Poetics of Place

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Writing place

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Poetics of Place: Editorial

Klaske Havik, Angeliki Sioli, Vincent A. Cellucci,
Jeremy Allan Hawkins

> Through poems, perhaps more than through recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of space.
> —Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Poetics of Place is the inaugural volume of the *Writingplace* book series. After seven years and nine journal issues (published between 2018 and 2023), *Writingplace* sets a new course. To celebrate this metamorphosis, we decided to delve into the beauty and inventiveness of poetry in order to discuss its importance for architecture and place. This first volume of the book series investigates how the connections between architecture and poetry can offer insights into the production and design of places. The title clearly refers to Gaston Bachelard's seminal book *The Poetics of Space* (1958), which introduced a poetic dimension to the study of intimate spaces, like houses, attics and cellars. Taking the poet's perception as a point of departure, Bachelard argued that spaces are vessels of poetic experience that affect our feelings, influence our memories and instil a sense of wonder.[1]

While being indebted to Bachelard's work, *Poetics of Place* moves away from the intimate sphere of domestic spaces and focuses on urban and communal places. The book embraces the multiplicities of places themselves (as indefatigable as poetry) and the potential of poetic practices to capture these multiplicities and generate design propositions. Bachelard's notion of the poetic image of space—recognized by the poet and translated into a communicable text that reverberates in the reader's mind—deserves an update. To do so, with this book we are looking for poetic practices that engage with the social complexity of places: their various meanings, memories, and imaginations as felt and expressed by their different inhabitants and users. We turn to poetry to explore how it emerges from places and what knowledge of places poetry can reveal to architects.

We see place as a complex and dynamic entity, comprised of multiple layers and influenced by different natural, cultural, and social forces. In *Place and Experience* (1999), Jeff Malpas calls for a relational understanding of place:

> Place possesses a complex and differentiated structure made up of a set of interconnected and interdependent

> components – subject and object, space and time, self and other [...] the complexity of place does not entail a dispersion of elements but rather enables their 'gathering together' – their interconnection and unification – in such a way that their multiplicity and differentiation can be both preserved and brought to light.[2]

Doreen Massey advocates for such a relational understanding, arguing that each place consists of multiple identities, experienced differently by different people. She pleads for 'an understanding of place as open (...), as woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space'.[3] The dimensions of place that Malpas and Massey contribute to the theoretical discourse have also driven the philosophical work of Edward Casey. His studies *Getting Back into Place* (1993) and *The Fate of Place* (1997) marked a significant shift in architects understanding the differences between place and space. They foregrounded the importance of '*being* in place, and more particularly, *becoming part of the place*,' in order to experience its 'felt density' and 'the sense that it has something lasting in it'.[4] Casey's work expanded on the phenomenological notion of *lived space* as explored by Maurice Merlean-Ponty, who trusted the capacity of art to guide us in perceiving and understanding the world around us.[5]

Further connecting the reality of the world around us with art, poetry critic Marjorie Perloff reminds us that the poet David Antin used to define poetry in the mid-seventies, as 'the language art'.[6] He claims that poetry was 'a form of discourse which, rather than saying one thing and meaning something else, returns to the literal but with the recognition that phenomenological reality is itself discovered and constructed by poets'.[7] It is with such inspiring philosophical and poetical underpinnings in mind, that we—as editors of the *Poetics of Place*, architects and poets ourselves—turn to the art of poetry in order to discover, explore and construct place, from an architectural perspective.

Architecture and Poetry

> Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.
>
> —Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' from *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*

The connection between architecture and poetry has come to the fore at several instances, particularly in the context of architectural education. The PUCV School of Architecture of

Valparaiso, in Chile, was founded by architects and poets in 1970. Their Ciudad Abierta is a space of experimentation where architecture derives from what is called the 'poetic act'.[8] Still today, poetry is part of their architecture curriculum. Architect and educator John Hejduk sought connections between architecture and poetry, in both his practice and education. He used to teach an architectural course on poetry as a professor at Cooper Union, New York, in the 80's and 90's.[9] Shigeru Ban, one of Hejduk's students, talks in his lectures about the importance of these exercises on poetry for his architectural formation.[10] Until recently the post-professional History and Theory Program at McGill University, Canada, under the influence of Alberto Pérez-Gómez, focused on the reconciliation of ethics and poetics in architectural practice.[11] In his essay 'Poetic Language and Architectural Meaning', Pérez-Gómez assures us that 'poetic—original, polysemic—language is central to the very possibility of retrieving cultural roots for architectural expression (...) responsive to pre-exiting *places*'.[12]

The pedagogies of the Methods of Analysis and Imagination Group at TU Delft's Department of Architecture, here in the Netherlands, have explored interdisciplinary connections through poetry workshops within the context of design courses.[13] 'Poems in Place: A Poetry Masterclass' detailed one such workshop at the 2023 international ACSA conference, 'Educating the Cosmopolitan Architect', and argued for a prominent presence of poetry in the curricula of architectural pedagogy.[14] At the School of Architecture in Strasbourg, poets work with architects to create design studios nourished by poetic imaginaries.[15] Publications like Jill Stoner's book *Poems for Architects: An Anthology* (2001) further explore the connection between architecture and poetry beyond the pedagogical setting.[16] While such pedagogical and discursive meeting points between poetry and architecture have been documented, the potential of poetry in relation to architectural practice is less recorded.

Poetics of Place endeavours to present such practices. It addresses how poetry could be insightful in working with ambiguous and pluralistic places—public urban places, for instance, used and inhabited by multiple characters. *Poetics of Place* asks how can such places, for instance, be characterized by multiple poetic images, or how could a single poetic image be polyphonic? How can poetic forms of investigation help to address this complexity of place in design questions? What can architects learn from the gaze of the poet or the methods used by poets to observe, invent, deform, erase, or to construct? Toward what specific topics and details do poets of place gravitate? Given that poetry can unveil and multiply the experiential aspects of a place, how can it guide architects to prioritize these qualities and enhance the embodied experience a designed place affords?

Looking for new ways to take account the connections between poetic language and the constitutive elements of situatedness and place, *Poetics of Place* approaches questions of place from three angles. First, it presents a series of chapters that investigate how poetic language can evoke qualities of situatedness. Then, it features a perspective from spatial practice, by practitioners who operate between architecture and poetry, using poetic writing as a mode to investigate places. It concludes with three conversations, in which poets and educators share how they approach poetry to engage with communities and places. A more detailed description of the book's three sections follows below.

Poetics of Place in Literature

The first section of the book, 'Poetics of Place in Literature', opens with an investigation of the work of Irish poet Seamus Heaney. In the first chapter, author Andrew Carr discusses Heaney's collection *Seeing Things* in relation to the spatial, social, and discursive context in which the poems were conceived and received. In this relational analysis, he shows how the poetic work not only comes forth from a complex entanglement of place and social context, but also how it informs, and perhaps transforms discussions of place by architects. The second chapter of this section moves to the Arab Quarter in Alexandria, a place where materials, atmospheres, and social codes form a complex spatial texture that slowly becomes legible for the visitor. Through the analysis of the use of poetic language in *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957) novels of Lawrence Durrell, Ali Rehza Shahbazin explains how the description of urban experience becomes emotionally charged. Here, language plays a role in evoking an intimate personal relationship to place, which instigates active engagements with situatedness. In 'Verses Witness', Ece Canli turns our attention to a radically confined type of place, a prison. The involuntary presence in a building characterized by strict rules and boundaries is far from the romantic view on place description that tends to characterize discussions on place and poetry. Here, the author delves into the written work of prisoners, as a means to understand the spatial dynamics and the physical, psychological, and affective impacts of incarceration.

Poetic Research Practices

The book's second section, 'Poetic Research Practices', explores how poetics work in situated practices of knowledge production. The first contribution tells of an embedded form of research, where the author Eline van Leeuwen had an active engagement as caretaker in a psychiatric hospital. She captures her lived experiences of the hospital in poems and sketches and reflects on how this way of documenting allows for understanding of the affective, ephemeral, and peripheral dimensions of atmosphere.

After the prison and the psychiatric hospital, the hotel enters as a third architectural type under investigation in this volume. Here, not the experience of the inhabitant or worker is at stake, but precisely their absence. In 'Fruits of Futile Flora', Maša Seničić visits abandoned and overgrown hotels in the Balkan region, depicting them as organisms with their own personality. Specific attention is dedicated to the role of plants, as they gradually take over and transform the spatial structures into a landscape of their own. Continuing on the notion of decay, poet Lydia Unsworth takes the reader along a trajectory of change in her chapter, 'Play Space in the Death Zone'. She shares how, as a poet, she responded to a period of decline and demolishment in a post-industrial working-class environment in Britain. The ambiguity of memory and the affective relationship with what remains from times of hardship is brought into sight. Her poetic practice records the transformation through both careful documentation and oneiric associations. Finally, in the last contribution of this section, we return to the city with a study of a public urban space in the centre of Vienna. The author, Ella Felber, gives insight into her prolonged poetic investigation of a specific site, emerging through repeated visits and informed by scholarly and poetic references. Here, the actual making process of the poetic text is shared as an almost spatial construction, with special attention to the use of poetic devices such as rhythm and punctuation marks.

Conversations

The book concludes with a section containing three conversations. While working on creating *Poetics of Place,* we thought it was important to talk with poets, architects and educators who actively engage with place and poetry, to bring their voices into the pages of the book. First, we present a situated interview with Dutch poet Erik Lindner, whose poems contain fragmented sequences of places. During a forest walk visiting sites closely connected with his recent poems, Lindner shares his creative process, combining the detailed observation of multiple places with the evocation of deliberately unfinished images. The next conversation is with architect, educator, and poet Ted Landrum who has lived and worked in various cities in Canada and North America to discuss how he engages with the poets and the poetry communities of the places where he has lived. We unpack his life-long project 'Archipoetry Bibliography', a compilation of a books consisting of both poetry and architectural titles and why they matter for architects and architectural students. The last conversation features Anna West, who works and teaches in Baton Rouge, in the south of the United States. West's leadership and dedication to community-based writing and performance pedagogies teaches us the impact one can have on place. Our conversation revisits the power and

vulnerability of urban literacy education movements, including youth open mics or poetry slams, and how they can combat the dispossession felt by many youth communities that need more encouragement—rupturing the silence of the status quo and making a place for poetry in places where so much else is denied.

Poems, Commentaries, and Visual Essay

The book includes, as intermezzos between the different sections, a selection of poems of place, chosen and commented by the editors. Given the subject and theme of this book, we found it both galvanizing and appropriate to include poems that spoke to our intentions when we set out to create *Poetics of Place*. We prompted ourselves to select poems that we thought exemplary for their relationship to place—poems that, we believe, do similar work to both what is discussed and what could not be discussed in the contributed chapters. Through conversations and sharing, we naturally realized additional criteria for selection and representation, as we just had too many examples, from a plethora of diverse poets and places. Eventually we landed on each editor providing a poem from a poet that touches upon the place that we each consider home: New York, New Orleans, the Netherlands, and Greece. These poems are certain to evoke their respective places, and we cast our commentary as an invitation for more conversations.

Lastly, we also included a visual essay on a recent architectural, site-specific poetry installation by one of the co-editors. The ability to not only bring poetry, but write and create poetry in public spaces—and therefore consciousness—is something we would like to leave open-ended and full of potential. We hope that our reflections and your own may lead to more and more places of poetic understanding and creation.

May these additions inspire you and act as refreshments for future feasts at the tables where architecture meets poetry.

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press 1994), 8.
2 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience, A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 173-174.
3 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 131.
4 Edward S Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 33.
5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Art and the World of Perception,' in *The World of Perception* (Oxon: Routledge 2004), 69-76.
6 Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1983), 75.
7 Ibid.
8 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.
9 John Hedjuk, *Aesop's Fables*, (New York, Rizzoli, 1991), 3-4.
10 Angeliki Sioli and Vincent A. Cellucci, 'Poems in Place: A Poetry Masterclass,' in *Educating the Cosmopolitan Architect,* 2023 ACSA/EAAE Teachers Conference Proceedings, June 22-24, 2023, 336-341, https://doi.org/10.35483/ACSA.Teach.2023.49
11 For more visit the program's website: https://www.mcgill.ca/architecture/programs/post-professional/prospective-students/architectural-history-theory
12 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 'Poetic Language and Architectural Meaning,' in *Timely Meditations: Selected Essays on Architecture vol 2* (Montreal: Right Angle International), 273.
13 For more visit the Group's website: https://www.tudelft.nl/bk/over-faculteit/afdelingen/architecture/organisatie/groepen/methods-of-analysis-and-imagination.
14 Angeliki Sioli and Vincent A. Cellucci, Ibid.
15 For more see: https://www.strasbourg.archi.fr/ateliers
16 Jill Stoner, *Poems for Architects: An Anthology* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2001).

February
James Schuyler

A chimney, breathing a little smoke.
The sun, I can't see
making a bit of pink
I can't quite see in the blue.
The pink of five tulips
at five p.m. on the day before March first.
The green of the tulip stems and leaves
like something I can't remember,
finding a jack-in-the-pulpit
a long time ago and far away.
Why it was December then
and the sun was on the sea
by the temples we'd gone to see.
One green wave moved in the violet sea
like the UN Building on big evenings,
green and wet
while the sky turns violet.
A few almond trees
had a few flowers, like a few snowflakes
out of the blue looking pink in the light.
A gray hush
in which the boxy trucks roll up Second Avenue
into the sky. They're just
going over the hill.
The green leaves of the tulips on my desk
like grass light on flesh,
and a green-copper steeple
and streaks of cloud beginning to glow.
I can't get over
how it all works in together
like a woman who just came to her window
and stands there filling it
jogging her baby in her arms.
She's so far off. Is it the light
that makes the baby pink?
I can see the little fists
and the rocking-horse motion of her breasts.
It's getting grayer and gold and chilly.
Two dog-size lions face each other
at the corners of a roof.
It's the yellow dust inside the tulips.
It's the shape of a tulip.
It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in.
It's a day like any other.

Schuyler, James. "February," in *Freely Espousing*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969.

Commentary by
Jeremy Allan Hawkins

What is a metropolis like New York when seen from the domestic space of a window in the last light of a day in late winter? Pink, blue, violet, yes, but from a spray of tulips on the desk to the monolithic United Nations Headquarters set against the sky on "big evenings."

The poetics of place are these images, these immediate ambiances that Schuyler shows us, but also the echoes of other places that juxtapose themselves in the imaginary, "the temples we'd gone to see" that continue to wave alongside and through our experience.

The poet can't get over how it all fits, seeming to culminate in the miracle of a mother appearing in a window, "jogging" her baby, showing the life of New York not accounted for in Wall Street reports, this city that could be any city but is also exactly this one.

And still he concludes with the ordinary, as if suggesting that the wonder experienced from the window is literally the everyday. And a poem set in the midst of what we know as the hyper-urban, turns back to the floral.

James Schulyer (1923-1991) was born in Chicago, but spent most of his life in New York. He was associated with the New York School of poets John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch. Winner of the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Schuyler was known for his poems attentive to the quotidian, but also carefully expressive of an inner life.

POETICS OF PLACE IN LITERATURE

POETICS OF PLACE
IN LITERATURE

Seeing Things in *Seeing Things*

Architectural Responses to Seamus Heaney

Andrew Carr

Seamus Heaney's collection of poems *Seeing Things* is a common point of reference for several architects and their work: John Tuomey cites it in the development of the Glucksman Gallery, Níall McLaughlin at the Bishop Edward King Chapel, and Biba Dow in relation to the Marshall House. Each architect reads and departs from the poems in different ways. This paper will describe the poems and their architectural responses, attempting to understand their resonances.

Heaney's collection, *Seeing Things*, is first discussed by describing its structure and identifying key themes and ideas relating to place, memory, time, 'marvels' and metaphors formed from everyday experiences, objects and actions. Select reference, where relevant, is made to the body of critical writing that has gathered around Heaney, although the emphasis of the paper is focused on the responses of each architect to the poet's work.[1] Each architect is then discussed in turn, drawing on their writing, lectures and built work, supplemented by dialogue with Dow and McLaughlin. The paper concludes by placing Heaney back into a more complex context where relations between poet, architect, place and proposition become blurred and entangled.

The architects discussed are all contemporary practitioners: O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects was founded in 1988 by Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey. They are based in Dublin and were awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2015. Níall McLaughlin was educated in Dublin before moving to London and founding Níall McLaughlin Architects in 1990, going on to win the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2022 for The New Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Also based in London, Biba Dow, with partner Alun Jones, founded Dow Jones Architects in 2000. They are perhaps best known for additions to the Garden Museum in Lambeth, London, and skilful, considered additions and alterations to existing buildings.

Seeing Things

Seeing Things was published in 1991, four years before Heaney received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The collection is organized in two parts, bracketed by excerpts, translated by Heaney, from works by Virgil and

Dante. The first part includes twenty-three poems that are of varying length and format, some gathered together under a single title. The second part, *Squarings*, is much more disciplined. It contains four sections – *Lightenings*, *Settings*, *Crossings* and *Squarings* – each of twelve poems and an identical length and structure of twelve lines, arranged in four stanzas of three-line tercets. There are multiple themes and images in the collection that build upon each other and are here introduced, in turn, using short quotations to reproduce Heaney's meticulous voice.

Many of the poems relate to Heaney's biography and recall the places he lived, his family memories and childhood games and activities, such as spinning a bicycle wheel in the mud in *Wheels within Wheels*. In *Glanmore Revisited* Heaney describes moving from Belfast with his family and living in their house near Dublin:

> Bare flags. Pump water. Winter-evening cold.
> Our backs might never warm up but our faces
> Burned from the hearth-blaze and the hot whiskeys.
> It felt half remembered even then, an old
> Rightness half-imagined or foretold,[2]

The poem then describes his daughter sleeping in the same cot that Heaney himself slept in. The sense of successive generations is established alongside the presence of a common physical object – the cot an inhabitable place, as much as an item of furniture – that moves between them. The past, present and future are intertwined with the physical and become almost interchangeable. There is also a sense that the house provides shelter and warmth, which contrasts with the less benign presence of the weather and seasons outdoors. *1973* begins:

> The corrugated iron growled like thunder
> When March came in; then as the year turned warmer
> And invalids and bulbs came up from under,
> I hibernated on behind the dormer,[3]
>
> And whatever rampaged out there couldn't reach us,
> Firelit, shuttered, slated and stone-walled.[4]

The passage of time is established along with the protective role of buildings that must be continually repaired and renewed to ward off decay. *Lightenings, II* instructs: 'Roof it again. Batten-down. Dig in.' – actions of the living, using buildings to protect themselves from time – as death looms in the excerpts from Virgil and Dante bracketing the collection.[5] Care is taken in measuring and setting out buildings as stable points of reference:

> Touch the cross-beam, drive iron in a wall,
> Hang a line to verify the plumb
> From lintel, coping-stone and chimney breast.[6]

Beyond individual buildings and interior worlds, a strong sense of place is suggested, of rural landscapes – never cities or settlements – evoked with distinct images and sensations:

> Inishbofin on a Sunday morning
> Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel.
> One by one we were being handed-down
> Into a boat that dipped and shill shallied
> Scaresomely every time . . .[7]

The first part of *Seeing Things* closes with *Fosterling* and – compared to earlier works that often addressed the contested territory of his native Northern Ireland – confirms an often-noted shift in his work 'from a deeply visceral engagement with the earth and the historical bodies buried in it to a preoccupation with more transcendental matters':[8]

> Heaviness of being. And poetry
> Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.
> Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
> To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin-cans
> The tinkers made . . .[9]

Many of the poems witness such 'marvels', often as revelatory metaphors crafted from everyday physical objects and actions, such as the cutting of *The Skylight*, which opens:

> You were the one for skylights. I opposed
> Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
> Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
> Its claustrophobic, nest up-in-the-roof[10]

Having established the presence of another, 'You', Heaney evolves a narrative about interior worlds that are opened up, repressions and boundaries released:

> But when the slates came off, extravagant
> Sky entered and held surprise wide open.[11]

The poem continues by referring to 'the inhabitant' as being like the sick man in the Bible story, who was lowered through the roof to be healed. These poems act as parables – truths and metaphors sought from everyday experiences, objects and actions. John Wilson Foster helpfully notes that Heaney has a 'conscious receptivity to the wondrous inherent in the commonplace'.[12] Here the physical act of adding a skylight becomes literally and metaphorically transformative. Using these 'restorative tropes', Charles Weston Prince argues that Heaney alters the elegiac quality imbued in the archetypal vernacular forms of architecture present in his work.[13]

O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects, Glucksman Gallery viewed from Lower Grounds of the university gardens, University College Cork, Ireland. 2004.

O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects, The entrance to the Glucksman Gallery, University College Cork, Ireland. 2004.

Buildings, places and interiors have a strong presence in the poems. Thresholds, gutters, hearths and roofs are observed, each assuming a potency. Heaney describes as a 'time machine' the top of the worn, marked kitchen dresser in his childhood home: 'It was all sensation, tingling with an amplification of inner space, subtly and indelibly linked with the word "old."'[14] Inner and outer worlds are here intertwined and temporal boundaries blurred. While for Heaney a response to the physical can become the starting point of a poem, the architects in the pages that follow look to Heaney's work to help craft buildings.

O'Donnell and Tuomey and the Glucksman Gallery

The Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork, Ireland, was designed by O'Donnell and Tuomey and opened in 2004. It is built among mature trees in the Lower Grounds of the university gardens, a more or less level terrain defined by the banks of the River Lee on one side and an arc of higher ground on another, from where older university buildings are visible among the trees. To try and work within these constraints, weaving a new building into a sensitive landscape setting, O'Donnell and Tuomey 'saw the possibility of a pavilion building with a minimum footprint standing between the trees'.[15] In his description of the building John Tuomey quotes from *Lightenings, VIII,* in the second part of *Seeing Things*: 'A ship appeared above them in the air'.[16]

In Tuomey's words, Heaney's poem provided 'a direct visual reference for us in our idea for the building – a ship straining above a stone terrain'.[17] The poem describes the monks of Clonmacnoise Abbey at prayer as a ship appears above them, its trailing anchor snagging itself on the altar rails. One of the boat's crewmen climbs down the rope but struggles to release it. Upon instruction from the abbot the monks help the crewman free the ship; he then ascends back up to the boat, 'out of marvellous as he had known it'.[18] The poem establishes an above and a below, a worldly and spiritual realm that are momentarily entangled. The exchange between the monks and the ship is enacted in the gallery.

Architecturally, the imagery is used both literally and metaphorically: The gallery is elevated among the trees – hovering overhead – and drops lines of structure down to anchor it to the ground. A void can be read between the mass of the ramped stone base and the elevated timber-clad gallery, establishing a clear distinction between a static plinth relating to the ground and a more dynamic form above: the world of the monks and the timber vessel of the ship. The form of the stone base emphasizes its solidity, vertical joints nudge the eye to the upper world of curved timbers – fixed horizontally, parallel to the ground – that open out at corners, releasing the interior into the tree canopy. Visitors thus ascend from the plane of the everyday world, upwards, into the realms of art and imagination, enacting a reversal of the poem as they descend back to the world below from the 'marvellous' above. Tuomey is sensitive to this dialectic and metaphorical play, noting how with Heaney 'consciousness crosses the domains between matters of fact and of the imagined'.[19]

Lightenings, VIII, is slightly atypical of the collection, a recalled 'annal' inserted between more biographical recollections that meditate on the land,

Níall McLaughlin Architects, Bishop Edward King Chapel, Cuddesdon, Drawing of Lightenings, VIII, by Níall McLaughlin, 2009.

the fleeting and the eternal. While the poem is cited by the architects as informing the worlds of above and below, they consider it separate from 'our idea of the building'. Interestingly, David Leatherbarrow reads the gallery through another part of *Seeing Things,* as a series of 'crossings' between building and site, quoting from *Crossings, xxx.* Heaney's words, 'The open they came into by these moves', provide him with a succinct description of the process of design 'moves' and the resultant 'open', 'they', the architects, derived in the form of a building from the crossings of routes within the site.[20] *Lightenings, viii,* is never mentioned as a means of understanding the building, but Leatherbarrow's reading is just as compelling. In their own narratives of other, later projects O'Donnell and Tuomey describe often diverse, incidental origins: Looking at a sleeve in a Vermeer painting Sheila O'Donnell wondered what it would be like living inside it; Tuomey then tried to draw it, and it became the form of a museum. Later, they realized they had both been looking at different sleeves. A walk along cliffs on the island of Inishmaan, prompted them to think of the façade of a university building as a cliff. One wonders if the buildings might have turned out differently if they happened to be reading something or visiting somewhere else at the time.

Tuomey regularly references writers, such as W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster and Robert Frost – alongside other architects and artists – in descriptions of the work and thinking of the practice. Often he discusses how each individual works, rather than their work itself. At the Glucksman we witness both, as O'Donnell and Tuomey borrow Heaney's imagery and heed his prompting in *Lightenings, ii,* to 'study the unregarded floor', seeking to transform spatial relationships otherwise, to become what they describe as 'the elevated ordinary' or 'strangely familiar'.[21]

Níall McLaughlin and Bishop Edward King Chapel

The very same poem is referred to by Níall McLaughlin in his descriptions of Bishop Edward King Chapel, Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire. McLaughlin quotes all twelve lines of *Lightenings, viii,* in his self-authored book *Twelve Halls*, privileging it with a page to itself, and draws the poem as a boat sailing above a gathering of those at prayer on the site of the chapel.[22] Sensitive to the theological connotations of Heaney's lines he suggests that it has a missing word – nave – relating the body of a church and a ship. He describes how:

'From the beginning, I wanted to create a spatial equivalent to the phantasmagorical image in the poem, that you are at once seeing the ship from below and on the deck of the ship among the masts. The roof is profiled like the keel of a ship stretched taut between the two foci of the ellipse.'[23]

It is one of many images and references used to derive and describe the building and was a reference point for McLaughlin long before he came to design the chapel. It was read aloud by his project architect to a panel of Anglican bishops at the competition interview. Its imagery infuses with around forty other diverse references to other buildings, architects, writers and ideas.

Before building the chapel in 2011, McLaughlin's team spent four days making a large hand drawing of its plan on a cast plaster floor. Describing this activity he quotes from *Lightenings, III,* a few pages earlier in *Seeing Things*, which begins:

> Squarings? in the game of marbles, squarings
> Were all those anglings, aimings, feints and squints
> You were allowed before you'd shoot, all those

And ends:

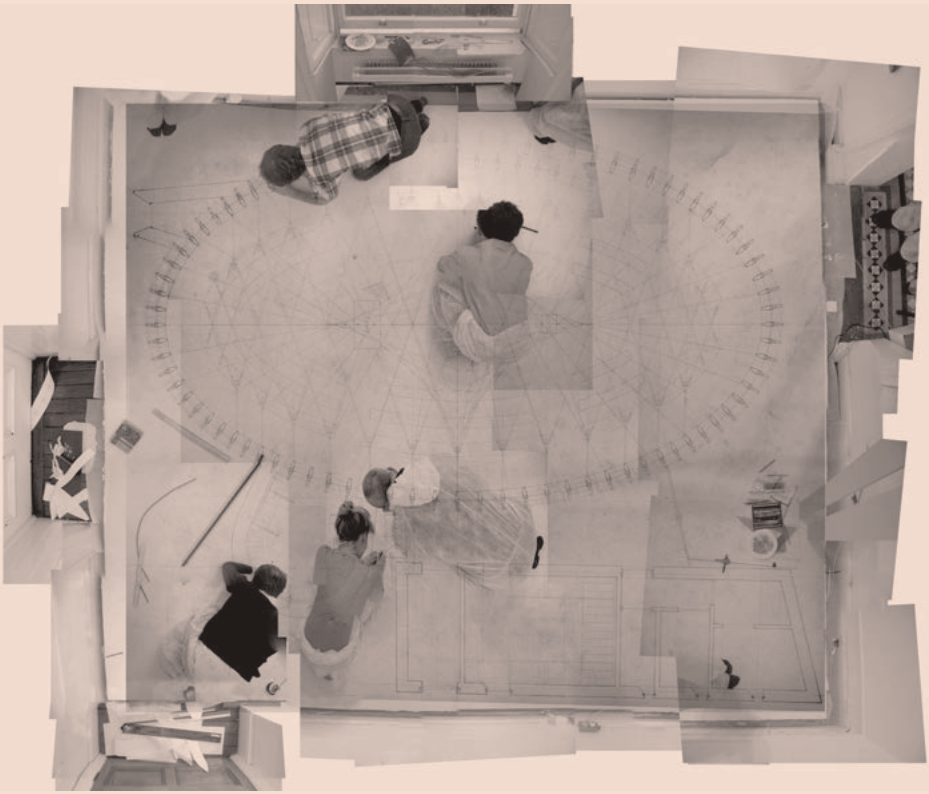
> Between your muscles' outreach and that space
> Marked with three round holes and a drawn line.
> You squinted out from a skylight of the world.

Ostensibly about a game of marbles, the poem describes a sense of preparation and consideration, a decision whether to draw a line here or there. On the plaster floor McLaughlin's team drew lines by hand that would translate into actual spaces formed by the labour of construction workers. These actions echo Heaney's lines concerned with measurement and setting out, here and elsewhere in *Seeing Things*, together with observations McLaughlin articulated for a radio broadcast linking Heaney and architecture. He likened the craft of the architect and poet, noting that architects 'take things from the ground', working with an idea and 'projecting forward into an uncertain place'.[24]

From these beginnings the chapel was constructed, opening in 2013. It is elliptical in plan. A timber lattice structure is offset from the outer walls to form a perimeter ambulatory and the inner space where, like the monks of Clonmacnoise, worshippers gather, an elliptical boat form evident overhead, surrounded by clerestory light. Whether worshippers make the connection with Heaney and the monks is unlikely but not important. The chapel works on its own terms. A relatively direct reading of the poem in the building is possible, but it is not the first chapel to draw on imagery associated with boat structures. Unlike at the Glucksman, here we remain on the ground, caught within 'a big hull rocked to a standstill', the worlds of above and below coinciding momentarily as we become both crewmen and monks.[25]

McLaughlin describes the way poems influence his thinking very directly: 'When I read poems sometimes they conjure a situation so convincingly that I feel like I want to, in some way, make that situation. I want to bring the imagined situation in the poem into being.'[26]

Lightenings, III, assumes a generative presence in the formation of the building but also infuses with multiple other references that have been gathered and overlaid, their density together forming something more complex – what McLaughlin more generally refers to as 'loam' – a process of accumulation likened to the layers of soil building up in a garden that create a nourishing, fertile substructure for growth. As such, while all references might have been present in and around the design process, or exist in the collective consciousness or habits of its participants, there may not be a



Níall McLaughlin Architects, The Tracing Floor, University College Dublin, 2011.

Níall McLaughlin Architects, Bishop Edward King Chapel, Cuddesdon, 2013.

direct causal link between each and the outcome of the process as embodied in the work itself. Some links might be obvious – like the poem – others more distant. Heaney's poem is clearly embedded in McLaughlin's loam; the imagery itself echoes *Bogland*, an earlier Heaney poem where the bog becomes a collective unconscious where things are dropped and stored, concealed but passed into the future. McLaughlin cites the poem when describing a paved floor-façade to a house in Wandsworth.[27] McLaughlin borrows a title, *Trial Pieces,* for a lecture and essay from *North*, a later volume of poems where Heaney uses the imagery of bog-bodies, Iron-Age corpses discovered in the bogs of Northern Europe, as a way of writing about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Other connections with Heaney can be made, but McLaughlin's loam is formed more broadly and includes other writers and poets, such as Sarah Maguire, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bishop, W.B. Yeats and Jorge Luis Borges. The chapel grew out of this context too.

McLaughlin admits that *Seeing Things* is not one of his favourite Heaney collections, except for *Lightenings, VIII,* which he used to introduce his lectures for a decade alongside *St Kevin and the Blackbird,* yet another Heaney poem from another collection that was also referenced in the competition entry for the chapel.[28] Here, Saint Kevin sticks his arm out of window, a blackbird laying an egg in his palm causing him to continue to hold out his aching hand, carefully cradling the new creation until the 'young are hatched and fledged and flown'.[29] There is a sense that the chapel was an almost inevitable outworking of these preoccupations, the poems recited as mantras or prayers, patiently being remembered to nurture a new building when possibility allowed.

Dow Jones and the Marshall House

Quiet Marvels is the title Biba Dow, of Dow Jones Architects, gave to a talk in 2022 as part of the Presence, Person, Beauty lecture series.[30] McLaughlin had given the previous talk, borrowing his title – *Old Timber to New Fires* – from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Dow derives her title from the last line of Heaney's *Lightenings, VIII*, which we have already encountered – 'out of the marvellous as he had known it'. In the talk, Heaney's work is described as a 'lodestone'. It has informed both a building designed by Dow Jones and something of their sensibility.

The Marshall House, Suffolk, was built in 2001. A long thin rectangle on plan, the building has a simple pitched roof of clay tiles. Blackened timber walls, punctured with modest window openings, rest on a brick plinth that extends inside to create the ground-floor surface, and upwards to form hearths and chimney stacks. The first floor, staircase and dividing walls are constructed with solidly detailed timbers. It is a modest, unassuming house with strong material properties. It might easily be mistaken for a much older building. There is something about the house that is very Heaney-like: It adopts a vernacular form. Its materials are used very simply and directly. There is a language of 'gutters', 'ridge-tiles', 'tongue-and-groove worthiness' and 'hearth-blaze' that reprise in Heaney's words. The brick ground-floor surface recalls a similar floor in *Squarings, XI:*

I was four but I turned four hundred maybe
Encountering the ancient dampish feel
Of a clay floor. Maybe four thousand even.[31]

Heaney goes on to close the poem:

Out of that earth house I inherited
A stack of singular, cold memory-weights
To load me, hand and foot, in the scale of things.[32]

The Marshall House could easily be the one that Heaney describes. Dow quotes these same verses to describe the importance she places on making things with her hands to appreciate their material character, often legible in the marks of tooling and repair, noting too how she is moved by things that are worn, such as 'a step softened by passing feet' connecting us 'through material and habits and places across time'.[33] While Dow does not directly link these verses with the house she does describe it using *Markings, III,* in part one of *Seeing Things*:[34]

All these things entered you.
As if they were both the door and what came through it.
They marked the spot, marked time and held it open.[35]

The words cause her to project the house forwards and back in time, 'marking' the site with a lasting brick plinth, hearth and chimney, should all else be wasted. To underline this potential future Dow shows an image of just such a hearth in Dungeness.[36] A new place is marked and made, establishing a physical presence in an 'unbounded' site. Dow's quote is from the beginning of the third part of the poem. Its earlier parts describe children marking out a football pitch, transforming 'bumpy thistle ground'. The second part associates this with:

The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly
To mark the outline of a house foundation,[37]

There is a clear sense of the careful setting out of lines and right angles that govern the labour of spades, mowers and 'freshly sawn new board', which has a direct resonance with the activity of an architect and the importance Dow attaches to making. It recalls too the connections Heaney makes between simple physical acts, material properties, places, memories and metaphor. One of his best known and earliest poems, *Digging*, was conceived while driving a car and changing gear to turn a corner.[38] Shifting from third to second then first gear caused Heaney to think about shifts through three generations of his family. The poem describes his grandfather digging peat, Heaney visiting him and watching him work as he reflects on his own tools:

Dow Jones, Marshall House, Suffolk, Exterior view, 2001.

