Introduction

REPOSITORY: 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places

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Jorge Luis Borges's short story *The Library of Babel* (1944) presents us with an endless structure, a sequence of hexagonal rooms beyond sight with an almost infinite number of books. In a small footnote, the narrator points out that *"In order for a book to exist, it is sufficient that it be possible. Only the impossible is excluded. For example, no book is also a staircase, though there are no doubt books that discuss and deny and prove that possibility, and others whose structure corresponds to that of a staircase"*.[1] What we present here however, tries to achieve what for Borges was impossible: to make a book (also) be a building, a container, a repository. But it also attempts to provide a device that, beyond collecting, is actually a generator of new content.

Unlike an inventory or catalogue, which comprise an itemized, arranged enumeration of elements ordered systematically, this Repository is more than a container where something is simply deposited or stored; it assumes the form of a book. Nevertheless, to be fair with the process of its own construction, we should say that this is a Repository that gradually adopted the form of a book, without losing its architectural attributes. In fact, this Repository was first built in a virtual interactive environment, where its content has been in permanent expansion, discussion, and auto-genera-tion. In this, we take inspiration from the impossible work which Stéphane Mallarmé undertook during the last thirty years of his life, trying to build an 'absolute book' that would condense the whole essence of his literature and reality. Simply called *Le Livre* (1898), it was made of a series of unbound pamphlets, loose sheets with no predefined reading order, allowing every possible combination.

The Repository, as much as Borges' *Library* and Mallarmé's *Livre*, is an attempt to build a hypertext, a flexible, interactive, open work, offering a kaleidoscopic and non-sequential reading. Rather than trying to understand the world, the ultimate function of this Repository would be to produce encounters and autonomous forms that could be added to those already existing. As such, the aim of this Repository joins the challenge of preserving the openness and multiplicity of dimensions and agents present in the rich array of methods that compose it.

Towards a Repository...

This Repository gathers a series of methods and assignments born from a shared interest in urban narratives. What can narratives tell us about how communities relate to place? How can existing stories of place allow us to write new narratives for the city? How can we read the stories that are inscribed in streets, on walls, and in architectural details? How can archives unveil hidden stories of places and buildings, and of their makers and users? How can we write the city by using our senses? This Repository can be seen as an invitation, encouraging scholars, students, and spatial practitioners to explore 49 methods, and, through clearly laid out assignments, take them out into the field.

This Repository is the result of over three years of intense collaboration within the framework of the European COST Action, *Writing Urban Places*, a diverse group of scholars in the fields of architecture, urban studies, literature, sociology and other disciplines interested in the value of local urban narratives – stories rich in information regarding citizens' socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations.[2] Working Group 3 of this network was dedicated to the articulation of concrete devices to unveil, study, and write urban narratives and to explore their potential for strategies of design, to generate new (and counter) narratives, and to reveal subjugated voices.

The group shared knowledge and experience about the methods they use to find, interpret and even produce urban narratives. A long process of dialogue took place within the group, first by collecting and discussing descriptions of methods on Padlet, an online platform where ideas can be shared. Through this digital instrument, participants were able to analyse the methods shared by similarities, objectives and output, fields and disciplines

involved, procedures in data collection, place and, last but not least, the techniques and procedures used, thus fostering international research partnerships.

The next step in the process was clarifying the methods, bringing the descriptions down to the basic elements of each method, in order to increase the communicability of the method in a very concise way. This process of distilling a sometimes-broad description of a method to only one page was one of the greatest synthesising efforts on the part of the authors of this publication. Furthermore, from the descriptive level, we searched for a format to activate the methods, discussing their practical use in fieldwork. Therefore, we asked the participants to articulate assignments that might formulate specific responses, potentially becoming case studies for the application of the method.

In April 2021, the group organised the online webinar, "Reading, Writing and Activating Urban Places," a mini-conference which brought together a large number of topics. The contributions were presented in a dynamic way, using a PechaKucha format, where researchers presented their methods with 20 slides, each slide being shown for 20 seconds only. The 3 panels of the webinar, which delineated three main categories of methods used to understanding the city – transcribing it with words into sentences and trans-forming it by design – were followed by reflections and discussions that detailed and enriched the presentations.[3]

This Repository thus came to fruition thanks to an intense collective effort bringing together almost as many different voices as the set of methods it gathers. We do not take this effort for granted. As we were planning this project, unimaginably, most cities across the globe put into place social distancing measures and urban popu-lations were ordered into lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic. For some of us, this project became a form of togetherness at a time of profound isolation. Unable to leave our homes and affected by our local realities, our ways of engaging with each other and urban places inevitably changed. For many, interaction with the city became possible only through window views, and discussions about urban life in locked-down cities were only feasible in online venues.

