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BETWEEN LITERATURE AND ARCHITECTURE

Writing as a Mode of Investigation

Klaske Havik in conversation with Suzanne Harris-Brandts and Isabel Potworowski

Literary writing as a mode of analysis

Klaske Havik

We could distinguish two possible approaches to using literature as an (un)common precedent for design. The first departs from literature as a source of knowledge, that is, studying how buildings and places are described in literature, whether fictional or real. We can find a beautiful example of an inspiring house in literature in the novels of the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2015). The house of the Buendía family in the fictional town of Macondo in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is an architectural object that seems to withstand common processes of aging and escape time.¹ Its courtyard and veranda not only store heat or moisture but also witness raging apocalyptic storms; above all, they accumulate stories.²

The second approach is using literary writing as a mode of analysis. Writing can be used to understand how architecture stirs our senses, affects our perception, touches us emotionally, and provides a backdrop for social interaction. Literary writing can foreground aspects that cannot always be shown in a conventional drawing, such as the social and temporal dimensions as well as the atmospheres of place. In my lecture for the *(Un)Common Precedents* conference, I showed how I used poetic language to describe the Mercado Libertad (1956–1958) by Alejandro Zohn (1930–2000) in Guadalajara, Mexico, a building buzzing with activity.³ Poetic language lends itself well to describing its colours, rhythms, and details of everyday life. I also showed how I used script writing to describe the social scenes around the Virgilio Barco Library in Bogotá, Colombia,⁴ the last realised project of architect Rogelio Salmona (1929–2007), from 2001. By means of short scenes, specifying characters and different times of day, I could evoke how one enters the building through the landscape, how the building plays a social role in the city, and how the library offers an almost serene place of tranquility in the metropolis of Bogotá.

Klaske Havik in Conversation with Suzanne Harris-Brandts and Isabel Potworowski

[Isabel Potworowski] What insights can be gained from studying fictional buildings, such as those you mentioned in the work of Gabriel García Márquez, as opposed to built ones?

[Klaske Havik] Studying precedents is not only about learning how something can be realised but also about becoming familiar with a way of thinking about design. Studying the fictional library in Umberto Eco's (1932–2016) *The Name of the Rose* (1980) can tell you about the mystic quality that a library could have, about showing hidden things, about shadow, about sound—aspects that might inform the qualities of a library, or things to avoid. For his project for a library, one of my graduate students, Davide Perottoni, studied Eco's library, as well as Jorge Luis Borges' (1899–1986) *The Library of Babel* (1941).⁵ While learning from those fictional libraries, Davide also analysed how his study area in Meran, Northern Italy, was depicted in local literature: accounts of the local Italian and German communities, as well as literary descriptions of the area by known nineteenth-century writers who frequented the town, such as Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and Franz Kafka (1883–1924).⁶

Another example of a fictional house that has served as a 'precedent' for architectural studies is the house in the novel *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Danielewski.⁷ A family moves into the house, and the husband realises, when he measures it, that the house is bigger inside than outside. He starts to discover hidden and impossible spaces, such as a basement with a haunted spiral staircase that continuously seems to change dimensions, as one of the protagonists states: "[e]verything here is constantly shifting. It took Holloway, Jed, and Wax almost four days to reach the bottom of the staircase, and yet we made it down in five minutes. The thing collapsed like an accordion."⁸ It is about the suspense derived from spaces and how our perception can be altered. The house in Danielewski's novel proved an inspiring precedent for understanding spatial experience, sensory perception, how our perception of time changes when it is dark, and the paranoia that can result when spaces are not how we expect them to be. My graduate student, Mike Schäfer, used the insights on sensory perception and disorientation found in the novel to design a training centre for the visually impaired. The spatial descriptions in the novel that dealt with disorientation and spaces of sound helped him consider how to work with sounds and textures for spatial orientation.⁹

[Isabel Potworowski] Regarding the second approach that you discussed, where literary writing is used as a tool for analysis—what might one learn from studying a building through such means, as compared to more common tools such as, for instance, architectural drawings?