Dow Jones, Marshall House, Suffolk, Interior view, 2001.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.[39]

Like O'Donnell and Tuomey's sleeves and cliff walks, an incidental act of changing gear becomes a poem describing the everyday physical activity of his grandfather, Heaney finding metaphors in – what Dow notes as – the 'space between the words and imagery', alert to connections between place, matter and people as 'He summons the essence of things'.[40] It is harder to say if the Marshall House is metaphorical, but it certainly provides a ground for metaphors, the likes of which are found by Heaney.

Marvels, Essences and Entanglements

Heaney's work has an international reputation and is well known within Ireland. It is no surprise that each architect is aware of his work, but more curious that each should choose, in their own work, to refer not just to Heaney, but to one of his collections specifically. So why are they drawn to *Seeing Things*?

In some senses, Heaney, like Joyce, is just too present, immediate and easy to reach for when discussing Irish architecture, epigraphs and quotations from them both being regularly appropriated in architectural writing. While this simple juxtaposition might prime our understanding of a building, it does not necessarily follow that there is a meaningful connection between a poem and a building, or a dialogue between the architectural and poetic imagination. The work of architecture does not somehow become poetic, nor the work of poetry become architectural. (We should note too that Dow has little connection with Ireland.) The buildings designed by each architect are not necessarily derivative of those described by Heaney in his poems. They respond to Heaney in other ways.

Lightenings, VIII, is a well-known, memorable part of *Seeing Things* and easily lends itself to architectural appropriation; its strong spatial imagery is also referred to in another O'Donnell and Tuomey project, 'The Vessel', a stacked timber plank structure installed at the 2012 Venice Biennale. The reference was here less direct, but Heaney's work was included on a 'table of affinities', acknowledging his presence alongside other influences in a similar way to McLaughlin's loam. Significantly, this poem is the one cited by McLaughlin when asked why he considers Heaney's work to be 'architectural'.[41] Heaney here evokes a spatial presence, in a way that could be likened to the activity of an architect. Dow observes something similar when reading *Markings, III.* Heaney's poems might feature buildings or use an architecturally analogous structure – like in the rigid twelve-poem, twelve-line discipline of the second part of *Seeing Things* – but what becomes apparent are parallels

between the craft and production of a poet and that of the architect; properties of structure, rhythm and tone coinciding among the worlds constructed by words and buildings.

Broadly, O'Donnell and Tuomey at the gallery and McLaughlin at the chapel respond directly to *Lightenings, VIII*. Dow, by contrast, absorbs a more general sense of *Seeing Things*, is less interested in formal suggestions and more rooted in essences and processes – an intrinsic poetry of things in themselves, in a building, its parts and its life. Her approach has more affinity with Heaney's tendency to see buildings as vessels that embody and carry memory, mark place and provide shelter. Heaney's 'marvels', which might not involve a building at all, transform our perception of the everyday and mundane, as we witnessed in *Skylight*. For Dow too, marvels are observed and found in the ordinary, in the 'essence of things'. In an apparent contrast, at the gallery and chapel the marvel of the poem becomes a means of informing design thinking and transforming the eventual presence and experience of a building: *Lightenings, VIII,* offers the architects of the gallery an insight into the possibilities and qualities of above and below as they nurture its form, whereas at the chapel the situation conjured by the poem is concretized and overlaid with other influences and inflections. In both cases, the resultant architectural form is suggestive, rather than closed, metaphorical rather than analogous. Polemically, the gallery and chapel could be considered metaphorical responses, whereas the house is conceived as a ground for metaphors, or marvels, although we could think of the chapel and gallery in a similar way. While Heaney may have been present in the gestation of each building, his presence is not required as we experience each one – they work on their own terms. Simple distinctions mask a more complex set of interactions and transactions which are taking place between buildings, poetry, architects and poets.

It is perhaps too obvious to state, but easy to overlook, that none of the architects build their buildings. They draw them and these drawings are used, by others, to construct the worlds they have imagined, as McLaughlin and his team rehearsed on the plaster floor. None of them appear to write their buildings into being, or if they do it is in the form of a contract or specification document, never a poem. In this sense Heaney's poems could be considered borrowed drawings, a means of exploring and arriving at something that does not already exist, an observation lent from another that might be translated into architectural form or method. Like the poet, architects are, as McLaughlin notes, 'projecting forward into an uncertain place'. Heaney reminds architects of something similar, remarking that:

> . . . each new structure involves, in a deep metaphorical sense, a re-creation of the world, and so contributes towards the bringing into being of a certain kind of world.[42]

The three architects we have discussed, and their respective buildings, assume a reciprocal connection with Heaney and the poetic. This connection does not necessarily rely on the appearance of buildings in his poems but in an architectural presence or potency given by his words. This potency allows each to think about architectural framing differently. An

Dungeness, View of ruined heath and chimney, 2001.

architectural element, such as a floor, does not then just become an aesthetic surface, a technical assembly or result of purely practical considerations, but assumes a poetic presence too. The nature of this presence might be as a carrier of memory and time, as the floor is used and worn – in the case of Dow – or part of the construction of a larger, transformative 'marvel' – a metaphorical application of the poem seen at the Glucksman and Bishop Edward King Chapel. In each, the architectural and poetic imagination coincides. Heaney's marvels might be found in many places, perhaps simply in the revelation of a designer reading one of his poems – while for Heaney the physical might prompt a poem, here, a poem might prompt a building.

On the surface, each 'use' of Heaney's poetry seems one-directional – an architect borrowing inspiration for their own creative process from the creative labour of another. Typically a single line, but sometimes a broader sense, or way of seeing, become a point of departure. However, Heaney's collection has its own debts that complicate a simple reading. *Seeing Things* was partly written at Bótharbuí, which Heaney describes in *Settings, XIII*:

> Hazel stealth. A trickle in the culvert.
> Athletic sealight on the doorstep slab,
> On the sea itself, on silent roofs and gables.[43]

A family retreat in West Cork, Ireland, Bótharbuí was designed and used by Robin Walker, partner of RIBA Gold Medal winning Scott Tallon Walker and the subject of another of Heaney's poems, *An Architect*. Walker taught at University College Dublin, alongside O'Donnell and Tuomey. McLaughlin was taught by him there and would go on to work for him. Dow's connections are less obvious but, alongside her partner Alun Jones, taught with Patrick Lynch who edited a monograph on Walker, with Walker's son, and curated an exhibition and film on Bótharbuí at the Venice Biennale in 2008, with a specially recorded soundtrack of Heaney reciting his poems.[44] A year later Heaney laid a foundation stone inscribed with his penned words at O'Donnell and Tuomey's Lyric Theatre in Belfast.

A complex intertwining of people, words, and buildings thus becomes evident, the roles and work of poet and architect reciprocal. Heaney's work is often noted for its sensitivity to places and memory, which here seems to stem from, and fold back into, the creative work of others, informing new places. Just as buildings and architectural elements resonated with Heaney, each of the architects has drawn from him, providing a potent image for O'Donnell and Tuomey at the Glucksman Gallery, a spiritual setting for McLaughlin at Bishop Edward King Chapel and a poetry in making and material presence for Dow Jones: Things seen in *Seeing Things*.

1 For a succinct overview of Heaney's work, see: Bernard O'Donoghue (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, 2009), 11-12.
2 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London, 1991), 31.
3 Ibid., 34.
4 Ibid., 31.
5 Ibid., 56.
6 Ibid., 56.
7 Ibid., 16.
8 Henry Hart, 'What Is Heaney Seeing in Seeing Things?', *Colby Quarterly* 30/1 (1994), 33-42.
9 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 50.
10 Ibid., 37.
11 Ibid.
12 John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney after 50', in: O'Donoghue, *The Cambridge Companion*, op. cit. (note 1), 207.
13 Charles Weston Prince, *Resonant Forms: Architecture in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcot*, unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Toronto, 2000).
14 Seamus Heaney, 'Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych', *Salmagundi* 188/189 (2015), 539-556.
15 John Tuomey, *Architecture, Craft and Culture* (Kinsale, 2004), 58.
16 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 62.
17 Tuomey, *Architecture*, op. cit. (note 15), 58.
18 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 62.
19 Tuomey, *Architecture*, op. cit. (note 15), 58.
20 Heaney, *Crossings, xxx,* quoted in: David Leatherbarrow, 'Landings and Crossing – The Lewis Glucksman Gallery', in: Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, *O'Donnell + Tuomey: Selected Works* (New York, 2007), 176-185.
21 Tuomey quoted in: Shane O' Toole, 'The Elevated Ordinary', *Architectural Review* 1432 (2016); Tuomey, *Architecture*, op. cit. (note 15), 90.
22 Níall McLaughlin, *Twelve Halls* (London, 2018), 22-23.
23 Níall McLaughlin, 'Incarnations: Bishop Edward Chapel Cuddesdon', in: Lisa Godson and Kathleen James-Chakraborty (eds.), *Modern Religious Architecture in Germany, Ireland and Beyond* (London, 2019), 117-136.
24 Níall McLaughlin, *Night Waves*, BBC Radio 4 programme (2004).
25 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 62.
26 Níall McLaughlin, 'Swimmers', *Poetry and Architecture* lecture, RIBA (2014).
27 Níall McLaughlin, 'Shem and Shaun', *Arch-ive* interview (2020).
28 Níall McLaughlin, e-mail correspondence with author (2024).
29 Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London, 1996), 24.
30 Biba Dow, 'Quiet Marvels', *Presence, Person, Beauty* lecture (2022).
31 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 9.
32 Ibid.
33 Biba Dow, 'First Hand', *Architecture Today* 277 (2017) 0.
34 Biba Dow, 'Summer Nights 2009', *Architecture Foundation* lecture (2009).
35 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 9.
36 Biba Dow, 'Legacy, New Horizons', in: *The Cultural Significance of Architecture*, The Dalibor Vesely Memorial Conference: Session 3 (2016).
37 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 8.
38 Seamus Heaney, in: 'The Four Sides of Seamus Heaney: Poet of Place', BBC Radio 4 programme (2023).
39 Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London, 1966), 13.
40 Biba Dow, e-mail correspondence with author (2024).
41 Níall McLaughlin, discussion with author (2024).
42 Seamus Heaney, 'From Maecenas to MacAlpine', in: John Graby (ed.), *150 Years of Architecture in Ireland: RIAI 1839-1989* (Dublin, 1989), 72.
43 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, op. cit. (note 2), 69.
44 Patrick Lynch and Simon Walker (eds), *Change is the Reality: The Work of Robin Walker Architect* (London, 2021).

POETICS OF PLACE
IN LITERATURE

‘How I love the place, you have no idea’

Exploring Poetic Language in the Arab Quarter of *The Alexandria Quartet*

Ali Reza Shahbazin

The primacy of place emerges as a central theme in the tetralogy of British novelist Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (hereafter *Quartet*, 1957). The series chronicles the experiences of European émigrés in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria in the 1930s. In its portrayal of the world city, *Quartet* also explores the poetics of place. Durrell understands place as a condition of consciousness that shapes perception: ‘We are the children of our landscape,’[1] he writes, reminding us that spaces are not merely practical or aesthetic objects but emerge with poetic qualities. Spaces can be experiential environments with poetic qualities. Poetic refers, in this context, to spatial qualities that evoke deep emotions or imagery – creating moods that allow one to perceive experiences with depth and sensitivity. Such spaces are explored in *Quartet* through the lives of characters like British lieutenant Joshua Scobie.

Scobie is a queer man and a crossdresser who feels most at home in Alexandria’s Arab quarter. Excluded from the British Navy due to his sexual orientation, Scobie is offered a degree of tolerance in Egypt, and occasional opportunities for self-expression.[2] Although certain aspects of his behaviour reflect the lingering influence of imperial culture, Scobie takes advantage of his empowering welcome in the Arab quarter to become a true individual who confronts barriers related to gender and race, as a ‘homosexual in exile’.[3] Moreover, his attachment to ‘Tatwig Street’ goes beyond homophilia. While he harbours romantic feelings for a man who lives there, Scobie embodies a profound love for the neighbourhood itself. As one would expect in a novel by Durrell, this love is conveyed in *Quartet* through poetic language that explores and celebrates spaces, and public spaces in particular.

In this study, I interpret Scobie’s urban experience and delve into the Arab quarter as depicted through Durrell’s language. My primary focus is the role of poetic (that is original, polysemic and metaphoric) language in place: the way poetry emerges from place, and what it reveals about place. Even more specifically, I ask from the point of view of architecture

theory what Scobie's interaction with place can teach us about the responsibility of architecture towards place. I argue that poetic language plays a role in nurturing a sense of belonging, acting as a conduit for responsiveness to urban space. Poetic language thus serves as an element of situatedness. Through poetic insight, we gain architectural insight into the way a neighbourhood, initially perceived as foreign, can be intimately understood.

Before delving into the Arab quarter, I should clarify my understanding of language, poetic qualities and place for the purposes of this study. Drawing upon the perspectives of Jeff Malpas, I explore the essence of language here as both a means of mapping the world and a medium for communication. According to Malpas's place-based approach, language sharpens our sense of place, acknowledging our existence within reality and unfolding as a social and placed phenomenon.[4] From his standpoint, 'language is orientation . . . it is situation, and . . . as such it is also a fundamental mode of relating.'[5] He adds that 'if language is a mode of orientation or placing, then it is also itself placed'.[6] In short, from this point of view, language transcends mere mental production; it is framed in lived time and space. Malpas's understanding of language thus aligns with phenomenological hermeneutics and the concept of emerging language as part of the flesh of the world.[7]

In much the same way, I define the poetic, following Bachelard, as extending beyond the act of writing poems. The poetic language under study here arises from our life experiences, engaging deeply and imaginatively with the world – the urban environment in particular for this study – through various moods and meanings including sensory perception. As Bachelard explains, the poetic harmonizes our senses and psyche. He writes: 'All the senses awaken and fall into harmony in poetic reverie . . . Poetic reverie listens to this polyphony of senses.'[8] Bachelard can therefore speak of 'psychological poetics: the poetics of psyche where all the psychic forces fall into harmony'.[9] By these definitions, poetic experience resonates with 'the tonality of being [place]'.[10] Harmony with being is not necessarily limited to poetic language, but we can find its trace in poetic language. From this point of view, poetry, in all its forms, guides life onto a path that broadens enactive consciousness, enriches existence and opens new possibilities for expanding our being in the world.[11] As Bachelard puts it, and as we will see in Scobie's urban experience, poetic language in the widest sense embodies a consciousness in harmony with being (oriented in the world), creating and living the poetic experience – 'a growth of being'.[12] This growth is inherently creative, as its nature is polysemic, inviting interpretation, fostering critical thought and seeking something new.[13]

In this study, the urban environment is accordingly presented as a setting for poetic language, manifesting as an environment that attunes our senses, reveals what is 'already there', and leads us to the things themselves.[14] The urban perspective involved thereby expands on Bachelard's view that the feeling of being at home is not confined to the corner of a childhood room, but can also belong to the urban public spaces of a world city.

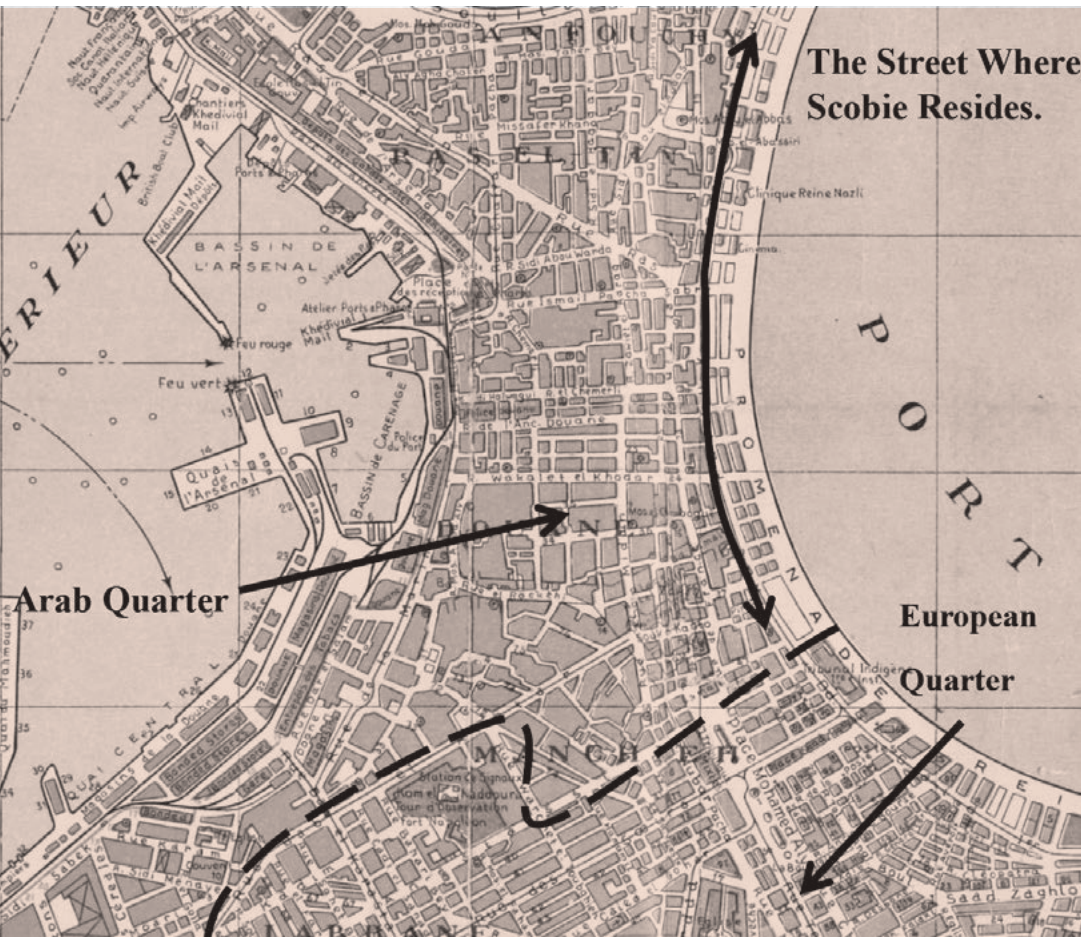
Finally, it should be noted that in terms of a phenomenological approach to place, Malpas defines place as the ground for human existence, seeing place as 'that wherein the sort of being that is characteristically human has its ground. So far as the idea of experience is concerned [it is place] within which events can "take place".'[15] For Malpas, then, place is a space humanized and humanizing, allowing humans to inhabit the world and feel at home.[16] Malpas considers feeling at home and in place to be inseparable from 'a sense of place [created] from the capacity for linguistic and narrative articulation'.[17] Since, he explains, the human connection with place is made possible through forms such as memories, poetry and stories: 'We understand a place and a landscape through the historical and personal narratives that are marked out within it and that give that place a particular unity and establish a particular set of possibilities within it.'[18] In essence, then, memories, poetry and stories imbue places with lived meaning, shaping both our perceptions of them and our interactions within them.

With these understandings of place and poetic language in mind, we can now turn our attention to the Arab quarter of Durrell's Alexandria in two sections: In 'Arab Quarter: Poetic Language in Place', I examine the role of poetic language in defining the character of place for Scobie, within the quarter's socially diverse and linguistically rich landscape. In the second section, 'Goharri Mosque: Place of Ritual and Dream', I show how Scobie's sense of belonging extends to the mosque as a site of ritual and dreaming. In these ways both sections contribute to my cumulative argument that attentiveness to poetic language can reveal the meaningfulness of people's perception of place – in this case the experience of being truly present in the built environment through the anchoring of feelings in place.

Arab Quarter: Poetic Language in Place

The Arab quarter, situated behind Tatwig Street, is the oldest neighbourhood in modern Alexandria. It is also known as 'Turkish town', the 'native quarter', and *Baḥarī* (sailor in Arabic).[19] As reported by English author E.M. Forster, following the Ottoman invasion in 1517 the quarter began to develop, in the seventeenth century, between two harbours.[20] It emerged as a product of traditional craftsmanship, blending architectural elements from Arabic and Hellenistic Alexandria, resulting in a town characterized by a 'hybridization of styles'.[21] Over time, the quarter evolved into a melting pot of cultures, attracting Jews, Greeks, Maghrebis and other immigrants from North Africa.[22] This diverse population contributed to the quarter's unique ambiance, with its densely packed two-storey houses lining bazaars and narrow, irregular streets. The area inspired many to wander and experience, as Scobie does in *Quartet*.

Although he might be expected to feel at home in the European quarter, Scobie actually feels more in harmony with the Arab quarter. The following excerpt represents how Scobie's behaviour and demeanour accordingly change as he moves between quarters:



Arab Quarter Plan in 1930. A. Nicoho Soff, 'Plan Général D'Alexandrie: Avec ses Embellissements Recents 1930' 1:10.000, Egypt, 1930, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b4aff4d2-e792-0a22-e040-e00a180610ca. The map is cropped and the double arrow line represents Tatwig Street.

> When he was in the upper town [European quarter] his walk and general bearing had an artificial swagger – it suggested a White Man at large, brooding upon problems peculiar to White Men – their Burden as they call it. To judge by Scobie, it hung heavy. His least gesture had a resounding artificiality, tapping his knees, sucking his lip, falling into brooding attitudes before shop windows. He gazed at the people around him as if from stilts . . . By the time we had reached the outskirts of the Arab quarter, however, he had all but shed these mannerisms. He relaxed, tipped his tarbush up to mop his brow, and gazed around him with the affection of long familiarity. Here he belonged by adoption, here he was truly at home.[23]

In this way, Scobie's movement through the city influences his bodily behaviour. The shift recalls Aristotle's observation in his *Physics* that 'entities are characterized by their "residing" in a *topos*',[24] where *topos* refers to place, suggesting its essence as a container that influences that which it contains.[25] In this case, place shapes people's feelings, as evidenced by Scobie's ease in the Arab quarter, where he walks 'with the ease of a man who has come into his own estate, slowly, sumptuously, like an Arab'.[26] Scobie is not 'Arab' by birth but by his presence in the Arab quarter. It is not about his ethnicity; rather, it is about the influence of place on him, as the Arab quarter shapes Scobie's manners.

Part of Scobie's behavioural change is due to the contrasting social structures of the quarters involved. The artificiality of his behaviour in the European quarter seems calculated to hide his queerness – his 'tendencies'.[27] When he goes to the Arab quarter, on the other hand, his 'tendencies' are not so troubling. He is even free to experience love there, where his beloved 'old Abdul is around the corner'.[28] However, acknowledging this social dimension does not give us the complete story. The place itself holds significance in inviting Scobie to feel at home. In the *Quartet*, the public spaces of the Arab quarter are not defined solely by formal characteristics, such as its intimate, narrow streets. They are also evoked through stimulation of the senses and the poetic qualities of public space that effectively convey meaning. These qualities are poetic in the sense defined above because they add depth to experience by creating a strong connection between the senses and place, making the meaning of place palpable. This sensory situatedness is exemplified in descriptions such as: 'In the Arab quarter the heat had hatched out the familiar smells of offal and drying mud, of carnations and jasmine, of animal sweat and clover.'[29] The adobe architecture of the quarter is portrayed in empathically non-abstract terms with characteristic smells, touching the emotions and creating a powerful presence. In another scene, we witness Scobie's sensory experience as he traverses the streets:

> He [Scobie] would pick a stick of sugar-cane off a stall as he passed, to gnaw it in the open street; or a sweet locust-bean . . . native splendours like rose-scented drinking water and whole sheep turning on spits, stuffed with pigeons, rice, nuts . . . Here he paused to inhale the draught of cooking Arab bread from the doorway of a shop and the old man exclaimed 'It smells like mother's lap!'[30]

These lines depict how place emerges through olfactory aspects, tastes and flavours, reinforcing engagement with the environment. Sensory stimulus (such as the aroma of Arab bread) can, for example, evoke emotional memories. This phenomenon recalls the 'Proust effect', in which sensory experiences trigger memories linked to spatial contexts. The term originates from *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust (1913), in which the narrator's taste of a madeleine dipped in tea involuntarily recalls vivid emotional memories, causing him to relive events and their settings.

In this way, Proust's literary work played a role in the development of Dutch scientist Crétien van Campen's argument that certain sensory stimuli (which he called 'sense memories') are capable of reaching our deepest emotions and providing insight about identity.[31] When we encounter such imaginative phenomena of the senses, we are not merely remembering; to some extent, we are experiencing the sensation of 'being there' in the place created by memory.[32] This insight from the sciences resonates with Malpas's observation that remembering always entails returning to a place, as 'remembering is the recollection of the place'.[33] For the purposes of this study, it is perhaps most significant that in this close relationship of place and sense, sensory stimuli in place are intricately linked to poetic language.

As Malpas explains, when our sense memories are activated in place, this process involves language, as such senses appear through the 'reflective attentiveness' enabled by language.[34] Paul Ricœur contends, in a similar way, that emotions and our attunement to reality are revealed through the medium of poetic language.[35] In this case, Scobie's need for poetic language to describe his resonance with the Arab quarter becomes evident when he smells the bread, prompting reflective attentiveness to place and evoking poetic prose: 'It smells like mother's lap!' As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, poetic language enables us to anchor a feeling in place.[36] Amid the ebb and flow of life's sentiments, one might say, poetic words are used 'to make ourselves at home'.[37]

For these reasons Scobie's feeling of being at home is not just his own subjective creation; it is an expression of the aromas and the ambient sounds of the quarter, the lively streets and the mood of the urban space, all of which contribute to the inspiration that gives birth to his poetic phrase. One can hear echoes in this phenomenological process of Gadamer's assertion that 'experience is not wordless'.[38] Our perception is not meaningless, and the world engages us through our senses. In turn, we respond via language, naming and expressing things that articulate and illuminate our experiences. Experience necessitates in such instances a precise choice of

words (*le mot juste*, in the spirit of Gustave Flaubert), in this case poetic prose that inherently belongs within a given urban environment. As the following paragraph demonstrates, poetic language also thrives within a rich and diverse linguistic landscape.

In *Quartet*, the language of place is also evident in the way it marks the limits of the neighbourhood. A limit here refers to the Heideggerian threshold from which a place extends its existence: a limit need not always be a 'rigid frontier' such as a visible wall.[39] As American philosopher Edward Casey notes, it can be challenging, in any case, to specify the exact beginning and end of an urban neighbourhood in physical terms.[40] It makes sense that it can be difficult to measure and delimit a place in bare physical terms when intangibles like language can define its limits, as we can also see in Scobie's experience. The experiential border of the Arab quarter is, for example, the place where people start speaking Arabic, Turkish, etcetera. Place thus co-emerges with language:

> Here, everywhere, the cries of the open street greeted [Scobie] and he responded radiantly.
> *'Y'alla, effendi, Skob'*
> *Naharak said, 'ya Skob*
> *Allah salimak.'*
> He would sigh and say 'Dear people' and 'How I love the place, you have no idea!' dodging a liquid-eyed camel as it humped down the narrow street threatening to knock us down with its bulging sumpters of *bercim*, the wild clover which is used as fodder.
> 'May your prosperity increase'
> 'By your leave, my mother'
> 'May your day be blessed'
> 'Favour me, O sheik.'[41]

When Scobie transitions from the European quarter to the Arab quarter, language emerges through the bustling streets like a lively bazaar, where rows of stalls offer a diverse array of goods. The linguistic landscape is an amalgamation of Arabic and Turkish. Phrases like *Y'alla* and *effendi* (a title of respect or courtesy in Turkish) are forms of greeting. Interestingly, *Y'alla*, which literally translates to 'Oh God' in everyday language, is also frequently used by Muslim men as they cross a threshold, in moving from public space to domestic space. It is like saying: 'Hello there, I am arriving.' *Y'alla* is therefore mostly associated with entering a place. Language here implies a mode of communication tied to thresholds, then including urban boundaries.

Scobie speaks Arabic and is emotionally attuned to the languages of the social realm of the quarter, as people at the entrances of shops and stalls acknowledge his presence. Language, therefore, shapes a liminal reality here, serving as the threshold between inside and outside, stillness and movement – a boundary where wandering can integrate into dwelling. As Malpas reminds us, language situates us in space, contributing to the social and spatial order.[42] It does not just exist in mental space. Instead, the social

aspect of language appears through speakers gathering in public spaces while saluting each other. In *Quartet*, these linguistic interactions, such as greetings, are characteristic of the Arab quarter, identifying it as a distinct place: 'These old-fashioned greetings one never heard except in the Arab quarter of the city.'[43] This linguistic specificity underscores the way in which language, intertwined with social dynamics, is linked to place – in this case as Scobie relates to place through poetic language and olfactory stimulation, seamlessly merging with the built environment, including landmarks like the local mosques that now call for our attention.

Goharri Mosque: Place of Ritual and Dream

When people truly dwell in a place, that place becomes imbued with dreams and rituals, which can be experienced as blessings, and even possess psychosomatic healing powers. For Scobie, there is a fictional mosque in the Arab quarter that embodies just such qualities:

> He would defiantly take a drink from the leaden spout sticking out of a wall near the Goharri mosque (a public drinking fountain) though the White Man in him must have been aware that the water was far from safe to drink . . .
>
> Today we sat together for a while in the shade of the ancient mosque listening to the clicking of the palms and the hooting of sea-going liners in the invisible basin below . . . He had fallen effortlessly asleep now, leaning back against the wall of the Mosque. ('A cat-nap' he used to say, 'but always woken by the ninth wave.' For how much longer, I wondered?) After a moment the ninth wave brought him back through the surf of his dreams to the beach.[44]

The safety of the drinking water is uncertain, but Scobie drinks it anyway, in a concrete expression of his faith in the place. The principle involved becomes even clearer when we read further in *Quartet* about the belief of the quarter's inhabitants that the Goharri Mosque possesses some sort of blessing or healing powers. For instance, one character is seen rubbing a slice of lemon on a pilaster of the mosque before sucking it, believing it will provide an infallible remedy.[45] The mosque is a sacred place, and its flesh (its pilaster, its stone) can bless the lemon and the water. The mosque performs its dwelling duty through blessings and rituals, then, as well as by providing shaded spaces where individuals like Scobie can sit and rest.

It must be remembered here that shade is the core of dwelling in hot regions. Japanese author Jun'ichirō Tanizaki once suggested that the need to dwell was fulfilled when people 'spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth'.[46] In Islamic culture, casting a shadow is part of a building's function in providing comfort; a mosque, as the house of God, is expected to play such a role. As one of the main public spaces of the quarter, the Goharri Mosque is open during the day for people to pray

and passers-by to temporarily rest in its shadows. Scobie, in his urban wandering, stops by the mosque, drinks water, leans against the wall and dwells in its shade. In this harmony with 'the tonality of being [the quarter, the mosque]', he listens contentedly to 'the clicking of the palms and the hooting of sea-going liners', reminding us that, as Bachelard suggests, 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home',[47] even when inhabited for short periods of time. Here, dwelling occurs briefly in the transient shadows of a mosque, a public space experienced as a home. Bachelard's definition highlights the adaptability of the notion of home: Scobie's experience shows that home can encompass urban public spaces in a cosmopolitan city for a queer character in exile. Put another way, the mosque serves multiple purposes here, beyond its religious function. It is also a place of community gathering, sanctuary, physical comfort and cultural continuity.

The *Quartet* is vague about the location of the Goharri Mosque, but it is said to face the sea; specifically, the old (Western) port (Fig. 1). The sea holds a magnetic allure for Lieutenant-Commander Scobie, evoking memories of his former vocation in the British naval forces, from which he was discharged due to his sexual orientation. Despite this negative professional outcome, he remains emotionally attached to the sea as a dreamscape. In response to inquiries about missing the sea, in fact, Scobie responds succinctly: 'Every night I put to sea in my dreams.'[48] This link between Scobie's urban experience and the dreamscape of the sea recalls Casey's notion that people cherish wild places for the emotions evoked by the quality and perception of place.[49]

In these ways, Scobie's act of gazing at the sea while preparing to nap against the wall of the Goharri Mosque reflects the sea's embodiment of belonging in place, through an intimate connection between poetic qualities and the urban environment. As articulated, the views from a place belong to the place.[50] For Scobie, the mosque and its vista work together to offer a sense of belonging. He feels connected to the place, and this connection is both articulated and heightened through his poetic language, which is in turn rooted in his experience of a socially dynamic linguistic environment. He comprehends and hears a welcoming meaning in the linguistic environment that defines the place's boundaries, finds solace in the mosque's comforting shadow and is soothed by the rhythmic sonic presence of palm trees, akin to a lullaby. In brief, it is through the poetic evocation of emotions that Scobie becomes attuned to the place, finding tranquillity in his surroundings. The mosque welcomes him tangibly while also situating him within his dreamscape: the sea. We see here, in other words, an exterior public space transformed into an internal one. As Malpas reminds us, this inwardness is not a merely subjective phenomenon; rather, it happens when people open themselves to a specific exterior place.[51] When a place appears at the intersection of sense perception and poetic language, it can indeed embody a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In this study, reflection on Durrell's *Quartet* has served to elucidate the meaning of place and its connection to poetic language. To this end, I first

outlined a phenomenological understanding of language and place. In that context, I posited that Scobie is meaningfully placed in Alexandria, partly by the power of poetic language as experienced within its socially dynamic Arab quarter. In terms of belonging and the built environment, I then showed how the Goharri Mosque emerges as a ritualistic dreaming space for Scobie. My aim was to convey that place transcends mere formal or stylistic considerations; it is not simply a physically measurable element to be addressed through analytical approaches alone. Rather, place is a lived phenomenon, endowed with experiential complexity, attuned to and discovered through various forms of engagement, including particularly poetic ones.

Building on the perspectives of Malpas and compatible theoretical approaches, I have argued that poetic language emerging from place enables an observer – in my case, an observer with architectural interests – to perceive the qualitative character of a public space. If the goal of architecture is to facilitate humanity's homecoming, then the homecomings of characters such as Scobie in *The Alexandria Quartet* deserve attention, since they reveal that real dwelling occurs when individuals engage with the poetic qualities of place. Scobie's story describes the essential human need to inhabit a resonant world; one that engages sensory modalities and is expressed through poetic language. In phenomenological terms perception is meaningful, and the world communicates with us through our senses. Architecture, therefore, does indeed bear the responsibility of homecoming, and must establish public spaces that engage and respond to the sensory modalities of their dwellers. The contemporary tendency to prioritize functional relations and systematic analysis over the poetic essence of place undermines these very qualities. Scobie's experience, encompassing smell, taste, speech and poetic language, makes the Arab quarter his home. Studying such characters within their landscapes is therefore valuable in the context of architectural reflection, since it sheds light on the way poetic qualities foster emotional connections with a neighbourhood, akin to the comfort of a mother's lap.

