

Unter der Hohen Brücke Case Study

Disclosing Poetic Practices

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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

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 durch⁴
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:

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*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

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 aufwachen¹⁴
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:

<i>ertappen</i> (	- <i>und</i> (¹⁵	<i>und den festgefahrenen Blick</i> -
catch it(	- and(	and the entrenched gaze -

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:

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

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 İklım Doğan, Franziska Fuchsl, 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.