[Klaske Havik] Writing can address multisensory perception and our emotional responses to a building. It can also describe how architecture serves as a background for social interaction. Literary writing allows us to think from the perspective of different characters, users, and communities. Writing, particularly poetry, can also bring to the fore a sense of detail, as I have discussed in my work.¹⁰ It can question different temporalities, simultaneities, conflicts, and the layers of a site, which cannot be analysed easily through plans, sections, and axonometries.

In literary writing, there is always a layer of interpretation. This approach is not meant to be scientific and all-encompassing; rather, it complements factual information about a place, such as measurements or demographic data, with more experiential knowledge. In the short narrative pieces for the library in Bogota that I wrote, I could not possibly interview all the library visitors; instead, I picked one sample to bring awareness to these experiential aspects anecdotally. In this way, literary writing foregrounds the relationship between people and their environment, seeing architecture not as an object, but as something that affects the people who use it and vice versa.

[*Isabel Potworowski*] How would you compare the literary approach with other methods of studying the relationship between people and their environment, such as anthropology?
 [*Klaske Havik*] It is essentially about how we can see through the eyes of another. Writing from the perspective of another character can help us to bring empathy into design. My description of the marketplace in Guadalajara included some of its daily users and visitors—such as the salespeople who would arrive early with their vans and then build their stands and daily routines. How do these activities unfold in time and space from their perspective? When writing these descriptions, I combined my observations of the architecture and logistics of this marketplace with my perception of the building in material and social terms.

The project “Writing Urban Places: New Narratives for the European City” (2023) brought together a network of architects as well as landscape architects, literary scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, and others.¹¹ Together, we developed narrative methods for writing urban places.¹² From anthropology, we worked with participatory methods including conducting interviews and the polyphonic reading of a place. We carried out fieldwork in ten European cities.¹³ In Tampere, Finland, we held a workshop with residents to make an archive documenting the past nine years of a site undergoing change.¹⁴ In Osijek, Croatia, we studied the cultural identity of the city by reading novels that gave an account of Osijek’s urban culture in the early twentieth century,¹⁵ identifying places in the city, visiting them, and seeing how the descriptions relate to how the places are used today. In Tirana, Albania, we collaborated with local communities to make walks and ethnographic films. It resulted in cinematographic narratives, documenting a sense of transformation.¹⁶

[*Isabel Potworowski*] Developing an awareness of the relationship between people and the environment through literature was also the topic of the Agora II Workshop on Literature and Architecture, which architect and urban studies scholar Suzanne Harris-Brandts coordinated.

[*Suzanne Harris-Brandts*] Indeed, the workshop was tied to the full-semester fourth-year undergraduate “Global Perspectives Urban Design Studio” that I taught at the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism (ASAU) at Carleton University in the winter of 2023. We focused on the urban development underway in Tirana, Albania, a place also linked to my research.¹⁷ The students and I travelled to Albania for nine days in February. Prior to that, we spent several weeks studying the country’s urban and sociopolitical history, part of which involved the Agora II Workshop on Architecture and Literature.

In the workshop, students explored how local narratives might further inform their understanding of Tirana, better addressing issues of subjectivity, temporality, and empathy. They worked

in groups of three and drew from Margo Rejmer’s 2018 edited book *Mud Sweeter Than Honey: Voices of Communist Albania*.¹⁸ The book includes 33 short yet evocative personal narratives recounting the communist period. The students were also inspired by Klaske’s writings on literature as a design research method. Their work brought together the experiences of several key protagonists in Rejmer’s book: human, biophysical, and architectural. The workshop resulted in large, collaboratively produced experiential collages that re-spatialised these narratives across the architectural, urban, and regional scales relative to the past, present, and future (Figures III.1–III.4).