1 Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (London, 2012), 39.
2 Ibid., 225.
3 Roger Bowen, 'Squalid with Joy: Scobie, Sex, and Race in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*', *Journal of Homosexuality* 36 (1998), 89.
4 Jeff Malpas (ed.), *The Intelligence of Place: Topographies and Poetics* (London, 2015), 81.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, 2016), 11.
8 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, translated by Daniel S. Russell (Boston, 1971), 6.
9 Ibid., 16.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 6, 8.
12 Cited in: Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, op. cit. (note 7), 186.
13 Ibid., 187.
14 Ibid., 177.
15 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, 1999), 33.
16 Ibid., 193, 198.
17 Ibid., 153.
18 Ibid., 186.
19 E.M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (London, 1982), 285.
20 Ibid., 67, 134.
21 Lama Fouad, 'Know Your City, Alexandria | *Baharī*', *Tadamun*', tadamun.co/?post_type=city&p=9050&lang=en&lang=en#.Yv--unbMLct, accessed 19 August 2022.
22 Ibid.
23 Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*, op. cit. (note 1), 223-224.
24 Massimo Cacciari, 'Place and Limit', in: Malpas, *The Intelligence of Place*, op. cit. (note 4), 14.
25 Ibid., 169.
26 Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*, op. cit. (note 1), 224.
27 Ibid., 225.
28 Ibid., 227.
29 Ibid., 844.
30 Ibid., 226-227.
31 Crétien van Campen, *The Proust Effect: The Senses as Doorways to Lost Memories*, translated by Julian Ross (Oxford, 2014), 2.
32 Ibid.
33 Malpas, *The Intelligence of Place*, op. cit. (note 4), 77.
34 Ibid., 80.
35 Paul Ricœur, 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling', *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 158.
36 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker and Dan Tate (Cambridge, 1986), 114.
37 Ibid.
38 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, 2004), 417.
39 Cacciari, 'Place and Limit', op. cit. (note 24), 13.
40 Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, 2009), 31.
41 Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*, op. cit. (note 1), 224.
42 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, op. cit. (note 15), 82.
43 Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*, op. cit. (note 1), 255.
44 Ibid., 224-225
45 Ibid., 675.
46 Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward Seidensticker (London, 2019), 35.
47 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston, 1994), 5.
48 Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*, op. cit. (note 1), 201.
49 Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, op. cit. (note 40), 108.
50 Ibid., 170.
51 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, op. cit. (note 15), 78.

POETICS OF PLACE
IN LITERATURE

Verses Witness

Reimagining Carceral Spaces through Poetry

Ece Canli

While prisons are among the most prominent architectonic structures in modern history and the contemporary justice system, they remain among the most concealed and cryptic spaces of our time. In recent decades, penal architecture has gained renewed attention in geography, criminal sociology and the arts due to the exponential growth of incarceration rates worldwide, spotlighting the inhumane conditions faced by prisoners.[1] However, prison space itself is still highly inscrutable and unmonitorable to 'free' citizens, including human rights activists, policymakers and even those who design these spaces.[2] This means first-hand accounts by incarcerated people are still the most impactful sources to depict the complexity of such spaces, especially those communicating in literary forms that tend to reach a wider audience. Many historically renowned and formerly imprisoned figures wrote prose and poems to externalize their insights and struggles within such a confined time and space, delineating the traces of the carceral environment inscribed on their bodies.[3] Their words shed light on the materiality and spatiality of imprisonment, serving as transversal storytelling and bearing witness across generations and geographies.

From this collection of narratives, I focus in this article on prison poetry in particular, examining its intricate relationship with carceral architecture to understand how such spaces are perceived and produced. In doing so, I take a closer look at the Canadian poet Bradley Peters's 2023 debut poetry book, *Sonnets from a Cell*, as a case study.[4] Through his verses, I aim to demonstrate how poems penned by prisoners provide a unique avenue for understanding the sociospatial dynamics of incarceration, as well as its physical, psychological and emotional impacts on individuals. By delving into the nuances of his poetic expressions and probing 'how architecture is shaped by words, images and ideas long before it is transformed into bricks and mortar',[5] I also reflect on how disciplined, controlled and penalized bodies perceive and navigate the confines of such spaces. From a more forward-looking perspective, this is also an exercise of pondering the potentiality for such poems to act as a resource for rethinking carceral architecture in society. In this way, they might reassess and counteract the harsh material realities and dehumanizing experiences that are

reiterated through new reformist prison designs.[6] Guided by prison abolitionism, this exercise envisions – even in a utopian way – designed spaces that recognize, mitigate and eventually put an end to the brutality of incarceration.

On the Complex Production of Carceral Space

Why prisons now? David Scott, in his edited volume responds to this question, foregrounding that 'rates of penal incarceration in many countries around the world have reached record levels', driven by the incessant rates of race-, class- and gender-based discrimination.[7] While critiques of mass incarceration, posed by penologists, social scientists and activists, stress the irrefutable dysfunctionality of prisons and criminal justice systems at large, in recent years yet another constituent of prisons, space, has been brought forward.[8] Carceral geography, for instance, a relatively new 'field of geographical research into practices of incarceration', examines the spatial dynamics of imprisonment and the experiences of confinement, and their link to increasingly punitive states.[9] Some architectural studies, albeit few, also identify the issues involved in the design of prison spaces, particularly in urban contexts, highlighting the entangled links between the design industry, neoliberal capitalism and state apparatuses, which entails the constant flow of bodies through the nodes of criminal justice system, driven by the creation of new crimes and criminals to fill these spaces.[10]

In the meantime, how these spaces, designed to deprive someone of liberty through punishment and control, affect their dwellers and get affected in return begs for further exploration. If we follow the contemporary theories of spatiality concurring that space is not a passive receiver of human conduct but an active participant in social and personal practices, we can also extrapolate that 'the configuration of penal space is . . . a determinate factor in shaping prisoners' social relations'.[11] But how to, then, approach prison space; one of the most repressive and rigid sites of power where the body is strictly disciplined?[12] How can we unfold its complex sociospatial conditions? While modern penal reforms have recurrently made substantial alterations in the typologies and regulations of such institutions, this only led to the construction of more prisons and the consolidation of retributive justice.[13] Today, most prisons built on the outskirts of urban areas function as cities in their own right. Moreover, these far-flung but networked archipelagos are scattered across remote zones and continents, deemed almost 'invisible' to the 'free' world.[14] This fact, despite the studies coming from on-the-ground research and second sources that challenge many erroneous beliefs about prisons, leaves the 'outsiders' even more detached from the prison(er) experience, with fallacious assumptions about criminality and the carceral space.[15]

For instance, prisons, often seen as spatially 'fixed' and impenetrable institutions, are in reality sites of constant flux, with a continuous flow of prisoners, social workers, visitors, goods, health supplies, food and material resources.[16] Rachel Ellis describes this as 'institutional infusion', making prisons rather 'porous' spaces where the social, material and emotional dynamics are more volatile than assumed, and what is inside is constantly mingled with what is outside.[17] Also, although seemingly a

prison is designed to be harsh, monotonous and impersonal environment that rarely allows customization, there is the undeniable agency and interference of prisoners who strive to personalize the prison space by employing personal objects and rituals. Such spatial modifications – turning prison spaces into quasi-homes, workplaces or third spaces – not only foster 'the [re]construction of the meaning of prison spaces' but also blur the line between the private and the public.[18] Prison is full of purported 'private' spaces (cells, washrooms, etcetera) that are regularly monitored, intruded upon and shared, and public spaces (such as workshops and prayer rooms) used as intimate refuges by prisoners in an attempt to escape the omnipresent gaze of authority.[19] Moreover, besides the disposition of 'the cellular, standardized, and linear nature of the wings' vis-à-vis 'more open, circular and intimate arrangement' of communal areas, there are also other spaces where the prison rules are 'partially or temporarily suspended, permitting a broader emotional register'.[20] Moran calls them 'liminal spaces' – such as visiting rooms – which complicate the boundaries between 'outside(r)' and 'inside(r)' and, thereby, the social production of punitive space through varying levels of mobility, 'intimacy, and physical contact' between prisoners and their beloved ones, depending on the prison's spatial settings.[21] This need for prison spaces to 'maintain public or quasi-public façades' renders them even more composite, providing various 'spatially differentiated emotional domains' all at once that create unique 'internal geographies of behaviour and emotional expression' and eventually spatial configurations of sociability, privacy and safety.[22]

Our understanding of these complexities is still limited, due to the inaccessibility of prisons, reinforced further by technical and governmental restrictions, as well as methodological challenges that often create 'unequal power relations between interviewer and respondent' within prisons.[23] This makes first-hand accounts from within even more necessary and relevant. I thereby argue that prison writing, especially poetry, in its unique 'architextural' form, is a significant medium for rendering prisons even more porous, leaking spatial and corporeal information through the walls of penal institutions to the outside world. This porosity allows prison poems, such as those by Bradley Peters that I explore below, to map the emotional geography of prisons and help us reimagine the materiality of justice systems.

On Prison Poetics and Spatio-Emotional Narratives of Incarceration

Prison writing has been a vital form of literary resistance across various times, cultures and geographies.[24] As a distinct genre, Prison Literature, materialized in the form of fiction and non-fiction from letters, prayers, memoirs and novels to poetry, encompasses works produced both by incarcerated literary figures and by those who begin writing in prison to cope with the hardship of seclusion and to portray the intricacies of confinement.[25] This deeply situated form of writing captures the personal, historical, physical, emotional and mental conditions of prison life, serving as both survival and resistance.[26] Although the genre is far from monolithic, thematically 'the problem of unstructured time, the agony of solitude, disintegration of the self, and suicidal urges' occur as 'common [but not

sole] denominators' depicted literally or figuratively.[27] Also, the gruelling experience of deprivation of freedom leads many writers to foreground resilience and hope, both as a self-expression and externalization of pain, and a vocation to highlight the shared experience of being captive.[28] Prison writing reveals truths about not only personal or group experiences but also the all-encompassing machine of the carceral system, prompted by policing, surveillance, disenfranchisement, impoverishing, racial and class stratification, and eventually state violence.[29] As Larson puts it, such writing, 'responding to the sovereignty of the punishment apparatus … is at once indexical of the precise conditions in which it is created, and susceptible to a global tropology', which widely informs and shapes, what he calls, 'prison poetics'.[30]

What makes poetry particularly influential in prison literature is its distinctive concentrated form, economy of words and evocative imagery, which encourages candour and conveys the intensity of imprisonment in ways other literary forms often cannot.[31] Its fragmented structure can mirror the disorientation and restriction of prison spaces, with line breaks, rhymes, rhythm and enjambment evoking the sense of confinement and disruption. While prose provides detailed and linear descriptions, poetry's condensed use of metaphor and symbolic immediacy can depict prison spaces as 'fortresses' or 'labyrinths', blending physical and psychological entrapment to convey both the literal and figurative impact of confinement. If, as Rashad Shabazz argues, 'writing from prison is also a *spatial act*', and if prisoners alter the space of prison 'through transcending the bars and repurposing prison space' by writing, prison poets are 'architects', as he proposes, in designing '*counter-carceral*' poetic spaces.[32]

Moreover, through poems we gain aesthetic and authentic testimonies of prison life through the prisoner's lens, sometimes detailing daily routines, inner journeys and inhumane administrative procedures.[33] In these delineations, space and material conditions constitute a crucial element, as they are one of the most immediate, tangible and omnipresent facets of confinement that shape both the content and structure of prison writing.[34] Walls, doors and bars are particularly prevalent in these depictions, symbolizing both prisoners' isolation and their emotional barriers with themselves, guards, other prisoners and their loved ones.[35] As mentioned earlier, despite structural reforms over the last two centuries, most material conditions of prisons persist, as demonstrated by poems written by prisoners hailing from different times and geographies. From renowned Irish playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and Turkish political poet Nâzım Hikmet Ran (1902-1963) to Moroccan Marxist feminist Saida Menebhi (1952-1977) and Russian Soviet dissident Irina Ratushinskaya (1954-2017), and from contemporary poets such as American legal scholar Reginald Dwayne Betts (b. 1980) to currently detained public figures including Indian activist G.N. Saibaba (b. 1967) and Iranian educator Mahvash Sabet (b. 1953), all these verse-makers have passed down diverse fragments of a broader carceral narrative.[36]

Amid the whole corpus of prison poetry, Bradley Peters' *Sonnets from a Cell* stands out in terms of unveiling multifarious institutional, personal, spatio-material, sociopolitical, affective and economic aspects of

carcerality in an unapologetically candid and meticulous way, unveiling the coercive and punitive state mechanisms. Following a quasi-linear narrative structure that delineates the before, during and aftermath of imprisonment, the collection is distributed into seven parts based on the seven stages of psychological adaptation to institutionalization – from alienation and severe isolation to post-traumatic stress, reflecting different facets of the carceral continuum.[37] Each poem begins with a literary or academic epigraph, adding external context to Peters's introspective reflections.

As to spatiality, in *Sonnets from a Cell*, like in many other prison poems, the predominant atmosphere is conditioned by the overwhelming presence of the prison cell and the 'concrete and steel, bordered by formidable barriers – stone walls, electrified fences, bales of concertina wire – that are punctuated by imposing guard towers' and other surveillance bodies.[38] These material aspects are portrayed alongside other intense sensory elements, such as light, sound, temperature and smell, through either their intense presence or perilous absence, continuously mediating between danger and survival. Peters verbalizes them frequently with wordings such as 'Loudspeaker buzz really a lawn mower / . . . 'Lights-out is called.'[39] Or '. . . the same room, exact same indigo / Cage lights. / . . . They flicker, exhale cold air, they vibrate / . . . Concrete altars. What light!'[40] In 'Getting Netted Up', Peters vents about their persistence

> Cage lights on bright white walls buzzing all night
> Are such fanatic hosts. I try to sleep
> While they glow above me. It's too much glee.
> It's too much beaming when I do push-ups.
> . . .
> I squat on the steel shitter. They don't blink.
> . . .
> The cage lights want to chat but I'm dead tired![41]

These sensations become even more intensified in solitary confinement – a.k.a. 'hole' or 'box', which is one of the most inhumane forms of punishment, often leading to long-term mental and physical damage to the prisoner's body. In 'A Visit to the Box', Peters recounts its deranging effects rather strikingly:

> The real room is inside another room.
> Its steel door snaps shut like a mouth. It reeks
> Of bleach. The room with no windows is scrubbed
> Skull white. I am a tongue stuck in its jaw.
> . . .
> . . . It dilates
> Into one rage box. The room moves through me.[42]

Both his 'After My Daily Twenty-Minute Shower Break' and his 'The Day My Hair Starts to Fall out in Clumps' that appears below refer to the psychosomatic effects of being sequestered in such a cruel space:

Sleepless but this is a private restroom–
Steel toilets upstream clear their throats all night–
At forty days the cage light is a mouth–
A feast of jabs naked door-kick madness–
. . .
One dead-tired inmate melts into a shriek–
. . .
Cell doors fold into formative symbols– [43]

Apart from these isolated spaces, Peters also provides insights into social spaces within the prison – mental health wards, dining areas, bathrooms and yards – in a casual yet descriptive manner. He depicts these areas as fraught with tension and violence, yet marked by spontaneous interactions between prisoners, and between prisoners and officers. Through a 'camera-like' lens, 'Postcards from inside the Machine' vividly captures these dynamics, allowing readers to visualize various settings and the interplay of characters within and with them – such as those in the dining area casually 'watch[ing] the dead man', referring to a young boy, 'walk across the unit and smile / at each table with his meal tray / like it's the first day of school'.[44]

Also, we get a glimpse of the constant tension in common areas, by reading, for instance, how after corrections officers (COs) 'unload two cans of mace on everyone', the protagonist falls off his chair, shields himself and later returns to his cell unscathed while 'bodies shift in the show hall'.[45] In another poem, he approaches a prisoner's cell on the 'third-last down the tier' at night, passing through the open doorways which radiate 'Indigo and TV babble and inmates / shift in the half-light'.[46] In these shared places, there are unwritten rules, gestures, routines and banalities, as seen, for instance, in 'Learning How to Jail' where Peters elucidates: 'This pay phone, that chow line. Don't watch / convicts / Pack suitcases, sharpen shivs in the yard. / . . . Jumpsuits: / Part pillow, part sleep mask. When night falls, wait / Two hours. The cinderblock walls sweat.'[47] Or depicted painstakingly in 'Hard Time':

In the hush all their hearts patter like rain.
Or is that the clock that towers above
The chow hall? Its face behind a red flare
Ignites the polished floor. Men avoid it.
They scamper like ants around its bright beam.
. . .
It brings dudes to your cell before discharge
For a send-off, guards, mace, brings you to seg
Where there's new clocks: meal carts, deadbolts,
wash breaks. [48]

Also, while poems like 'Daydreaming in the Shower before Lights-Out' show how public spaces can offer a semblance of refuge for contemplation, as mentioned earlier, others like 'Ding-Wing' – which describes the mental health ward – illustrate how others' experiences can intrude upon one's private space:

The moans. The high-pitched screams. One man
wailing
. . .
The mindless hours I lie on my steel bunk
With no pillow staring at the blue bulb
In the cinder block room, a young poet
. . .
Psych camp. Red tag. Sleep on steel. Turtle suit.
Under watch . . .'[49]

This restlessness, paradoxically, also lies in the overpowering sameness and depersonalization enforced by prison (such as bare architecture, uniform clothing and strict no-cell-decorations policies) which aim to erase any individual expression and turn prisoners into a monolithic entity.[50] However, the deprivation of resources and the prison's back-breaking economics lead people to find alternative material solutions, as Peters illustrates. In his poems, the protagonist sometimes uses 'magazines chest-strapped for body armour' and grips his 'pen like a shiv' to protect himself, and sometimes 'brews pruno [prison wine] in the shower' 'in garbage bags with fruit flies'.[51] Also, in making such a harsh environment more bearable, Peters, though sarcastically, utters that he, splayed on his bunk, finds his cell 'Part cage, part comfort zone' and emphasizes that he will 'exalt the brickwork' and 'serve dead air' / 'For so long that it starts to feel like home' suggesting that one should 'stash shanks, stack books, fine-tune' one's cell to make it endurable.[52] He propounds:

With fear, with rage, make yourself feel at home
Make yourself a city inside a cell
Inside one more form of shelter.[53]

What makes *Sonnets from a Cell* particularly noteworthy in this genre is not only its exploration of prison environments but also their connection to other territories of penal justice and urban spaces that both precede and follow incarceration, often setting the stage for imprisonment. For instance, in 'Pleading Guilty' and 'Diesel Therapy', Peters takes us to the courtroom, reciting:

All the senses are so strong. Lights and sound always present.
The courtroom makes halos with their applause,
. . . I sit and the opulent lamps shudder
Through regulation blue and red stained glass
Or is that my eyelids? In the courtroom.[54]

And from the courtroom to the road to prison:

Same white van of Plexiglas and sorrow
Idling below the ankle-chain courtroom
. . .

Steel bunks, holding cells, bleach fumes, pizza pops,
Fingerprints, stale interrogation rooms.
The van revs. The garage doors rise.[55]

Furthermore, some of the poems vividly highlight the link between 'what counts as criminal' and 'where', focusing on streets, graffiti, skate parks and cruising. Here Peters showcases local spots from his past, such as 'ravines', 'mall parkades', 'clapboard barrack', skid-rows, 'a camper behind the skate park', British Columbia's 'last-closed residential school', 'the snow-weighted roof droops', dry streets to skate, people's backyards, abandoned garages and 'warehouse pubs'.[56] He depicts a reality where police violence is the new urban justice-making and 'where houselessness / is the new economy' and a route to prison.[57]

Besides its political aspects, Peters's exploration of different zones also demonstrates that prisoners' limited exposure to mundane things and the natural environment drives them to engage with their confined surroundings and express them uniquely.[58] Prison writings often reflect the space between prisoners and the outer world that speak exactly from the place of the abovementioned liminality where the separation between 'inside(r)' and 'outside(r)' is challenged. Often, the juxtaposition of 'inside' and 'outside' is used obliquely, simultaneously questioning 'absence' and 'presence'.[59] As many theorists suggest, 'imprisonment also necessitates negotiating new concepts of space', derived largely from an imaginary and mental state.[60] Most confined poets create new spaces in their writing to offset their lack of access to the outside world, expanding their inner imagination. As Van Vuuren aptly puts it, through the 'consciousness of the restrictedness of the prison cell and the absence of the unrestricted "outside" . . . the prisoner searches to create new space within which to move, whether it be within memory, stream of associations, dreams, or writing'.[61] These spaces can be as close as a sunbathed prison yard, a nearby forest or a silver sky seen through the barred windows, or oneiric places evoked in their imagination like their homes, childhood locales or hypothetical future dwellings. Peters too projects:

I pretend prison is one lame field trip.
Some nights I stay parked. Some nights I just cruise,
First to my old street, soaked from the sprinkler,
Jeans rolled up, holding the sun-baked driveway,
Which feels like the carpet below church pews
. . .
Maybe nights are a vehicle I need
To move, get from A to B, to feel free.[62]

In other poems, he not only daydreams in the shower, contemplates the church as a place of penance like a penitentiary or recalls his schooling times but also, like in 'Sleep Paralysis', conjures someone's felt presence as a fantasy:

I watch you walk across my cell and think
My cell you are walking across my cell
Cool earth pressing through the plastic mattress
Beneath cage lights beneath one more daybreak.[63]

Interestingly, the appearance of imaginary people and spaces in poems creates a blend of present (physical) and absent (mental) realms, reflecting a concept of 'ecopoetics' that refers to the prisoner's 'hyper-awareness of environmental encounter' and demonstrates 'how environments environ the writer'.[64] This approach allows writers to momentarily escape their current space and their 'out-of-body experience to come home to the reader'.[65] Prison ecopoetics is of utmost importance because, as Nolan notes, if a prison poet, 'deprived of the variety of physical experience', can infuse different 'mental, cultural, imagined and textual components' together, the 'complexity of his or her concrete experiences during incarceration' can be expressed even further. In this way, 'the multifaceted environment of prison', a space which is otherwise concealed, restricted and inaccessible, 'can be glimpsed by the reader'.[66]

In the meantime, these superimposed spaces are also inseparable from overlapping temporalities of past, present and an uncertain future. In prison studies, time – especially 'doing time' – is as constitutive as space in shaping the prison experience; just like: 'Doing time is also doing space, for the temporal distortion is paralleled by tyrannical control of space.'[67] Thus, this chronotopical aspect – or space-time, or timespace – in poems reveals the carceral conditions further.[68] Peters's poems reflect this too, for instance, recounting that 'The clock stalks them. . . . / The clock hikes its charred robe and taps barefoot / Past cell doors. Listen: the shadow ticking / Days on the wall is just the start. Hard time' or pretending not to care while days pass by physically:[69]

And days caught between the past and nothing.
Pretend not to care. Each day postures up,
. . .
Pretend not to care. These days I don't eat,
Sleep, or shit. Days clog their guts with more days,
. . .
When the day won't shower, shaves in the sink,
The night warns him once, then cracks his temple
Off the toilet rim. Pretend not to care.'[70]

Lastly, taking the dimensions of poems' spatio-temporality further, Amy Washburn, in analysing the former prisoner and activist Ericka Huggins' poetry, uncovers that one of Huggins's poems 'functions as a direct spatial challenge to time' both conceptually and textually, as the words spill continuously over other pages as an 'active continuity'.[71] This indicates that poems generate also a textual space as another architectural medium on which the experiences of physical prison space are reflected. Peters plays with his nuance masterfully by aptly choosing the sonnet form, which classically explores themes like the passage of time, life's transience,

psychological complexity and deep emotions. Peters likens the highly strict structures of sonnets – fourteen lines with specific meters and rhyme schemes – to little prison cells on the page; so strict with rules that compel one to find their own voice, individuality and freedom within the given parameters and monotony – much like life in prison.[72]

Peters is also inspired by a sequence called the 'crown of sonnets' (corona or coronet) wherein each poem's last line becomes the next poem's first line, and the last line of the final poem is the same as the first line of the initial poem, creating a continuous loop. This 'architextural' method highlights two key concepts: first, the architectural circularity of prisons, reminiscent of Van Gogh's *Prisoners' Round* (1890) and structures like the panopticon, a surveillance architecture that permits prisoners to be(lieve themselves) constantly observed; second, the cyclical nature of the carceral system, where initial incarceration often leads to a continuous cycle of probation, bail and recidivism, especially for marginalized communities.[73] By such architexturality, 'the poem not only allows but forces the reader to acknowledge the space of the poem on the page', which eventually enhances the conveyance of the spatial experience of the writer.[74]

Future of the Verses, Verses of the Future

Given the complexity of prison poetics, I propound that poems possess a powerful potential to confront and question the inherently cruel, dysfunctional, outdated and unsustainable dynamics of carceral culture. Despite neoliberal capitalism's efforts to rebrand the criminal justice system with new modern, aesthetically pleasing prisons and advanced surveillance technologies, the first-hand accounts of prisoners continue to expose the severity of these institutions. While poems, stemming from prisoners' particular confined space-times within particular architectural typologies inform us about the specificity of these contexts, the similarity of prison spaces and experiences remains striking. All prison writings, thereby, can be considered as public testimonies and eventually intimate descriptions of the coercive nature of the state.[75] This challenges the belief that prison poems are 'emancipatory', 'cathartic', 'therapeutic' or 'rehabilitative', since, as Bradley Peters puts it, there is no art form that can fulfil this role in our broken justice system.[76] Instead, such testimonies generate 'critical spaces within the carceral landscape that enable prisoners to speak to the world on their own terms, transgress the spaces that hold them, and foster connections' with the outside world.[77] This is also a practice of 'spatializing hope' for a world beyond prisons, starting with exposing the cruelty of these places, aiming to inspire action and reimagine them.[78]

In the meantime, 'the process of reimagining the prison as a physical and social structure is important to the aesthetic of the poetry prison canon'.[79] Through the spatial examination of prison life, we are reminded that 'the determining force of space is not just physical or architectural, but resides in the ways that places carry meanings, harbour and cultivate particular practices and sentiments'.[80] In an era of mass surveillance and carceral capitalism, the poet(ry) offers a way to 'diminish the divide between incarcerated and non-incarcerated worlds' and new approaches exempt from penal logic and state violence.[81] This aligns with what prison

abolitionists have long aimed to achieve: Dismantling carceral structures and replacing them with 'life-affirming' institutions where justice is not disciplinary but transformative.[82] I even daresay that visions of poets and prison abolitionists are intrinsically kindred, as both summon the unimaginable to the point where the conditions for new realities are set to emerge. And if these realities can be imagined, they can also be (un) designed. As American activist, exiled ex-prisoner and poet Assata Shakur impels, 'a wall is just a wall / and nothing more at all / It can be broken down'.[83]

1 See, for instance: David Garland, *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences* (New York, 2001); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, 2003); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, 2010); Jack Norton et al., *The Jail is Everywhere: Fighting the New Geography of Mass Incarceration* (London/ New York, 2024).

2 See: Harun Farocki, 'Controlling Observation', in: Alex Farquharson et al. (eds.), *The Impossible Prison: A Foucault Reader* (Nottingham, 2008), 16-20; David Scheer and Colin Lorne, 'Illusions of Utopia: When Prison Architects (Reluctantly) Play Tetris Carceral Spatiality', in: Dominique Moran and Anna K. Schliehe (eds.), *Carceral Spatiality: Dialogues between Geography and Criminology* (London, 2017), 113-134.

3 See, for instance: H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York, 1989); Bell Gale Chevigny (ed.), *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (New York, 2011 [1999]); Julian Murphet, *Prison Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Literary Guide* (Edinburgh, 2023).

4 Bradley Peters, *Sonnets from a Cell* (Ontario, 2023). I recognize that focusing on a single example when discussing prisons could risk unfairly stigmatizing a particular country or sociopolitical context. However, to provide a more nuanced analysis and avoid generalizations, it was essential to select one work that most effectively encapsulates the issue. I chose *Sonnets from a Cell* for several reasons. First, its recentness underscores that the prison problem remains urgent and relevant in the twenty-first century. Second, originating from the Canadian context, it challenges the notion that severe prison conditions are confined to underdeveloped and developing countries. Finally, it addresses multiple spatial, political and affective dimensions of incarceration by exposing the larger network of carceral capitalism.

5 Catharina Gabrielsson et al., 'Reading(s) and Writing(s) Unfolding Processes of Transversal Writing', *Writingplace Journal 3* (2019), 4-9: 5.

6 See: Sophie Angelis, 'Limits to Prison Reform', *UC Irvine Law Review* 13/1 (2018), 1-34; Vera Institute of Justice, 'Reimagining Prison Report', 2018, vera.org/downloads/mass-design-group-reimagining-prison-booklet.pdf.

7 David Scott, 'Why Prison? Posing the Question', in: David Scott (ed.), *Why Prison?* (Cambridge, 2013), 1-22: 1.

8 Dominique Moran, Yvonne Jewkes and Jennifer Turner, 'Prison Design and Carceral Space', in: Yvonne Jewkes, Ben Crewe and Jamie Bennett (eds.), *Handbook on Prisons* (London, 2016), 114-130; Jennifer Turner, *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space* (London, 2016); Karen M. Morin, *Carceral Space, Prisoners and Animals* (London, 2018).

9 Dominique Moran, 'Carceral Geography and the Spatialities of Prison Visiting: Visitation, Recidivism, and Hyperincarceration', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013), 174-190: 175; see also: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London, 2022).

10 See, for instance: Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt (ed.), *On the Architectures of Carcerality* (New York, 2020); Mabel O. Wilson, 'Carceral Architectures', in: Nick Axel et al. (eds.), *Superhumanity: Design of the Self* (Minnesota, 2018), 43-54.

11 Ben Crewe et al., 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', *Theoretical Criminology* 18/1 (2014), 56-74: 60. See also: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge, 1994).

12 Ibid.

13 Angelis, 'Limits to Prison Reform' and Vera Institute of Justice, 'Reimagining Prison Report', op. cit. (note 5).

14 Doran Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', *College Literature* 37/3 (2010), 143-166; Scheer and Lorne, 'Illusions of Utopia', op. cit. (note 2).

15 Farocki, 'Controlling Observation', op. cit. (note 2).

16 Rachel Ellis, 'Prisons as Porous Institutions', *Theory and Society* 50 (2021), 175-199; Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7).

17 Ibid., 176.

18 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 176; Crewe et al. 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9).

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 67, 71.

21 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 180.

22 Crewe et al. 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9), 59, 60.

23 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 184.

24 Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12).

25 Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*, op. cit. (note 3); Murphet, *Prison Writing in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit. (note 3).

26 Ibid.

27 Helize van Vuuren, '"Labyrinth of loneliness": Breyten Breytenbach's Prison Poetry (1976-1985)', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 46/2 (2009), 43-56: 43, 44.

28 Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*, op. cit. (note 3).
29 Ibid.
30 Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12), 145.
31 Robert Johnson and Nina Chernoff, '"Opening a Vein": Inmate Poetry and the Prison Experience', *The Prison Journal* 82/2 (2002), 141-167.
32 Rashad Shabazz, '"Walls Turned Sideways Are Bridges": Carceral Scripts and the Transformation of the Prison Space', *ACME* 13/3 (2014), 581-594: 582.
33 Johnson and Chernoff, 'Opening a Vein', op. cit. (note 31).
34 Shabazz, 'Walls Turned Sideways Are Bridges', op. cit. (note 32); Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*, op. cit. (note 3); Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12).
35 Crewe et al., 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9).
36 The reason for their conviction is not the subject of this article.
37 Craig Haney, 'The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment', *From Prison to Home Conference*, The Urban Institute, 30-31 January 2002.
38 Johnsson and Chernoff, 'Opening a Vein', op. cit. (note 25), 142.
39 Peters, 'Daydreaming in the Shower before Lights-Out II', op. cit. (note 3), 53.
40 Peters, 'Indigo', op. cit. (note 3), 43.
41 Peters, 'Getting Netted Up', op. cit. (note 3), 74.
42 Peters, 'A Visit to the Box', op. cit. (note 3), 49.
43 Peters, 'The Day My Hair Starts to Fall Out in Clumps', op. cit. (note 3), 56.
44 Peters, 'Postcards from Inside the Machine', op. cit. (note 3), 38.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 40.
47 Peters, 'Learning How to Jail', op. cit. (note 3), 76.
48 Peters, 'Hard Time', op. cit. (note 3), 73.
49 Peters, 'Ding-Wing', op. cit. (note 3), 47.
50 Johnsson and Chernoff, 'Opening a Vein', op. cit. (note 25).
51 Peters, 'Journal Fragments', op. cit. (note 3), 20; 'Prison Economics', 77; 'Afterwards, Some Place Bets on If and When He Checks In', 79.
52 Peters, 'Indigo', op. cit. (note 3), 43; 'Like Home', 'Group Therapy Homework: Write a Letter to Yourself', 33.
53 Peters, 'Mission II', op. cit. (note 3), 19.
54 Peters, 'Pleading Guilty', op. cit. (note 3), 22.
55 Peters, 'Diesel Therapy', op. cit. (note 3), 67.
56 Peters, 'Mission', op. cit. (note 3), 13-14.
57 Ibid., 15.
58 Sarah Nolan, 'Prison Ecopoetics: Concrete, Imagined, and Textual Spaces in American Inmate Poetry', *Green Letters* 18/3 (2014), 312-324.
59 Van Vuuren, 'Labyrinth of Loneliness', op. cit. (note 23).
60 Ibid., 45.
61 Ibid., 51.
62 Peters, 'The Season of Unease', op. cit. (note 3), 26.
63 Peters, 'Sleep Paralysis', op. cit. (note 3), 45.
64 Nolan, 'Prison Ecopoetics', op. cit. (note 50), 312-314.
65 Ibid, 317.
66 Ibid, 322.
67 Chevigny, *Doing Time*, op. cit. (note 3), 25.
68 Christopher Soto, 'Poetry in the Age of Mass Incarceration: Challenging the Dichotomy of Innocence Versus Criminality', *Poetry Foundation*, 25 September 2017, poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2017/09/poetry-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration-challenging-the-dichotomy-of-innocence-versus-criminality; Moran, 'Carceral geography', op. cit. (note 7).
69 Peters, 'Hard Time', op. cit. (note 3), 73.
70 Peters, 'Pretend Not to Care', op. cit. (note 3), 25.
71 Amy Washburn, 'The Pen of the Panther: Barriers and Freedom in the Prison Poetry of Ericka Huggins', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8/2 (2014), 51-78: 64.
72 Bradley Peters, 'Interview Q with Tom Power', Ep.16, cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-50-q/clip/16028404-bradley-peters-sonnets-cell-solitary-confinement-sonnet-prison.
73 Ibid.
74 Nolan, 'Prison Ecopoetics', op. cit. (note 50), 319. This method, which also appears with the use of unconventional indentation, punctuation and visual configuration, has been employed by other prison poets too, including Russian and Soviet playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nâzım Hikmet Ran and Reginald Dwayne Betts.
75 Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12).
76 Peters, 'Interview', op. cit. (note 64).
77 Shabazz, 'Walls Turned Sideways Are Bridges', op. cit (note 32). 589.
78 Ibid., 592.
79 Soto, 'Poetry in the Age of Mass Incarceration', op. cit. (note 60).
80 Crewe et al., 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9), 71.
81 Soto, 'Poetry in the Age of Mass Incarceration', op. cit. (note 60).
82 Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, op. cit. (note 6); Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, op. cit. (note 1).
83 Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, 2001), 1.

