

THE STANZA PROJECT Mapping Vancouver's Urban Environment Through the Writing of the Thursday Writing Collective

I read Haruki Murakami, Jorge Luis Borges, Jonathan Safran Foer, Gabriel García Márquez, George Perec, Mark Z. Danielewski, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, Jean Paul Sartre, George Batiale, James Joyce, Carl Einstein, Honoré de Balzac, Marcel Proust, Christian Bök, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Fernando Pessoa, Anne Hopkinson, Anne Young, Antonette Rhea, Anupam Singhal, Cathy Truong, Erol Hamelek, Ghia Aweida, Henry Doyle, Irit Shimrat, James McLean, Joan Morelli, Matt Malyon, Mohamed Helaly, Patrick Foley, Robyn Livingstone, Roger Stewart, Ruth Dato and Yulia Aleynikova.

I write about Councillor Krespel, the Buendía family and cities like Fedora, Maurillia, Despina and Tekla. About a crack in the floor, plastered ceilings and sanitary objects that lack enamel. About the poetic alphabet, the Dutch landscape, a pilgrimage and a shelter. I describe a toilet: brand, Laufen, type, PRO, color, white. A window-frame: wood, stained, specification according to the drawing of the architect. And the interior finishing of the bathroom: ceramic tiles, brand Mosa, type 15thirty, color 17090, vertically placed until + 1212 mm.

Architecture and writing seem to be two different disciplines that have no common relationship. Poetry and fiction differ from architectural drawings, buildings and the urban space. Creating a home in a text could be considered as something completely different from drawing up a house or an urban plan. Nevertheless, when we position these two disciplines together we start to build spatial narratives.

The Stanza project publication, together with the five other Thursdays' chapbooks, are home to some of the richest spatial narratives that I have come across. Elee Kraljii Gardiner introduced me to these works at a conference in Prague where we started to think about how to collaborate within the frame of our idea: The Stanza Project. Because my own research is devoted to the relationship between literature and architecture, the collaboration became a researched-based project of writing and designing, exploring the spatial qualities within words, the urban environment and the house. We examined the notions of shelter, housing, home, indoor/outdoor and accessibility, writing our way through these ideas to create a home in the text, building a spatial literary environment.

As Michel de Certeau contends, every story is a spatial practice. One can read a city through its architecture and, conversely, one can also enter and inhabit a text. The yearlong collaboration investigated the spatial qualities of creative writing and the urban environment in which that writing occurs. Housed within an area where approximately 65% of the residents are living below the poverty line, the Thursday Writing Collective offers a non-profit creative writing program for the residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Space is a major concern in this neighbourhood, where welfare rates are eaten up by rent in unsafe, infested Single Resident Occupancy (SRO) hotel rooms and developers are intending to monetize the area they perceive as ripe for gentrification. Henry Doyle, one of the writers of the collective, has written a poem that aims to interpret the atmosphere and spatial inequality of this neighbourhood:

Poetry of a Squared Room
Henry Doyle

Dirty brown door
8x10 room
Bed against far corner
Covered by greyish white sheet
Round old bar table, with ashtray
Yellow walls
A window onto brick
Small sink with cracked mirror
A forgotten radio plays
Stairway to Heaven by Led Zeppelin
Welfare Wednesday runs down the hallway
I lock the door
Sit down at the table
It reads in think black ink

Death Is Alive Here
Hate Is Real Here
God Doesn't Exist Here
Welcome to the DTES.¹

In a neighbourhood where inequality has turned private space into a curiosity, the public and urban space becomes a place where personal narratives meet and are transformed into spatial syntaxes. These syntaxes concern the every day tactics of a marginalized group within the most expensive city in Canada. A group that has created a particular environment by dwelling in the public space,. A good example of how one of the writers perceives his environment would be the compass drawn by Leroy Jongeling (fig.1). By reading the text one can directly notice that a stable centre is lacking. None of the spaces mentioned or written down contain a point of departure, a stable home or a place where one can dwell. Instead of a path departing from this stable home and leading to certain goals, Leroy's environment can be seen as a domain. The domain according to Christian Norberg-Schulz is a relatively unstructured ground on which places and paths appear as more pronounced 'figures'.² But the domain of Leroy contains neither places nor paths. Instead, his domain evolves around the spaces he is or has been in, or encompasses the spaces where he does not belong or will never be found. His domain is a space of exclusion and desire; it is the DTES.