The approach allowed students to consider other subjectivities since often the narratives in the book foregrounded non-human protagonists: a tree that provides shelter, or the companionship of books or a radio that allows one to exist in two places at once, with one’s mind in one reality and their body in another. This assignment also revealed the complexity of layered place meanings, contemporised and reconciled with the conditions of Tirana today. Students learned about Albania’s past from quite a different perspective than the formal master plans, archival documents, or textbooks offering a chronological history.

[Klaske
Havik]

I think it was wonderful that you found a book that offered these different perspectives on the complex history of Albania, Suzanne. These narratives of Tirana, through the eyes of diverse characters, gave your students an entry into the city. The workshop format and the novel as an entry point seemed to have allowed an exploration of the city not only through plans but also temporality, how past, present, and future are related, as well as characters and oral history. The students, in their analysis of the city, worked with characters of different ages. In this way, all of them related differently to the studied situation. I also appreciated the experiential collages, which strongly evoked a sense of conflict and how architecture and other objects offered consolation.



FIGURE III.1 Experiential collage inspired by two short stories in Margo Rejmer’s 2021 book *Mud Sweeter than Honey. Voices of Communist Albania*: “How We Used to Vote Bright and Early,” in which Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) looms as a pervasive figure and ‘shepherds’ the people of Albania as ‘sheep,’ and “The Many Deaths of Enver Hoxha,” portraying the breakdown of his authority and the ensuing disorder and confusion. Collage by ASAU undergraduate BAS (Bachelor of Architectural Studies) urbanism students Amra Alagic, Leah Dykstra, and Lara Kurosky, 2023.



FIGURE III.2 “Italian Songs,” an experiential collage inspired by a short story in Margo Rejmer’s 2021 book *Mud Sweeter than Honey. Voices of Communist Albania* depicts the dual lives of the young Albanian woman Mari Kitty Harapi. The left side depicts the difficult reality in Albania of growing up in a family educated in Venice and considered bourgeois and an ‘enemy of the people’; the right side shows her imagination of the world beyond communism through her communication with her aunt in Venice and through Italian music. Collage by ASAU undergraduate BAS urbanism students Bryn Skippen, Samantha Pennock, and Simon Martignago. 2023.

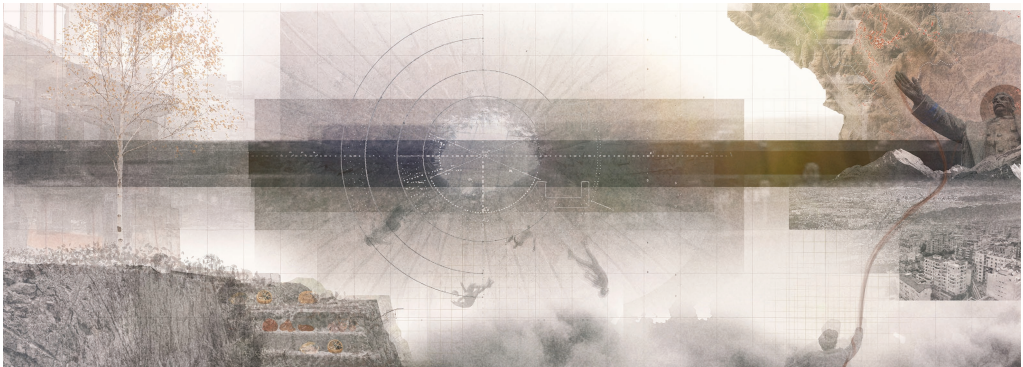


FIGURE III.3 Experiential collage based on the short story “Bad Boy” in Margo Rejmer’s 2021 book, *Mud Sweeter than Honey. Voices of Communist Albania*, depicting food scarcity in communist Albania. A summer drought leads to fears of starvation and imprisonment for speaking out; life was communicated ‘in a whisper’ with a sense of instability. Collage by ASAU undergraduate BAS urbanism students Doliba Durkin, Mouhamad Jamili, Anthony Papini, and Will Loizides. 2023.

