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Writing place

#6

City Narratives as Places of Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration

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writinG urban places

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“*Becoming Part of...*”

City Narratives as Places of Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration

Sonja Novak, Angeliki Sioli, Susana Oliveira and Klaske Havik

‘You become part of the street, the neighbourhood, the city, the country, so perfectly, so delicately aligned, assimilated, that you disappear,’ reads the excerpt from the pages of Edmund de Waal’s latest book, *Letters to Camondo* (2021), an epistolary illustrated novel of sorts.¹ De Waal empathically uncovers the meanings of assimilation in a very particular context, portraying a Jewish family established in a big house in late nineteenth-century Paris with all its exquisite as well as tragic vicissitudes.

In spite of these specific circumstances, the quote, and the novel more generally, highlight how the built environment can absorb us, integrate us and incorporate us to such an extent that we seamlessly become a meaningful part of it. In that way it poignantly echoes the themes of meaningfulness, appropriation and integration that form the focus of this issue of *Writing-place*. In fact, these terms have been identified in the current EU COST Action Network Writing Urban Places, as points of departure for approaching, engaging with and intervening in mid-size European cities. Within this Action Network, these terms are understood in a specific way. Meaningfulness is seen as offering urban communities and spatial agents (architects, urbanists, designers and planners, among others) the instruments and methods to interpret their environment and thus their tasks and engagements towards that environment as a whole. Experiential, collective and personal,

historical and site-specific qualities of space attribute meaning and identity to urban places. Therefore, meaningfulness can be explored through historical narratives, oral history and cultural heritage in the (re)construction of urban identities. Appropriation is the possibility to act and empower local communities, by improving their ability to project feelings and expectations on urban planning schemes and built environment strategies. The role of local actors (users, inhabitants and other stakeholders) becomes crucial in such urban processes, precisely because they are the ones who experience and develop their surroundings and local conditions. Lastly, integration is seen as offering concrete tools and methods for the construction of common grounds among diverse and often contrasting communities, allowing for multiple narratives, embodiments, and urban developments to interact and connect, creating new meanings and appropriations of space.

Within this frame of reference, we invited submissions of original research papers that, from an inter- or a multidisciplinary theoretical perspective, attempt to define and illustrate meaningfulness, appropriation and integration in the context of mid-size European cities. The proposals were expected to explore narratives and stories of meaningfulness in the urban environment, examples of urban appropriation from different local agents, architectural processes and literary perspectives on community integration in the European urban context. COST members of the Writing Urban Places Action were purposefully invited to contribute, and to team up with one or more members of the COST Network.

The disappearing of the subject in De Waal's literary description above seems to allude to integration with the urban surroundings, not as a form of dissolution into non-existence, but, on the contrary, as an image of deep understanding and engagement with the urban environment and its aspects. The articles collected in this issue attempt a similar alignment with their places, subjects, perceptions and stories, while describing, in their assemblage, a miscellaneous tour guiding us from Oxford to Ghent, from

Naples to Sheffield, and from Riga to some historical towns in Spain. Along this journey across Europe, with a small detour to Latin America, the articles discuss, in relation to our core concepts, issues of inclusivity, politics, urban heritage, collective housing, agency and activism.

This issue of *Writingplace* was preceded by an online symposium with the same title, organized by Working Group 2 of the COST Action Network Writing Urban Places in November 2020. This event was an attempt to get a step closer to determining these terms from a theoretical perspective. As we noticed both during the symposium and the editorial work on this issue, the three themes are by no means mutually exclusive. As Sonja Novak and Angeliki Sioli stated in their reflection on the symposium:

Interestingly enough, the last of the three listed terms – integration – seems to ironically have the tendency to question any type of setting boundaries as its definition and the main idea behind it is to incorporate something into a larger unit; to form, coordinate or blend into a functioning or unified whole; it refers to desegregation and is thus a paradox that is proving quite difficult to define from a theoretical point of view.²

This issue is therefore an invitation to look beyond the definitions of meaningfulness, appropriation and integration, and explore the relations between them. We have liberally arranged the articles under the three main themes but, as it can easily become clear, there are overlaps among the themes. In that way, this issue offers not only a geographical journey along different urban narratives, but also an expedition into the network of interrelated terms and spatial practices.

