kitchens. We asked them to create lines (un beholden to grammar) that describe these spaces or their smells through imagery and metaphors and edit them by incorporating their peer's feedback. "The morning breath of oatmeal suffocating the kitchen air," the "blue-collar coffee maker pulling double shifts on the heavy counter," and "the vanishing species of jars full of herbs in the open cardboards" emerged through the student's joyful and experimentative responses to our prompts.¹³ We worked with these lines, improving and evaluating their evocativeness

as a class by relying on our now common vocabulary for poetic techniques.

Following this initial work, we invited the students to walk the hallways of our School and create olfactory maps, maps of scents, smells, and aromas. For our purposes, maps were meant to be made by words alone communicating in parallel the way the smells spread in space, both in plan and section. Multiple iterations led to results that offered a unique reading of the place. The charted smells revealed traces of stories related to activities that were no longer present in space, stories connected to people's customs and everyday routines. The smells of the materials in the School's Model Hall were reminiscent of past assignments and projects, for example. Moreover, the noted smells brought forward memories of other smells familiar to the students, smells from their homes or the city that served as references in order to describe the School's olfactory landscape. The maps led to the creation of narratives that communicate the life of the building, with the students using techniques like personification to give voice to inanimate elements, like the microwave, the floor, even the toilets.

WRITING A POEM IN SPACE

Building on these narratives, we asked the students to proceed with the writing of a poem. The poem was meant to portray the smells of the School, their presence in space, the way they influence our experience of it, and the way they connect and bring forward memories of smells from other places. The poems had to include imagery, metaphors, and/or other instances of figurative language to capture smells from the space of the School and the spaces of their memories. This connection between the existing and remembered smells pointed to the fact—and made the students aware—that olfactory memories interfere with our perception of smells enhancing our experience of a place. After multiple iterations and editing of the poems, the students were prompted to imagine their words inhabiting, three-dimensionally, space within the School. Their task was to pick one stanza or a few lines from their poem and create a small-scale installation that would place them in the building. Questions of scale and the word's materiality imbued the conversation. The students soon realized that the content of their poems, the medium used to write their stanzas in space, and the location in the building itself, could creatively inform each other.

Noëlle van Kouwen was always mindful of the smells emitted by the multiple recycle bins, specifically for coffee and teacups, spread all over our building. Her poem described these bins and their olfactory presence in space. She selected the lines:

The restless reek of
 russet rot razzle dazzles
 amidst the drops...



Figure 3. Maja Liro's price tags. Image by Mishca Mannot.

For her installation, Noëlle created round surfaces out of translucent plexiglass, which she placed at the openings of the bins. She etched the words of her verse in each one of these surfaces and then poured tea in them for the smell to come out even more strongly (figure 1). Students and faculty who tried to open and use this recycle bin were welcomed by a strong scent of tea and Noëlle's words, and were temporarily unable to recycle their cups.

Maja Liro's poem talked about the fresh smells of materials like wood and metal that prevail in the School's Model Hall. It also talked about the models, structures and spaces these smells make her aspire to create, ignoring all the practical and financial difficulties. The line she selected to spatialize was:

freshly folded
fantasy with a
forgotten price tag...

Maja created various price tags on which she wrote this verse and placed them on the various designer's chairs that are under permanent exhibition in one of the building's hallways (figures 2 & 3). She wanted to comment on the possible discrepancies

between the original imaginative ideas of all these designers and the final outcomes of their work, as shaped by material, financial and practical constraints.

Sepher Asadi's poem talked about smells that he could trace in the building and what they reminded him of. He excerpted this couplet:

Agarwood scoffs
at his foggy faith

Sepher then created a small astray looking container. Reading his poem, he lit pieces of agarwood. As soon as the pieces were slowly burning, he closed the container with a transparent acrylic lid with the line laser etched on it. The smoke coming from the agarwood below, clouded the lid surface and made the line pop. He did this short performance, on a black communal table in the School equipped with chairs that are designed by the Dutch artist and designer Maarten Baas to look purposefully as if they are burned (figure 4 & 5).¹⁴