I wondered, if the students had their first impression of the city through descriptions of a specific historical period, how they confronted the city as it is today, with its contradictions between large new developments and people tucked away in existing neighbourhoods—the many faces



FIGURE III.4 Experiential collage based on the short story “Bad Boy” in Margo Rejmer’s 2021 book, *Mud Sweeter than Honey. Voices of Communist Albania* depicts the protagonist’s identity torn between a rural and urban resident and his idealisation of the city. When communism is abolished, the people are ‘cut loose’ without any support, yet the protagonist dreams of an alternative future. Collage by ASAU undergraduate BAS urbanism students Arden Hamilton, Katherine Kolody, and Marly Magharious. 2023.

of the city, at once monumental, self-built, and speculation-driven. Were the many layers of Tirana surprising for the students?

[Suzanne
Harris-
Brandts]

The students were taken by the complexity of the city. As you say, there are many facets and, increasingly, in the core of Tirana, many spaces that have been cleansed of their pasts, hiding the nuances of their history. Literature became a way to show how the physical space can hold different meanings to different people over time. That is something that the students grappled with during the workshop—thinking through an effective approach to distilling these layered meanings.

Through the workshop, I saw the opportunities and challenges that literature affords us in architecture: it allows one to enter intimately into the personal experiences of key protagonists and empathise with their positionalities. However, it is important to remember that these are anecdotal narratives. They are not representative of the entire population, as Klaske noted above. That was one advantage of Rejmer’s book having multiple chapters of separate stories, each with several key characters: instead of the students speculating about others’ experiences, they could read a range of stories in this book and then reconcile these accounts further with their spatial readings of how Albania is transforming.

I think that reconciling one’s imagined mental image of a place with one’s in-person experience happens often since cities are living things. Even if we know a place well, it continues to change over time. That is why using literature in the two manners described by Klaske—both as a precedent and as a means of site analysis—can be productive. We can revisit past writing about a place to spark old memories and write about new experiences, which are then layered on top of these memories. In line with this, the students returned to some of their collages when creating their final design visualisations, asking: How would I now communicate the narrative

of this space and its changing identity? What are the kinds of emotions that I want my *own* project renderings to communicate to a future audience?

[Klaske
Havik]

In the course’s final propositional design assignment, students discussed site processes and their experiences. For example, a market or festival—programs that are not easily pinned down in terms of square meters and building volume—are more about lived experience and temporality. I wondered whether that was related to what they encountered in the literature (Figure III.5).

[Suzanne
Harris-
Brandts]

It was influenced by many things, and part of it was a conscious desire on my part to counter the type of high-end, megaproject development currently underway across Tirana, which is erasing the many diverse narratives of the city—past and present—described in the literature. Currently, city planning is overwhelmingly top-down, and there is a drive to refute that to better acknowledge the localised existing narratives and practices of communities that have and will continue to do a lot for the city.¹⁹ As a class, we considered how design could facilitate local work and saw the role of the everyday and incremental juxtaposed with the iconic and top-down. Literature suggested how we might think across scales, not just looking at what is happening in one project site and its particular conditions but also what it means relative to the entire city, region, and globally, from the perspective of different actors. Literature was a catalyst for thinking about the complexity that is not easily captured in traditional architectural and urban analysis.