Untitled Blues

after a photograph by Yevgeni Yevtushenko

Yusef Komunyakaa

I catch myself trying
to look into the eyes
of the photo, at a black boy
behind a laughing white mask
he's painted on. I
could've been that boy
years ago.
Sure, I could say
everything's copacetic,
listen to a Buddy Bolden cornet
cry from one of those coffin-
shaped houses called
shotgun. We could
meet in Storyville,
famous for quadroons,
with drunks discussing God
around a honky-tonk piano.
We could pretend we can't
see the kitchen help
under a cloud of steam.
Other lurid snow jobs:
night & day, the city
clothed in her see-through
French lace, as pigeons
coo like a beggar chorus
among makeshift studios
on wheels—Vieux Carré
belles having portraits painted
twenty years younger.
We could hand jive
down on Bourbon & Conti
where tap dancers hold
to their last steps,
mammy dolls frozen
in glass cages. The boy
locked inside your camera,
perhaps he's lucky—
he knows how to steal
laughs in a place
where your skin
is your passport.

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Untitled Blues," in *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Commentary by
Vincent A. Cellucci

shotgun

This is not a metaphor, rather a colloquial term for a type of narrow house very common in New Orleans. The term derives from the straight line of doorways in the procession of rooms, almost like a hallway, so that, as the lore goes, if you fired a shotgun through the house, the shot would make it to the back door before spreading. The metaphor of calling them a coffin is original to the poet and apropos if you think of the region's poverty, violence, and flooding.

kitchen help under
a cloud of steam

The city has always depended on the hard labor of African Americans for its renowned culinary creations. This image also blurs their work with the city's history of slavery.

the city clothed in
her see-through
French lace

Part of the city's allure is its personification as seductress. Note the juxtaposition between the see-through imported luxury garment and the unseen labor.

tap dancers hold to
their last steps

There is a tradition of young African American boys tap dancing to entertain passerby for money in the French Quarter, often with crushed cans on the bottom of their feet—these performances still occur to this day.

a place where
your skin is your
passport

Race is documented, controlled, and becomes the determining factor for crossing social and geographical borders.

Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet teaching at New York University, hailing from Bogalusa, Louisiana (110km from New Orleans). His rural upbringing during the Civil Rights Movement and kinship to the musical city of blues and jazz infuse many of his poems, as well as his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. His most famous poem, 'Facing It,' is one of the most canonized examples of poetry responding to architecture commonly taught in U.S. education, given that it's written from the perspective of the poet visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C (designed by Maya Lin Studio).

POETIC RESEARCH PRACTICES

Exploring the terrain.

Poetic Writing as an Enactive Method for Studying Psychiatric Hospital Atmospheres

Addressing Affective, Ephemeral and Peripheral Dimensions

Eline L. van Leeuwen[1]

Psychiatric Hospital Atmospheres

I've always been captivated by the atmospheres in psychiatric hospitals.[2] Approaching these atmospheres from a dual background in nursing and architecture has deepened my curiosity about exploring their complex yet significant role in shaping users' experiences. In general, atmospheres are fundamentally pervasive, vague and evanescent phenomena: they can be regarded as the 'unbound occupation of a surfaceless space in the region of what is experienced as present'.[3] Gernot Böhme understands them as the 'common reality of the perceiver and the perceived', and stresses the 'peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object'.[4] Having merely temporary existence, they 'can only give rise to experience according to a dynamic, a rhythm, a quality of duration'.[5] Consequent to their boundless and *ephemeral* nature, atmospheres resist delimitation and localization, and complicate our ambition to describe them: 'Just like emotions.' Dario Galati states that 'atmospheres too are curious situations that lose meaning when one tries to describe them'.[6] Perceiving atmospheres comprises a holistic and emotive connection to one's environment, characterized by a profound impact through senses and emotions, as well as being touched by them in the felt body.[7] Therefore, to study atmospheres, we must make ourselves receptive to them, and to the *peripheral* modes through which we perceive them.[8]

With his *New Phenomenology* (1980), philosopher Hermann Schmitz presents an elaborate framework for understanding atmospheres, deeply grounded in our corporeal involvement with 'situations' or 'rich impressions'

in our immediate surroundings.[9] He outlined how, despite our chaotic relation to surroundings and the internal diffuseness of situations, our embodied communication allows atmospheric value to be perceived in the whole environment 'much before the potential atmosphere of its single elements is perceived, and so much before one is able to describe them analytically'.[10] Therefore, it only makes sense that 'one has to be in them to understand them'.[11] This raises the question of which research approaches can foster receptivity to atmospheric value. Methods to evoke *corporeal involvement* may include using Schmitz's embodied dynamism of expansive and constrictive corporeal tendencies, drawing or exploring the combined effort of our multi-sensory perceptions.[12] However, these methods do not evidently address one's personal and affective involvement in situations, which could play a pivotal role in the perception of *pluralistic places* that this issue of *Writingplace* aims to address. Psychiatric hospitals are apt examples of such places, where diverse situational backgrounds of nurses, patients, family members and visitors distinctly shape atmospheric value and perception. These environments are inherently 'complex and differentiated', requiring a *relational* understanding, as emphasized by Jeff Malpas.[13] Given that psychiatric hospital atmospheres are shaped, at least in part, by their community, they may benefit from *situated* approaches to research.[14] Considering the complex and multifaceted nature of these atmospheres, it may be valuable not only to immerse oneself in their all-encompassing presence, but also to address and discuss the researcher's own situated presence in place. To that end, my background in both nursing and architecture is leveraged for exploring diverging roles and perspectives – aiming to address personal, situated and relational dimensions of psychiatric hospital atmospheres.

Exploring Poetic Practices as an Enactive Method

To incorporate our affective, personal and situated involvement in pluralistic places like psychiatric hospitals, we may explore methods beyond the conventional tools of the architect and learn from the gaze and practices of the poet. Hermann Schmitz described how poets and writers can convey 'rich impressions' by carefully weaving meanings into situations – allowing the audience to access atmospheric value through 'playful identification'.[15] This playful identification is described as a loose exploration *towards being affected*.[16] It could be argued that *both* reading and writing poetic language evoke perception by *enacting* it through embodied interactions with the world rather than by passively receiving information.[17] The careful combination and rearrangement of meaning in poetic writing can be seen as recurrent cycles of interaction between the writer, the meanings in the text and the topic of interest. Thus, poetic writing could serve as an enactive method for cultivating receptivity to atmospheric value, providing a means for affective engagement with surroundings amid the chaotic complexity and internal diffuseness of situations. This approach facilitates the development of personal and situated understanding of place.

The discourse on poetry, much like that on atmosphere, is characterized by difficulties in articulating what exactly *defines it*. Some approaches emphasize technical characteristics such as genre, content

and formal qualities, formulating conclusions such as 'the essential point for poetry is the verse rhythm, influenced, among other things, by the determined line length'.[18] Emily Dickinson, contrarily, defined poetry according to her experiential recognition: 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry'.[19] Our focus, however, lies in spatial and atmospheric knowledge rather than literary discourse. Therefore, we turn to sources concerned with adopting the poetic gaze and the activity of poetic writing. Originating from the Greek *poiēsis* (*the creative act of bringing something into existence*), poetic writing can be understood as the generative search for words to get a grip on that which overwhelms us, to establish a 'momentary stay against confusion'.[20] While poets and academics alike are driven by curiosity and receptivity to the unexpected, their methods to acquire knowledge differ.[21] Scholars pursue knowledge with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic, while poets 'stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them'.[22] Poets derive knowledge from a 'fresh look and a fresh listen' into language, adopting an imaginative gaze that 'abandons [their] everyday way of seeing – rational, practical, utilitarian – and sees by means of [their] "creative imagination".'[23] The poets Robert Frost and Rutger Kopland both describe poetic writing as an exploration: rather than being written by the poet, the poem 'makes itself' and carries the poet away with it, reaching below the surface of consciousness and behind the appearances of things.[24] This makes poetic writing especially promising for addressing *ephemeral* and *peripheral* aspects of perception and atmosphere. It is understood as a process allowing poets to remember things nearly forgotten, or to recognize an unknown part of themselves.[25] Similarly, Susan Griffin noted: 'Poetry does not describe. It *is* the thing. It is an experience, not the second-hand record of an experience, but the experience itself.'[26]

For my research purposes, I employ poetic writing as a generative search for words, offering a fresh perspective on language to grapple with overwhelming experiences. This paper presents a reflective evaluation of utilizing poetic writing as an enactive method in architectural research. Embracing unfocused and imaginative observations rather than analytic ones, my poetic writing refrains from deliberate structuring, letting the language unfold organically and reveal unknown facets of atmospheric perceptions. The exploratory qualities of the poetic writing experience take precedence over stylistic considerations, with the aim of making it accessible and applicable to researchers regardless of their poetic experience. Rather than polished poetic results, this work reflects an experimentation in enriching research practices. As Robert Frost aptly expressed, everyone is a 'rider' and a 'guider' suggesting that everyone is a possible poet, maker and finder.[27]

Expanding on the exploration of poetic practices, the following section presents a reflective evaluation of utilizing poetic writing as an enactive method in architectural research. It explores the intricate complexities of atmosphere in three different contexts, with each case respectively addressing the affective, ephemeral and peripheral dimensions of perception. Each case outlines my role (as a researcher) and the application of poetic writing in context, followed by selected poetic

Peripheral corridor space.

fragments. Subsequent reflection examines how poetic writing yielded insights and shaped situated spatial knowledge. To convey the immersive nature of the activities carried out, the case descriptions adopt a personal writing style, a departure from formal academic language that better captures the experiential essence of the research process.

Case 1: Affective Involvement in Pluralistic Places

Duration: two hours. Preparations: twenty-three months.
In the first case, I am allowed a two-hour supervised site visit to pavilions designed by a famous architect. Strict conditions apply in relation to the pavilions' imminent demolition and patients' privacy. Extensive efforts and contractual agreements precede my presence to ensure that I will not photograph people or publicly advocate against demolition – the potential harm of my visit travels ahead of me. The tight window for observations prompts me to mentally prepare for absorbing the atmospheric situation as intensively as possible.

Playful Identification
When I arrive, early, the context of my visit evokes noticeable tensions as I explore the terrain and question the legitimacy of my presence. Under situational pressure, I can either distance myself from these tensions or align with their impact. The imaginative poetic gaze helps me to get a grip on the overwhelming discomfort of my unwarranted presence on a hostile site:

> Coffee rooms and nursing stations
> frown at her through bleak façades.
> Muscles strain ahead into creases
> soon a guest – yet – an intruder
> on the barren asphalt path.

Dissociating into an external viewpoint, the poem mediates the affective intensity of feeling suspiciously observed and out of place. This newly shifted perspective invites attunement to my unease and thereby allows becoming receptive to the situation's uncanny atmosphere. As Anne Sullivan outlined, poetry thrives on ambiguity, open-endedness and unresolved complexity.[28] This quality supports the loose exploration towards being affected, which Schmitz called *playful identification*. Such poetic exploration equally helps exploring the dual tension which I sense in relation to patients as they enthusiastically initiate proximity:

> Blushing away, my lens cuts their faces,
> Out of the frame, avoiding their call.
> Approach, detect me,
> Capture, inspect me…
> Shivering glances swelter
> across membranes of glass.
> My bated breath must urgently,
> let this moment pass.

Timid intentions, curiosity and cautious restraint collide with potential harm and imagined privacy invasion, underscoring the disparity between these dimensions. As Schmitz notes, affective involvement has the power to overwhelm us and 'possess us at least briefly', but the intensity of being affected later depends on the degree to which we allow or withhold the feeling.[29] Poetic writing's ability to articulate sensitivities and internal frictions serves to mediate and temper the paralysing intensity of observing and being observed. Aligning with Gillie Bolton's emphasis on the therapeutic potential of poetry, it not only heightens receptivity to the affective dimension of atmosphere, but also facilitates processing the intensity of resultant perceptions.[30]

A Fresh Look at Pluralistic Places

Receptivity to my own affective involvement allows to develop a situated understanding of place, shaping insights through relational interactions. This begins with interrogating my own position while awaiting my appointment in the lobby:

> This brittle Wednesday afternoon,
> He – shouts at the receptionist.
> She – stays unmoved behind the glass.
> I – calmly let the instant pass;
> regardless of what may –
> none is my concern today.

Three sharply separated perspectives disclose my uninvolved position in de-escalating this tense situation, equally reflecting a situational divorce from my familiar role and practices as a nurse. Later, this relational discomfort deepens in conversation with another nurse, who harshly critiques the buildings:

> Dark at night, oppressive, moist.
> Articulates her patient's voice.
> Too hot, too cold – designers' faults . . .
> Our creeping skin collects her pleas,
> folds sharply through our shared unease.

Her discontent is vaguely directed towards the real estate manager supervising my visit, yet sharing his unease uncovers how I have become inadvertently entangled in latent frictions that define this situation. Later, a patient's uncomplicated expressions of content contradict her pragmatic judgements, underscoring the complex and differentiated fundaments of place.

> Simple happiness, sharp critique,
> chase each other in my mind.
> Resound, respond, reflect, remember,
> beyond the truth: questioning my kind.

In the case described here, I have obtained a position in between opposing notions of distance and intimacy, which Klaske Havik describes as an opportunity to replace dualist thought with a more open, experiential mode of investigation.[31] This provides a playful *flexibility* to address the nuanced, unresolved or sometimes conflicting dynamics that define pluralistic places. In this context, poetic writing instigates ongoing ruminations that gradually untangle the relational complexities shaping internally diffuse situations, articulating my *situated* understanding of this psychiatric hospital atmosphere.

Case 2: Capturing Ephemeral Transitionality

Duration: one week. Preparation: two months.
I spend a week of participatory observation in the daily life of a clinic in Berlin. The situation allows plenty of time for observation and contemplation – presenting an *abundance* and *multiplicity* of impressions that form a continuous stream of fleeting situations and affective involvements. Both during immersive observation and at night, I gather poetic notes to collect ephemeral fragments of each day before the next one arrives.

Capturing Fragments
As noted by Mark Winborn, poetry can help to develop sensitivity and responsivity to ephemeral moments, by moving us to the 'edge' of experiential awareness, removed from ordinary consciousness.[32] The initial stages of poetry writing, especially when written rapidly, have a strong potential for intuitive creativity and avoiding rational or reflective thinking.[33] Therefore, upon first entry, I seek to cultivate a state of consciousness that precedes analysis, rationalization and explanation – a naive state of not-knowing that is essential to poetry and experiencing things anew.[34]

> Unease reflects on smiling faces,
> unfolding into broken phrases.
> Patches of meaning, blur into vapour
> naked, I shiver, in line with their tracks -
> Not-yet, no-longer, undisclosed
> I stumble, through their distant prose.

Through unfocused and automatic writing, I pursue a 'merging of action and awareness', associated with trance-like states or *rêverie*.[35] In such flow-like states, one is relieved from preconceived beliefs or desires and is free to follow what resonates with the individually attuned senses.[36] Here, poetic writing helps me to dissolve into these new surroundings and capture the open-ended quality of the atmosphere at first impression. It fosters receptivity to the ephemeral indeterminateness of the atmosphere, wherein hesitance and uncertainty direct my perceptions while relations remain to be defined.

Daylight in the common room.

Tracing Transitions
Beyond the immediacy of momentary observations, instants tie together into motions and transitions, shaping the place's daily cadence:

> Glimmers enter, ripple the wall
> Arches slice into the sharpening morning
> Shift, pass and stretch
> while windows fall.
> Rooms drift into the evening, slowly turn their insides out.
> Corners flood in creamlike swelling:
> sooth my breath and ponder,
> then lose their ground to cooling air.

Poetic *revision* is understood by Nigel McLoughlin as a recursive, open-ended and iterative investigation – the interpretative engagement of poets with their experiences.[37] I accumulate, revisit, re-imagine and edit poetic fragments over the course of my visit, immersed in an environment of continuously changing and interacting spatial influences. As Kirsten Kreider outlines, language not merely reflects but *produces* reality through embodied and reciprocal acts of speaking and listening, or writing and reading.[38] As such, the poetic revisions *evolve* reciprocally *alongside* spatial influences as they unfold into patterns and rhythms, enacting and recording the atmospheric situation according to its quality of duration. The (re) writing process 'becomes the experience' by slowly sculpting ephemeral transitionality into the dynamic rhythm of poetic form, and tracing how recurrently shifting patterns shape the atmosphere.

Interrogating Intertwinement
Despite causing initial discomfort, the considerable language barrier allows an intuitive exploration of place. Collected fragments of non-verbal interactions trace entanglements between the spatial and the relational realm:

> Carrying cutlery, cleaning the counter
> the day continues its routinised pace -
> Distance grows and shrinks between us
> inhabits a liquid silence
> souring across my lips.
> Disengaged with understanding,
> sadness simmers, divorced from speech.
> Mugs repose into cabinets, kettles swell into space…
> Their murmuring gestures
> fall me into place.

Just like me, newly arrived patients oscillate between peripheral and central areas, slowly gravitating towards active engagement around the kitchen counter. As I follow their movements through space, poetic writing evokes *resonance* with my surroundings; a temporary synchronization, particularly promising for multi-sensory research.[39] Here, poetic resonance highlights

and reinforces intertwinement between spatial motions and perceived relational distances. Aligning with Jane Rendell's emphasis on sites and situatedness as embodied through engagement, poetry gradually reveals how spatial configurations foster my shift from disconnectedness towards relational and situated embedding in place.[40]

Case 3: Retrieving the Peripheral

Duration: two-and-a-half years. Preparation: none.
I have worked as a nurse in psychiatry since August 2021. Despite knowing my work environment intuitively and intimately, I rarely reflect in depth on my personal relation to the place or its atmosphere. Through poetic writing, I delve into half-forgotten memories to explore this.

Implicit Corporeal Sensitivities
In contrast with the previous cases, my presence in place is crucially defined by my role and responsibilities as a nurse. Poetic writing here supports 'reflexivity', described by Kim Etherington as 'the ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events'.[41] The routine of opening locks and doors forms the starting point for interrogating my situated and relational embedding in place:

touch me, click me,
pierce, stab, and stick me,
handle or knob –
who shakes my swiftly frozen hand?
then, expanding depths
chase the echo of my steps
piercing buzzers, ticking clocks
a fragmented vacuum
into
...embracing locks.

As suggested by Kristin Prevallet, poetry is 'what bubbles forth from the periphery of subtle felt sensations, into consciousness and into form' – in this case, capturing through verse rhythm how the cadence of touching, clicking, ticking and buzzing is implicitly ingrained in my perception.[42] Imaginative subtleties and magnifications underline how heightened alertness – uniquely tied to this environment – sharpens my corporeal sensitivity to the dynamics of enclosure. These insights confirm, as previously suggested by Helen Owton, that poetry in research can enhance self-understanding through reflexivity.[43] Reaching below the surface of consciousness, poetry revealed aspects relating to 'the knower's body and background', defined by Michael Polanyi as 'personal knowledge'.[44]

Personal Situation
In further exploration, I return to the recurring situation of entering the ward before my shift, when I am unable to fully oversee the space that I am about to unlock:

Lurking in shadows, for you I seek
cloaked in velvet corners
deep out of sight.
A strained hush
spirals into sudden frenzy -
from muted mornings into manic fright.

Past impressions, nearly forgotten memories and previously anticipated scenarios continue to direct my experience as they blend into the emergence of an imagined patient. Hetherington and Atherton suggest that poetic images may signify embodied experiences beyond language, while writing can retrieve previously forgotten memories.[45] This aligns with Schmitz's description of our 'personal situation' as a layered collection of impressions, whose meanings have gradually moved into the chaotic multiplicity of our past.[46] He suggests that what we forget, rather than disappear, is fused into this 'personal situation', which continues to resound implicitly into our present perceptions.[47] When I address the patient directly in this poem, the relational dimension of my personal situation materializes. Inversely, I remain peripherally cautious of spatial implications and safety considerations when interacting with patients:

She rips into herself
slams her door onto my shift
overturns anticipation
in eviction, bitter and swift.
Inverts viscid membranes of skin
moves outside -
and outside in.

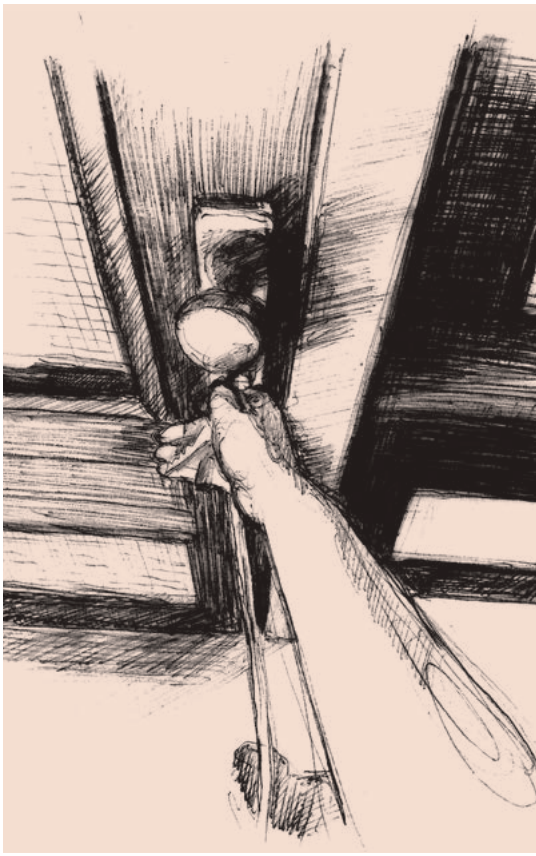
At the level of poetic language, what is imaginatively possible may be as 'real' as anything else.[48] Here, the imaginative *inversion* of my patient uncovers how spatial and relational dimensions concerning trust, enclosure and safety in professional interactions are not only intertwined but mutually consequential.

Affective, Ephemeral and Peripheral Dimensions of Atmosphere

The different cases demonstrate how poetic writing can enhance research by fostering receptivity to the affective, ephemeral and peripheral dimensions of atmospheric perception. The fresh, imaginative look into language helped to explore, articulate or retrieve these dimensions. This enactive approach yielded insights ranging from pluralistic relational tensions to implicit personal knowledge.

In the two-hour supervised visit (Case 1), poetic writing contributed to slowing down and developing a receptivity to the *affective dimension*. Departing from analytical or detached ways of observing, the imaginative poetic gaze helped me become attuned to the affective dimension of the situation in search of a more relational understanding of place. Findings suggest that poetic writing can foster and mediate receptivity to affective involvement, helping to process intense perceptions and facilitating a loose

Holding the door handle.



Upon entering.

exploration towards being affected. Additionally, poetic writing provides flexibility to address nuance, relational frictions or conflicting dynamics that shape pluralistic places. During the week of participatory observation (Case 2), poetic writing allowed a capture of the *ephemeral dimension* of atmospheric perception. Automatic writing and poetic *rêverie* made it possible to access and maintain perceptions as they appeared in the moment. By developing reciprocity and resonance with surroundings, poetic (re) writing enacted and recorded the atmosphere according to its quality of duration, thereby gradually developing a situated understanding of place, incorporating ephemeral, transitional and intertwined spatial and social dimensions of atmosphere. Reflecting on experiences at work (Case 3), the use of poetic language retrospectively enabled to retrieve implicit or *peripheral dimensions* of spatial understanding, even long after impressions had diffused into the chaotic multiplicity of my personal situation.[49] Although latent memories and implicit forms of knowledge may not be immediately available, reflexive and imaginative explorations can help retrieve their spatial and relational understanding. Here, poetic writing helped reveal how half-forgotten memories continue to direct corporeal sensitivities, and how this 'personal knowledge' resounds into present professional relationships.

Returning to the aims of this edition of *Writingplace*, poetic practices seem to support openness to qualities of perception that one may not immediately access or explicate. Poetic language and atmosphere both touch upon the non-linear, non-rational ways in which we perceive and relate to our surroundings. The affective receptivity fostered by poetic writing effectively engages with these aspects of perception. Their relevance to architectural (design) practices resonates in Peter Zumthor's descriptions:

> When I design a building, I frequently find myself sinking into old, half-forgotten memories, and then I try to recollect what the remembered architectural situation was really like, what it had meant to me at the time, and I try to think how it could help me now to revive that vibrant atmosphere.[50]

Receptivity to affective, ephemeral, and peripheral perception is crucial for researchers and designers of architecture. In navigating the (academic) field concerned with atmosphere, poetic writing may help to operate between dimensions of immediate and situated involvement with that of (explicated) reflective analysis. Aligned with phenomenological theory, we argue that the poetic gaze is particularly adept at navigating the chaotic and multifaceted relationships we maintain with our environment. Encompassing relational, situated and personal complexities, this offers a valuable addition to existing research and design methods, particularly in complex and pluralistic environments like psychiatric hospitals. By embracing the poetic gaze as a tool for inquiry, architects and researchers can cultivate richer and more nuanced understandings of spatial atmosphere, contributing to the creation of more empathetic built environments.

1 Supervised by Bernard Colenbrander and with consultation of Ralph Brodrück upon request.

2 By 'psychiatric hospitals' we mean architectural environments for the clinical treatment of psychiatric complaints, into which patients are admitted – as opposed to ambulatory settings in which they reside more briefly.

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Abandoned Children's Resort, Jelsa, Croatia, 2020.

Fruits of Futile Flora

Maša Seničić

Ruminations on Ruins

Each ruin is a reflection on the fleeting moment, an archive of time passed – *transient, amorphous, in question*.[1] Ruins function as devices of memory (past), metamorphosis (present) and mental images (future), thereby unequivocally narrating the effects of time, which can disrupt their structural and operational logic. In his essay *Metamorphosis of Ruins and Cultural Identity*, Professor Marcello Barbanera explains that the ruin is a marker at the edge of time:

> On one hand it marks the advance of time that has worked upon it and reduces it to a fallen wall, a phantom of a once whole ancient structure. On the other, it is also a resistance against time, a continuing witness in the physical presence of the construction.[2]

The melancholy evoked by ruins resonates with existential questions rooted in the inevitability of physical decay, while the remnants of human-made structures underline the contrast between the impermanence of architecture and the enduring presence of nature. Sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel draws a similar comparison between human and natural forces reflected in debris:

> The ruin of a building, however, means that where the work of art is dying other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown; and that out of what of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity. . . . It is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature.[3]

Ruins are neither serviceable nor straightforward. They are layered, referential entities, built upon the indescribable atmosphere of a specific space, which is why they always demand interpretation. Additionally, atmospheres are ephemeral and ever-evolving, ingrained in momentary experiences that feel both beyond time and inherently transient. Philosopher Gernot Böhme writes that the particularity of atmosphere lies in its phenomenology of the in-between. He debates that 'their value lies precisely in this in-between state, bringing together what was traditionally separated into the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception'.[4] Ruins depend profoundly on these corporeal and ineffable qualities of place, quietly reminding us of endurance and human endeavour. Even when

viewed through the lens of tourism, this corporeality persists. As John Urry and Jonas Larsen suggest in their studie on the tourist gaze, the experience of place is multisensory: 'touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and so on, as well as the materiality of objects and places and not just objects and places viewed as signs'.[5] Empirically and theoretically, atmosphere not only shapes the experiential quality of a ruin – it brings it into being.
Drawing on Simmel and others, researcher Francesca Coppolino views ruins as narrative devices reliant on a non-linear structure marked by interruption and incoherence. In other words, ruins are perceived in motion, which enhances their atmospheric quality. Coppolino draws a comparison with film editing, identifying visual works in which ruins serve as a central motif. Her essay does not seek to confine the ruin to a specific historical period or to regard it as a static object; rather, she understands the ruin as a site of continual transformation:

> So it is clear that it is possible to emphasize the stories told by ruins and the fact that they express a void, an absence that needs to be narrated: the ruin has 'narrative skills'. They are not, however, like consequential and linear narratives, but they are hybrid and incoherent narratives, made up of breaks, of interruptions, of continuous returns, of splinters from the past that re-emerge as pieces of unconscious, exactly like memories come to mind.[6]

Despite the considerable interdisciplinary attention they attract, ruins are still predominantly studied through an archaeological lens – a discipline that establishes principles of integrity and historical accuracy. Since this paper focuses on the Mediterranean, it is worth noting that the region contains innumerable archaeological sites from a diversity of civilizations: arenas, theatres, churches, temples, palaces, fortifications and entire cities dating back to medieval times and several centuries BCE. Marta de la Torre and Margaret MacLean, in their research on the finite and fragile archaeological heritage of the Mediterranean, conclude that 'the region contains the vestiges of the ancient civilizations that shaped our own societies. If these are destroyed – whether by overuse, neglect, or failed intervention – the tangible evidence of the past will be erased for future generations.'[7] The abundance of ruins across this region calls urgently for institutional preservation and has inspired collective initiatives such as Reuse Italy, a cultural project dedicated to revitalizing Italy's neglected historical architecture. In recent years, Reuse Italy organized a competition that resulted in the publication of *Atlas of Ruins* (Volume 1), a photobook compiling ruin imagery from various countries. Contributors are now being invited once again to 'immortalize the world's architectural ruins' for Volume 2.[8] Another European programme, Architecture for Heritage (YACademy), trains architects and designers to undertake sensitive interventions in historical structures, promoting 'a close dialogue between the ancient and the modern'.[9] Among contemporary architects deeply engaged with these themes is Lina Ghotmeh, who believes that architecture should emerge from the layers of history embedded in a place. In her conversation on the *Time Sensitive* podcast, she reflects on the profound

relationship between ruins, poetry and architecture, emphasizing how remnants of the past can inform and inspire present-day design. For Ghotmeh, ruins are fertile grounds for regeneration, while architecture transcends mere construction – it becomes storytelling and poetic expression, particularly in the Mediterranean context.[10]

All these ventures aim to position ruins as active elements within a continuum of cultural evolution, shaping future progress not through imposed narratives but through their material presence and the historical sequences they embody. Such practices explore ways to make ruins more accessible, educational and usable, while recognizing their intrinsic atmospheric and cultural value. Most importantly, they acknowledge that ruins are not relics of the past alone, but significant issues of our time.

Dilapidated Destinations

The practice of visiting ruins occupies a well-established place in today's global tourist market. While one might question how safe or accessible these neglected sites are, part of their allure lies precisely in the sense of exploration and adventure they offer. Researcher Renée Silvan notes that 'the ruins are reflections of political struggles, cultural fashions, technological skills, artistic expressions, religious beliefs, and other aspects of human behavior'.[11] Yet a simple online search reveals that images of ruins are almost invariably devoid of people, presented in a highly aesthetic manner and stripped of context. The term *ruin porn* – reportedly introduced by blogger James Griffioen in a 2009 interview – critiques photographers who fetishize decaying urban landscapes, particularly in Detroit.[12] Although informal, the phrase is now widely used within the photographic community documenting the deterioration of the built environment. However, glorifying ruins in ways that trivialize or overlook the social, political and economic conditions behind their decay does little to encourage meaningful engagement with cultural heritage or collective memory.

Artistic reflections on ruins are not a novelty and can be equally compelling and diverse, though the implications of such interpretations vary greatly. In 1830, Sir John Soane famously exhibited a drawing portraying the Bank of England as an ancient ruin, suggesting that the building would remain splendid even as a decayed, overgrown structure.[13] Almost two centuries later, Tate Britain's exhibition '*Ruin Lust*' mapped over a hundred works exploring 'the mournful, thrilling, comic and perverse uses of ruins in art from the seventeenth century to the present day'.[14] Some contemporary ruins – if the phrase can indeed be applied – have been reimagined within creative frameworks to provoke political discourse. Artist Maria Eichhorn's ongoing project *Building as Unowned Property* (2017–) proposes the legal transformation of an abandoned building into a memorial to urban ruination.[15] Similarly, Berlin-based American painter Ryan Mendoza transported an uninhabited house from the United States across the Atlantic to Europe – not as a functioning dwelling, but as a symbolic work of art highlighting the countless decaying homes in Detroit awaiting demolition.[16] There have been numerous semi-subjective studies on ruins, and this essay too stems from personal curiosity – first expressed

through *The Golden Coast*, a project I conceived a decade ago and continue to develop. The exploration centres on a hotel complex built in the late 1960s in a bay between Sutomore and Bar in Montenegro: Hotel Inex, The Golden Coast.[17] This hybrid curatorial project, developed within a framework of intimate ethnography, navigates the tension between publicly accessible content and personal, vernacular collections. At the time of writing, the hotel has once again been sold and is once again under construction, ready to resume its life in a partially refurbished form. As cultural theorist Svetlana Boym observes in her reflections on the off-modern: 'Both ruins and construction sites provide perfect metaphors for architecture's potentials.'[18] The first hotel ruin I ever encountered continues – deservedly so – to invite architectural labour, emotional inquiry and artistic as well as academic analysis.

Through repeated visits to this all-too-familiar site, I have noticed that the most visible change between stopovers lies in the flora, which shifts dramatically, while construction work remains slow and inconsistent. During the hotel's prosperous decades, organized gardening played a central role in shaping its communal spaces. Hospitality infrastructures are designed to foster calm and security, and horticulture contributes to this by animating travel destinations, imbuing them with life and presence. Today, parts of the complex are entirely overtaken by wild growth that, despite years of neglect, still bears traces of its former significance. In a poetic sense, this contradiction speaks of resilience, revealing latent value in what might otherwise be deemed barren. It suggests that even decaying systems can generate moments of meaning – spaces inhabited by the bodily, the allegorical and the irrational. I approach them, therefore, as the fruits of futile flora.

Architecture and poetry both rely on structure and rhythm to be materialized and understood. Walking through an untended landscape and engaging in poetic reflection – whether thinking, writing or reading – constitute temporal experiences. Just as poetic language depends on the ambiguity inherent to its medium, ruins evoke a similar opacity, requiring historical and referential interpretation. Edward Hirsch, in *A Poet's Glossary*, describes poetry as 'an inexplicable (though not incomprehensible) event in language'.[19] Building on a related thought, the Yugoslav poet Oskar Davičo wrote that 'along with spaces of meaning, words also contain gaps, which are other spaces – empty spaces, ready to receive fresh supplementary meanings and, in most cases, at the same time, spaces for unpredictable spontaneity'.[20] It is, however, crucial to distinguish between spaces that serve no purpose and those that are simply unused. 'How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity?' asks Georges Perec in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, his anthropological-philosophical meditation on the seemingly banal spaces people inhabit.[21] Hotel rooms and corridors are slowly transforming into forests, untamed coastal realms that stand in stark contrast to their original purpose. It is precisely within these empty, spontaneous spaces – within this deliberate rejection of functionality – that the poetic interpretation of decay emerges.