It is within this context that new, creative, and humane approaches to engaging, researching, understanding, planning, and creating urban places find renewed importance. While this unprecedented

situation catalysed novel forms of solidarities and creative, collective urban experiences, it also exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities and injustices and visualised their pervasiveness in urban places. During the work on this Repository, we realised that *another* way to interact with urban places is not only possible but necessary. A disassociated form of urban inquiry is no longer viable and the construction of segregating or even alienating urban environments based on dispossession and the destruction of nature must cease to be the norm. This Repository is a call for action and an invitation to interact with material and immaterial dimensions of urban places in a more caring, compassionate, collective way and with all our senses activated.

...of Methods and Assignments...

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a method can be defined as "a way, technique, or process of or for doing something".[4] The word derives from the Ancient Greek *méthodos* from *meta* "in pursuit or quest of," and, *hodos*, "a way or manner," and "a travelling, motion, journey... a path, track, road".[5] The methods collected here can indeed be seen as particular ways to approach urban sites, and the assignments as steps to take along these 'ways'. The assignments are systematic procedures of acting that offer ways to explore, examine and discover urban places. In this repository, all methods are entitled by means of verbs, rather than nouns, indicating that we see these methods as active engagements with the city.

However, methods do not emerge in a vacuum; they are underpinned by different ontological and epistemological positions and assumptions. The ways we choose to inquire about the world around us are strongly influenced by who we are and where we stand. The choice for the use of particular methods thus inevitably has a political dimension. And when it comes down to the politics of *methods and the city,* a critical reference to the Chicago School is inevitable.

The Chicago School was established in the late 1800s at a moment of rapid urban growth and at a time in which *the city* started to receive scholarly attention. Particularly the city of Chicago – which some argue emerged at the time as an "instant metropolis" (Lutters & Ackerman, 1996) – attracted an interdisciplinary group of scholars for whom the city became, "at once, the object and

the venue of study" (Gieryn, 2006). These scholars viewed (and treated) the city as a field-site and, as such, the tools, approaches, and methods used by anthropologists to study *others elsewhere* were adopted and adapted for the purpose of studying *the city* and its emerging urban society – being particularly attentive to the "social problems of the day" (Hunter, 1980). Paradoxically, they also adopted and adapted the rhetoric of the natural sciences referring to *the city* as "a social laboratory". Their accounts and representations of the city are frequently described as ecological and evolutionist. However, their approach to "the city as a social laboratory," is far more than mere rhetoric; it epitomises an epistemic assumption that researchers can study the social world entirely outside and disassociated from it – like in a laboratory.

This assumption, not yet fully overcome, is particularly problematic for at least two reasons. First, it presupposes a certain higher positionality of the researcher in relation to the city and its society. Secondly, as these scholars "purposely focused upon disorganisation precisely because [their research] was oriented to [...] social reform," (Hunter, 1980) their scholarly work had a direct impact on urban reform, policy, and built environments well beyond Chicago (Baeten, 2017) and rarely for the advancement of social justice. So, while the Chicago School marked an important referent in urban studies; "its scholars left behind an abundance of research monographs and manuals in research methods" (Gieryn, 2006 p. 7); it produced some of the most intriguing maps of the city of Chicago[6]; are renowned for their highly qualitative research approach and praised for their rigorous data collection methods (Lutters & Ackerman, 1996); their story is also a reminder of the political dimension (and power) of methods and narratives.

Nevertheless, these narratives and approaches have not gone unchallenged and, since then, an array of critical epistemological and theoretical perspectives have emerged, from Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s in North-Western Europe and post-socialist perspectives in Eastern Europe to decolonial movements all over the world. Amongst others, feminists have (in their activist and scholarly constellations) fervently contested the belief in an objective (thus, dissociated) form of social enquiry and questioned the role and position of the researcher – the subject of knowledge (Tuana, 2017). Feminist epistemology argues that knowledge and its generation are subjective and situated, never value-free and always contextual. The contestation of the position of the subject of

knowledge has also been the point of departure of subaltern studies in Europe, South-East Asia (precursor to postcolonial theory), and Latin America (precursor to decolonial thinking).