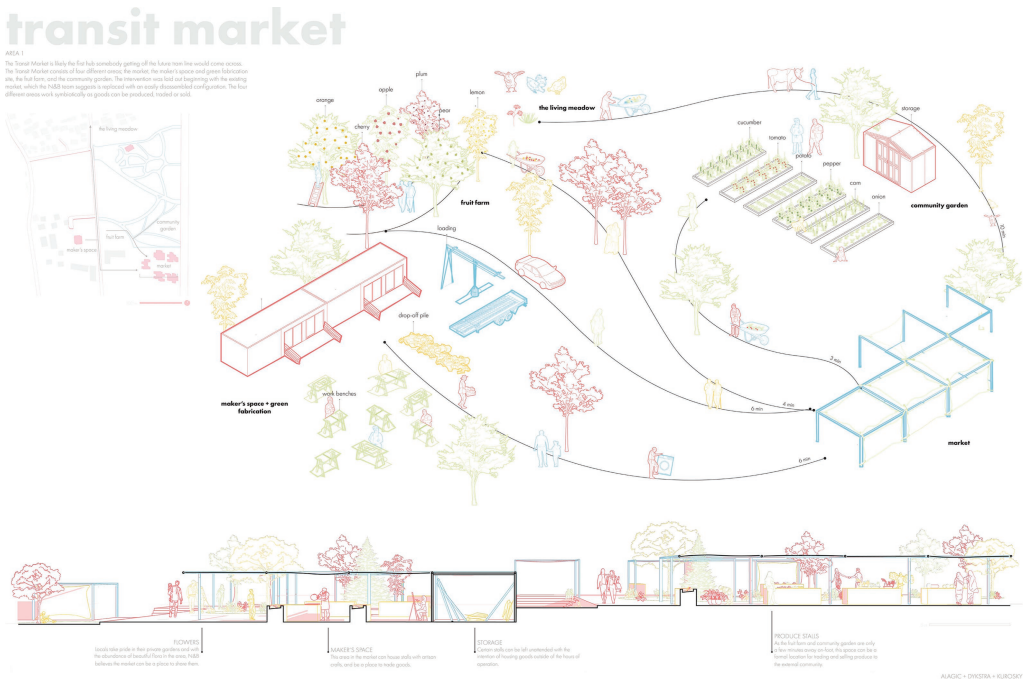


FIGURE III.5 The Transit Market, including a market, a maker’s space and green fabrication site, a fruit farm, and a community garden; part of a proposal by students Amra Alagic, Leah Dykstra, and Lara Kurosky for a temporary solution fostering longer-term change for Njësie Bashkiake Nr. 9, Tirana. 2023.

[Isabel Potworowski] You both discussed opportunities and challenges of training students in a literary approach to design. Klaske, how have your students tackled some of the challenges, for instance, of dealing with sensitive social and contextual situations?

[Klaske Havik] If we build somewhere, we need to know who we are building for and with, and to understand the local specificities of communities. Privacy is a central issue: one cannot simply extract knowledge from people and use it. When conducting fieldwork with students, they must write a plan outlining how to address privacy, ensure that people give consent, and anonymise information to keep people out of trouble. One example is the work of Dorina Pllumbi, a doctoral candidate at TU Delft (Delft University of Technology) who has been working closely with communities in Tirana.²⁰ Her research requires gaining the trust of the community, which necessitates making clear why she is doing this research, what it is for, and keeping them involved in the process. It takes time to gain this trust, to be accepted by the people, for them to allow you into their everyday lives and sometimes into their homes. For long research projects like a PhD, part of our task as researchers is to use these stories responsibly.

[Suzanne Harris-Brandts] I think that these are excellent points. I also see potential openings for literature in this regard. The community that I work with in Tirana with my colleague, media and communications scholar Ervin Goci, is 05 Maji (5th of May), on the northern peripheries of the city, originally self-constructed by rural migrants who arrived in the capital in the early 1990s following the collapse of Enver Hoxha's regime.²¹ It is one that is facing mass dispossession driven by the state after the announcement of an urban renewal proposal in the 2010s. I have held off with having students interview members of the community because this can be triggering. The undergraduate students do not yet have the methodological skills or time to do research in the same way that someone could at the doctoral level. At the same time, there is often a thirst on behalf of students to engage and ask questions. We met with the community and had informal gatherings, coffees, and walks. Many community members have been foregrounded in the media and are re-interviewed over and over again. I am cognizant that there can be an exacerbation of reliving that trauma every time they are asked questions. Existing coverage of those narratives can be used by students as secondary sources without retriggering painful memories. Students can read the community's testimonies, accessing some of the existing knowledge without always having to re-collect it firsthand.

