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Lyric Spatial Agency:
Poetic Practices and Situated Knowledge in the Design Process

Jeremy Allan Hawkins

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A context in literature

In the last decade, growing interest in ‘literary methods’ for spatial practice has opened a field of inquiry to explore creative writing’s capacity to influence architectural research and design1. While this literary tendency has led to vibrant reconsiderations of how imaginative language participates in design processes, it has largely privileged the study of narrative strategies, and particularly the role of storytelling in both the understanding and making of place. If narrative brings certain qualities to spatial design, including an evocative sequential language and the semantic apparatuses intertwined with accounts of causality, the logic which undergirds these affordances also carries limits, for example on its capacity for non-sequential representation2. At the same time, poetic texts, or more specifically the writing practices that produce them, have been relatively underexamined, even within the purview of literary design methods. If the metaphor as poetic figure has begun to be studied in its role in architectural and urban projects3, and if there has been a recent rise in interest in the use of ‘poetic acts’ in the pedagogy developed at the Valparaíso School of Architecture in the late 1960s and early 1970s4, we still know relatively little about how poetic writing itself can contribute to the design process. What else enters into the dynamics of the design that might be absent without the introduction of poetic language, when we undertake writing within the spatial project?

This is a question of how poetic practices and the linguistic materials they produce can offer new fields of action and agency for spatial practitioners. Looking beyond isolated poetic figures, how can writing in the lyric mode, for example, support the reading of a territory in its material-sensorial extension, but also as it manifests in the imaginary? How can Oulipian constraints and procedural poetics reveal characteristics or dynamics of a site that are potentially hidden from traditional architectural tools and their habitual modes of intention/attention? At a time when the spatial project, faced with environments of ever-increasing complexity, seeks means to avoid fixedness and rigidity, how can a poetic text give name to the uncertain, the ambient, and the ephemeral in the flux of a spatial figure?

In this paper, we explore the hypothesis that unique forms of situated knowledge5, complex and evocative in their tenor, arise from poetic practices undertaken in the design process, affording forms of

1 Dutch architect and professor Klaske Havik’s 2014 work Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture has been a critical reference for a range of research and design activities with a focus on literary methods, notably in Europe. In the book, a publication adapted from her doctoral thesis, Havik specifically names and calls for “scriptive” methods for design, and that appeal has found echo in the research activities of her Chair of Methods of Analysis & Imagination at TU Delft, and the EU Cost Action “Writing Urban Places”.
2 Philosopher Galen Strawson has famously argued “Against Narrativity” (2004), in particular for its difficulty in adapting to episodic understandings of reality.
critical spatial practice and spatial agency⁶ that are, as yet, underdeveloped. As part of the experimental work contributing to our practice-based doctoral research at the University of Glasgow, we set out to test this hypothesis in the context of the development of exploratory scenarios within an international research consortium, the SuMo Rhine research programme (Promotion of Sustainable Mobility in the Upper Rhine Region, INTERREG, 2018-2021), as part of the ENSAS/AMUP/IMM research team, directed by Andreea Grigorovschi⁷. Within this interdisciplinary and intercultural consortium, bringing together architects and urbanists, data scientists, sociologists, geographers, and other specialists, we engaged in poetic practices to explore the sites of future mobilities through written territorial engagement, particularly in the peri-urban spaces of the metropolis, and on the verges of major infrastructure. Through the creation of a corpus of texts produced through various poetic practices – site-writing, collage, erasure, concrete poetry, and lyric writing – we were confronted with nonrational elements in both the territory and in the spatial imagination which exceeded traditional discursive logics and gave material to design ideas in the development of our exploratory scenarios, not replacing traditional project tools, but accompanying and nourishing their work.

Writing to read the territory

Within the SuMo Rhine research programme, the ENSAS/AMUP/IMM team was set with the task of developing exploratory scenarios to test a new indicator-based evaluation tool in its application as a support for municipal-level decision making in the Upper Rhine Region encompassing the trinational area between France, Germany and Switzerland. The team developed contrasting sustainable mobility scenarios for 2030 Strasbourg. In developing these, several challenges confronted the research team, including the need to spatialize and/or materialize both theories and concepts, the need to produce a qualitative environment in which to test a quantitative evaluation tool, as well as the expansive complexity of the scenarios themselves, across both spatial and temporal scales, in addition to the increasing urgency around the need to define our specific forms of agency in a world where automated mapping and data-driven modeling tools are beginning to usurp the human prerogative in design.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the full extent of SuMo Rhine or the ENSAS/AMUP/IMM team’s contribution to the larger research programme, it is within this context, which may at first seem inhospitable to literary methods in general, that we undertook poetic practices as a means to launch and nourish reflection on what would become spatialized scenarios. If scenario design is often conflated, however, with certain modes of storytelling, from the earliest phases of the project a familiar need to grasp the territory, to understand the metropolitan landscape and to name its character, preceded any occasion to narrate. How would our team seek to understand the spaces and places of Strasbourg, in order to later project possible futures across its territory?