In Europe, critical urban theory, in the Marxist tradition (through Henri Lefebvre), emerges directly as an antagonist to the approaches of the Chicago School, emphasising "the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space" (Brenner, 2009, p. 198). These critical urban thinkers are not alone and have certainly influenced the uprising of dissident perspectives from the Global South, including postcolonial urban theorists such as Ananya Roy (2016) and anarchist urban theorists, like Marcelo López de Souza (2012), who are also influencing urban scholarly work in the Global North.

Furthermore, these emerging and always evolving critical perspectives have also opened up the possibility of multiple, novel, and creative ways to critique capitalism's 'modes and relations of production' (Lefebvre, 1991) while simultaneously pursuing knowledge about urban places. By doing so, they brought subjugated voices, stories, and narratives to the fore, and revealed new venues from which knowledge and theoretical insights could be drawn. All of these dimensions are particularly visible in the subversive approaches adopted by the politically-engaged and art-driven group, Situationist International, whose legacy remains relevant today and is latent in several contributions in this Repository.

This Repository celebrates this proliferation, multiplicity and cohabitation of thoughts and visions and thus gathers, not the most fixed, mainstream and institutionalised methods to read, perform, or write urban places, but a series of innovative and creative procedures deriving from different horizons in order to expose the diversity in which the city might be grasped, told, and expressed and thereby also produced. It intends to stimulate new approaches in architecture, urban studies, and other fields of spatial development and to invite creative, often embodied, and sometimes playful engagements with the material and immaterial dimensions of urban places.

...for Writing Urban Places.

The multiple entries of this Repository reveal methods with different purposes, themes, media, and formats. Some are predominantly oriented to data collection, surveying or understanding reality

through the identification of the elements that define a given environment with qualitative and quantitative types of research. It is the case of *Localizing Details; Building Consensus on Place Representation; Charting People, Activities and Places*; or *Streaming the Urban*. Others aim deliberately at transforming that place, interpreting its characteristics by means of activation, either through design operations, like in *Designing by Participation with Giancarlo de Carlo*, or via more activist approaches, as in *Co-Creating,* and in, *Intervening Tactically.*

The marks of memories from the past, the tangible or invisible structures of power, the shared qualities of a community, or the presence of nature, compose the large and diverse array of themes they address. Dealing with these different approaches and agendas, inevitably requires different tools. Our body might be the principal instrument in perceiving or transforming reality in embodied approaches, like *Bordering, Tailoring Ethnography* and *Performing (on) Architecture with Theatre Protocols*; or the walking-based methods of *Aimless wandering, Horizontal viewing,* and *Walking backwards*. Others are mediated in their outputs, as is the case of the visual methods, which operate with drawing or photography, such as: *Revisiting postcards* or *Double-exposing Place*; as well as with text-based methods like: *Writing at 1:50; Making Material Sense; Uncannying the Ordinary... with Cortázar;* or *Exhausting Urban Places à la Georges Perec*. Equally mediated are those which generate diagrams to synthetise information such as: *Walking and Scoring*, or *Surveying with the PlaceMaker Method*; or even generate maps, namely when creating pedestrian routes such as in: *Planning and Walking Thematic Routes* and *Mapping Graffiti and Street Art*; or in the application of graph theory in *Connecting the Nodes*. Other methods incorporate the possibilities promised by artificial intelligence or those already offered by virtual space – such as *Geotagging the Urban Landscape* or *Performing the City from Cyberspace*.

Combinations are also frequent, either merging visual and text-based methods like the visual urban essays of *Framing the City in Words and Images*, or the mix of performative and image-based approaches in *Weaving Stories*, or *Re-acting with Images*. Another type of combination relates to transactions and interactions between the objects of analysis, either between buildings (as in *Appraising*), between the city and characters (*Transcribing the City as Character*), or between human and non-human beings (*Imagining Dialogues with the Voiceless,* or *Playing City-making*). Some methods, however,

are mediated not only in their outputs but also in their objects, because rather than dealing directly with reality, they work with their registers or representations – either by looking at literary texts, as with *Reading the City*; by delving into the archives, as in *Re-activating Minor Matters of Archival Documents*, and *Assembling Pasts*; by performing a rhetorical analysis of all sorts of media in *Recapturing the City*, or by combining the physical experience of space with archival research, as in *Stacking Narratives*.