Different approaches might also exist at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This workshop was inserted into the structure of a design-studio course, but I could imagine entire courses, theses, and dissertations that take up this approach. Klaske, how do you feel about that broad scope of literary methods in your experience?

[Klaske Havik] The literary approach to design permeates most of my courses, both on the bachelor's and master's levels in the architecture program.²² There are different formats, such as a writing workshop, or a seminar. In my design courses, students do creative writing exercises; for instance, they write about their design in a limited timeframe or from the perspective of a particular character. Even in just

one session, new questions appear, and students start to see their design decisions differently. Within the Bachelor's programme, we offer a series of courses titled "Foundations of Architectural, Urban and Landscape Design," which provide students with an entry into an architectural vocabulary by discussing basic architectural notions such as 'space,' 'use,' 'form,' 'perception,' or 'type.' We discuss where the words come from, their etymological background, and how they have been used in architectural culture. It is about becoming conscious of words and how we use them. In a second-year undergraduate module of this series, the students travel to a European city, and they have to write a report. I always encourage them to read a novel about the city before going. When we were on the excursion, I asked everyone to choose a passage from the book that describes a place in the city, to go to that site, and then to reflect: What did I expect when I was reading this passage? What were my associations? What is this site in reality? In Berlin, we used a collection of columns from Philippe Remarque, a Dutch journalist who had lived in Berlin, and students recognised sites mentioned in the book.²³ As Suzanne said about Tirana, this confrontation between what the students have read and their own experience of the place is an entryway into the city. Also, when writing the reports, we always encourage them to include fragments of a diary or their sensory perceptions of a space.

In our masters'-level courses, students sometimes develop narrative approaches for their projects, such as the two examples that I described earlier: the library based on literary analysis, and a project that used the *House of Leaves* Novel as a source of inspiration to design for the visually impaired.

For our recent diploma studio, which studied the city of Tallinn in Estonia, we encouraged students to use language as part of their 'toolbox' for analysis and design. For instance, one student captured the atmosphere of a ruin of a former monastery, and of her proposal for its conversion, in two poems that accompanied her visual presentation. The opening poem describes the encounter with the place as it is today, as a ruin, and the closing poem describes its future, as a walk through the imagined building. The poems, in this way, complemented the plans, sections, and physical models, evoking the atmospheric qualities and associative thoughts of the project.

[Suzanne
Harris-
Brandts]
[Klaske
Havik]

If we are discussing using a literary approach in architecture as a new paradigm, is it something that stays in academia, or can we imagine how it can engage design practitioners?

Writing is a skill complementary to drawing and modelling. It is an essential tool for architects, but it is not taken seriously enough, even though much communication about architecture occurs in writing. If students learn how to use language and creative writing early on, it can make a big difference if they have it as part of their toolkits. Angeliki Sioli, a colleague in my group at TU Delft, ran a fantastic course in 2023 called *The Space of Words*, where students wrote in their own language and English. Through a series of writing exercises that they presented to each other, the students took each other's writings and developed them.²⁴ In the end, they built two installations here at the Faculty of Architecture. It was a process of writing, sharing, and responding to each other, allowing the individual activity of writing to become a collective process of designing and building.

- [Suzanne Harris-Brandts] I agree. Effective communication is part of how we deal with our clients, our consultants, one another, and most importantly, with the people in communities who inhabit and are impacted by the spaces we design.
- [Isabel Potworowski] In what other ways can reading, writing, and imagining—activities that can often be individual—become part of a collective design process?
- [Klaske Havik] Architecture is indeed not a purely individual craft, but it is produced collectively by craftspeople, clients, and a whole community around a project. At TU Delft Angeliki Sioli, Aleksandar Staničić, and Pierre Jennen are running the graduate course “Designing with Others,” in which students build with and work collectively with and for a community.²⁵ If you work together, it is important to communicate with one another. Architects tend to describe the narrative of a project in a rhetorical manner, as if saying, “This is the story that the project wants to tell.” However, I think that the narrative quality of an architectural project is precisely the opposite. It captures multiple narratives and allows for new ones, because every site is polyphonic. There cannot be one single story driving a design. What is beautiful about the book that Suzanne chose about Tirana is precisely that it has multiple voices and protagonists. The question is then: What can one offer as an individual writer? I have my own mode of observation, different from that of others, but despite that subjectivity, there exists “empathic imagination,” by which an author can imagine how different uses, practices, and characters could relate to a space.²⁶ Such empathic imagination, which I would argue is an important skill for architects, could be developed by means of writing.