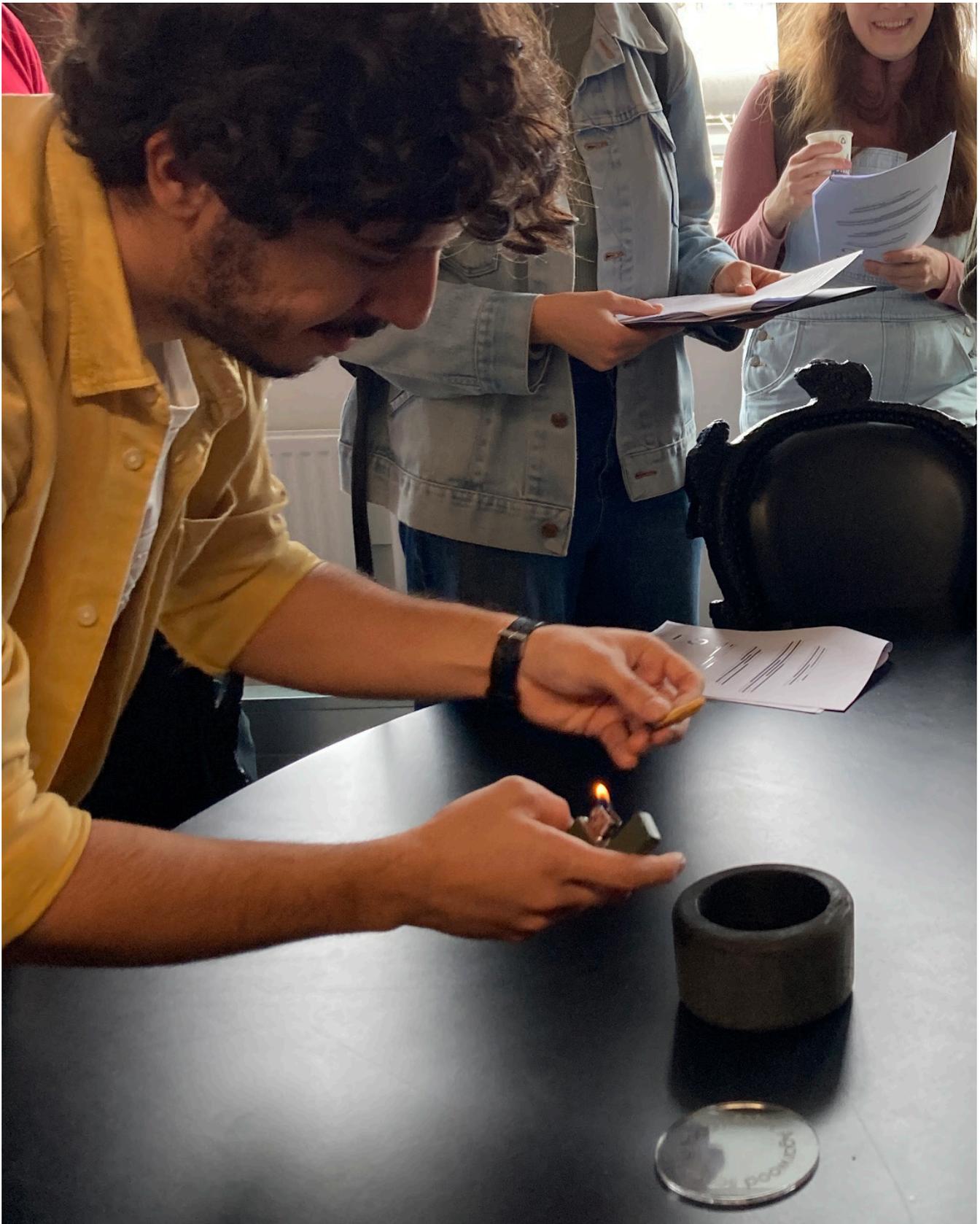


Figure 4. Sepher Asadi lighting up pieces of agarwood . Image by Angeliki Sioli.

A POETRY READING FOR ARCHITECTURE

The final review of the masterclass functioned as a site-specific poetry reading. We walked across the building, to the locations where the stanzas were installed, and the students recited their work, giving us an experience that begins to create their sense of smell and how it connects with place. The guests were both architects and poets. The conversation oscillated between the immaterial world of poetry and the material word of architecture and the way the one informs the other, cultivating architects' capacity for a storytelling that is poetic and evocative. Our collective observation was that on one level, the students discovered and narrated the stories of the place itself, sharpening their observational skills. On another level, they created and shared stories of the place's olfactory characteristics, employing poetry to express elusive but important spatial qualities. Such knowledge not only fine-tuned their sensibilities as future designers but also empowered their capacity to communicate in expressive ways, ways that can transmit palpably to multiple audiences the spatial qualities the students (and future architects) imagine when designing.



Figure 5. Sepher Asadi's installation. Image by Mishca Mannot.

ENDNOTES

1. Shigeru Bahn, "Balancing Architectural Works and Social Contribution" (lecture, Delft University of Technology, Delft, South Holland, October 12, 2022)
2. "The Space of Words" was awarded the 2021 Comenius Teaching Fellowship by the Dutch Ministry of Education and Culture
3. Motherwell, Robert, ed. *The DADA Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 82-83.
4. Oscar Andrade Castro & Reyes Gil, "The Word that Builds: Poetry and Practice at the School of Valparaíso," in *Writingplace: Journal for Architecture and Literature*, 2018(1), 29-47.
5. John Hedjuk, *Aesop's Fables*, (New York, Rizzoli, 1991), 3-4.
6. For more visit the program's website: <https://www.mcgill.ca/architecture/programs/post-professional/prospective-students/architectural-history-theory>
7. For more visit the Chair's website: <https://www.tudelft.nl/bk/over-faculteit/afdelingen/architectuur/organisatie/groepen/methods-of-analysis-and-imagination>
8. For more on the CxC program see: <https://www.lsu.edu/academicaffairs/cxc/about-cxc.php>
9. Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre: the Poem, the Poetic Revolution, Poetry and History*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press, 1973), 37.
10. Jill Stoner, *Poems for Architects: An Anthology* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2001), 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
12. Alberto Perez-Gomez, "The Architecture of Richard Henriquez: A Praxis of Personal Memory," in *Richard Henriquez: Memory Theatre*, ed. Howard Shubert, catalog of the exhibition co-organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Canadian Centre of Architecture, Montreal, 1993, 7.
13. Excerpts from the students' notebooks, "Poems in Space: Au de Cologne/sour theater," for the MSc1 studio "The Space of Words," Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, Fall 2022.
14. For more on Maarten Baas' work see: <https://maartenbaas.com/>