¹ Thursday Writing Collective & MLPPROOSTEN|ARCHITECTURE edited by Elee Kraljii Gardiner (2013), The Stanza Project, Vancouver: Otter Press, p.55

² Christian Norberg-Schulz (1971), Existence, Space & Architecture, New York: Praeger Publishers Inc, p.23 [Existence, Space & Architecture, London 1971]

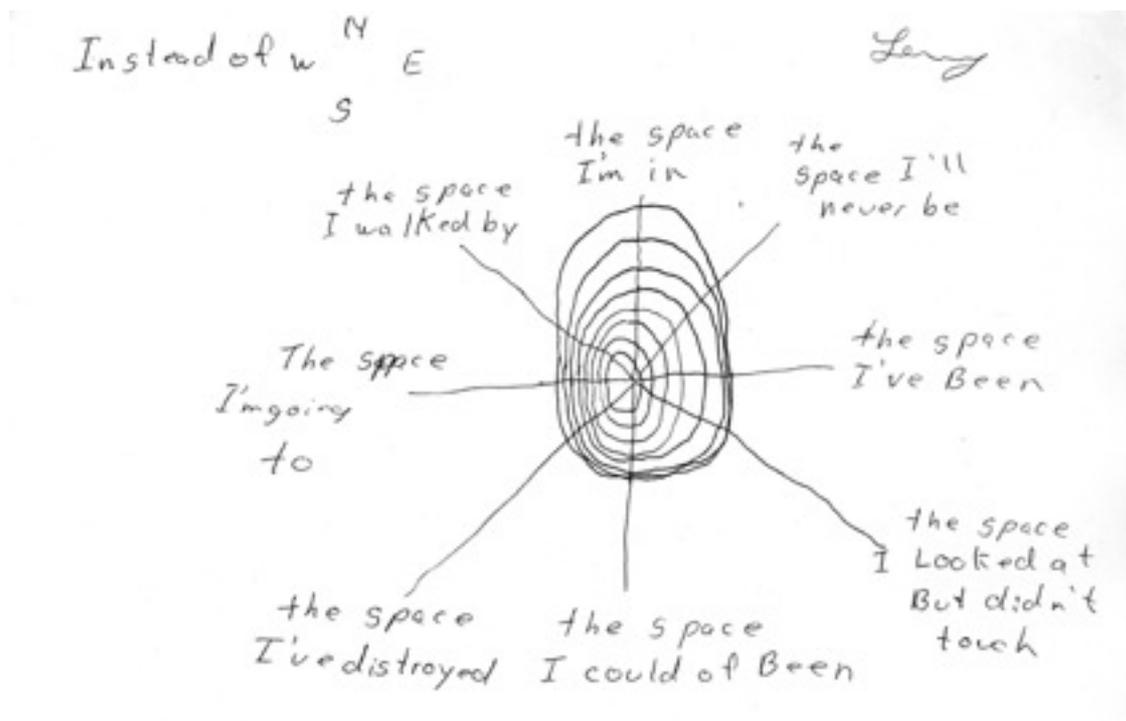


fig. 1 Compass, Leroy Jongeling³

This diagram structures very well the possibilities and activities of a marginalized person living within spatial conditions that are anything but stable. As mentioned before, the diagram lacks a stable point of departure, a private space. The environment in the DTES is everything but private; they dwell in public space. The Belgian architect and writer Wim Cuyvers stresses the quest for public space starts with the reading of the existing space:

you simply have to follow those who have nothing, those who have no private property and thus have no private space, those who have not privatised any space, those who are needy, vulnerable, assailable, those who recognise their neediness or have no option but to do so: the homeless, travellers, children who want to light a fire, smoke cigarettes, play with the dick of the boy next door, bisexuals who are seeking an anonymous and casual homosexual encounter, young lovers, drug users of every kind . . . these all indicate public space; public space is the space of dissipation⁴