Traversing Tourist Trajectories

The romanticization of debris-strewn landscapes has fuelled the rise of ruin tourism across rural and urban areas of the former Yugoslav countries, particularly around their many derelict hospitality venues. These uninhabited structures are increasingly regarded as mythical, unpremeditated, self-regulating and even eco-friendly monuments – rebranded as *hidden gems*. In his study of the semiotics of tourism, Jonathan Culler observes that even 'an unremarkable piece of ground becomes a tourist attraction when equipped with a plaque',[22] though such attractions are often artificially constructed. A case in point is the sentimentalized image of the former Yugoslavia as a once-flourishing travel destination, now dotted with decaying Mediterranean hotels.

Historian Patrick Hyder Patterson notes that, during the socialist federation, 'tourism appeared to be one of the few "sure things" that Yugoslavs and their leaders could count on. It figured in contemporary accounts as a reliable, happy feature of the country's progress.'[23] He asserts that, as 'one of the most important forms of experiential abundance, tourism was a critical part of the vision of the Good Life that lay at the heart of the Yugoslav Dream, and as such, it may be subject to many of the same misgivings and reservations'.[24] In his thesis on Montenegrin modernist hotels, architect and researcher Danilo Bulatović discusses the development of the same tourism sector, with particular emphasis on the expansion of road and catering infrastructure to support travellers:

> As the socio-political circumstances in Yugoslavia emphasized the importance of the visitors rom both the East and the West, at the beginning of the 1960s, rapid urbanization, with high-capacity hotel complexes and road infrastructure was the key in achieving this goal.[25]

Historian Igor Duda – whose research focuses on Yugoslav social history and the everyday life of the second half of the twentieth century – similarly detects that 'in the 1960s tourism became a mass leisure activity, which would be unthinkable without the construction of hotels, tourist resorts and other facilities'.[26] In the conclusion of his book, by revisiting emerging architectural and urban practices, Bulatović finds that former Yugoslavia functioned as an 'aesthetico-political project, which allowed the transition from generic to authentic architectural language to develop'.[27] Following the economic reforms in socialist Yugoslavia and the construction of the Adriatic Highway, a rise of hotel and resort development emerged along the coast between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Coastal hotel architecture, in particular, had a significant influence on the evolution of architectural forms. It is therefore striking that researchers have begun to seriously recognize and valorise this heritage only in the past decade. One of the earliest projects of this kind was the exhibition 'Tourism in Socialism and After – Transformation of Hotel Architecture on the Croatian Adriatic Coast' (2015, MMSU Rijeka). It provided a historical overview of major tourist resorts along the Adriatic coast, highlighting their transformation following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the onset of privatization.[28]

Riding the wave of renewed interest in architectural heritage, the

Hotel Inex - Golden Coast, Sutomore, Montenegro, (in reconstruction), 2020.

acclaimed documentary series *Slumbering Concrete (Betonski spavači,* 2016), produced by Croatian National Television (HTV1), explored modernist architecture across the former Yugoslav region. Narrated by architect Maroje Mrduljaš, one of the series' creators, the early episodes introduce viewers to what the authors call *megastructures* – a term used to describe the striking hotels and tourist complexes featured in the programme. Mrduljaš begins with the words:

> Abandoned, forgotten, ruined spaces that are slowly being taken over by nature seem like the remains of an ancient, vanished civilization. Resorts, hotels, motels, this architecture is not older than 40-50 years. It was created during the tourist boom in which more was built on the Adriatic coast than ever before, or ever since in this area. The brutality of the bare spaces and the melancholy of decay today attract more and more urban explorers, architects and artists, as well as curious tourists in search of the remains of not-so-ancient history.[29]

Some of the ruins of former Yugoslav hospitality facilities have been neglected, while others have been renovated or entirely transformed. Certain sites were never completed, and others deteriorated as a result of social, legal and financial complications. Several were owned by the Yugoslav Army, while others had complex ownership structures, further complicating preservation and investment. During the civil wars of the 1990s, many hotels were repurposed as temporary housing for refugees.

Now victims of prolonged neglect and systematic privatization, these hotels along the former Yugoslav Mediterranean can be regarded both as recent and as archetypal examples of Juhani Pallasmaa's conception of architecture. He argues that 'architecture is essentially an extension of nature into the man-made realm, providing the ground for perception and the horizon of experiencing and understanding the world'.[30] Confronting these overgrown structures in their tranquil decay also evokes a sentiment that poet John Keats conceptualized as 'negative capability'. Keats believed that a writer 'capable of being in uncertainties'[31] is open to doubt and contradiction, thereby expanding the boundaries of human experience. This notion resonates profoundly with the experience of ruins: while built architectural forms are typically regarded as expressions of permanence, ruins reveal that their fate, too, is marked by negative capability – by openness to ambiguity and contradiction.

As Umberto Eco observed: 'With its voracious vitality, history robs architecture of its meaning and endows it with new meaning.'[32] The transformation of these sites unfolds gradually yet conveys a clear message: the facilities once designed to serve guests can no longer cater to anyone.

Anthropology of Abandonment

In his book on the ontology of the Mediterranean South (*A Book About South*), writer and journalist Jurica Pavičić explores what he terms *the anthropology of abandonment* in a chapter aptly titled 'Abandoned Croatia'. He argues that 'if there is something that thoroughly defines the area of the Western Balkans then it is precisely the ruins and abandoned buildings'.[33]

These include a range of sites: military barracks, petrol stations, railway halts on disused tracks, deserted villages and the remnants of motels, guesthouses and cultural centres. Ruins are defined above all by the accumulation of events that have already passed and concluded. Among them, Pavičić writes, are 'factories that no longer produce anything, hotels where there are no more guests'.[34] Viewed through the lens of traditional spatial hierarchies, derelict hotel structures are dismissed as mere residues, yet they are capable of fostering unconventional interactions and exemplifying the liminal spaces within tourism that once defined them.

Architect and researcher Petros Phokaides, who examines the coastal areas of Greece, discusses beach resorts as both *resources* and *possessions*. In his essay, he reminds us that 'mass-tourism, with architecture's complicitness, set in motion the symbolic and material reconfiguration existing dynamic coastal economies and complex ecologies, often with irreversible and unforeseen outcomes'.[35] The material fabric of these buildings transforms over time – decomposing and corroding, each in its own irregular way. The same process unfolds along the Adriatic, where the coastline has become highly valuable and exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation, often subjected to activities that bypass legal and environmental regulation. It is important to disclose that when these spaces persist long enough to become inoperative or derelict, they decisively diverge from anthropocentric use and, in doing so, resist commodification.

As researcher Andrew F. Wood observes: 'The smooth, unstrained continuum of modernity, after all, awaits the puncture of ruins. In the detritus of abandoned places, discarded products, and fetishized peoples, we chart the borders and barriers of a culture marked by rationality, efficiency, confidence, and progress.'[36] Dimensionally and philosophically speaking, when ruins take over, human scale ceases to be the measure of things.

Assuming and Accepting Ambivalence

The eagerness to participate in the unfolding spatial experience, felt as we enter a location, may be likened to the anticipation with which we approach a poem. In both cases, this act of entry depends as much on the encountered material conditions as on our memories, knowledge and curiosity. Just as poetry transforms everyday language into peculiar imagery and abstract thought, a built transitional structure becomes a platform for interpreting and understanding aesthetic interplay and social relations. It aligns with the procedural and non-linear nature of lived experience. As Georg Simmel describes, in slightly different terms:

> Between the not-yet and the no-longer lies an affirmation of the spirit whose path, it is true, now no longer ascends to its peak but satiated by the peak's riches, descends to its home. This is, as it were, the counterpart of that 'fruitful moment' for which those riches, which the ruin has in retrospect, are still in prospect.[37]

The language of poetry is a mode of contemplative inquiry: inherently nuanced and opaque, it resists fixed definition. Even poems with a clear narrative arc rarely assert meaning outright; rather, they suggest, inviting

multiple interpretations. This tension between the known and the unknown can be unsettling, evoking a profound sense of ambiguity. It is precisely this state of in-betweenness that makes such explorations compelling. During the first of his renowned Frankfurt lectures, cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk remarked: 'Between loss and losing again opens a space, a space in which we refuse what is too real and learn to be the apprentices of the impossible. This space is opened by poetry, which does so by exposing itself to uncertainty.'[38] Poetic moments are therefore not to be perceived as quantifiable or tangible entities, but as frameworks for apprehending and articulating the accidental.

Seeing 'poetry as the essence of everything', Henri Cartier-Bresson reflected on the encounter with the strangeness or inelegance of a scene that a photographer might deem poetic. 'No,' he indicates, 'poetry includes two elements that are suddenly in conflict – a spark between two elements.'[39] The confrontation of dissimilar elements is a defining feature of poetic work – whether as the juxtaposition of ideas and images or, in the case this essay investigates, as the capacity to perceive landscapes as platforms for conflicted transformation. In one of his well-known essays, Joseph Brodsky observed that 'in the business of writing what one accumulates is not expertise but uncertainties'.[40] Poetic conflict – what Bresson calls *a spark* – emerges between past and present, precisely in the tension between what has already been realized and the latent potential of what is yet to come.

An overgrown hotel is not a rupture in the scenery, but an encounter, and conceptualizing it as such opens it further to poetic interpretations. As Georges Perec wrote, 'space is a doubt',[41] and it is precisely this kind of uncertainty to which we surrender when seeking deeper understanding. Poetry arises in places where we are confronted not with answers, but with suspicions. This allegorical tension is, indeed, the very space that ruins inhabit. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin develops a theory of Baroque allegory in which the ruin, as the physical counterpart of allegory, takes a central role. He describes allegory as a form increasingly marginalized, yet one whose critical potential surpasses that of symbolism. Allegory, he writes, exceeds pure aesthetics:

> In the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise, history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty.[42]

Although they transcend conventional definitions of poetry, contemporary hybrid documentary films from the former Yugoslav region are often both allegorical and expressive. Their investigative frameworks warrant closer examination of the poetics of place – far beyond their visual allure – which is why I turn to them in this closing reflection. Many such films offer evocative interpretations of specific, often deserted or politically charged, landscapes. As professor of Film Studies Pavle Levi notes, these are *political landscapes*.[43] Interpreting the thematic framework of the Senses of Cinema essay series *After Yugoslavia*, film scholar Nikola Radić writes about derelict buildings tended to by an *army of employees* – once again, a conflicting image.

Radić's interest extends beyond cinematic language to the ontology of the filmed objects themselves, particularly their symbolic and poetic potential through vegetation. In a fragment of his text entitled *Potential of the Plants, Power of the People*, he describes imagery of plants and maintenance staff watering or relocating them:

> Against the backdrop of deteriorating materials and surfaces, the vegetation in all its greenness and vividness is more than a mere ornament. It represents breathing, living, and the potential for growth. Yet this vegetation does not embody nature reclaiming its rights over man-made structures. The plants in pots paradoxically incarnate its exact opposite, namely a resistance to the decline, whereas the caretakers are the resistants defying oblivion by preserving materiality.[44]

Georg Simmel claimed that the ruin is intelligible from the standpoint of nature – it is 'entirely meaningful, comprehensible, differentiated'. At the same time, he lyrically noted that 'nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served a material for art'.[45] Although Radić does not explicitly evaluate architectural features, as a perceptive observer he proposes that the material and physical elements of space – its surfaces, textures, colours and odours – shape atmosphere, intensify emotion and convey meaning. They blur the boundaries between individual sensory responses.

Aligned with the idea of indivisible biological perception, Predrag Matvejević, author of a remarkable anthropological glossary of the Mediterranean, contemplated the seamless cohesion intrinsic to its environment. He wrote that it is impossible to define precisely 'at what altitude certain plants stop growing, how exactly their roots withstand the wind, or from which point they do so'.[46] According to Matvejević, the Mediterranean possesses a distinctive and ultimately indecipherable atmosphere. This complexity likely originates in its temporality – a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by inherited and newly established rhythms. Across this expansive territory, people experience a shared climate, and perhaps it is the gentle seasons that foster a perception of time as slow and cyclical. The region's historical and artistic depth is profound; ruins are but one element in a vast tapestry of toponyms through which the past blends into the present.

Not unexpectedly, native Mediterranean social practices embrace gradualness and an attentiveness to the present moment. We might define this, in Gaston Bachelard's terms, as a 'poetic instant, a stimulated ambivalence – an active, dynamic ambivalence. The poetic instant compels us to value or devalue'.[47] With this in mind, ruins should be understood not as memorials but as testimonials, and we must remain cautious of interpreting them through a nostalgic lens. Hotel remnants, in particular, ought to be examined within the shifting discourse of tourism and the evolving political context. As such, hospitality structures can be reinterpreted as 'sites of memory',[48] rather than labelled as third-rate tourist attractions.

Instead of attributing overwrought symbolic meaning to Mediterranean and former Yugoslav ruins, it is more productive to engage with them through urgent frameworks – legal, technical, analytical and cultural. In doing so, we move from passive contemplation to active engagement with the past, fostering both thoughtful preservation and innovative poetic reinterpretation.

In conclusion, as Matvejević boldly insists: 'It is not about the past or surrender, history or heritage, memory or belonging. The Mediterranean is a destiny as well.'[49] And what an enchanting destiny it must be – built upon the resonant poetics of its architectural cadavers.

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POETIC RESEARCH
PRACTICES

Play Space in the Death Zone, or The Unused as Muse

Lydia Unsworth

What is it like to live in an area of postindustrial decline surrounded by the broken leftovers of given-up-on urban utopias and narratives of working-class toil? Do we grieve the buildings we lose to 'progress'? What does it do to the worldview of children to learn that the area they live in is ugly and not-to-be-aspired-to, that they must seek beauty elsewhere? While this essay will not answer the above questions, it will offer a poetic approach for navigating the postindustrial urban landscape while holding such questions in mind. It uses the association and drift – 'a type of dreaming' – that accompanies a moving body in physical space as part of an explorative methodology.[1] In doing so, it seeks to give value to mythmaking and personal interpretation within the cycles of neglect, demolition and redevelopment that recur in our urban spaces, suggesting play and creativity as forms of resilience, agency and understanding in areas of development and decline and their attendant messy scraplands.

Sites of postindustrial neglect provide evocative materiality, ripe for exploration and imaginative gameplay. Tim Edensor claims that when you walk through an unused industrial place, you have to use your imagination; there are clues or fossils to interpret but ultimately you are on your own. He points to the immersion place provides, how the tangibility of being *in situ* provokes an emotional response: 'You can feel and sense the past but you can't narrate it.'[2] Through such lack of narration or guidance, the landscape and its relics differ from a heritage site or a museum with their silhouettes, speech bubbles and wall projections of children pushing carts through projected mines: you must reconstruct a story, in fragments, as accorded by the rubble of the world-site.

For the purposes of this essay, I am going to focus on my poetic responses to Fiddlers Ferry in the North West of England, a decommissioned power station on the borders of Warrington and Widnes, originally consisting of eight cooling towers and one chimney stack. The power station, completed in 1971 and closed in 2020, had four of its eight towers demolished in December 2023, with the remainder of the site set to be removed by 2026.

One year prior to demolition, I lived some twenty miles away and the sight of the towers on the horizon became a calming point of reference.

I began a series of writings about the towers and started to construct interventions with them. In short, sensing their vulnerability, and perhaps my own, I entered into a relationship.

My Poetic Practice

As a poet, I intervene in the landscape by trying to capture the emotions present in an experience; emotions that appear as images – unruly, associative, chaotic – and that become controlled by their condensation into a poem. I strain to capture experiential fragments, transience or the sensuous embodied materiality of the world.[3] As a poet, my craft follows a certain dream logic, and a blurring starts to exist between the work itself and the kinds of situations and environments required or provoked to produce it.

Christopher Bollas, in his book *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*, states that the structure of the dream experience 'has its equivalent in ordinary waking life', claiming 'we walk about, have intense moments, and then associate to them'.[4] Such walking about is bound to be affected by the environments it takes place in, so my poetic practice seeks out environments that I know will yield something and are in accordance with my interests. My associations, as they occur naturally in space, are later recollected and channelled to become poetry. As such, the poems can be thought of as condensed waking dreams that are prompted by and in some sense moored to my lived environment.

My work is drawn to between-spaces, to the decaying but not the dead, to urban ruins, neglected buildings, abandoned shopping malls. In such places, time collapses, and – as with rock formations, strata, fossils – the past lives in the present to be touched.

When I enter a postindustrial landscape, whether through a gap in the fence or by climbing a few graffitied concrete steps that must go somewhere behind a promenade, it's not an answer I'm looking for, not a product or an asset: I just want to see what I find and play with it. I want the landscape to surprise me, test me. I want to come away from a place knowing more than when I went in. Because, in the words of Bradley L. Garrett, 'exploration is, on some level, always a process of becoming less ignorant',[5] and spatial exploration is a form of mental exploration, as Rebecca Solnit elucidates when she describes walking as 'a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals'.[6]

On 3 December 2023 at 9:38 a.m., four of the eight Fiddlers Ferry towers lining the Sankey Canal in Widnes were brought down before a crowd of hundreds, all of whom had gathered for a four-hour window of potential demolition in near-zero temperatures in full mist. For the one and a half hours we were waiting, the towers were hardly visible: a curve here, an edge there. The Eight Towers pub was open for the occasion and served pints in plastic cups. Parents had brought children; there were former power station workers and people who didn't seem sure what Fiddlers Ferry was or in which direction they should be looking; they'd simply come down to see what was happening. The crowd may have been in an open and receptive state of being, or 'sensuous engagement with the environment',[7] a state that Edensor suggests is provoked by immersion in undefined space.

For a couple of months leading up to the event and since, I have been a member of a Facebook group called Fiddlers End where people post memories, jokes, photos and links to news articles about the towers and their environs. It's a busy group with posts such as 'who's missing the towers today?' or 'woke up this morning suddenly feeling sad about it' making regular appearances.

Following the explosion, I wrote a poem called 'Just a Natural Consequence of Their Design, Just Part of Their Natural Life Cycle' (2024),[8] documenting the Fiddlers Ferry demolition. This is an extract:

I want to watch the enormous shrink

photos of the four resultant chicken-pox stains
on the ground
make me gag
    just dust now
we're ghosts inhaling the insides of hoover bags

the material keeps coming
it will keep on coming

they are designed to collapse into their own pits
not to disturb anything
to pop in a footprint

this is a date, I said
and I kissed your cheek

the fog was brown and orange like when the Sahara
comes and coats us

the pub was rammed
another piece of history flattened
people were drinking Heineken on the street

Without explaining away all the poem's ambiguity, I shall unpack a few double meanings or associations in the above extract. The line *I want to watch the enormous shrink* follows a series of metaphors describing the sudden collapse of the four towers, and the use of the vague *the enormous* is brought in to convey a perhaps political, perhaps familial lack of agency and a rising anger that extends beyond the actual shrinking here being witnessed. The lines *the material keeps coming / it will keep on coming* are able to extend beyond the clouds of dust and into the never-ending development and chasing of progress within our urban environments. The line *they are designed to collapse into their own pits* and those that follow in that stanza, while referring to the towers explicitly, make a solid analogy to the working classes, and to societal docility and obedience more generally.

When writing a poem, I am largely writing about the urban environment and the details occurring in the situation I have set up

or in which I have placed myself. Associations and analogies occur preconsciously, in an 'ambient condition', a state that Bollas describes as akin to our earliest years; the mind is at rest in such a condition, peaceful, creative.[9] Multiple meanings of these poetic leaps and jumps are noticed only *at the point of writing* and not beforehand. In this way space itself becomes a defining material within my practice.

Before the demolition of the four towers, there was a charity raffle, the prize of which was to press the button to start the explosion. In interviews, the woman who won mentioned how her own son was sad about the demolition; nonetheless, she felt it 'meant something' to be a part of history in this way. I tried to capture my and her complicated feelings in the same poem referenced above, with another extract here:[10]

> it was 9:36 when Grace pressed
> the button a cable unsnapped
> from the plastic block she was holding
> like a gleeful hoover cord putting itself away
>
> Grace has mixed emotions about winning the raffle
> with the comforting landmark gone
> how will she know when she's home?
> her son is sad the view from his bedroom window
> is changing
>
> Grace doesn't mention her feelings post-initiation
> she shares a video from her husband's phone
>
> as a child I had a recurring dream
> about winning a raffle I wasn't supposed to enter

At the end of this section, I have allowed for free association to occur, and this section finishes with the lines *my father's voice booming / like the crack of four towers coming down*, thus looping it back to the towers and the present moment of demolition immediately after travelling back to childhood recall. The poem here performing how a consciousness moves through space, drifting in and out of reverie as environmental prompts act upon it.

One month before attending the demolition, I had walked the twenty miles from my house to the towers, to better understand the space between myself and these structures, the scale of the sprawling conurbation that separated us, and the ways I could talk to the towers and how they talked to me. Through this walking, I sought to meet the towers and contrive a stronger bond with them in order to create a steadier and more informed place to write from. I wanted to engage in dialogue; a certain confidence of phrasing being facilitated by my movements in the landscape.

This walk turned into a journey poem three pages long, in which the towers themselves scarcely feature, but whose driving force was a sense of pilgrimage towards them, a pilgrimage I had contrived for the purposes of the poem. The poem's themes range from delusion, capitalism, parenting, futility, acceptance, humour, ownership, growth, memory, inheritance

and urbanism, all of which drifted naturally to my attention through the associations prompted while roaming the landscape.

The Poet as Witness, the Poem as Tool

I wrote poems both before and after the event, trying to capture my emotive response. This is not to say that the poet must understand or put a name to such emotions – they simply appear. As a poet, I drift through urban spaces and, when successful, have trained my attention to capture certain acute details in the form of words. A poem becomes a tool for capturing the complications of a shifting urban landscape, presenting the reader with habitual languages and landscapes turned askew. Local news articles can appear next to details captured from live events, textbooks and associations drawn from lived experience. The poet serves as witness, collecting details that would not otherwise be collected. This rich temporal detail anchors the poem more profoundly to the broader sociopolitical contexts in which it was formed. In performing juxtaposition, analogy, metaphor and metonymy, the poem, like the abandoned or neglected site, presents a playground of potential interpretation and site-specific ephemera, simultaneously offering morsels of history and complicated contemporaneity as prompts for exploration. In much the same way that we, as curious bodies, encounter spatial fragments.

Gaston Bachelard opens his seminal book *The Poetics of Space* by considering the poetic image, our being receptive to it as soon as it appears. He talks of shedding old habits, breaking ties with the received cultural past to better meet with the 'sudden salience of the psyche',[11] that is, the poetic imagination. Let's say the city is a (found) poem and its juxtapositions are heavy with history, experimentation, innovation, symbolism. What am I, as a poet, looking at? I'm looking at the bits that are being erased and I'm considering the ambiguity of that erasure.

From my childhood I have very clear physical memories of underpasses, bus stations, department-store flooring, thick blue pens marking sheets of acetate. The environments we are raised in imprint themselves into us during our formative years and, I suspect, continue to influence our lifetime aesthetics. For example, I recently went down a mine shaft in South Wales and thought about the many months over many years that my grandfather would not have seen sunlight. The abstract thought became embodied, and such embodiment becomes the raw material of my poetic practice. I have largely learnt about the world by visiting it. I want the *stuff*, the pile-up of matter, which I then sift through, read around and redesign into poetry.

My poetic practice seeks physical memories in undefined spaces, it seeks the surrealism of unknown shapes and crevices. The strangeness that certain architectural spaces afford me is akin to the strangeness offered to the reader by poetry, and the heightening of consciousness (alertness to life) that ensues from tangible and undefined confrontations in the landscape. Without a cooling tower or a mine shaft to surprise me, where is my sudden salience?

An Explorative Practice

How do you remember, if all traces are removed? How do you tell a town it has nothing of note beyond old photographs of what it once was, not even a curious fragment? As past architecture sits there, not yet destroyed but no longer of importance, I wonder whether the object is lonely, why it makes me feel so strange. In this sense, poetry is a questioning; it is the doubt that underscores (that should underscore) everything. Georges Perec talks of space as a doubt that must be constantly marked and captured, and longs for stable, unmoving and deep-rooted spaces to serve as reference points for departure.[12]

My poetic practice understands and lives the urban environment by exploring how a consciousness moves through and experiences (urban) space, drifting in and out of reverie as environmental prompts act upon it. An uncertainty or impermanence of self is enacted through a similar uncertainty or impermanence in the environment. Through this resemblance, a kinship is formed, and my changing self finds itself within and feels seen by its changing environment. As Bradley L. Garrett writes in his study of urban explorers, in such between-spaces 'one realizes that everything is already being lost'. This realization, he finds, often leads to a state of transcendence or acceptance, which in turn creates a kind of existential calm born by possessing or knowing a place on one's one terms, without external regulations.[13]

Fran Lock describes her poetic practice as *feral*; she speaks of 'the cobble and borrow' as a working-class method for excess hunting, 'a determination to use every available resource'.[14] Such creative engagement with the landscape is suited to being adaptable, piecemeal and in progress. Sites of neglect or incompletion offer a chance to see the workings of the urban environment, 'revealing layer after layer of active life'.[15] Lock calls poetry the '*perfect* mode of production for those poor in time and in resources . . . it travels light, communicates in fragments and flashes', and like structural encounters in the landscape, 'requires no specialist equipment or training'.[16] Where Lock describes wrestling an 'inchoate mess of thoughts-feelings-impressions' into a poem,[17] Bollas compares the city to the 'seeming chaos of the unconscious mind . . . interlaced in some kind of moving form that gives rise to a type of organising vision'.[18] Following a dream logic, my embodied poetic practice condenses and disseminates sensorial information,[19] building narrative and moulding agency, crafting unbounded and raw environmental materials into poetry.

In his book *Middlefield*, Ian Waites presents a series of images of the housing estate where he grew up and juxtaposes these with memory vignettes, triggered by details in the estate. These vignettes bear titles such as 'Cobbles', 'Cut-Throughs', 'Privet', 'Kerbs', 'Pebbledash' and 'The Phosco P107',[20] highlighting how memory can be triggered by place, however banal the detail; how moving through space provokes flashes of dormant memory, or, sometimes, just as crucially, doesn't. Both Lynsey Hanley's *Estates*[21] and John Grindrod's *Concretopia*[22] touch on some of the same emotions as Waites's *Middlefield*, but while the former provide their emotive responses second-hand, as motive or catalyst for research, Waites's emotive response *is* the research – he embodies the spaces and, through the

embodiment, he remembers. The poetic form offers a more direct method for nuanced exploration of experience, and its associative qualities are akin to how we navigate architectural spaces.

Poetry of Pasts: Memory of Post-Industrial Sites

Architecture, like poetry, is a holder of memory, and the urban environment holds multiple, often conflicting, memories from multiple timelines in close proximity and communion. Think about the unused or unfinished you might travel past on a regular basis: the boarded-up windows, cordoned-off new developments, the ubiquitous crane lights twinkling between high-rises at night. Think of young professionals, nuclear families, pop-up shops, shared houses, ghost signs, ghost estates. It's all there. As Benjamin suggested in 'On the Concept of History',[23] the urban environment is perpetually *in progress*, so a language for relating to the unused, unfinished or condemned spaces in our urban environments creatively and emotionally seems crucial.

Christopher Bollas, in *The Evocative Object World*, states that 'the built landscapes in which we live reflect the unconscious nature of collective life'[24] and compares walking through cities, à la Debord's *dérive*,[25] to wandering about in a 'world-daydream'. If all dreams take place in imagined environments based on received, cultural or real-world experiences, and 'vivid structures will enter our dreams',[26] the mapping of dream onto city and city onto dream creates a loop, making the environment we experience when we are awake also a kind of collective dreamscape, as well as ripe material for poetry.

Bollas claims that a psychoanalyst aims to 'catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his [sic.] own unconscious'[27] – and here I find Bollas's use of the word *drift* very telling, the casual movement of it, the ambulant state. Architecture is a collaboration; new buildings are built, largely, in communities of other pre-existing buildings. The landscape drifts. Both the architect and the poet, who aim, respectively, to shape our external and our internal landscapes, seem to engage in a kind of therapeutic dialogue with the unconsciousnesses perusing an environment, and to be, knowingly or not, catching the drifts of all those passing through.

Edensor, in a chapter of *Industrial Ruins* entitled 'Waste, Excess and Sensuality', suggests that in the ruin, or the unused site between definitions, the formally hidden emerges; the 'internal organs' or 'guts of the building' spill out.[28] I understand the resonance of a building by being in its presence; and that *being* is a crucial *filling up*, an abundance I then pause with in order to write and filter. Poetry is a way of playing with the unconscious, a form of deep understanding. In the words of Bollas: 'We cohere as intensity, we disseminate as association.'[29] My poems cannot be written without the environment from which they emerge; they are born of the deep intensities and associations I encounter in the urban realm.

Bollas suggests that once structures appear they become evocative 'silent obelisks' and that it would take 'considerable historical work and decoding' to unpack the many ways people have been affected by and since their arrival.[30]

As Edensor says, 'one of the characteristics of power is the ability to

make decisions about what is required'.[31] My poetry provides me with a form of agency in a rapidly changing urban environment, an environment whose changes often involve the violence of demolition and whose priorities often seem misaligned with my own. My artistic attention is a form of love, an act of rebellion and a desire for community, connectivity, care and conversation. I want to write poems in the spaces, gather and churn the scrappy memories into a form of articulation before they are displaced.

This is a job that requires observation, direct study, the lifting of shrouds and the peeking behind signs telling us to Keep Out. If you tell me a building has fallen out of favour, then I want to go and make friends, find out why that is, stand up for it, learn who it used to be. I want the past of a site to be taken along with it into the future. I want the buildings I encounter to be replete with memory. And not just in name: I want layering in a site, 'a constellation of meaning' that feels participatory.[32]

The work of poetry is to take all the material available and think. When a site stops being one thing, it turns into possibility. And when a site is not pinned down is when poetry is best placed to capture it.

Before the urban ruin or neglected building, I am confronted with conceptual death, the death of whatever world I was told in my formative years would be bequeathed us. And in much the same way as pencils and pens are left at the grave of Douglas Adams, or lipstick kisses pressed all over Simone de Beauvoir's headstone, so I, and perhaps many others, want to honour the dying building, offer something of myself to the place.

The neglected object silently succumbs to its fate. The demolished object is taken from us without our agency. The encountered object is a good listener and does not push us away. As soon as a building is under threat it becomes politically interesting; or, 'accidental sculptural forms emerge from the violence of collapse'.[33] In change, there is always a state of becoming. Likewise, when a building is taken away, the site does not return to a time before that building, we are instead left with a new kind of absence, a 'tomb' or 'death-zone' or 'reverberation of the object'.[34] Bachelard, himself drawing on the work of phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski, claims that this reverberation – the effect an object or place has on us – and crucially, our experience of that reverberation through the encounter, contains the 'being' or essence of the poetic image.[35] Through such encounters, 'we feel a poetic power rising naively within us'.[36] That naivety is important: it – like poetry – is a free and childlike form of exploration; an open, kind and unjaded way of responding to and taking up space.

What does it do to memory to leave a site in a state of neglect? Or to demolish a structure only to abandon development? Or to promise scheme after scheme to those living with architectural ghosts in the landscape? We need to find joy in the between-phases. Our towns are not 'ugly'. By demolishing or neglecting the structural heritage of the recent past, the recent past changes, and without structural interruptions in the landscape to remind us of its complexities, the interpretations of that recent past become flattened, vulnerable to marketing, and history becomes a mono-thing, whose story slips from our grasp.

Conclusion

When a history is not your history, you may not have much to say about it, nor find it particularly easy to be invested in. If a popular opinion is overheard at regular intervals, one may repeat this opinion without much consideration: think of phrases like *concrete monstrosity* or *blight on the landscape*. But the blight *becomes* the landscape. Before you are initiated into the polemic of how to think about a particular townscape, it simply *is*. How many eight-year-olds are missing the view of the recently demolished cooling towers at Fiddlers Ferry from their bedroom windows? How did those mountain-like structures impact their imaginations? And how does their removal change things? To a child there is no *urban* or *rural* or *developed* or *deprived*; there is just what *is*, and the inner worlds one builds from the things one sees.

My poetry suggests beauty is a form of attention: as you start to understand a language, like that of architecture, you can start also to speak. Who is telling us we don't like our concrete shopping precinct? Our looming mill? Our dark library with the narrow-slit windows? Our cheeky cubed police station in the centre of town reminding us of something very obvious and heavy-handed but somehow entirely less sinister than the future we have replaced it with?

What if more people spoke about the postindustrial in sensuous language? Such as Otto Saumarez Smith does when he writes: 'Whether or not you see an abstractly humanoid presence in cooling towers, and I do, there is something elementally graceful about the way that they make heavy concrete visually light through a tender hyperboloid curve.'[37]

When they demolished half of Fiddlers Ferry, they left the other half standing for all to see. Rather than being able to move on and forget the structure, it's now half a thing, and that half that remains is a constant reminder of what is missed.

To learn from history, we have to remember it. For history to touch us, it must be encountered, connected with. An abandoned building accepts me, expects nothing. And maybe I can't save it but I want to, and my poems about such structures are a form of celebration, the way attention is a form of love. My poems are a human apology to materials that trusted us. I can feel the long-gone excitement of a building's birth, its strange and incomprehensible passage, its neglect, its naivety. I want to mother it.

There is humour in the details of how we fumble with our built environment, continuously correcting it. As a poet, I exist within a persistent urban undoing, making connections, gathering scraps from the clearance aisles, from the construction sites, and building something I can go home with. And through the experimental and site-specific methods of my poetic investigations, I have become more attached to my city and its suburbs, to the neighbouring towns and cities, and even to regions that are not mine but that I have briefly connected with, more aware of my city's changes and pace and the treasures lurking in its supposedly grim little corners, and more acutely aware of the political milieu of which I am a part. This embodied approach that fuses my practice with my environment leads to encounters, both planned and accidental; I overhear things; my own voice quiets, calms, finds direction, and the thrum of my surroundings steps into its place.

