

‘The City is a 1,000 Poems’

A Conversation with Ted Landrum

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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, eureka. 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, heterogeneous, 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 Francisco 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.

Poetics of Place

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 *archê*) 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 Shklovsky’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).