Writingplace #6 opens with a piece on urban landscape, contributed by Saskia de Wit, who presents a walk through Oxford, a mid-size European city with a strong identity. Weaving the landscape of the non-traditional architectural ensemble of St Catherine's College into that of the historical

urban landscape, this paper aims to unfold the physical landscape – and the way it is perceived – as a generator of meaningfulness. According to De Wit, this ensemble exposes just how much the quality of the physical landscape can affect what we perceive and how we attach meanings to what we perceive.

Indeed, meaning may be generated through our embodied perception – as De Wit makes clear – as well as through the narratives that are entangled with urban environments. Kris Pint's article 'Narrative Deserts and Embodied Meanings in the City' also touches on the embodied experience of urban and architectural elements – in this case the Stadshal (City Pavilion) in Ghent – and discusses this experience in relation to the microstories of Ghent's City Pavilion. Taking that particular architectural project as an example, Pint addresses Michel de Certeau's notions of narrativity of space and their juxtaposition with the technocratic and economic discourse of efficiency and homogenization of contemporary cities. He also examines Mark Johnson's idea of emerging meaningfulness as a formative force. As comes to the fore in Pint's contribution, meaningfulness is inseparably connected to language and communication, whose main purpose is to convey a literal or symbolic message or create an atmosphere.

Giuseppe Resta's article 'The Belly of Naples and Displaced Meanings' employs the tropes of city-as-body and city-as-theatre to examine selected literary representations of the city of Naples in the late-nineteenth-century *Risanamento* period, a period that was characterized by dramatic renovations of the old town. The departure work of reference is *Il Ventre di Napoli* (1884) by writer and journalist Matilde Serao. Resta analyses how Serao tackles the contradictions of a built environment by means of bodily metaphors, in parallel with excerpts from foreign travelers of the same time-period such as Charles Dickens, and later visitors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Walter Benjamin. They all deconstruct the stereotype of the picturesque and displaced meaning, which allows Resta to understand and defy the forma-

tion of stereotypical images associated with the picturesque of the South, through the example of Naples.

For the next article, we remain in Naples and gradually move into the theme of appropriation by looking at a representation of the city from a feminist perspective. Sernaz Arslan's study 'Appropriation and Gender Spaces: A Discussion on Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels' looks into the famous tetralogy that narrates the lives of two female friends within the strict and limiting confines of their lower-class neighbourhood. The space of the neighbourhood, but parts of the rest of the city as well, are appropriated in ways that change as the women grow and the sociopolitical conditions of the country (and Europe) transition and advance. Arslan's article explores how the female characters interact with and experience the urban space, while her reading sheds light on issues of gender and class as connected with the conversation on appropriation.

Expanding on the perspective of women, we follow Dalia Milián Bernal, who takes us far from the European continent to present the stories of appropriation of vacant and abandoned urban spaces by four women in the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. By means of narrative inquiry, and based conceptually on Lefebvre's notion of appropriation, her article 'Narratives of Appropriation: Abandoned Spaces, Entangled Stories, and Profound Urban Transformations', collects and presents the individual and collective efforts of these women to transform and give new uses to these spaces. At the same time, it shows how these women assert their right to the city, caring for an active participation in the processes of urbanization. The article concludes by discussing how the women's actions might have inspired and encouraged similar processes elsewhere and might have planted seeds for future practice-based processes and research.

Continuing on the notion of appropriation, and building upon selected writings by Henri Lefebvre as well, Nevena Novaković's article 'The Concept of

Appropriation in Collective Housing Design: Understanding Dwelling as a Poetic Practice' provides a contribution to the ongoing theoretical debate on collective housing design by focusing on dwelling as a poetic practice. Novaković defends the methodological potential of appropriation as a concept that fosters the understanding of dwelling. The author looks into dwelling as the creative practice of human fulfillment, meaning an analytical tool for reading the transformation of existing space by its inhabitants.