1 Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* (Abingdon-on-Thames, 2009), 63.
2 Tim Edensor, 'Invisible College public talk: Tim Edensor, 23.3.2012', *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=tEchL5WeGu8, accessed 13 May 2024.
3 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford, 2005), 168.
4 Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London, 1995), 57.
5 Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London, 2014), 34.
6 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London, 2000), 18.
7 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 84.
8 Lydia Unsworth, '2 poems', *Anthropocene*, anthropocenepoetry.org/post/2-poems-by-lydia-unsworth, accessed 10 May 2024.
9 Christopher Bollas, *The Infinite Question* (London, 2009), 20.
10 Unsworth, '2 poems', op. cit. (note 8).
11 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York, 2014), 1.
12 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London, 1999), 91.
13 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 54.
14 Fran Lock, 'T.S. Eliot Prize Writers' Notes,' *Poetry School*, poetryschool.com/theblog/fran-lock-t-s-eliot-prize-writers-notes-hyena/, accessed 10 May 2024:.
15 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 51.
16 Lock, 'T.S. Eliot Prize Writers' Notes', op. cit. (note 14).
17 Ibid.
18 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 56.
19 Bollas, *Cracking Up*, op. cit. (note 4), 57.
20 Ian Waites, *Middlefield* (Axminster, 2017).
21 Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London, 2023).
22 John Grindrod, *Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain* (London, 2014).
23 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Simon Fraser University*, sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html, accessed 28 February 2025.
24 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 2.
25 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the *Dérive*', *Internationale Situationiste* 2 (1958), 62-66.
26 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 64.
27 Ibid., 10.
28 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 109.
29 Bollas, *Cracking Up*, op. cit. (note 4), 57.
30 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 57.
31 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 105.
32 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 44.
33 Ibid., 115.
34 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 53.
35 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op. cit. (note 11), 2.
36 Ibid., 8.
37 Otto Saumarez Smith, 'Cooling Towers Are a Powerful Presence in the Landscape', *Apollo*, apollo-magazine.com/power-station-cooling-towers-deserve-to-be-saved/, accessed 10 May 2024.

Ella Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, Vienna, book extract, 2021.

Unter der Hohen Brücke Case Study

Disclosing Poetic Practices

Ella Felber

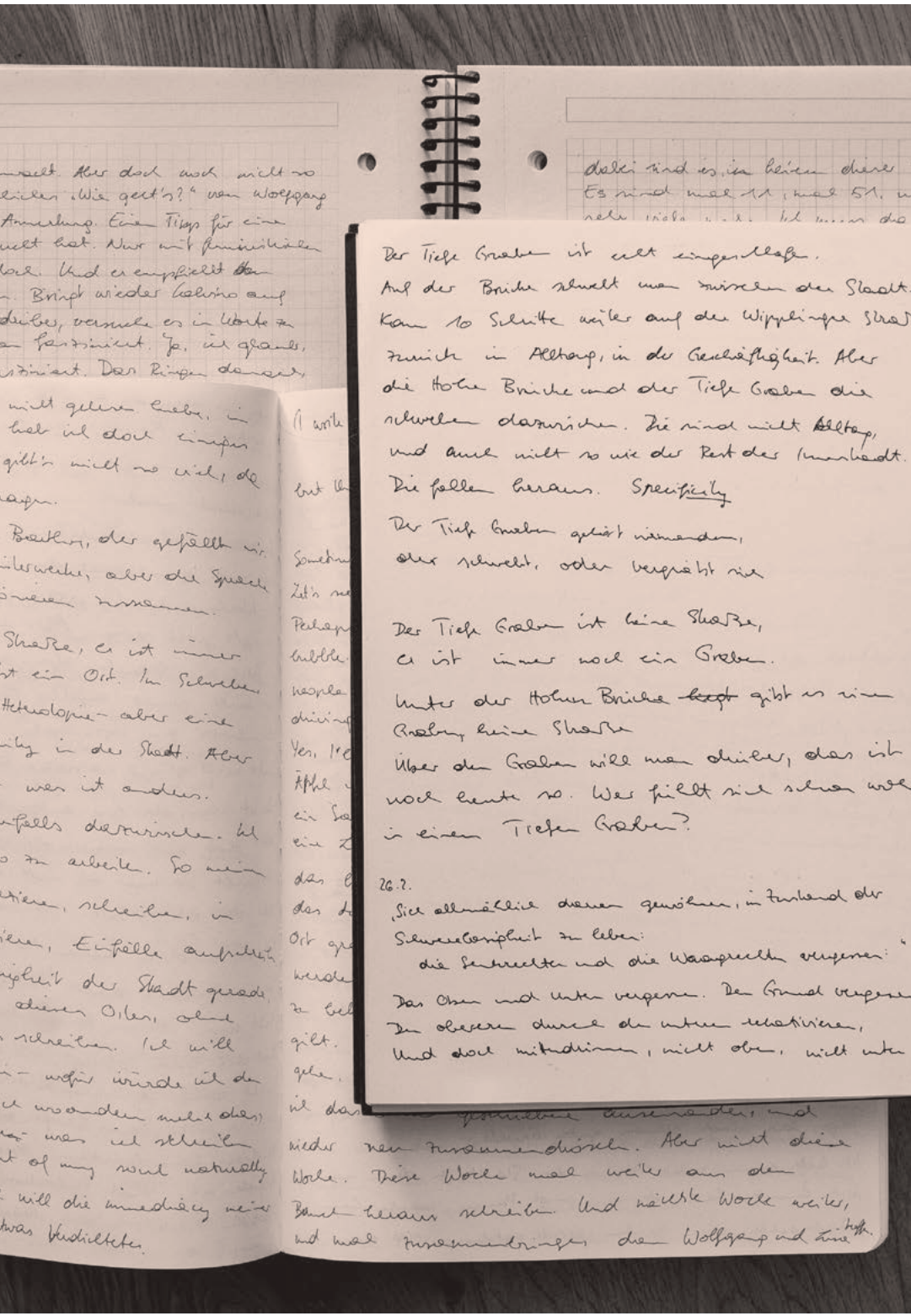
In this exploratory essay, I invite you into the poetic practices that I have developed for *Unter der Hohen Brücke – digging in a ditch, writing for a place*.[1] Five years after writing the book, I revisit, disclose and critically reflect on the process of this 'case study – a reading and construction, an analysis and interpretation – of an existing place: Tiefer Graben/Hohe Brücke'.[2]

Located in the city centre of Vienna, this place is a peculiar one. One street, Tiefer Graben, is crossed by another street, running above the bridge, Hohe Brücke. *Unter der Hohen Brücke* (Underneath the High Bridge) gathers multiple attempts to capture the complex lived experience of this place through writing. The book is conceived as a narrative from multiple perspectives that can be entered, explored and constructed anew by readers. It is structured in three parts: an essay, *Writing as Architecture*, a sequence of poems, *Im Inneren der Stadt,* and a written sketchbook, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*. Readers progress from an inventory of architectural writing in English, through constructed encounters with the place in German, to exposed and tentative approaches in both languages. In between there are photographic interludes and blank pages that invite readers to shift their attention, to change their gaze and to rest.

For this paper, I will walk through the process chronologically and show how the poetic practices shifted throughout. First, I will elaborate on my repeated site visits and their documentation (chapters 'Visiting' and 'Lingering'). Then, I will discuss how key references marked shifts in my understanding and practice (chapters 'Reading' and 'Lingering, again'). And lastly, I will do a close reading of selected fragments of my own poems to disclose and discuss my writing process in detail (chapters 'Constructing', 'Forming' and 'Detailing').

Visiting a Site, Repeatedly and Intuitively

This work started with the Tiefer Graben/Hohe Brücke site. I was intuitively drawn to this peculiar place in my meanderings around the city centre of Vienna. For a full year, I made many attempts to approach this site. My own fabulous design ideas came up against gloomy atmospheres



Der Tiefe Graben ist weit eingeschlafen.
Auf der Brücke schaut man zwischen den Staudt
Kann 10 Schritte weiter auf der Wipplinger Straß
zurück in Altstadt, in die Geschäftigkeit. Aber
die Hohe Brücke und der Tiefe Graben die
schweben darunter. Sie sind nicht Altstadt,
und auch nicht so wie der Rest des Innenstadt.
Die fallen heraus. Specifically
Der Tiefe Graben gehört niemandem,
aber schweift, oder vergeht sie
Der Tiefe Graben ist keine Straße,
es ist immer noch ein Graben.
Unter der Hohen Brücke ~~kaputt~~ gibt es einen
Graben, keine Straße
Über den Graben will man drüber, das ist
noch heute so. Wer fühlt sich schon wohl
in einem Tiefen Graben?

26.2.
Sich allmählich daran gewöhnen, in Zustand der
Schwerelosigkeit zu leben:
die Schultern und die Waagrechte verlieren:
Das Oben und Unten verlieren. Den Grund verlieren
Im oberen durch den unteren relativieren,
Und doch mitdrinnen, nicht oben, nicht unten

Ella Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, Vienna, site visit notes, 2020.

and political takes on the commodified city centre. But none of those ideas spread their roots. I started again and again, approaching the site, observing the people, the light, the weather, the bridge, the numerous layers of place. Until, eventually, I decided to base my work on precisely this practice: repeated, intuitive site visits, and writing.

For a few weeks I visited the site every day and attempted to grasp the atmosphere of the place:

> *Der Tiefe Graben ist eingeschlafen. Auf der Hohen Brücke – schweben in der Stadt. . . . Nicht Alltag, und auch nicht wie der Rest der Innenstadt.*[3]
> The Deep Ditch is asleep. On the High Bridge – hovering in the city. . . .
> Not everyday life, and not like the rest of the inner city.

This place felt disparate compared with its immediate surroundings, seemingly asleep, yet I could not yet name precisely how this atmosphere was created.

Lingering, as a Slow Spatial Practice

To capture the site, I chose to apply somatic practices I had learned in my dance and performance training, opening my senses to the complexity of the place. While being present, I experienced the textures, the changing shades of colours of the building façades and the bridge and connected them to my knowledge of architecture. Through the slow spatial practice of lingering, I noticed the rhythms of the place: the ever-changing light, the shifts of morning bustle and afternoon lulls. Sensing the changes by spending a long time there and repeating those visits allowed me to gain an embodied understanding that a place is always a process: a process that consists of many components and layers that constantly interact and shift. Some of these shifts are slow, like the change in usage of shops; others are faster, like the bursts of rain followed by sunlight.

Some days, I jotted down my observations and sensations in brief, unembellished notes, which at times became imaginative musings and poems. Most days, my experiences sparked associations and memories. Through the repetitions, my reading of the place became more nuanced and rhythmic, and my words and verses too. I was drawn to how people move through this slightly sloped street, for example, how they did not stop but moved through.

> *sie bleiben nicht stehen, sie kommen nicht an,*
> *sie spazieren auch nicht, sie gehen durch*[4]
> they do not stop, they don't arrive,
> they do not stroll, they walk through

I allowed the verses to deviate from merely capturing the rhythms of place. The poem gained its own rhythm, translating the felt sense while observing into an experience while reading.

In parallel, I observed myself observing. I collected and ordered the accompanying protocols, initial research on the history of the site, as well as my impressions. The collection was intended to invite readers to explore

multiple entrance points and narrations of the project in their own time. I wanted to openly share my process and doubts:

> *5.3.20*
> *Noch fällt diese Straße zu viel auseinander.*[5]
> 5.3.20
> Still, this street falls apart too much.

Placing the collected disparate writings and views in a tentative layout helped to give them their own space and relevance. Yet I felt stuck and sensed that I needed to shift my practice again, in order to capture this place in a narrative with multiple perspectives.

Reading, Up Close and Unfinished

I started to research literature on architectural poetic writing. This shift coincided with the first Covid-19 lockdown in Austria. It marked a turning point in my practice. Rather than visiting the site in the city, I visited sites in literature, trusting the recommendations and remarks by my colleagues from architecture, literature and their overlay.[6] My aim was to gather practices and qualities of architectural poetic writing. In the essay *Writing as Architecture*, I identify aspects of poetic narrations, as well as my own insights of practices in architecture and related fields, without claiming universality. I understood there are resourceful connections and methods to be found in literature, which can be applied to capture and work with the complexities of place.

My poetic practice now moved back and forth between reading, taking notes, extracting particularities, writing tentative paragraphs, translating and reading out loud. These shifts of attention, applied similarly during my site visits, deepened the research. An unfinished, imperfect inventory emerged, developing in the same way as 'a preliminary design process: non-linear, and full of detours'.[7]

Lingering, again, with Ilse Aichinger

The work of Ilse Aichinger, a poet and writer who grew up in Vienna, became a key reference in my process. She too worked with memories of repeated, extensive site visits. In her book *Kurzschlüsse* she described specific places in Vienna while she lived abroad in the 1950s. In these texts Aichinger intricately layers her own memories, using the curious gaze of childhood, allowing a place to unfold through the candid gaze: '[The] gaze of childhood that allows places to become places, and give them their names anew.'[8]

Aichinger's book *Kleist, Moos, Fasane* (1987) comprises three sections: memories in prose, selected notations in condensed sentences and speeches on other writers' works. Each section allows for a different perspective on her life and thoughts in the time before and during the Second World War, as well as in the post-war period. At the same time, she reveals insights into her own poetology.

The German term *Betrachtung* (contemplation) is particularly important for Aichinger. Rather than merely observing, it allows for a

prolonged consideration and treatment: 'Contemplation, this is a beautiful word; as if one allows silence to fall between oneself and the object and the hellish noise, the mute noise that is usually in this room, disappears.'[9]

In these prolonged windows of time, the place can shed noise and reveal peculiarities. The spatial practice of lingering allows, through slowness and silence, for sensations and reflections. Through writing, these spheres can be entangled in the same material: words, sentences, sounds.

These insights instigated a process of refining my approach to place-making through writing. While translating citations from German to English, I paid close attention to the vocabulary used, sentence structures and sounds.

Constructing, a Sequence of Poems

When I started bridging the sketchbook and the essay, I treated the material collected during the site visits with the practices and qualities drawn from the close readings. This resulted in a sequence of poems, *Im Inneren der Stadt* (Inside the City). Each poem is a constructed encounter with Tiefer Graben/Hohe Brücke. In the following close reading of selected fragments of the poems, I offer insights into the construction process of this poetic form.[10]

Every poem follows the same stanza structure, which serves as a pattern of orientation:

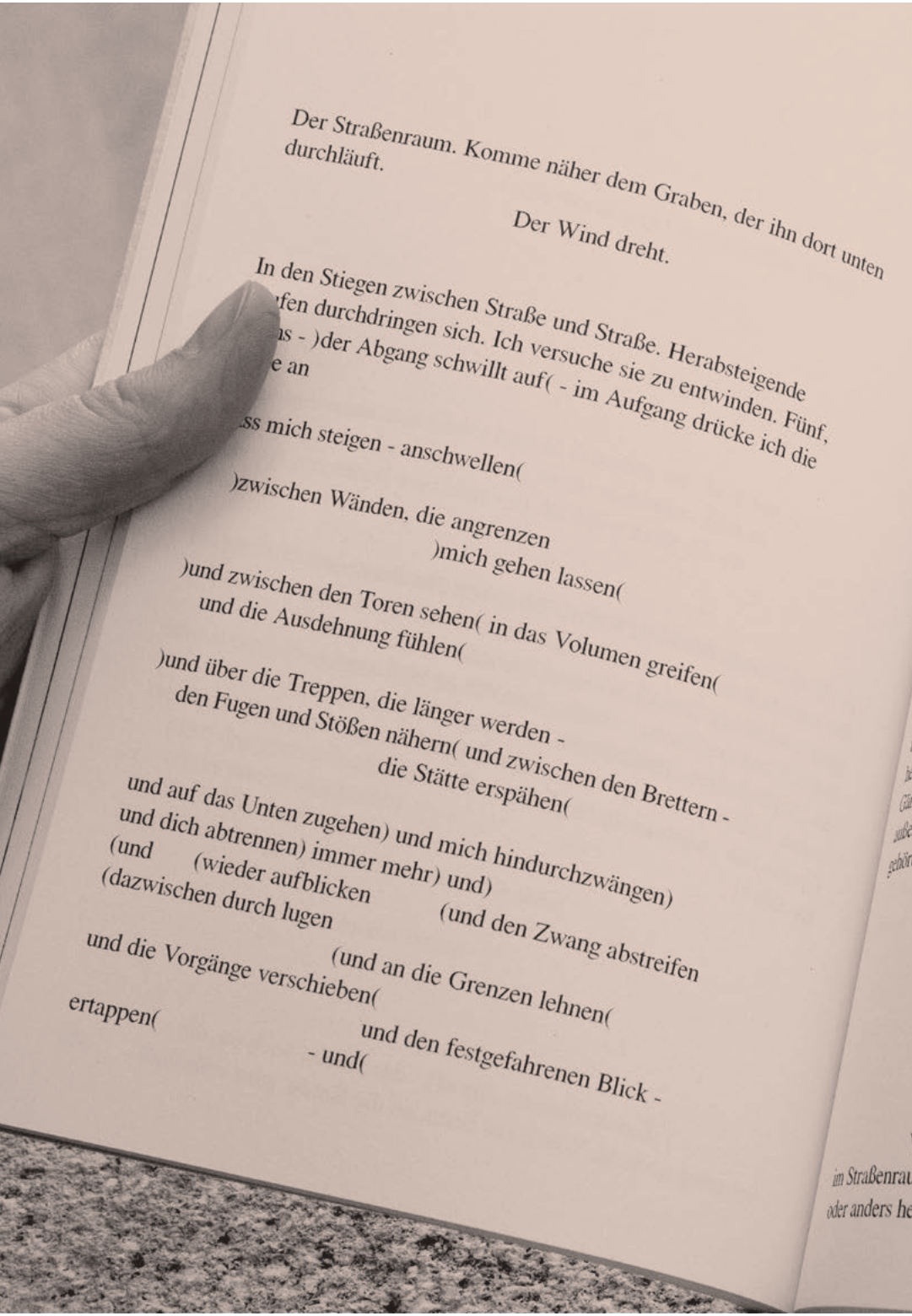
- Describing how one approaches the site, including a note on time and weather
- Focusing on a detail that allows one to enter
- Expanding on sensations, components and movements
- Attempting to grasp meaning in the experience
- Remembering a detail that allows one to exit and return to the city

This cyclical framework for all the encounters emerged through my close readings of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1977) and Dung Kai-Cheung's *Atlas* (2012), where each chapter unfolds an imaginative observation or a playful speculation, based on one characteristic of a city.

Each of my poems is an iteration of the encounter that came before, and they come in pairs.[11] The first is thematically and formally similar to the last, the second to the second last. I started with one encounter, building a rough structure and then played with the length of sentences, the relations between words and punctuation. I then reiterated once more with a related yet different spatial idea – building on the existing, but transforming where needed, and editing many times.

Forming Access to Lived Experience

When we visit a place, the complexity of its layers can be overwhelming. Repetitions and multiple visits, taking time to stay, allow our attention to notice details. Translating this experience from my visits to writing, I arrived at a sequence of iterative visits. In this way, introducing linearity, I direct how the readers explore the site. In progressive visits, the writings unfold various sensations, associations and experiences, both lived and


Der Straßenraum. Komme näher dem Graben, der ihn dort unten durchläuft.

Der Wind dreht.

In den Stiegen zwischen Straße und Straße. Herabsteigende
fen durchdringen sich. Ich versuche sie zu entwinden. Fünf,
s -)der Abgang schwillt auf(- im Aufgang drücke ich die
e an

ss mich steigen - anschwellen(

)zwischen Wänden, die angrenzen
)mich gehen lassen(

)und zwischen den Toren sehen(in das Volumen greifen(
und die Ausdehnung fühlen(

)und über die Treppen, die länger werden -
den Fugen und Stößen nähern(und zwischen den Brettern -
die Stätte erspähen(

und auf das Unten zugehen) und mich hindurchzwängen)
und dich abtrennen) immer mehr) und)
(und (wieder aufblicken (und den Zwang abstreifen
(dazwischen durch lugen
(und an die Grenzen lehnen(
und die Vorgänge verschieben(
und den festgefahrenen Blick -
ertappen(- und(

Ella Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, Vienna, a poem, 2021.

imagined facets of the place. One by one, layers accumulate, disentangling and re-constructing the multi-sensory experience.

This poetic form makes it possible to access, enter, linger and dwell in the poems, too. Similarly, one of the key moments in any architectural form is how it is accessed: its pathways, entrances and openings. In poetry, these moments can be fragmented, similar to the lived experience where only a few details are perceived at once. In the opening lines of the encounters, I describe how one approaches the place. In the following two progressive encounters, the shifts of attention form the spatial experience: through a change in weather, a shift in gaze, an abstraction, a letter replaced. Small movements like these make the ever-changing atmosphere of the site tangible.

Der Straßenraum. Ich durchquere ihn. Komm näher der Brücke,
die ihn oben dort kreuzt.
Laub weht über die Schuhe.[12]
The street space. I traverse it. Come closer to the bridge
that crosses up there.
Leaves blow over the shoes.

Der Straßensaum. Ich balanciere auf ihm. Komm näher dem Bogen,
der ihn dort vorne fasst. Der Wind flaut ab.
Die Sonne zentral.[13]
The street lace. I balance it. Come closer to the arch
that frames it there, ahead. The wind subsides.
The sun is central.

Detailing Spatial Sequences in Text

Dismantling sentences and unconventionally operating with syntax, with the structures in language, allowed me to construct spatial sequences. Poetic devices like rhythm and breaks, as well as the deliberate, unconventional use of punctuation marks, typesetting and white space allowed me to enhance the spatial experience while reading.

Some encounters explore the potential of parentheses, inspired by Clarice Lispector's playful, rhythmic use of them in her novel *The Chandelier* (2018). At times the parentheses are expanding and taking up space – they become cantilevered extensions of the phrases, so to speak – and other times they are catching, and taking in space:

und mich verziehen) und einnisten)…
(und (wieder aufwachen[14]
and I withdraw) and nestle)…
(and (wake up again

The parentheses are pointing and directing depending on how and where they are placed. They indicate a room within a room, and thus depth and interiority. The introspective view enhances the level of intimacy. I searched for a vocabulary that evokes spatial experiences. The verbs used – withdraw, nestle – simultaneously indicate a movement and a movement

quality. The parentheses and the vocabulary together enabled me to detail the spatial experience.

The connective *und* (and) has a different function. Similar to a pickup note in music, the reader anticipates a moment to follow, before the main movement of the phrase has actually begun. This poetic device builds momentum, crucial to the rhythm of the place. Short hyphens are used for short breaks, not quite a dot, but still some time for a quick breath before the movement of the phrase continues:

und den festgefahrenen Blick -
ertappen(- und([15]
and the entrenched gaze -
catch it(- and(

Yet again, a shift of attention, the perception remains agile, moving from one layer to another. Movement and rhythm are created through these conjunctions, prepositions, punctuation marks and parentheses. The white spaces allow room for the reader's senses and feelings. These crevices and clearings enable us to pause, and move through. Rooms, stairwells and ditches are created by shifting, connecting and relating sounds, words, sentences and syntax. These movements are carefully constructed spatial sequences. We move with the assembled materials and experience the atmospheres; we inhabit the tones; we explore and imaginatively construct the place in the moment of reading:

)und über die Treppen, die länger werden -
den Fugen und Stößen nähern(und zwischen den Brettern -
die Stätte erspähen([16]
)and over the stairs, which get longer -
approach the seams and joints(and between the boards -
spot the site(

Here, a pathway becomes longer when treading it, and yet readers and writers come closer to the interconnectedness of a place. Peeking in between enables one to find a hidden site: A place in the overlay of architecture and poetic writing, perhaps, that can be accessed through the gaps in and between both disciplines.

Conclusion

In sharing the process of *Unter der Hohen Brücke* I explored the poetic practices that became particularly important in my work on the complex lived experience of places. Through lingering, the slow spatial practice of prolonged and repeated site visits, I was able to develop a somatic, sensing approach that allowed me to capture the lived experience of the place.[17] Whereas close reading and translating the work of other writers – particularly Ilse Aichinger's – extracted potential qualities of architectural poetic writing, such as the curious gaze and cyclical structures. With the iterative sequence of poems, I found a poetic form that allowed me to (re-) construct the complexity of place in written text. With carefully selected

vocabulary, rhythm and punctuation, as well as syntax and typesetting, I steered the readers' movement through spatial sequences. The key ingredient in all these practices is generosity in time.

The repeated, intuitive and agile shifts from one poetic practice to another, from one mode of attention to another, became a crucial method on its own. It enabled me to remain receptive and add layer upon layer. This slow accumulation of approaches is crucial to construct places as multisensory processes, both in architecture and in poetry.

1 This work started as a Master's thesis at the Institute of Art and Architecture, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. Originally presented in 2020, an edited version was published in 2021 by Point Nemo Publishing, Remerschen.
2 Ella Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke* (Remerschen, 2021), 33.
3 Ibid., 168.
4 Ibid., 142.
5 Ibid., 179.
6 I wish to thank İklim Doğan, Franziska Füchsl, Silvester Kreil, Clarissa Lim Kye Lee, Stepan Nest, Miriam Spinrath, Andreas Dittrich, Konstantin Felber, Blanka Schmidt-Felber and Robert Felber, as well as my thesis supervisors, Wolfgang Tschapeller and Lisa Schmidt-Colinet.
7 Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, op. cit. (note 2), 45.
8 [*Die*] *Sicht der Kindheit, die Orte zu Orten werden läßt und ihnen ihre Namen neu gibt.* Ilse Aichinger, *Kurzschlüsse. Wien* (Vienna, 2001), 51. Cited and translated in: Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, op. cit. (note 2), 63.
9 *Betrachtung, das ist ein schönes Wort; als ließe man Stille zwischen sich und den Gegenstand fallen und der Höllenlärm, der stumme Lärm, der für gewöhnlich in diesem Raum ist, vergeht.* Ilse Aichinger, *Kleist, Moos, Fasane* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 44. Cited and translated in: Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, op. cit. (note 2), 63.
10 For my thesis presentation in 2020, I made an explanatory video, following a similar route of argumentation for a previous version of the book. Some passages in the thesis, though edited and updated, are based on this video: Ella Felber, *(Über) Unter der Hohen Brücke*, 2020, 12:39, vimeo.com/935472023.
11 Additionally, there is one triplet of fictive encounters in a café, a hotel and a bar.
12 Felber, *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, op. cit. (note 2), 106.
13 Ibid., 108.
14 Ibid., 106.
15 Ibid., 114.
16 Ibid.
17 The work remains bound to my personal observations. In a next project it might be possible to involve other people and their perspectives, particularly in the early phases of the process, to fully capture the polyphony of the place.

The Closing Dike
M. Vasalis

The bus, like a room, drives through the night
the road is straight, the dike is endless
the sea on its left, tamed but restless
we look out, a tiny moon shines soft and bright

In front of me, the young and fresh-shaved necks
of two sailors, they both produce a muffled yawn
and later, after short and limber stretching backs
fall asleep against each other's arms

Then suddenly I see, as if in a dream, in the glass
thin and transparent, attached to ours
once clear like us, then in sea, as if drowned,
the spirit of this bus; the grass
cuts the sailors right across
There, too, I see myself. At loss:
my head, floating just above the sea
the mouth moves as if through it speaks
a mermaid, who finds all this astonishing
There is no end and no beginning
no future, no past within this trip
just this long present, wonderfully split.

M. Vasalis, "Afsluitdijk" in *Parken en Woestijnen*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1985 [1940].
Translated into English by Klaske Havik

Commentary by
Klaske Havik

The Closing Dike

The Afsluitdijk is a 30 km long dike that closed off a former sea bay (Zuiderzee / Southern sea) to protect the inland of the Netherlands from high tides. This a piece of Dutch coastal engineering was constructed in the 1920's, finished in 1932. Though a piece of bold engineering, the long line through the water has a surreal quality, which is beautifully evoked in this poem from 1940, by Vasalis.

The bus, like a room, (...)
soft and bright

The image of a bus in the evening, filled with people, as if a moving room in the silent night. The landscape is an endless line. If one travels to the west, the Zuiderzee, a big lake since the construction of the dike, is visible on the left side. The locked off sea is described as a living being, tamed and restless.

In front of me, (...)
against each other's arms

Describing the mariners, the 'room' that the bus is, becomes a social space. Others are present, can be seen, close-by. There is tiredness, movement, comradery, silence.

Then suddenly I see, (...)
all this astonishing

Moving reflection in the restless water. The image of the bus moves along in the reflection. In this surreal landscape, of water and a line, the reflection of the moving bus in moving water becomes an oneiric image.

There is no end (...)
wonderfully split.

Indeed, this uncommon place which seems scaleless, and timeless, and endless, the closing dike a space outside everything else, a floating moment in time. It is a surreal experience of the Dutch landscape, being taken 'out' of the land, an experience of endlessness, between two parts of the land.

M. Vasalis was the pseudonym of the Dutch poet and psychiatrist Margareta Leenmans (1909-1998). Her three volumes poetry, *Parken en Woestijnen (Parks and Deserts)*, *De Vogel Phoenix (The Bird Phoenix)* and *Vergezichten en gezichten (Views and Faces)* were written between the late 1930's and 1950's. Her collection *De Oude Kustlijn (The Old Coastline)* appeared posthumously, in 2002. The poem *Afsluitdijk (The Closing Dike)* was included in the collection *Parks and Deserts*. M. Vasalis received two important Dutch literature prizes: the Constantijn Huygens prize and the P.C. Hooftprijs.

CONVERSATIONS

CONVERSATIONS

Place in Sequence

A conversation with Erik Lindner

Klaske Havik

For this conversation, poet Erik Lindner and I met in the forest. We decided to visit the very site of his collection *Hout* (Wood), the place from which sprouted the first lines of the series poem 'Het Ontwerp' (The Design):

> Leaves where the road used to be
> (....)
> the brick cobble bedded in the ground
>
> the straight wide-open road
> which runs across the curving path.[1]

Erik: This area is extraordinary. You can walk a whole day here and not come across any houses or roads. It's the largest nature reserve in the Netherlands. It's called the *Kroondomeinen* or Crown Estates. Some parts of this area are closed from 15 September to 25 December during rutting season. It's said that's when the king [Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands – ed.] hunts here. Even though it's a very old forest, it keeps changing. Since the time I lived here for a writer's residency, some of the paths have changed completely. I've seen new paths emerge and old paths I used to take get closed off.

> Klaske: As a more urban poet, you've worked in The Hague, Berlin and Amsterdam. How did you end up here in the forest?

Erik: I'd been looking for a place for some time; it was hard to find anything in Amsterdam, and then I discovered a small ad for a writers' residency in this area. I thought it would be interesting, seeing what it would be like to work from a forest. It ended up being my opportunity to see what it was like to live outside the city. I also had a plan right away. Several poems I'd written before were linked to places by the sea (in North Holland). There's one series that ends with *de zee uit, uit de zee* (the sea out, out of the sea). With that phrase the thought was: 'now it stops, now I'm leaving the sea, [and] going into the woods' – as if it was planned that way ...

> Klaske: As if the ending of that series was also a kind of prelude to this new environment: from the seaside to the forest. But in your earlier collections, you've also addressed the city ...

Erik: That's right. In my work, walking is important, but I think one can walk through nature as well as through a city – preferably a foreign city – and make notes that, if all goes well, become material for poems. This can be done in a place that's familiar, but in a strange city, you're more observant or receptive to unfamiliar details. Perhaps because something surprises you, you look more closely, more sharply, longer, because you've not seen it before. Ultimately, those cities can all be simultaneously present in the work; they run right through those series of poems.

> Klaske: But when I read your urban poems about The Hague, the city you hail from, it strikes me that you describe details that an outsider, on the contrary, would not see. You evoke the rough margins of the city, ones you have to know to recognize a specific Hague atmosphere, say in the Schilderswijk or at the Haagse Markt.

Erik: That's true. There were places like Duindorp or the area around my home at the time, on the edge of the Schilderswijk. The walk from there to the market, past the swimming pool with the glass façade, that supermarket on the Hobbemastraat, the supermarket's entrance with a photocopy machine where the sliding doors kept opening. Those images are all in my second collection:

Here's a swimming pool. A glass wall.
A shopping street where the traffic won't fit.
...
At every move beside the photocopy machine
the supermarket's sliding door springs open.[2]

> Klaske: What was your process when you created *Hout* (Wood) during your stay here? Did you simply walk in the forest each day and observe, or did you have some kind of plan, plotting certain routes in advance?

Erik: There was a bit of psychogeography in it, to paraphrase André Bréton...

> Klaske: The psychographic walks of the Surrealists and International Situationists, with their *dérives*, were meant to spur a sense of wander, letting yourself be guided by the subconscious... But sometimes they took a very systematic approach to achieve this, for instance by navigating a city based on a map of another city, or by deliberately using an algorithm: for instance, always taking the first left and the second right, and so on, so that they ended up in unexpected places. Did you employ such constraints or are you just concerned with wandering in itself?

Erik: My father was an avid chess player. He said that even chess masters get stuck at some point. And then they somehow know 'this move just feels better than the other one'. That's how it works for me too. Some paths feel better than others. When I moved here, I'd stopped working at the Jan van Eyck Academy and editing *Terras* magazine, so I had time. I would often start the day by reading some pages of Proust or Woolf. Then I would go out walking the rest of the day. Sometimes I purposely walked at Dutch dinner time – six in the evening, when it is quiet here, very quiet. And sometimes I saw something and then I had to stop. Always to make a note.

Klaske: Do you always have a notebook with you?

Erik: Always. And I'm always looking. The first few months I told myself: I want to have at least *one line* on each walk. Even then, sometimes your first note is unusable . . . You just have to get your pen going.

Klaske: One line per walk is a modest ambition, isn't it?

Erik: Yes, I don't write that much. More is allowed, of course. I used to make the mistake of only writing down single words. These keywords usually made me remember the place where it was written. But at some point, I realized words on their own are not that useful. It always has to be a line. Half a line of poetry at the very least. There must be a bit of a temperament in it . . . When I imposed that on myself, it made my impression a little greater than just a word.

Klaske: So, suppose you take walks here every day; you write a line every day. Then when you're here for a fortnight and you've taken fourteen walks: does that result in a poem, a composition of all those different impressions and lines?

Erik: No. That would be ideal, because then it all stays together in a homogeneous way. But I work much more messily than that. Those notes do come together at some point. If I have a lot of them, I put them in sequence in a document. And then I have one or two pages of lines that I want to use. Then I elaborate on some notions. I print these pages and then, on my next walk, I take that printout with me, next to my notebook. And at some point, when it's really enough – but then I'm already walking away from this forest – I'll sit in a café in Amsterdam and write every morning.

Klaske: You have a regular writing spot?

Erik: Café Park, in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam. That's where I work, using a big notebook: I group all these loose lines and impressions on different pages. And if I do that for a month, six days a week, for an hour each time, constantly rewriting, at some point the

poem and eventually a series of poems emerge. But before that, I need to gather sufficient material.

Klaske: When you're doing a residency like this, do you make a plan beforehand to get the most out of the time?

Erik: Sometimes residencies are more like explorations – for instance, in the case of short ones of only two weeks, when you don't need to have your own project for it right away. At a certain point, I started taking a more planned approach. Once I was offered a residency in a beautiful apartment on the boulevard in Oostende on the Belgian seaside; it even looked out over the sea. And then I thought: I've always wanted to write one long sea poem, in which the movement of the sea actually determines the poem. In the poem I wrote during that residency, I used two-line stanzas only. The first is a wave coming towards you, the second another wave rolling back. To find it, I walked up that jetty in Oostende every evening and wrote one or several lines. And so that was a conceptual, or rather, a *preconceived* poem. And there I also only had fourteen days, eleven of which I used to write, I think.

Klaske: And for your residency here in the forest?

Erik: Here I was also working on my second novel, which is partly set in San Sebástian in Northern Spain, so that had nothing to do with this place. But at the same time, I did take those many walks here in the Crown Estates, which provided lines for my poems. And that series of eleven poems that concludes the *Hout* collection is the product of those first eight months here.