Early experiments included site-writing visits led by the author and in which the architect-urbanist team members were given a series of writing constraints to provoke new, non-disciplinary language to emerge. In the texts produced, participants found themselves noting subtle Doppler shifts in the conversations of approaching and departing cyclists, or how the motorway resembles a ribbon of

⁶ In terms of the radical extension of the field of architecture beyond the act of building, we position ourselves in alignment with Jane Rendell’s notion of critical spatial practice, Paola Viganò’s (2016) claim for the project as knowledge producer, as well as with the notion of spatial agency developed by Awan, Schneider and Till (2011).

⁷ The research team works under the auspices of the Ecole National Supérieure d’Architecture de Strasbourg, AMUP / UR 7309 Unité de Recherche Commune, and the Franco-Chinese Chair of Innovative Metropolitan Mobilities. Additional information on the INTERREG programme is available on the project website: https://sumo-rhine.com/en/
asphalt, or even how the flow of traffic forms an endless spectacle for neighboring residents who sit on their balconies watching the vehicles pass like an eternal, metallic, and monotonous passeggiata.

Later, sessions of association-driven collage writing were created to help produce texts assembling remembered space, desired mobilities, and imagined landscapes. Three distinct prompts guided a phased writing session where the architect-urbanist participants recorded feelings about the current state of the Strasbourg metropolis, characterized a sample site alongside the A35 motorway, and provided memories of mobility spaces that left strong impressions. A second operation led to the cut-up and collage of the writing into new, oneiric texts [Fig. 1]. The often-somber results revealed a peri-urban landscape ossified by lines of infrastructure, perceived as abandoned, deserted space, despite its fringes of vegetation that can be read in the texts almost like leftover strips of ornamental piping.

Figure 1 - Poetic text produced by collage techniques, by Andreea Grigorovschi and Jeremy Allan Hawkins, map background by Marie Fruiquière (2020).
Still later, a range of poetic landscape transcriptions sought to find new ways of rendering perceived relationships between territorial objects, infrastructures, and materialities in textual forms (and which revealed a strong imprint from police and military infrastructure throughout the urban fabric). Concrete poetry, as well, gave form to perceptions of deleterious atmospheres, including a series of works titled “motors” which presented what might be considered the only existing territorial constant in the western region of contemporary Strasbourg: the ubiquitous presence of traffic noise [Fig. 2].

The practices described until this point can be characterized as poetic on multiple counts. First, on the page they work as examples of the poetic function of language, as described by the linguist Roman Jakobson, in that they call attention to themselves as language itself, with a “focus on the message for its own sake”\(^8\). More transparent means to describe a territory and its elements are available when efficiency of communication is desired. Poetic language, however, differing from speech or writing oriented toward the transmission of information, or vocative interpellation, for example, presents itself as language (not as pure information, not as appeal), with all the material qualities that are specific to language. When a writer-researcher names a territorial object as “a slow + massive spill,” the resistance to our understanding it as “a river” calls attention to language in its radical opacity. Jakobson refers to this poetic function as “promoting the palpability of signs”\(^9\), which can be understood as an indication of the materiality that undergirds the poetic as such. In her 2014 volume, *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subject and Site*, Kristen Kreider draws on Jakobson and others to posit a material poetics, in contrast to “formalist linguistic theory wherein language is conceived solely in terms of an immaterial order of signs.”\(^{10}\) In Kreider’s reading, the speech event – including or especially the written – becomes an embodied situation, one in which the reality effects of poetic language have material and thus spatio-temporal manifestations that are the grounds for experience and knowledge.

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\(^{9}\) ibid.
\(^{10}\) Kreider (2014), p. 20.
A second principal means by which the practices described above can be characterized as poetic is in the sense that they stand as exercises in poiesis, the act of creation at the very root, etymologically speaking, of poetry and poetics. In “What is the act of creation?”, Giorgio Agamben asks, “What is poetry if not an operation in language that deactivates and renders inoperative its communicative and informative functions in order to open them to a new possible use?”11 This aspect can also be considered in terms of Victor Shklovsky’s ostranenie (estrangement)12 or Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt (alienation or distancing effect)13, but by whichever frame we adopt, the poetic act of rupture in the standard relations of signification and communication offer a possibility to reposition oneself and, through new perspectives, create new language, new meaning, new understanding. This is perhaps a hidden sense of what the poet Ezra Pound meant by his famous maxim, “Make it new,” regardless of its dubious translation history14.