While the articles in the section of appropriation bring to the fore the perspectives of particular user groups, the next set of articles discusses how different social groups can come together, acknowledging that spatial integration is behavioural: it is a quality towards the built environment of accepting, adapting, transforming the place but also other people's ideas, mentalities and sociospatial practices. Based on a recently finished research project that involved ordinary objects of minor villages and towns from the Valencia Region in Southern Spain, Juan Garcia Esparza's contribution discusses how assessing and discussing everyday artifacts can improve conservation practices, taking into account the inhabitants' experience of their town. His article 'Narrating the Urban Fabric of Our Historical Towns' explores informal expressions of cultural heritage in historical towns, and analyses new forms of appraisal in historical urban settlements. The suggested approach challenges the idealistic constructed scenarios of the past and creates space for new interpretations on the cultural diversity of the unplannable or informal place-making. In doing so, it examines how historical values can better incorporate past and contemporary anthropological informalities.

While integration can be stimulated by more inclusive approaches to urban analysis, it is as important to examine how integration is obstructed, and how spatial and social obstructions can be challenged. Dace Bula's article 'Sites of Narrativity and Spatial Debate: Fences in Neighbourhoods in the Port of Riga' examines, through an ethnographical approach, how fences

surrounding urban public spaces can be perceived as 'storied', that is, possessing the quality of being and/or producing narratives. Through examples from the case study of the Riga port and the four areas around the estuary of the Daugava River, the author shows how the residents react to the newly introduced fences of their surroundings that seem to exclude and separate them rather than integrate and include them. The paper attempts to bridge narrative and material studies by exploring the ways the imposed fences fragment the residents' built environment. This fragmentation urges them to construct their own nostalgic and activist narratives, along with narratives pertaining to everyday practical life, like how one accesses the waterfront or the difficulties they face getting from one place to another.

Finally, the article 'Beyond Community: Inclusivity through Spatial Interventions' by Asma Mehan, Krzysztof Nawratek and Farouq Tahar argues against the concept of integration as the main mechanism that allows various sociocultural groups to live together. Instead, the authors propose 'radical inclusivity' as a less oppressive model for a pluralistic society. Through analytical and reflective research on the non-cohesion-based approach to integration or inclusion, this article examines the affordances and limitations of integration through various forms of spatial interventions. The authors discuss the case study of the Ellesmere Green Project in Sheffield (UK) as a typical small urban regeneration executed in a highly diverse part of the city. This piece thus aims to bring forward the significance of moving beyond the community-as-cohesion model in urban politics and planning for integration.

Instead of providing a holistic definition of each of the terms – meaningfulness, appropriation and integration – the articles in this issue of *Writingplace* demonstrate that these terms cannot be analysed or defined as independent, but rather as open and interconnected. Meaningfulness is in itself a notion that implies a fullness of relation between form and content, where form can be either permanent or ephemeral, physical or intangible

and the content literal or symbolic. It is the process of integration of the two that further adds meaning. In both individual and collective observations as well as subjective processing of what we consider meaning, we appropriate these ideas by adding our own input. Indeed, appropriation – positive or negative connotations aside – inevitably includes a kind of change or transformation. This, in turn, creates new meanings that vary according to the different scales, from that of the individual, to the local community and the social group, all the way to the region.

There is a clear need for multiperspectivity in understanding meaningfulness, appropriation and integration but, in terms of impact and scale, the articles have shown how the mid-size European city is an ideal context to examine these terms. The mid-size city 'can serve as a useful lens in describing a broad section of the European continent'³ and it is also a fruitful starting point to explore the tendencies of contemporary urban environments with all their narratives.

It is exactly this relation between the terms meaningfulness, appropriation and integration and the scale of the mid-size European cities that shifts the emphasis to the people of a given place. The mid-size scale allows the city's inhabitants to act as different stakeholders in the processes of urban and societal development. They are not overwhelmed or absorbed by the massiveness of a metropolis. Thus, they are easier motivated to search for creation of meanings, appropriation and integration of certain places in the built urban environment. They become part of the stories of their own place.

- 1 Edmund De Waal, *Letters to Camondo* (London, 2021), 152.
- 2 Some fragments in this editorial were adapted from the report of the on-line mini conference ‘Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration of/in City Narratives, organized by Sonja Novak and Angeliki Sioli, Working group 2 of the COST Action Network *Writing Urban Places*, in November 2020. The pdf – including links to the recording of this event – is available at: writingurbanplaces.eu/output/meaningfulness-appropriation-and-integration-of-in-city-narratives/
- 3 See: Michiel Dehaene, Bruno Notteboom and Klaske Havik, ‘Medium: The Mid-Size City as a European Urban Condition and Strategy’, *OASE* 89 (2013), 2-9.