Klaske: That's rather distilled.

Erik: Yes, quite distilled. And that's also why it's often difficult to trace it back precisely for the readers, who – if all goes well – also add their own images and memories to the image, which in the end makes it very difficult to figure out exactly where the poem is located: it becomes a montage of the places I evoke and the ones readers associate with them. As a result, my descriptions remain abstract, to some extent, in the sense that I don't specify different types of trees, for example. Well, I did mention a birch, once.

Klaske: Indeed, you don't give much information on the different species of plants. It's diverse here, though. Just now we're mostly walking among pine trees and very slender birches. The ground has a very green covering of moss and blueberry shrubs. Other sections we passed were much higher, had more beech trees and less vegetation on the ground. We're now crossing an overgrown path.

Erik: We cross straight ahead here; this is an old man-made path. You know, when I walk, I'm not searching for anything in particular, unlike the people who hike here to see the deer or the boars. That's nice too. But if you're looking for that, you're not looking for an impression for a poem. For me, it's about opening yourself up to something that's not necessarily there.

> Klaske: You said what you want is to capture a kind of atmosphere or mood of a place, right? Your perception?

Erik: Sometimes when I visit a place for the first time, I don't quite capture that site-specific atmosphere or mood right away. I have to visit it a few more times to figure out why I'm there – or why something is happening to me, right there, why an emotion is evoked by that place.
About the word perception: of course . . . we walk through a forest and we perceive things. But actually, the reader is not that concerned with my personal perception. In my poems, I try to evoke photographic images. These do emerge from my perception, my close observation, but from these, I construct images in the poems that don't have to match exactly what I saw.

> Klaske: Remarkably, in your poems you never literally say 'I see' or 'I hear' or something like 'the sun on my skin'. You actually keep yourself out of your poems: you just describe the trees, the path, the objects and situations. So you leave yourself, the 'I', out, allowing readers to insert their own perceptions . . . without you as the intermediary, as it were.

Erik: I think that touches on the essence of what I mean very well. It's not that I want to eliminate myself completely. Because I think that in every smallest choice, of an article, of a word for something, there is already something subjective. Language is never completely neutral.

> Klaske: But you don't impose it or explain it. Perhaps we can put it this way: your images come from specific places that evoke some kind of emotion in you, which then appears in the text in a kind of distilled form.

Erik: If that works, if that emotion ends up in a text, let's call it lyricism. That's what makes poetry lyrical. There's obviously something underneath it. It's not just a forest. There's also something in that forest that manages to trigger something. And then you're talking about a human experience, of course, even if I'm not literally describing it.

Look, here it comes again. Do you see it?

Kroondomein, The Netherlands.

Klaske: Yes, the sun. Only in winter when the trees are still bare is the ground so beautifully illuminated.

Erik: Yes, and then the ground immediately looks greener. But I don't describe how I see the bark of that tree there and the ground beneath it. I don't describe how I see them. They have to exist in the poem by themselves, so to speak.

Klaske: They *are* present in your poems, without introduction or explanation. I see you use very few full sentences, with a verb and a subject and an object. There are instead many nouns, sometimes almost lists of objects or spaces.

Erik: Yes, and I also try to be sparse with adjectives. You see, eventually those words together produce the images in a poem. And evoking an image in a poem is, I think, different from describing my perceptions. The point is that those images, together, produce a kind of film. The moment that film works for you, you've moved beyond that enumeration, that list, as you put it; it turns into a more complex image.

Klaske: Just ahead, a herd of deer is crossing through the trees into an open field. There must be thirty of them!

Erik: You see a lot of deer here. You're really in the middle of nature. But then, suddenly, on a path, you find a paving stone set in the soil, in the midst of all these vast acres of the Crown Estates. If a paving stone is set in the soil, there must have been a stone road here. And that, for me, is where I find the sensitivity, in that stone. Something left behind from an earlier time. It makes you realize that before, this was not just a nature reserve. And that also means that there was a design.

Klaske: In that series we keep returning to, 'Het Ontwerp' (The Design), you also jump from image to image, and for me as a reader these jumps are not always logical. Sometimes they are even disorientating. You start with the path we're walking towards now. And then you enter a sort of old-fashioned, painting-like image, with a spinning wheel and a single bed and a cluttered open-top desk, in the second poem. And the sequence keeps jumping from one situation to another.

And as a reader, you're pulled away from that path and those trees the poem started with. I wonder how this all comes together, and why this is titled 'The Design'. What is designed? Does the poem describe a design, or rather, is the montage of those images itself the design?

Erik: I can give you several answers. The design is indeed the configuration of those five poems. The first poem is in fact really about

a design. You'll see that in a moment, when we get to the place. But if you go beyond the spinning wheel and the single bed and the cluttered open-top desk – from a film by Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre* (*The Room*)[3] – then, in poem three, you arrive at a fragment from Athens about fish being cleaned on mat. So, Athens appears in the same series. I often go to Athens – a friend of mine lives there. Then, in poem four, you arrive at a painted window. And then a person comes into view, a curved jawline, an outstretched arm, and the fifth and last poem ends at a house:

Hier schijnt de zon van onder de vloerdelen.
Hier staat jouw huis in een tuin van puin.

here the sun shines from under the floorboards
here your house stands in a yard of shards.[4]

> Klaske: I've read the series several times, as it appeals to me from the perspective of architecture as well: how do I read 'design' into this, and how do all these very different situations come together? Why is that fish being cleaned on a mat? What does that have to do with that avenue of trees or that garden of rubble in the fifth poem? How does that come together?

Erik: Very simply put, they're notes from one and the same period. To me, they must have some connection. At the same time, there's some space between them because they're not on the same page. They also stand by themselves, each in their own poem.

Design is also what precedes the writing, what you do not yet know precisely, but which emerges during the process: the form that the poem will eventually have. Free verse is an open form, unlike an alexandrine or a sonnet, and yet, even in these free verses, every poem has a fixed structure. The process of writing entails a search for that design, and I know the final form only once I feel the poem is finished, when I know I've created that form. You could also call that a design.

> Klaske: So then every series poem could also be called a design. You collect lines – that's what you work with; that's what you design with.

Erik: Yes, I start with half or whole lines that I collect, and they cluster into stanzas. A blank line between those stanzas can be another major displacement already.

Look, a boar. It's a boar, right?

> Klaske: Yep. He's pretty big, light in colour, well camouflaged in the high yellowed grass.

So, it's about constructing a certain series of images, that you evoke with all those different entrances, maybe? Like that bag of medlars and that white tub chair in the first poem, where did they come from? You won't easily find a bag of medlars on a road, right?

Erik: I conjure a cheap plastic tub chair in the grass, whose legs bend easily. And that bag of medlars fits with that. That's an image. But why do they match? In the image I want to form, it's right because the poem needs it. And that's why I always rail a bit against the notion of perception. Sometimes I feel like a small child in that too. Of course I perceive things. But no, it's ultimately what the poem wants. Yes, that poem needed that image.

Klaske: Is it because only the description of the avenue and the trees and the field needed contrast? Something that has to happen, adding a kind of ugliness in the space?

Erik: There's not much chance of such a chair here, in a nature reserve. Therefore, that image provides a kind of suspense.

Klaske: I noticed your poems sometimes linger after a line: you set something up and then you leave it open for a moment. And then you switch to another situation – which leaves me, as a reader, with a question mark.

Erik: You could say I make images, but to complete those images I need the reader. It's precisely because it might not be possible – to create the image with language (unlike with photography or a drawing, but I choose language anyway) – that I do it, and I also want to see the handwritten way I wrote it down, on the spot.

Klaske: So when you write at the table in the café, you're actually editing what you jotted down *in situ*. You extract lines, moments, ingredients, straight from the site, which you then bring together in a follow-up process.

Erik: In essence, you're right: in that place, the poem arises from notes. But that's the place captured in words. But in all those scribbles, I cannot yet see the form of the poem in them at all. Only when I'm sitting at that café table will it start to look like a poem. And any reader of my work will start to discover a structure of the poem.

Klaske: Look! Fresh deer tracks on the path.

Erik: Might be those thirty we just saw running. It does build quite the suspense of the place. The way to reach the place is always longer than I think. We did make a bit of a detour. We're not actually allowed in this area.

We're almost there.

Klaske: Ah, there was a drive here. From a country estate maybe.

Erik: You see. This is the design. You see it. I think it was a road

Klaske: Yes, you'd think it belonged to a country estate. It's clearly been planted, in the past: those rows of beeches. You almost expect a fence or a stone here. And it's probably planted for aesthetic reasons, an avenue of beeches: for grandeur, marking the entrance to something, a farm, a manor house? The light at the end of the path that makes the place mysterious. A jump in time, to imagine that something was here. You realize that centuries ago, a carriage drove here, or someone on a horse. And then it stops, after this beech grove.

Erik: Yes, although the path does continue; actually it merges into a larger path. And that ends in a field. But you saw it right away, before we got here, you said: this is a drive. Strange though, this is in the middle of nature, because we've been walking through the forest for more than an hour now, and now suddenly we're standing in a place that was built, made, inhabited.

Leaves where the road used to be
the avenue of trees halfway across the field

birds in the swaying treetops

a white bucket chair in the grass
a bagful of ripe medlars

the tussocks of heather
the brick cobble bedded in the ground

the straight wide-open road
which runs across the curving path.[5]

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Interview translation Klaske Havik,
Poems translation Francis R. Jones

1 From the poem ‘Het ontwerp’ (The Design) in Hout (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 25, transl. Francis R. Jones.
2 From the poem ‘Tijdelijke Halte’ (Temporary Stop) in Tong en Trede (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2000), 21, transl. Francis R. Jones.
3 Chantal Akerman, La Chambre: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7pybf8.
4 From the poem ‘Het ontwerp’ (The Design) in Hout (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 28, transl. Francis R. Jones.
5 From the poem ‘Het ontwerp’ (The Design) in Hout (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 25, transl. Francis R. Jones.

CONVERSATIONS

‘The City is a 1,000 Poems’

A Conversation with Ted Landrum

Angeliki Sioli

Poetry and Conferences

> Angeliki: We first met at the conference ‘Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture’, about ten years ago. You and your partner, Professor Dr. Lisa Landrum, gave a performance titled ‘Eudaimonia: a Pantomime Dreamplay’ – instead of a traditional paper presentation. This was not your only non-traditional conference participation. Reading poetry at conferences is another form of participation for which you have been advocating. Would you please explain why?

Ted: Not only poetry, but films, debates, exhibitions, musical performances, *food* (etc.) make any conference a more fulfilling meal. Plato’s *Symposium* is the go-to archetype, as Marco Frascari (among others) liked to emphasize. That ‘Pantomime Dreamplay’ later became a significant paper (by Lisa), published with our collaborative/retrospective extras: a poem/script, restaged photos, and retrospective drawing, attempting to document the live event.[1] All that was ‘confabulated’ to honour Marco Frascari, a rare scholar, teacher, architect who embraced humour, poetry, food and mime as meaningful modes of architecture theory. That event was somewhat unique, but – it’s true – I have argued standard forms of academic and professional work are insufficient to the goals of shared, meaningfully transformative, eurekas. Genuine scholarship is very important, as an act of shared discovery, and disclosure, but the standard formulas for academic discourse can lead to mechanical monologues that flatten language, and ideas, making discovery a dull ordeal. A poetic approach can be both more freely searching and more freeing. In other words: more open, vivid, heterogenous, risky, uncertain, honest, emotional, troubling and surprising.

A quick back story. In 2006, there was a Call for Papers for a conference in Cardiff, Wales, on architectural quality, called *Quality Out of Control*. A great title, even more appealing since

the conference organizers called for diverse offerings. Lisa suggested I propose to share some poems I had been working on, on architecture and language. Happily the proposal was accepted and I did share and publish a trio of 'Archi-Poems' on quality, architecture, and language.[2] Also offered, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, was the wild polemic that architectural quality cannot be captured in number or prose; for the best 'architecture', being tangled up in messy arts and struggles of life, is both *immeasurable*, and *beyond words*. Thus, we need poetry!

Recently, I had the chance to bring 'Archi-Poetry' into more practical, professional conferences organized by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC). At their 2024 *Conference on Architecture*, in Vancouver, I helped convene, and joined, an event called '*Archigrammar: a Talking City*', in collaboration with three local architect-poets, Derek Deland, Graham McGarva and Richard Evans. As a follow up, at the 2025 *RAIC Conference on Architecture* in Montréal, I hosted an event effectively handing the megaphone to Alberto Pérez-Gómez, for a launch and discussion of his *Alliterative Lexicon of Architectural Memories* (2024)—among the most substantial contributions to architectural poetics ever made.[3]

Poetry and Cities

> Angeliki: You are a poet yourself, and architectural educator, actively engaged with poetry communities in the cities where you have lived. How has poetry helped you relate to these cities?

Ted: It's people really, that make a place; and meeting local poets is a great way to learn about people, and the stories of a place. Architects and academics know they have to get out of their disciplinary and social bubbles, to truly see the situations they are working in. I've found poetry is a great way to burst those bubbles. Beyond that, as bubbles go, the poetry bubble is universal. It travels well, because—ultimately, poetry is a way of being and staying human. I feel the same about architecture. They are both world-building acts of communication, and have much to say to one another. Because architecture and poetry happen anywhere people live thoughtfully, and by design, it makes good sense for poets and architects to collaborate more often, and more directly. I'll mention here, quickly, that Ferlinghetti's doctoral dissertation was about poetry and cities; and the bookstore he founded, City Lights, clearly attends to urban life in San Franciso and as a global concern.

Toronto is my twelfth town, and I *mostly* love it; but it's not the buildings I love. The life and poetry of a city happens between and within the buildings, and more importantly,

between and within people. That's where poetry and architecture intersect, and interact; and how the idea of place gets built up.

Before arriving, here, I was aware of many local poets, and had read some of their work. It's part of any tradition, to work in relation to those before, beside and ahead of you. It's a shared project, and discourse, that is multigenerational as well. There is also a more international avant-garde poetry tradition, I had been engaging with since university, but that tradition has significant Canadian players—bpNichol, Christian Bök, Lisa Robertson—whose work unquestionably had Toronto roots, but truly knows no boundaries; beyond being bound by the Toronto press, Coach House Books. I mention this detail partly because that poetry press, a *local* press, also publishes many books on the city itself. Also, because (I recently learned) Coach House was founded by an architecture school drop-out (in 1965), himself from elsewhere. Stan Bevington, from Edmonton, although he chose to leave architecture for poetry, became—one could argue, through collaboration—one of the city's most significant architects.

Poetry and architecture are about making connections, often accidental and surprising connections. Whenever, wherever poetry happens we are moved, but also land, again, changed and renewed—which is perhaps the point.

Coming to Toronto is a return to a city life I've known before. When I left university (April Fools' Day 1995), I headed to New York City: chasing unlikely dreams, and all the magic and poetry the place is known for. It's where Lisa and I met, and many other life-long friends, and became who we are. Those transformative years, in a transformative place, are forever part of me, part of us, wherever we go. That's true for everyone: every place we ever live in, lives on within us. Cities are not one place, but many: multiplicities. This is why a *city is 1,000 poems*.[4]

In NYC I was again going to poetry events, often participating in 'open mic' events, listening to and reading other poets' work, as I had begun doing as a student, but the campus was a magically storied Manhattan, and broken bits of Brooklyn, where we still can read Walt Whitman, and the places he contained: 'multitudes'. I heard some great poets: Allen Ginsberg, Jackson Mac Low, Charles Simic, Charles Bernstein, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Jorie Graham; and we saw as much theatre as we could. These poetic, dramatic encounters were stimulating, and refreshing, particularly after working long hours in architectural offices. Participating in poetry events was one way to keep creative, intellectually alive, and human.

When we left New York, in 2002, it was a return to university. Lisa began her Masters and PhD at McGill, in Montréal, where I continued doing architectural work in a new place and frame of mind: different country, different language,

different cities, goals and adventures. First, Montréal, then Ottawa, then Vermont, then back to Montréal, then we were off to Winnipeg, to teach for fifteen years. (Lisa had a full position, I taught part-time, as much as I could.) Teaching for me was itself a return to poetry, in important ways, but I also wanted to engage more seriously in poetry and theatre as complementary alternatives to architecture.

On arrival in Winnipeg, I was not very familiar with Canadian poetry. So, I reached out to local poets, introducing myself as new to the place and interested. We met for coffee and conversations. I began participating in local poetry workshops, and quickly become a 'regular' at poetry events. All this helped me find my voice within the complex communities and situations of that place.

Poetry and Place

Angeliki: Connecting with the poetry community of each city means participating in poetry readings but also doing a lot of reading on your own. I know you have an impressive collection of poetry books.

Ted: More than a 1,000 poetry books, so far. The "ArchiPoetry" bibliography springs from this same bibliomania. I've long felt it's in the act of reading that poetry happens, and have written elsewhere: 'there can be no writing without reading, and no reading without reading situations'.[5]

Of course, we read widely to learn widely, but also to recognize we are always writing in relation to other texts. That's both humbling, and a relief, to know that poetry is a shared project – not a work of ego. It's the same for all the arts. For example, jazz improvisation is not random 'solos', but involves responses, quotes and paraphrases, to other songs, and within particular musical and cultural contexts. So, at some point I started making poems somewhat as a jazz musician, but also as a reader responding to particular texts.

Angeliki: Your poems are responses to texts and not to places?

Ted: Often both. A good example is Roland Barthes' *Eiffel Tower*, a source (or *archē*) in response to which I made several archi-poems. When I first read Barthes' essay, I had not been to Paris: I read it in bed, on the bus, at a café, in the library, at a small kitchen table, near an open window overlooking an alleyway, far from Paris. Years later, when I did visit the Eiffel Tower, that Barthes text came with me, and some traces of the places I had read it. I later made three poems from that one source text, while living in different cities.[6] In fact, I remember making good

progress on those poems on the airplane; over multiple flights, from a window seat 35,000 feet in the air. This condition of being between places, in a kind of meta-place, entered into poems made in response to that tower in Paris, which itself transcends location. When I'm in the mood and mode of making a poem, that 'place of poetry' is not a place fixed to a geographic spot, but far more a cosmopoetic multiplicity—in which, and toward which, poetry happens.

Poetry and Architecture

> Angeliki: When we announced the call for *Poetics of Place* you sent an unconventional proposal. Instead of submitting an abstract for a chapter you suggested to share your Archi-Poetry bibliography with us and the readers. What is this bibliography and why do you wish to share it?

Ted: My 'bibliography' is not a work of proper scholarship, *per se*, but merely a working record, an archive, if you will, of some key sources: including texts, parallels and precedents that have helped me find, make, do *and share* the Archi-Poetry experiment. The bibliography—a recommended reading list, really—has developed spontaneously, and intermittently, when opportunities to present the Archi-Poetry project have arisen. For example, I did print up a version last May (2024), and gave copies to anyone interested at the RAIC Conference on Architecture. (The version I sent you was a slightly updated version.) But let's back up a bit, because this is not a new project.

I discovered the love for books while questioning and changing my direction: from engineering to architecture. When I did begin architecture school, in 1989, the school where I studied (Ball State University) had a quite good academic library, where I also worked as a student. I would check the 'new book shelf' often, on my break, or while procrastinating on architecture deadlines. That's where I discovered Gertrude Stein, John Cage, Francis Ponge, Charles Simic, and many others. I discovered poetry browsing in the library, but would also print out long lists of readings, from the new 'digital catalogue'. Keyword searching was a brand new thing, and I printed reams of stuff 'to read'. Perhaps I was having a somewhat unusual experience from my other architecture peers, having rejected engineering for a more social, artistic and philosophical adventure.

What's more, I studied architecture in the early 1990's—a heyday of big theory in architecture, trying to play catch-up with more radical humanities. In addition to poetry, I was reading Derrida, Deleuze, Lacan, Bergson and Bataille, while also exploring performance art happenings, experimental theatre

and environmental art. My Archi-Poetry experiments today, are very much a continuation of possibilities, and agencies, I discovered, largely through reading as a student.

Since then, I have compiled a selection of books, articles, 'readings', and it's more than three decades long.

> Angeliki: I know it is probably an impossible question but if you could mention five key books from your Archi-Poetry bibliography, which ones would they be?

Ted: It is quite impossible. Archi-Poetry is endless, and growing every day! Here are a few sources I recommend. Some may be obvious, others not: Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Jill Stoner's *Poems for Architects*, John Hejduk's *Such Places as Memory*, Louis Sullivan's *Kindergarten Chats*, Josef Albers' *Poems and Drawings*, Ian Ritchie's *Lines*, João Cabral's *Education by Stone*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and *Stanzas in Meditation*, Robert Duncan's *Opening of the Field*, everything by Lisa Robertson, and Jan Zwicky. Renee Gladman and June Jordan both studied architecture, and must be read. Prose-poems matter too – tops for me are: Viktor Shklovksy's *Art as Device*, Francis Ponge's *The Table*, *Pebble* and 'Electricity', Madeline Gins's *Architectural Body*, and Roland Barthes', *Eiffel Tower*. Lastly, two essentials, bound to be timeless: Michael Sorkin's '250 Things an Architect Should Know', and Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Alliterative Lexicon of Architectural Memories*.

1 ‘Miming a Manner of Architectural Theory. Eudaimonia: A Pantomime Dream Play’, appears in *Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture*, ed. Carolina Dayer, Paul Emmons and Marcia Feuerstein (Routledge, 2017).
2 ‘Utter Qualia: three probe poems’ in *Quality Out of Control: Standards for Measuring Architecture* (Routledge 2010).
3 A review by Graham Livesey, appears in *Canadian Architect* magazine, Feb 2025. link https://www.canadianarchitect.com/book-review-an-alliterative-lexicon-of-architectural-memories/
4 ‘City is a 1,000 Poems’ is a massive understatement echoing Roland Barthes, echoing Hugo and Queneau, in ‘Semiology and the Urban’, a lecture published in Op. Cit., 10 (1967), collected in Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 1997): ‘When we move about a city, we all are in the situation of the reader of the 100,000 million poems of Queneau…’ (p170); and, ‘The city is a poem, as has often been said and as Hugo said better than anyone…’ (p172).
5 Ted Landrum, ‘On Reading a Hunt for Optimism’, *On Site* review, n34, issue title: ‘On Writing’ (Fall 2015).
6 Those poems are ‘If Tower’, ‘Roland the Para-Tower’ and ‘Roland’s Tower, X’d’, in *Midway Radicals & Archi-Poems* (Signature Editions, 2017).

CONVERSATIONS

The Gathering of Voices Becomes a Place

A Conversation with Anna West

Vincent A. Cellucci

Vincent: Can you inform us about the mission of Humanities Amped and how it's rooted in your hometown of Baton Rouge?

Anna: Thank you for including me in this conversation about the poetics of place. As you say, I am dug in here in Baton Rouge, my home city. I have returned here multiple times, despite the draw to take my efforts as an organiser and educator of critical youth literacies practices to places where the meaning of the work would be more widely legible. And yet, it is the illegibility of Baton Rouge that draws me back here, like a puzzle, or a Sisyphean rock I must contend with.

I am my mother's daughter. She, too, was a deeply dug-in Baton Rouge educator who taught first graders to become readers and writers in a trailer turned into a classroom. These days, I walk down the long corridor of a windowless public school to literally the last possible classroom on the left, where I teach high school students who travel almost two hours across a miasma of subdivisions to reach this little space we call Humanities Amped.

Our mission to 'model and share transformative educational practices that result in people's power to shape their world' feels immense against this little quotidian classroom. In some ways, we are hiding in plain sight, something akin to a 'Freedom School'. The goal is to hold open a modest space for reading, writing, and dialogue. This space is a way of saying simply that working-class, primarily Black and immigrant youth deserve the opportunity to think, to be critical researchers of their worlds, and to feel the vibrancy of their collective power in their words and proximity to one another. The meaning of this is only discernible if you first understand how dispossessed our community is from these forms of power, and how that dispossession is normalized, unremarkable, invisible in its

everydayness, such that it is only noticeable when the silence is ruptured.

I say 'we' and 'our' here in the sense that I am shaped by the unspeakability of these dynamics as much as anyone. I falter most when asked to give the elevator pitch for Humanities Amped, despite twelve years of shaping it. What I can explain reads better as a yes/no flow chart:

Do you understand how the rise of techno-rationalism as the prevailing logic of schooling has foreclosed meaningfulness as an important attribute of learning in the era of high-stakes testing?

Yes?

Do you understand that youthful rebellion against meaninglessness draped in empty appeals to authority is a natural, human response?

Yes?

Do you recognize that these conditions lead to the de-skilling of many people, ultimately weakening their capacity to tap into language, analysis, research, cultural resources, and the imagination as a way to resist further dispossession?

Yes?

Do you realize that there is a silent but insidious belief held by many so-called educators and educational institutions that 'these kids do not want to be educated?'

Yes?

Do you know how wrong they really are?

Yes?

Do you know that for people's minds and hearts to change, they must first see that it could be otherwise?

Yes!

It is at the end of this reasoning that we set our practice, faltering often, towards an embodied 'otherwiseness', as the philosopher Maxine Greene urged. Our classes and initiatives, held together by just a handful of people, work within the greater fold of the public schools to breathe some life into the classroom as a space of democratic engagement and voice. We read and write with social purpose.

And we hold public forums, such as the longstanding youth open mic Fresh Heat, as spaces for not just youth creative personal expression, but as intergenerational, youth-driven meeting grounds, where the practice of literature is oriented towards naming the otherwise unnameable and proclaiming the otherwise unsayable. In this configuration, youth exist as apprentices to the craft of literature, but also as full practitioners in the civic and social structures raised together with the community of adults who practice 'holding' open the space for such forms of exchange.

The connection to Baton Rouge is the deep hunger that

exists for such forums and outlets here, especially opportunities that are not secretly meant for 'those' people and not 'these' people. My former student and now colleague, T. George, often says that the underlying value proposition of Humanities Amped is that 'Everybody eats'. In other words, no one is turned away without sustenance, and there are no prerequisites for entry. By coming to the table, you form a network of mutuality with those beside you, sharing what you have to offer and taking what you need as well.

> Vincent: Keeping place in mind, can you describe the value of youth open mics?

Anna: What I love about the poetry open mic is that it is structurally a polyvocal platform for anyone who believes they have a poem to share. It differs from social media platforms in that it is an embodied, temporal performance space with no commercial investment. As an oral tradition, and especially here in the South and throughout its diaspora, spoken word is a descendant of the Black church, in which testifying is an experience of communal recognition thrumming with the call and response tradition: 'Everybody make some noise!'

The open mic is an example of what scholar Django Paris has coined a 'culturally sustaining pedagogy'. This lively, porous relationship between audiences and spoken word poets is not just showcasing cultural practices; it is also invoking and strengthening cultural practices by inviting more and more voices to join into an inherently pedagogical space, where teaching and learning are happening among practitioners who are differently positioned in terms of both experience and skill. Sometimes people talk shit about open mics, like, 'What about all the *bad* poetry?' But they are missing the point. The pleasure of open mics is not the sum of the performances. The larger space of witnessing that emerges from the repetitions, the intertextual play, the anomalies, the sudden strokes of genius and failures, forms an imperfect, always digressing, chorus. That chorus is where place is made. There is no coherent, singular narrator; rather, the gathering of voices becomes a place to be with and among one another.

Baton Rouge is a college town, a capital city, a petrochemical hub, and a relatively high ground from the effects of coastal erosion in South Louisiana; thus, it is a place people both move to and away from. Despite this transience, the youth open mic creates a sense of intergenerational belonging. While youth use the space to summon a generational belonging to one another, an accidental outgrowth is a sense of intergenerational belonging that grows among the adults. Our shared witness of the youth, as we listen to them express their joy and pain, creates a feeling that these are 'our kids', and thus, we become bound to one another

in our ethical relationship to them. In other words, our act of listening turns us into the 'village' that can 'raise the child'.

When I grew up in Baton Rouge in the 1980s and 1990s, my generation felt the absence of spaces to gather and recognize ourselves, much less a space to be acknowledged on our own terms by older generations. Outside of school and home, there was the mall and the church, spaces that seemed more interested in policing our youthfulness rather than engaging it. In a suburban landscape with virtually no public transit system or gathering grounds, there was nowhere to tap into what we could have been the 'village', which would have been for us a place to be seen, and to play out the inevitable dramas of becoming a person in the world. For my peers and me, this lack of recognition meant that we tapped into hidden, often psychic spaces where we could circulate our desire to imagine a larger life: poetry passed in hallway notes, weed smoked behind our parents' garages, sneaking out of sleepovers to drive down River Road in cars with strangers who cut the headlights just for the thrill of it. I had language and books, a loving family, economic and racial privilege, to keep me from some, not all, of the traps that surrounded me. It is a gross understatement to say that my generation could have used an outlet. I saw too many of my peers, rich and poor, fall into the stupefying hands of addiction, abuse, and early death. Black kids were, and *are*, exponentially more likely to be eaten alive in this atmosphere of repression compounded by White supremacy institutionalized in the criminal 'justice' system that regularizes spaces like juvenile detention centres, probation offices, courtrooms, and police stations. The people doing youth poetry work, most of whom also 'come from' this place, whatever the decade or locality, are imbued with a desire to build something that was missing from our own youthful lives. We see the power of spaces where people can grow up being witnessed and loved publicly by their community. For young folks who have no other access to this kind of nurturing, an open mic is an oasis, allowing you to experience not only your own rhetorical force but that of your peers, and thus your generation. This rhetorical force is itself a precondition of political and social power.

> Vincent: How do these open mics relate to the national SLAM poetry scene?

Anna: A larger national and, to a lesser extent, international network of youth spoken word organizations emerged in the early 2000s. These (inter)national gathering grounds and their networks have lost some momentum in recent years, first with the exhaustion that many organizers and young writers experienced navigating the deep contradictions of youth poetry slam as a format, and eventually due to the interpersonal harm

that ricocheted between the small network of organizations holding those forums together.

I'm less interested in rebuilding that national scene at this point in my trajectory as an organiser and educator. I stopped taking young people to national slams like Brave New Voices when I began to see the potential harm of asking them to navigate the complexity of representing themselves and their communities on a scale that could not be responsible for their stories. The nation has a consumption-based way of reading the Deep South as pathological, and Baton Rouge's identity often gets engulfed in the stories about the South, about New Orleans, and the burden of that representation is a lot to put on young people, many of whom are often traveling outside of the state for the first time.

The incursion of digital spaces into youth spoken word's live performance spaces did a lot to compound the potential for that kind of harm. When digital modes of publication took off in the early 2010s, it meant new negotiations over the ethics of inviting youth to present themselves, often quite vulnerably, in the midst of their own becoming. In my evaluation, much of the good work of holding space for youth voices was being devoured and exploited by a toxic celebrity culture. This was amplified by poetry slam competitions, where the illusion of winners and losers made it easy to contort what had been functioning as grassroots popular education into something more like reality TV, which is exactly what HBO did with its *Brave New Voices* documentary in 2008.

That said, there is immense power in providing young people with access to travel and look at things from new perspectives. We work closely with another program, Andover Bread Loaf, located in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is fascinating because it is the home of the old textile mills that once processed the South's cotton and was later home to some of the first labour strikes in the country. They have developed a network of educators and youth from all over the country and the world. We send teachers to Massachusetts every summer to tap into that network, and we are starting to bring youth into that exchange, too. The opportunity to look at yourself from a distance, through the eyes of others whose experiences mirror and contrast with your own, is a large part of understanding where you are in the world, who you are. These exchanges, which are immersed in writing and witnessing alongside one another, are to me richer than big gathering grounds of festivals and conferences because there is an emphasis on sitting still in circles with one another. It prioritizes a pedagogy of kindred listening over the empty currency of visibility and posturing, which can too easily turn good-faith efforts to speak and be witnessed into spectacle.

Vincent: The Alton Sterling shooting and Black Lives Matter protests were the most memorable and internationally publicised of many race and prejudice-related events in the recent history of the city. How do places like the Triple S convenience store (site of shooting and memorial mural) function as sites of trauma and coping?

Anna: Coping feels like too generous a word for what has happened in Baton Rouge. In 2016, Alton Sterling's killing by police in front of the Triple S Food Mart thrust us onto the map of a national reckoning with policing and its hitherto openly invisible violence, throughout Black American spaces and life.

Baton Rouge is a majority Black city, but one where Black life is consistently rendered invisible through the grammar of White supremacy. These grammars are geographic, institutionally sanctioned, and relentlessly rationalized. Spatially, we are a city of subdivisions ending in cul-de-sacs that cut off the flow from one territory to another, resulting in a configuration more like a series of plantations than an interconnected polis. In fact, many of those subdivisions exist on the land where plantations once stood, memorializing slaveholders in their names. Here, as in other cities throughout the South, housing patterns during Jim Crow were characterized by 'checkerboard segregation', meaning that Black and White communities were developed in proximity to one another so that Black domestic labourers could more easily serve White employers. This is crucial to understanding how race and space function in the South, where people are adept at sharing space while also maintaining a rigid, and again, unspeakable, power structure.

I live in a quiet, lower-middle-class neighbourhood just to one side of Baton Rouge's starkest racial dividing line, Florida Boulevard, which bisects the city into North and South. From my home, it is a 4-minute drive to the Triple S Food Mart, literally one right turn off my street, and you are there; and yet, the proximity ends there. My niece, who also lives on my street, asked me once why she rarely left the neighbourhood and turned right. How to explain the facts that hide in plain sight: that nearly all of the cultural, economic, civic, and social institutions that shape her life exist in the city's South?

The uprisings that took place in Baton Rouge after Alton Sterling's killing were a fever dream in the intense heat of July, in which we saw the outrage pour out over the veneer of our green lawns as police zip-tied peaceful protesters on their knees in a swift, militarized response. Black leaders who broke from the status quo to speak out about what was happening were met by fierce backlash from the city's power structure. Seven years later, in 2023, the BRAVE (Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination) police task force was revealed

to have run an unmarked warehouse for years, where people suspected of criminal activity were held and tortured. In this repressive environment, being critical of the police is equated to criminality.

Poet and educator Donney Rose, my friend and former colleague, was vocal about the state of Black life in Baton Rouge through online platforms both before and after Alton Sterling's death. In 2017, the city contracted Forward Arts, which had been the home of youth poetry in Baton Rouge since 2005, to run a series of youth workshops. In July of that year, city council member and police union liaison John Delgado went online to complain that the city's resources were going to pay Rose for teaching 'a poetry course to young gangbangers'. This deeply racist characterization only begins to reveal the troubling logic of those who would, at every turn, deny that the need to memorialize, to process, indeed, to cope through language and community, be extended to those whom Delgado and the worldview he represents deem sub-human.

Eventually, the accumulation of lost contracts led to Forward Arts folding into Humanities Amped, where we too faced various forms of censorship and mischaracterization, a foreshadowing to the theatre of the absurd that continues to play out all over the country over how history can be taught, what 'feelings' are allowed to be felt in schools, and who indeed can show up in public existing in their body.