Each method is translated into practical assignments that are meant to take different durations, from hours or one day, like *Scaling Stories*, or *Transforming through Active Space*, to several days or longer periods – as in *Atlasing Urban Experience* or *Meaning-making*. According to their structure, some assignments are also ready to be implemented individually, such as *(multi)Styling Places... with Queneau; Site-writing; Storying Stories*; or *Eavesdropping*, while other are more suitable to be performed collectively in a group, eventually in workshops, as in *Drawing collectively; Engaging (with) Images*; or *Collaging Community Narratives*.

We want this Repository to be a practical tool, an open document, and a living device. In it, each method is described in a short text and is accompanied by an assignment. The assignments are a central element of this Repository, as they interpret, complete, or continue the methods themselves, but also encourage a constant dialogue between contributors and users, through a series of experiments and practices within the urban space. Each assignment is presented as a clear set of numbered instructions to guide the reader to explore and employ the method.

As such, this Repository is intended to stay off the shelves and aims to be a useful tool to inspire, accompany, and assist spatial professionals, researchers, students, and non-academic communities alike to engage with urban places and to discover and develop responsible approaches to current urban challenges.

1 Borges, J.L. (1944). The Library of Babel. In *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1998, 117

2 The EU COST Action network *Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City* is an interdisciplinary group of international scholars. The Action Writing Urban Places focuses on the potential of narrative methods for urban development in European medium-sized cities. https://writingurbanplaces.eu

3 Some of these contributions further developed into full-fledged academic articles, which after a process of peer review were published in 2021 in the *Writingplace Journal* issue #5 "Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places. https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/writingplace/issue/view/878

4 Method. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved November 25, 2022, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/method

5 Method. In *Etymonline.com Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved November 25, 2022, from https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=method

6 *Mapping Chicago - Mapping the Young Metropolis - The University of Chicago Library*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 25, 2022, from https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/mapping-young-metropolis/mapping-chicago.

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Instructions on How to Roam into this Repository – or not.

This Repository can work as a book of recipes, providing alternative strategies for writing urban places, with steps you could try out, while always allowing for many possible combinations. As this is not a regular book (nor a regular building), you don't need to read it linearly, from cover to cover, or to go all over every alley from the entrance to the exit, rather:

Pre-assignment

1
Draw up your own itinerary choosing the methods and procedures that are related to the subjects you are interested in, to the media you are familiar with, to the scopes you want to achieve, to the forms of implementation you want to try.

2
Venture yourself through unknown alleys… and create as many itineraries as you want or need, combining the familiar with the unfamiliar.

3
Use the blank spaces (empty shelves) to write or draw your own notes and comments about the methods and procedures you are interested in, or to make the assignments proposed by our contributors; feel free to paste photos, or maps, or journal clippings, or whatever comes to your mind.

4
Do you have something to add to one of the methods or a suggestion to make on references or further readings in order to deepen the latter? Do not hesitate to complete the online version of the Repository (this is an open and interactive book, a building in permanent construction. You have an active role in the continuity of its realisation).

5
Did you find a method that is somehow related to the project you are working on? Why don't you make some copies of the assignment proposed by the author of this particular method and develop it with your colleagues or with your students, in your agency, laboratory or class?

6
Do you think several methods could be complementary? Try to combine them in order to generate a hybrid one. That invitation works also for the assignments: you can graft and assemble parts of different assignments and create a hyper-assignment.

7

Do you think somebody across
the world (a colleague, a friend, a
relative) could be interested in one
of the assignments you found in
the book? Or in an implementation
you just made of one of them?
Take a post-card, fill it with your
proposition, go to the nearest post
office, buy a stamp, and send it to
that person.

8

Do not worry if this Repository's
wear starts to be noticeable: if
some important lines are under-
lined with ink, borders are bent,
some sheets are missing, or the
covers are ripped. It is meant to
be used and reused, as paths
that can be walked, over and over
again, in different directions, find-
ing new views on the way.