What materiality and creation afford through poetic practices in a spatial design context is the ability to produce specific types of situated knowledge. When Donna Haraway calls for situated knowledges as an answer to the instrumentalizing power of idealist and transcendental objectivity15, she makes no mention of modernist planning modes, but does set forward a very ambitious claim to the making of modest ones: claims of what we can know here, where we can be held accountable for our behaviors. In employing poetic practices in a design setting, we are able to connect this ambition to the language of the spatial project. The embodied act of writing connects the text to a site, its material history, the people who live with/within it, and so what we can make known conforms to a very localized objectivity, and in forms that poetic texts favor, such as ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty, and doubt. In the experimental writing undertaken in the SuMo Rhine research programme, for example, we learn that these architect-urbanists, confronted in the fabric of Strasbourg with the reality of major infrastructural objects, will refer to the motorway as a “cement frontier” or a “hard border”, a “gash” in the landscape, an impermeable boundary—regardless of the many well-practiced and safe crossings or passageways which would make this territory, in theory, one of relatively high porosity. The temptation, of course, would be to generalize the conclusion, to make claims about perceptions of heavy infrastructure, notions of safety, and boundaries in the imaginary that impact crossing behavior. At the same time, a brief trip to Shanghai, or any number of other places where infrastructure inserts differently into the perceived and lived fabric of the city, would invalidate the generalization. Instead, we have highly specific knowledge, difficult to exchange or redistribute across other territories.

**Describing a way towards spatial agency**

As a form of conclusion, we would like to look at the lyric, and at its ramifications for spatial agency. While it is necessary to defer entering the lengthy and ongoing debate around the lyric as a category of literary activity, it is important to indicate here that by lyric we mean not a poetic genre but a mode of linguistic production, one that is not mimetic, and which produces its effects via other, nonrational logics than those we associate with reason16. Often associated with the brief expression of subjective emotion, the lyric – through effects of voice, effects of presence, and poietic (rather than

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14 An entertaining and informative account of Pound’s questionable rigor in translation can be found in Michael North’s “The Making of ‘Make It New’,” published at Guernica in 2013: [https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/](https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/)
mimetic) production – does tend toward what we often call the subjective position, precisely in the sense that lyric is localizable in a form of consciousness that is produced in the text itself. But as we’ve suggested earlier, the divide between subjective and objective is not especially pertinent here. When Walt Whitman wrote, “Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn! / Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!”17, rather than ask if the poem carries truth in some universal sense, it would be better to question when in time and where in space this particular language *means*, and how that meaning changes with time and space. We know, for example, that the sphere of influence over which the lyric mode holds sway may collapse down to the scale of a single person, with highly localized knowledge, here as much in the vocalization of a specific consciousness as in the naming of the borough of Manhattan.

In the language of the spatial project, poetic practices that produce lyric writing stand out with the logic of the automated, the seemingly transparent, the optimal, the universalizing and thus violent, the purely market-driven, and the data-obsessed. The material and creative forces at work in these poetic practices are rather oriented towards the embodied utterance, entangled with its environment, creating knowledge on a highly local scale, whatever openings for transposition there may be or not. In the case of the SuMo Rhine research programme for sustainable mobility, a brief lyric text, written within the project activities, contributed to reflections that ultimately guided one scenario design towards a specific materialization of ‘soft mobility’:

> where walls and roads converge
> the water describes a way
> through from before

This short meditation on how local waterways managed to cut through, under and around apparent impasses in the urban fabric of Strasbourg came to feed a scenario concept for regaining the hydrographic network as a platform for low environmental impact mobility. In its first line, it offers a descriptive name for Strasbourg, before the second line where it gives the water network the capacity to communicate movements, and then carrying onto the third line where the water passes through, as does the knowledge of prior generations. In the ENSAS/AMUP/IMM team’s scenarios, this is materialized in a spatialized network of river-born passenger transport.

In a certain sense, this is an example of spatial agency simply by merit of how the lyric writing – performed in-situ, in this case – allows the author to contribute to a scenario concept, to impact the design itself. The notion of agency here, however, is larger, in that the lyric mode as a choice of writing strategy is to choose non-rational means of taking part in the design process. While it does not preclude other rational and often strongly practical design tools, it does break with notions of mastery and/or optimization, let alone information and/or communication. In so doing, especially when practiced as an embodied and active form of refusal of normalizing imperatives, including enshrined scientific methods, at stake or at risk is not the individual or artistic genius, but rather the ability to bring the design back down to the scale of human consciousness, especially in its relations to the human body. Which we might posit, tentatively, as a critical competency to maintain or develop if we should ever aspire to

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17 Whitman, W., “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, first published in 1865, and more recently inscribed in a waterfront guardrail in Brooklyn Bridge Park.
spatial practices that take into account our relation to the other beings and forces that build this world with us.

REFERENCES