The mural on the Triple S of a warm, smiling Alton Sterling, haloed by a yellow glow, feels like a family snapshot, reflecting the uncomplicated love for an uncle or father who has, nevertheless, been swallowed into a night that is as hard as history to explain. Like the small gold pendants that many of the boys in my classes wear, carrying on their chests the smiling portrait of a dead brother, uncle, or friend, the mural is a way to remember that life has a way of mattering in the face of all odds, even death.

> Vincent: The theme of this issue is 'Poetics of Place', a play on the Bachelard title, which encouraged dwelling in psychic spaces. Can you share any images or insights about the psychic spaces inhabited by youth today related to the architecture of the city?

Anna: A couple of years ago, I took a handful of my students to testify to the Louisiana House Education Committee. I'll skip the details of what brought us there, but summarise by saying that it was depressing, so when we left the dark committee meeting room, I read the dejection on my students' faces and suggested, to lighten the mood, that we take the ride up the tiny elevator to the top of the State Capital building, which happens to be the tallest in the country.

Once at the top, we walked outside and felt the wind

sweeping across our bodies. To one side, the light churns softly on the surface of the Mississippi River, where casinos, levees, and barges are brought down to scale against the river's ancient cadence. To the left, looking past downtown's meagre skyrises, is a thick tree canopy, a chorus of oaks, pecans, crepe myrtles, magnolias, cypress, and pines, swaying softly over black rooftops in the humidity. Further downriver stands Tiger Stadium, cartoonishly large, a commercial of itself, sworn to bleed its proverbial purple and gold football blood into the already soaked soil of the former plantation it sits on. If you walk to the backside of the observation deck, as we did, you would see the tiny Capitol Lake, buttressed by the Governor's mansion and the state's Department of Education. Beyond that, the Gotham sprawl of Exxon Mobil offers plumes of white gas to the sky. (The wind pattern has been proven to blow these emissions into the predominantly Black, North section of Baton Rouge). This panorama is a jarring visual: multi-story structures of pipes and scaffolding built out over an immense concrete landscape; it is just one of hundreds of refineries and chemical plants that make up 'Cancer Alley' between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. For this 85-mile stretch, it is widely known that air pollution exceeds hazardous risk levels.

When I was a child and we drove past the plants at nighttime, I believed they were New York City, as seen from a distance, due to the glittering lights and towers whose smokestacks reached the clouds. That city had a structure and name in my consciousness. But this place, where my father and my classmates' fathers disappeared to work each day, was nevertheless a cipher to me, an inexplicable rupture in the landscape. On this day, I watched my students wonder too, looking out at the refinery, inscrutable and menacing as the faces of the men in the basement we'd just stood before. It has always seemed apt to me that this is the view from the backside of the State Capitol building. The relationship between an extractive, powerful industry and the seat of law is just here in the backyard. If one is polite enough–as we are known to be here–one might not even draw a connection.

It would be hard for me to say how youth today see the city, but I do know how I was trained to see the city as a youth, as a series of dissonances that do not add up to anything coherent, even when the story is right in front of your face. And I saw that on my students' faces that day too: truths almost too crushing to speak into the polluted air, waiting for them.

On the train
Kiki Dimoula

On my return
Every seat returns
almost empty—as much as can be returned—
the departure is always overbooked
many depart, almost all.

The train accelerates
dismembering all this journey gave me
faces freshly loved,
feelings astonished, places

I'm afraid the melancholy seated next to me
might derail.

Generally I don't like to bypass
with irreverent speed
the fields, the sown, especially the fallow
I worry not having the time
to burn a glimpse
at the sacred stoicism that incenses
some distant desert chapels.

To burn a glimpse
at shacks gnawed by rodent
abandonment and to genuflect
washed away by rain and weeping times
ghost station signs in passing

to not have the time to kiss
the distant whistle echo
of a bygone stationmaster.

Δημουλά, Κική. "Στο Τρένο," *Άνω Τελεία*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Ίκαρος, 2016.

The English translation—by Angeliki Sioli and Vincent A. Cellucci—is an excerpt from the original poem.

This translation is dedicated to the victims of the train tragedy in Tempi, Greece on February 28, 2023.

Commentary by
Angeliki Sioli

to burn a glimpse....
chapels

A powerful poetic image capturing a discreet but constant presence in the Greek landscape. In the middle of fields or on the sides of hills and mountains there are countless little chapels. They are modest in structure and appearance, and they are usually taken care by the residents of the close by villages or towns. They are open to the public and any local or traveller can stop by to burn a candle (a common expression in the Greek language which the poet uses metaphorically in her poem). They stand in the landscape stoically without offering mass on Sundays or other big holidays, but they are celebrated once a year. As they are dedicated to one of the Greek Orthodox ssaints, on the feast day of this saint (referred to as the name day), residents and priests organise mass at the little chapels and celebrate with food and drinks afterwards.

washed away .... in
passing

A reference to many abandoned train stations in the Greek rural landscape. The train system, along with its many little train stations around the country, was built by the Italians after the end of the World War II as an act of reparation. With the advent of the car, the train was used less and less and many of the small and local stations started falling out of use. The signs followed all the same design with the same red frame around it and the same font of capital letters, denoting the name of each village. The buildings themselves were very modest usually painted in a light-yellow colour or made out of stone.

genuflect and kiss

Religious acts connected with someone's visit to one of the many little desert chapels that are secularized in the poem. To burn and light and to stop at a rural train station means that one has to take their time, something that contemporary life's speed does not really allow anymore. The poet, traveling in an accelerating train, worries for not having this time and takes the time to look mindfully at the passing by spaces and invoke their rituals. The presence of many lonely-standing and deserted structures in the Greek landscape seems also to connect the train rider with thoughts about absence, abandonment and ultimately death.

Kiki Dimoula (1931-2020) was a highly acclaimed female Greek poet, whose work has been recognized with numerous national and international awards. Her unique way of employing grammatic elements in unconventional ways and combining metaphors with poetic images are among the strongest and most beautiful characteristics of her poetry.

Hambrug poetry bridge raises and lowers for pedestrian traffic between campus and Delft's city centre.

Bridge Poem

Vincent A. Cellucci

When I moved to the Netherlands in 2019, I had no idea where poetry would be waiting for me.

If I'm being honest with myself, I had become a regional poet. Back home, in Louisiana, I could not pen a poem that wasn't steeped in place, a fertile funky silt I had sunk myself deep into for the last two decades.

I joked with friends I was 'upgrading swamps', and I threw myself into the foreign.

The pen remained capped for some time as I learned to attune myself to South Holland.

Until I saw something in Delft, on my daily commute, just after the bicycle bridge that connects the city to campus. This specific moment forever lifted me out of the seasonal depression of my first winter in the Netherlands.

One gigantic puddle covered the entire bike path. Everyone needed slow down, pull their feet up off the pedals, and coast through.

It was the delight of my frequently rainy days, and I began to look forward to this event as it allowed me to tap into a childish state of simple joy as well as exchange rare grins and consideration with my fellow citizens.

I knew I had to commemorate this moment with a poem. 'one puddle' was the first poem I wrote about Delft and the Netherlands.

The first colleague I met at the TU Delft Library later translated the poem into Dutch for an arts exhibition, so it was also my first poem situated in the language of the land.

Not long after I discovered something else uniquely inspiring to me: poems inscribed on Dutch cities.

Poetry murals waiting for me on walls of Leiden, poems on garbage trucks in Rotterdam[1]...

The more I looked, the more poetry there seemed to be.

(This was COVID times, and I was equally inspired by the banners of poetry spreading throughout Tehran on the news too.)

Eventually, I came across the Parkhaven poetry bridge in Rotterdam and the scale stopped my bicycle in its tracks.

I thought: how does one go about getting a poetry bridge?

My next thought was of the Hambrug, how the main bicycle bridge in Delft deserved a poem.

The longest part of the project was gaining the courage to propose my own poem. But I knew I had a site-specific poem about the exact place.

Years passed until I reached out to the typographic designer of the Parkhaven poetry bridge. We had a coffee and rode bikes to the proposed bridge, where Monice agreed to reach out to the Delft municipality.

We had impeccable timing; it turned out there was a window of opportunity as the bridge was undergoing a major maintenance, and we could paint the poem on its underbelly while it was removed.

We made a proposal, we pitched it to the city and the university as a partnership, and we started designing.

This public art project was realised in 2025, so that the Hambrug serves as a literal and symbolic bridge between the municipality and the university.

The poem, 'one puddle', is an allusion to Bob Marley's 'One Love' and it celebrates the interdependent inspiration of poetry and place.

I hope it is the first of many poems to inhabit this bridge.

1 Later research uncovered these moving murals are a decades-long collaboration between the Poetry International festival and the municipality.

Original stenciled 'rain' concept by typographic designer Monice Janson.

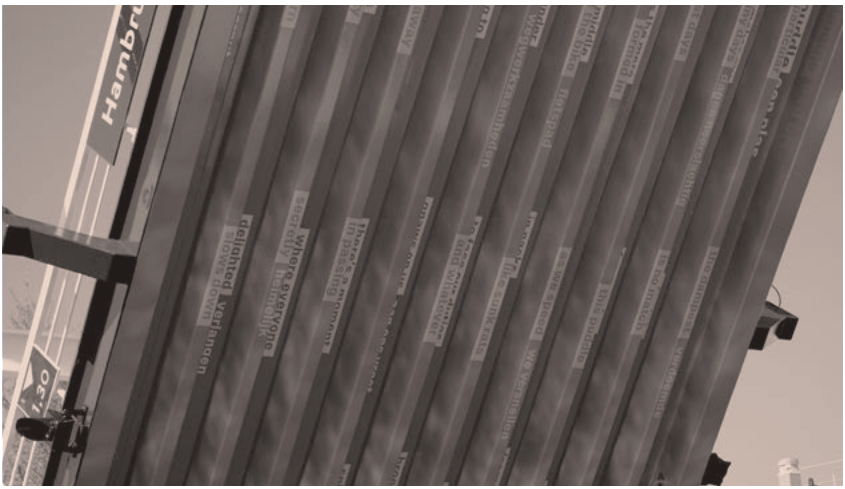
A visit to the Hollandia maintenance 'shed' (warehouse) to measure the removed bridge for design planning.

Preparing the text stencils for painting.

Renovated bridge with poem is placed by barge the night before final installation.


LEKST..OOM TRAN.. ORT BV 0180661

Final installation of renovated bridge by Hollandia. This bridge was out for many months so it was a special occasion to have it back.



Detail of the undulations of bridge poem final design with reflections from the canal below.

one puddle

in particular
makes my
rainy days

most days
it's the mere
formed in
the middle
of the bike
path under
construction
heading to
campus

and away
from delft's
center city
canal's
southern
drain

the dampest
of spirits
is no match
for crossing
this puddle

as we speed
in packs
like sunk rats
to face our duties
and whatever
gnaws on us

there's a moment
in passing
where everyone
secretly
delighted
slows down

pulls their feet
off the pedals
(some even rise!)
as if about to float
and coasts
out of their
brooding into
the inevitable
splashing
out of
personal
paths

we
acknowledge
our own role
in
jeopardy
and
the oncomer
making
us
all kin
in our brief exodus
from everything

een plas

met name
maakt mijn
dag neerslachtig

meestal gevormd
in het midden
van een
fietspad
opengebroken
voor wegwerkzaamheden
op pad
naar campus

weg van Delft
weg van het centrum
de gracht voert
naar de zuidelijke
afvoerput

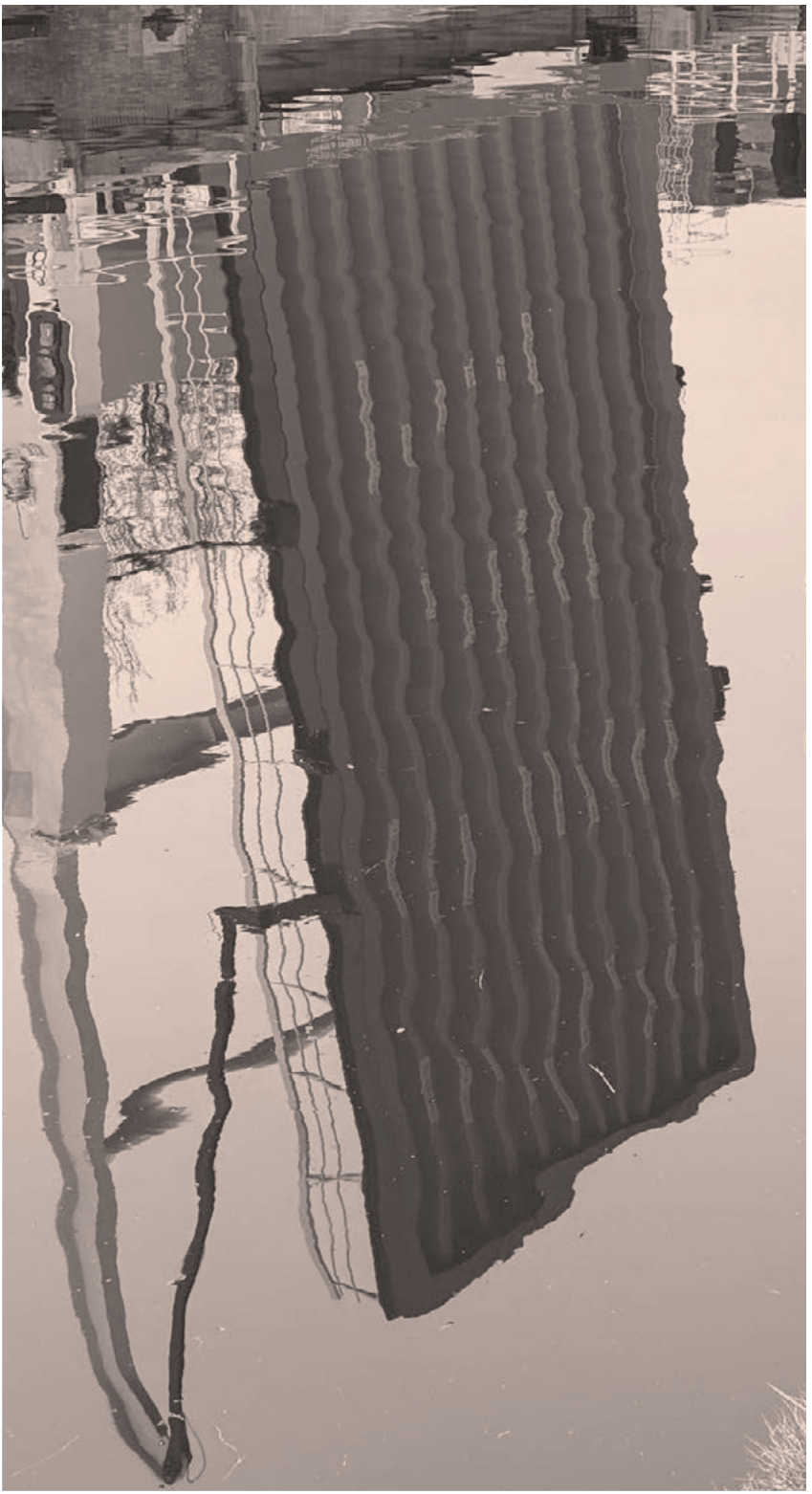
zelfs de
verdoemde geest
is niet
opgewassen
om de plas
over te steken

terwijl we versnellen
en herpakken
om als
natte honden
onze taak
uit te voeren
met alles wat
er aan ons vreet

en dan het moment
van passeren
heimelijk
verlang je
langzamer
te rijden

het trappen stopt
voeten van de pedalen
(soms omhoog!)
drijf je weg?
weg van de kustlijn
richting einder
om het door het
onvermijdelijk
spetteren
uit je
persoonlijke pad
tegemoet te treden

met gevaar
voor eigen leven
accepteren
we onze rol
en zorgen we
dat we overleven
in dit korte moment
tot onze uittocht



Reflection of bridge poem in the canal below—a reminder that life, poetry, the planet, are all 'one puddle.'

Acknowledgements

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* 'one puddle' was originally published in: *~getting away with everything* (Unlikely Books, 2021), a collaborative book written with fellow poet Christopher Shipman about leaving New Orleans to make new homes elsewhere.

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Chapter Abstracts

SECTION I: POETICS OF PLACE IN LITERATURE

Seeing Things in *Seeing Things*
Architectural Responses to Seamus Heaney

Andrew Carr

This chapter describes the poems of Heaney's collection, *Seeing Things* and their architectural responses, attempting to understand their resonances. Heaney's collection, *Seeing Things*, is first discussed by describing its structure and identifying key themes and ideas relating to place, memory, time, 'marvels', and metaphors formed from everyday experiences, objects, and actions. Select reference, where relevant, is made to the body of critical writing which has gathered around Heaney, although the emphasis of the paper is focused on the responses of each architect to the poet's work. Each architect is then discussed in turn, drawing on their writing, lectures, and built work; supplemented by dialogue with Dow and McLaughlin. The chapter concludes by placing Heaney back into a more complex context where relations between poet, architect, place, and proposition become blurred and entangled.

'How I love the place you have no idea'
Exploring Poetic Language in the Arab Quarter of *The Alexandria Quartet*

Ali Rehza Shahbazib

Studying the sense of place in British novelist Lawrence Durrell's 1957-60 novel, *The Alexandria Quartet*, provides architects with insights into the poetic qualities shaping urban spaces. Durrell's portrayal of novelized 1930s Alexandria aligns with the phenomenological understanding of place as a condition of consciousness in perception. This theoretical framework guides my paper on the 18th-century Arab quarter of Alexandria which involves a hermeneutical reading of British Lieutenant Joshua Scobie's urban experience. The urban environment comes to life for Scobie through olfactory experiences, touching his emotions and reinforcing embodied engagements. These engagements are intimately tied to poetic (i.e., polysemic, and metaphoric) language. For instance, the smell of bread in a street gives rise to poetic prose: "It smells like mother's lap!" This sentence captures a moment when poetry emerges from a place by anchoring a feeling in place. In this context, Scobie's journey conveys to architects that the feeling of being at home unfolds when architecture stimulates poetic emotions. Ultimately, poetic words are in our hands to make ourselves at home in the world.

Verses Witness
Reimagining Carceral Spaces through Poetry

Ece Canli

Despite growing global concern over mass incarceration and carceral capitalism, the architecture of imprisonment remains largely inaccessible, obscured and inscrutable, even to prison reformers and designers. In this context, first-hand accounts by prisoners are crucial for revealing the material and affective dimensions of carceral space, especially when conveyed through literature. Over the centuries, many imprisoned figures have turned to prose and poetry to express their struggles and spatial experiences, inscribing confinement onto their bodies and words. From Oscar Wilde to Nazim Hikmet, Mahmoud Darwish to countless unnamed voices, prison poetry has served as both testimony and resistance, offering a powerful lens into the lived realities of incarceration and forming a transhistorical, transgeographic archive of carceral experience. This article focuses on Canadian poet Bradley Peters' *Sonnets from a Cell* (2023) in particular to examine how prison poetry can illuminate the psychological, material, and architectural contours of confinement. Through a literary and spatial reading of Peters' work, it explores how poetic expression maps the lived experience of confinement and reveals how bodies perceive, endure, and resist carceral design. Grounded in abolitionist thinking, the article proposes a dialogue between poetry and architecture to reimagine carceral spaces and ultimately question their continued existence and the role of prison designers.

SECTION II: POETIC RESEARCH PRACTICES

Poetic Writing as an Enactive Method for Studying Psychiatric Hospital Atmosperes
Addressing Affective, Ephemeral and Peripheral Dimensions

Eline L. van Leeuwen

This chapter proposes a reflection on the act of poetic writing as a method in architectural research, particularly in uncovering implicit forms of spatial knowledge gained from residing in space. It presents three cases, each exploring the atmospheric quality of a psychiatric hospital environment through lived experiences. In these cases, varying contexts and durations reveal different ways in which poetic writing can contribute to our understanding of atmospheric perception, while also addressing relational and situated facets of the pluralistic psychiatric hospital environments. Reflecting on these three cases, we delve into how the incorporation of poetic writing could elevate the research methodologies of architectural researchers and designers. By embracing the poetic gaze, researchers can access the affective, ephemeral, and peripheral dimensions of atmosphere, thereby gaining valuable insights into the multifaceted complexities of these environments. The chapter argues that poetic writing can offer a rich and nuanced, enactive approach to addressing the here outlined dimensions and consequently offering valuable insights into pluralistic complexities psychiatric hospitals. Hereby it contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals engage with and are shaped by their surroundings in psychiatric care settings.

Fruits of Futile Flora

Maša Seničić

This chapter aims to investigate the overgrown hotels on the Mediterranean as decaying organisms, the victims of a violent and systematic privatization. Questioning the politic and poetics of this unplanned growth, the essay uses the hotel both as a contemporary and an archetypal example of what Juhani Pallasmaa believes to be true: that architecture is an extension of nature, to be experienced by all our senses. Horticulture plays an essential role in travel destinations. Obviously, it is used to nurture the event and reception spaces, providing guests with shade and fresh air, especially in the holiday resorts on the seaside. The plants dictate the atmosphere, and continue to do so long after the hotels close their doors. The rooms and halls are becoming forests, disobedient coastal realms, which is quite an obvious disparity to their intended use and ontology. Enriching the landscape, the hotels are becoming a part of it, with colours, scents and sounds coming from the plants as well as from unobtrusive tiny animals. The many materials the building consist of change in various ways - they decompose, corrode and change shape, each one of them with its own peculiar aesthetics. Fruits of futile flora are exactly the experiences of spaces that are being occupied by the irrational, the bodily, and the persistent. The non-deliberate, non-prudent elements of a once charming tourist destination.

Play Space in the Death Zone or The Unused as Muse

Lydia Unsworth

This paper makes a case for the importance of ambiguity and exploration-as-play in the unpackaged environment. I detail how my own psychogeographic urban walks, explorations, and research undertaken into the public grief displayed online for Fiddler's Ferry, a series of decommissioned cooling towers in Warrington, Cheshire, together with the writings of Christopher Bollas, Tim Edensor, Owen Hatherley, and others have formed into an emotional and psychological response to the post-industrial landscape, which underpins my poetic practice. Using my own poetry as case study, this paper considers how awareness of and attention to associative memories, the attachments we have to certain buildings, and the in/stability the urban landscape provides are important factors in how people respond to space and change. Crucially, this paper details how the hybrid and fragmentary nature of poetry is the perfect medium to explore hard-to-articulate responses to the hybrid and fragmentary urban 'between', i.e. the not-yet-demolished but not-yet-reclaimed.

Unter der Hohen Brücke Case Study
Disclosing Poetic Practices

Ella Felber

In sharing the process of the work Unter der Hohen Brücke , the author explores poetic practices engaging with the complex lived experience of places: through lingering, the slow spatial practice of elongated, and repeated site visits, a somatic, sensing approach was developed which allowed capturing the lived experience of the place. The author discusses how close reading

and translating the work of other writers, particularly Ilse Aichinger's, extracted potential qualities of architectural poetic writing, such as the curious gaze and cyclical structures. Further the iterative sequence of poems is described as a poetic form that allowed to (re)construct the complexity of place in written text. Further, the author discusses how carefully selected vocabulary, rhythm and punctuation, as well as syntax and typesetting can steer the readers' movement through spatial sequences. The key ingredient in all these practices is generosity in time. The repeated, intuitive and agile shifts from one poetic practice to another, from one mode of attention to another, is presented as a crucial method enabling the writer to remain receptive, and add layer upon layer. This slow accumulation of approaches is crucial to construct places as multisensory processes, both in architecture and in poetry.

SECTION III: CONVERSATIONS AND VISUAL ESSAY

Place in Sequence
A conversation with Erik Lindner

Klaske Havik

During a walk in the forest where the Dutch poet Erik Linder spent several months as an artist-in-residence, this conversation unfolds around the question how his poems emerge from observations of places. The poet explains that his poems are not representations of places, but rather sequences of place-related associations. When carefully brought together in poems, these fragments form an almost cinematic series of images, which are then complemented by the memories and associations of his readers. The walk leads towards a site featured in one of his poems, and the conversation dissolves into the poem itself.

'The City is a 1,000 Poems'
A Conversation with Ted Landrum

Angeliki Sioli

In this conversation, Ted Landrum advocates for poems as means to discuss architecture. Poetry is necessary, even in conferences and scientific events, because architectural qualities—ones that moves us, surprise us, and liberate us—cannot be captured in numbers or prose. He vouches for the importance of connecting with the stories of a city and urges architects and academics to trust in poetry as it enables them to move beyond their disciplinary and social bubbles by connecting with their city's poets and its poetry communities. Reading and writing poetry are also ways that connect us with places and people, while transcending specific places and moving towards a multiplicity of places and meanings.

The Gathering of Voices Becomes a Place
A Conversation with Anna West

Vincent A. Cellucci

This interview excavates the place of Baton Rouge, Louisiana and its complex bearing of youth identity, public education, power, and poetry. Conceptually mapping the intersections of systemic racial injustice, environmental degradation, and urban planning, this conversation reveals the ways in which spaces and poetry are both shaped by and resist capitalism and racism. As co-founder of Humanities Amped, Dr. West offers a nuanced understanding of the experiences of educators and young people in urban literacy education movements.

Bridge Poem

Vincent A. Cellucci

"Bridge Poem" is an exploration of the ways in which poetry can intervene in public space, transforming ordinary structures into sites of artistic expression, collaboration, and cultural significance. Through a series of photographs, texts, a poem, and its translation, this project serves as a snippet case study highlighting the often-overlooked moments in cities, spaces where poetry can and does appear. This visual essay about a bridge design from a site-specific poem—which was realised in Delft—reveals the ways in which words can be used to reshape our understanding of the urban landscape.

Biographies

Ali Reza Shahbazin holds a Ph.D. in Architecture from McGill University. His dissertation examines modes of dwelling in cosmopolitan public spaces as portrayed in *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957), British novelist Lawrence Durrell's reimagining of 1930s Alexandria. In 2022, Shahbazin received the William Godshalk Prize for New Durrell Scholarship from the International Lawrence Durrell Society, awarded to scholars advancing research on Durrell. His broader interests lie in urban spaces at the intersection of architecture and literature. He has also published two novels in Persian.

Andrew Carr is an architect based in London who combines practice, teaching and research. He is the founding director of Tempo and a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Westminster. Prior to this, he practiced with Brady Mallalieu Architects for over twenty years. He often writes on time and temporality in architecture, through design-based research, the interpretation of the work of contemporary architects such as Níall McLaughlin and most recently through a study of the momentary architecture of Virginia Woolf. His writing has been published in arq (Architectural Research Quarterly), Drawing Matter, JoCA (Journal of Civic Architecture), the RSAW Journal Touchstone and several independent publications. His essay 'Brackets' was runner up in the Architecture Foundation Writing Prize 2022.

Angeliki Sioli is an architect and associate professor at the Department of Architecture, TU Delft. She completed her Doctor of Philosophy in the history and theory of architecture at McGill University. Her work connects architecture with language, literature, spatial atmospheres, and urban places. She has edited the collected volumes *Architectures of Resistance: Negotiating Borders through Spatial Practices* (Leuven University Press, 2024); *The Sound of Architecture: Acoustic Atmospheres in Place* (Leuven University Press, 2022); *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience* (Routledge, 2018). Before joining TU Delft, Sioli taught both undergraduate and graduate courses at McGill University, in Montreal; Tec de Monterrey, in Mexico; and Louisiana State University in the U.S.

Anna West is an educator, scholar, and community organizer whose work focuses on the intersections of critical youth development, public education, and community-based writing & performance pedagogies. Anna co-created Humanities Amped in 2014 and currently serves as the Director of Teaching & Learning. She holds a Ph.D. in English Education from Louisiana State University, where she was awarded the 2017 Distinguished Dissertation Award, and an M.Ed. from Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she received the 2011 Arts-in-Education Intellectual Contribution Award. She is the 2022 recipient of the East Baton Rouge Mayor-President's Community Impact Award in the field of education. For nearly thirty years, Anna has aligned her life with Amped's mission: to share transformative educational practices resulting in people's power to shape their worlds.

Ece Canli is an artist and researcher whose work explores the intersections of body politics, material regimes and performativity. She holds PhD in Design from University of Porto and is currently a researcher at CECS (The Communication and Society Research Centre) at University of Minho, where she investigates the spatial, material, and technological conditions of the criminal justice system, queer materialities, penal design, and abolition feminism. She is a board member of ATGENDER (NL), a member of Carceral Geography Working Group (UK), SOPCOM and A Passeio platform, and a collaborating researcher in several COST Action projects on artistic research.

Eline L. van Leeuwen studied nursing at *Hogeschool Arnhem en Nijmegen* (2015) and architecture at *Eindhoven University of Technology* (TU/e), where she graduated cum laude in 2021 with a study on the role of architectural form in Japanese rituals. She is currently conducting her PhD (supervised by Bernard Colenbrander and Cor Wagenaar) which centres around atmospheric perception of psychiatric hospitals with particular attention for historical and phenomenological aspects of this topic. Eline also works as a mental health nurse at Utrecht University Medical Centre Utrecht, which allows to incorporate patient interviews and insights from practice into her studies. She previously published in the journal *'Archiprint: Journal for Architecture, Eindhoven University of Technology*, (2019) and was editor in chief of the publication *'Na Denken : Essays over architectuurkritiek, -vorm en -ervaring ter ere van Bernard Colenbrander'* (2022).

Ella Felber writes, researches, curates and educates in the expanded field of architecture. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, her first book *Unter der Hohen Brücke*, further texts, artistic and architecture

research were published and shared on various occasions. She initiated and curated *Zwischen Kostenschätzung, Muttermilch und Bauwende*, a collectively developed exhibition advocating for fair architecture work (Architekturzentrum Wien 2023, and travelling Austria). In 2024, she received the Margarete-Schütte-Lihotzky project grant to develop *Mourning Spaces*. Ella Felber is a lecturer at New Design University St. Pölten, sharing her research and writing design methods.

Erik Linder is a poet born in The Hague, The Netherlands, who lives and works as a freelance writer in Amsterdam. He made his literary debut in 1996 with *Tramontane* (Perdu) and has published seven books of poetry to date, the most recent of which is *Hout* ('Wood', Van Oorschot, 2024). Lindner has also published two novels: *Naar Whitebridge* ('To Whitebridge', De Bezige Bij, 2013) and *51 manieren om de liefde uit te stellen* ('51 Ways of Postponing Love', Van Oorschot, 2021). His poetry has been translated into many languages. The German collection *Nach Akedia* was translated by Rosemarie Still and published by Matthes & Seitz Verlag Berlin in 2013. It received a recommendation by the German Academy. *Words are the Worst*, selected poems translated by Francis R. Jones was published in 2021 by Vehicule Press/Signal Editions in Montreal, and nominated for the Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry.

Jeremy Allan Hawkins is a poet and lecturer at the Strasbourg School of Architecture in France, where he is a member of the AMUP research laboratory and contributes to teaching and research on design narratives, architectural writing, and poetics. He holds a DFA in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow, entitled Poetic Practices and Spatial Agency: Writing into New Situations. He is the author of *enditem.* (Downingfield, 2024), *Fantastic Premise* (Alien Buddha, 2023) and *A Clean Edge* (BOAAT, 2017). His writing has been selected for inclusion in the Best New Poets anthology series, as well as the extended program of the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennial. His research interests include creative writing as spatial practice, material poetics, practice-based research, and knowledge production in urban design.

Klaske Havik is professor of *Methods of Analysis and Imagination* at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology. Her research relates architectural and urban questions, such as the use, experience and imagination of place, to literary language. Her books on the topic include *Urban Literacy. Reading and Writing Architecture* (2014) and the edited volume *Writingplace, Investigations in Architecture and Literature* (2016), after which she initiated the *Writingplace Journal for Architecture and Literature*. Earlier, she was editor of architecture journals OASE and *de Architect*. Her poetry collection *Way and Further* appeared in 2021. In 2022 she received an honorary doctorate of Tampere University, Finland, in recognition of her contribution to the study of architectural writing.

Lydia Unsworth is a poet based in Greater Manchester, UK. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies including Oxford Poetry and Shearsman Magazine. She is an NWCDTP-funded PhD candidate at the Centre for Place Writing, MMU, looking at kinship with disappearing post-industrial architecture. Her latest book, *Arthropod*, is published by Death of Workers Whilst Building Skyscrapers, and she has two new poetry collections coming out in 2026, *Stay Awhile* and *This Now Extends to My Daughter*.

Maša Seničić is a writer: a poet, essayist, and creative researcher, working across multiple forms of text. She is the co-programmer of Brave Balkans (Belgrade Auteur Film Festival), program director of Filmkultura, and a PhD candidate in the fields of Memory Studies and Media Theory (FDA, Belgrade). Her work spans institutional and independent projects—primarily in film and literature—where she takes on the role of author or editor-in-chief. Oriented toward exploratory frameworks, her practice often results in collective or individual seminars, exhibitions, or printed objects, shaped less by medium than by context and process.

Ted Landrum is a teacher, critic, artist and poet, living in Toronto, Canada. He is the maker of *Midway Radicals & Archi-Poems* (Signature Editions, 2017) and three collaborative "chapbooks": *Table for Four/ Eccentric Crops* (JackPine Press, 2020), with Steven Ross Smith, Jennifer Still and Colin Smith; *Room to Room: Poetry & Architecture in Conversation* (2018), with Ingrid Ruthig and Komi Olaf; and "This City is Read" (2014), with Lisa Landrum. In 1997, he hand-stapled his first gathering of experimental archi-poems, "*NY Gist*" - distributing them to strangers, and friends. Published widely, his work is building worlds between *the architecture of poetry and the poetry of architecture*. Find more at Ubu Loca, an open archive of Archi-Poetry research.

Vincent A. Cellucci wrote *Absence Like Sun* (Lavender Ink, 2019) and *An Easy Place / To Die* (CityLit Press, 2011). He also has three collaborative poetry titles: *come back river* (Finishing Line Press, 2014); *_a ship on the line* (Unlikely Books, 2014), which was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award; and the most

recently released *~getting away with everything* (Unlikely Books, 2021). Vincent performed *Diamonds in Dystopia*, an interactive poetry web app at SXSW in 2017, and the poem was anthologized in *Best American Experimental Writing 2018*. He works at the TU Delft Library and combines technology and poetry at Leiden University.

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Poetics of Place

Writingplace book series on Architecture and Literature

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Architects and poets alike experiment with writing as a spatial act, using verse and reflection to navigate landscapes both real and imagined. But how does poetry emerge from place, and what knowledge of place can poetry reveal for architects, designers, and spatial practitioners?

This inaugural volume of the *Writingplace* book series investigates the fertile ground where architecture and poetry meet, revealing how their intersection can deepen our understanding of spatial experience and the making of place.

Poetics of Place brings together literary and spatial perspectives in articles, reflections, and creative works that consider how language itself shapes spatial perception. Poet, educator, and activist contributors—using literature or poetic writing as a means of investigating place—examine how poetry evokes a sense of situatedness and how writing itself can act as a spatial practice.

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