Notes

- 1 García Márquez 1970.
- 2 Havik, 2014, “The house of fictile time - Gabriel García Márquez.” *Writingplace. Journal for Architecture and Literature*, April. <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/writingplace/announcement/view/160>, accessed September 21, 2024.
- 3 Havik 2021: 90–104.
- 4 Havik 2017: 49–51.
- 5 Eco 2014; Borges 2023.
- 6 Perotoni 2018.
- 7 Danielewski 2018.
- 8 Danielewski 2018: 164.
- 9 Schäfer 2010; see also Havik 2014: 218.
- 10 Havik 2018: 62.
- 11 “Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City,” <https://writingurbanplaces.eu/>, accessed September 22, 2024.
- 12 These methods are presented in, for example: Havik, Pint, Riesto, and Steiner 2020; *Writing Urban Places* 2021a; *Writing Urban Places* 2021b.
- 13 See Havik, Oliveira, Mejía Hernández and Dale, 2023, *Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City*, *Writingplace* 8–9, Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/writingplace/issue/view/985>, accessed October 30, 2025.
- 14 The workshop “Narrating Hiedanranta” was led by Dalia Milián Bernal and Elina Alatalo. An account of the workshop was published in Milián Bernal, Alatalo, Hawkins, and Lehtovuori. 2023, “Tampere: Co-Constructed Narratives of the Grassroots in the City; Narrating Hiedanranta,” *Writingplace* 8–9, November. <https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.8-9.7257>, accessed May 15, 2025.
- 15 Novak, Sonja and Angeliki Sioli, 2023, “Osijek: Mapping the Fictional and the Physical City: The Spatiotemporal and Cultural Identity of Osijek, Croatia,” in *Writingplace* 8–9: 269–286, <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/writingplace/article/view/7261>, accessed April 18, 2025. The article studies novels

- written by female authors, such as Vilma Vukelić's novel *A Past Rescued from Oblivion* published by FriesenPress in 2020.
- 16 The event in Tirana was organised by Dorina Pllumbi, Willie Vogel, and Diana Malaj. A conversation about the event has been published as Pllumbi and Vogel 2023, "Kamza and Tirana: A Travel Captured in Correspondence; Preparations for the Training School - The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between," *Writingplace* 8–9, November. <https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.8-9.7262>, accessed May 15, 2025.
 - 17 Harris-Brandts and Goci 2023.
 - 18 Rejmer 2021.
 - 19 Pllumbi 2022.
 - 20 Pllumbi 2022; Pllumbi March/April 2022: 30–35; Pllumbi and Vogel 2023: 288–310.
 - 21 Harris-Brandts and Goci 2023: 32.
 - 22 Havik and Sioli 2021: 160–169; Methods of Analysis & Imagination at TU Delft, <https://www.tudelft.nl/bk/over-faculteit/afdelingen/architecture/organisatie-1/secties-en-groepen-nieuw/situated-architecture/methods-of-analysis-and-imagination>, accessed February 7, 2025.
 - 23 Remarque 2008.
 - 24 Sioli 2023: 203–229.
 - 25 See the course description at <https://www.tudelft.nl/bk/over-faculteit/afdelingen/architecture/organisatie-1/secties-en-groepen-nieuw/situated-architecture/methods-of-analysis-and-imagination/education/designing-with-others>, accessed February 7, 2025.
 - 26 "Empathic imagination" is a term used in 1988 by Irish philosopher Richard Kearny. Kearny 2003: 392; See Havik 2022: 3.

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