Within the domain of the public space it is their need for a stable environment that makes them sensitive for their direct existing space. They read the public space, their dwelling space and that means they read and experience that space and at the same time experience oneself. Contrary to the autistic patients Cuyvers mentioned in his article, the writers within the project are actually able to communicate. In fact, the Thursday Writing Collective created a literary environment by means of publications and public readings that gave some of them a voice on stage in order to express their selves. Here, the voice of Yulia Aleynikova provides an example of how existential space can be used to express how she experiences herself:

³ Thursday Writing Collective & MLPPROOSTEN|ARCHITECTURE edited by Elee Kraljii Gardiner (2013), The Stanza Project, Vancouver: Otter Press, p. 96

⁴ Wim Cuyvers (2006). "From the Dream of the Novel Turned to Stone to the Acknowledgment of Public Space". In *OASE 70, Architecture & Literature. Reflections/Imaginations. Grafe, Havik, Maaskant* (pp.20-29), Rotterdam: NAI Publishers. p. 26

Freedom of Mind
Yulia Aleynikova

My mind is a locker. It locks me in a little cell where walls are painted in melancholy. The ceiling is an island of solitude and it scares even the spiders. A old-fashioned grey heater, feigning warmth. The floor is covered with footprints of rapid motion from nowhere to a dead end, which is only another corner of a tunnel called 'thought'. There is only one window in this room, from which i can be seen from the outside, but the light does not come in. This is the place where my mind wants me to live and to reason, while I am somewhere else at the same time, just like somebody, who is going nowhere, whenever I'm allowed, if ever. Where mind's freedom ends, my freedom begins. ⁵

The voice that we gave to this group of writers, and the literary experiments that evolved out of the project can be seen as treatments of space. These are everyday stories that are influenced by their dwelling in the public space. According to Michel de Certeau, activities within the public space have a narrative structure. Within these narrative structures the organization of the space becomes a spatial practice, which concerns the everyday tactics.⁶ The notion of tactic is important to stress out, since de Certeau has a very distinctive intention by using that particular word. Stressing out the notion of 'Making Do' De Certeau makes a distinction between strategies and tactics. A difference that emerges from authority: *strategies are able to produce, tabulate and impose spaces, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate and divert these spaces.*⁷

The members of the Thursday Writing Collective and many of the dwellers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside do not have access to any form of power. They use their everyday tactics to organize their dwelling in the public domain. Tactics that are often on the boundaries of legitimate actions but form the daily activity in maintaining and claiming (private) space, This effect of re-claiming space has become one of the main themes that has been developed though out the project. It is this "claiming" or "squatting" in a text or drawing what we mean by the technique of "word squatting". As it relates to the claiming of physical or urban space, and the need to have one's writing to be read by others. A good example of how "word squat" can trigger the poetical spatial qualities within writing comes from the voice of Sen Yi:

⁵ Thursday Writing Collective & MLPPROOSTEN|ARCHITECTURE edited by Elee Kraljii Gardiner (2013), The Stanza Project, Vancouver: Otter Press, p.29

⁶ Micheal de Certeau 1988). The Pracice of Everyday Life, Berkely: University of California Press, p.115 [L'*Invention du Quotidien*. Vol. 1, Arts de Faire. Union générale d'éditions 10-18. Paris 1980]

⁷ Idem, p. 30

Breaking Out, after John Asfour's Moving Sen Yi

*I will take all the windows with me,
travel all night
and give them to patients
in hospitals who crave a bright morning sky.*

*I will take all the windows with me,
use my hearth as a guide,
and bring them to political dissidents
trapped in the iron house of prison,*

*to poor living in caves
or under laws that rule out their views:
to any who need air and sunlight*

*Once I was trapped in an underground
subway for the briefest moment,
couldn't see the tunnel end
or the dimmest light.*

*My hair twitched and skin crawled,
my heart beat, an audible tremor,
my pores screamed with cold sweat
out, out of here! Now I keep
my windows with me. ⁸*

Other interesting examples of re-claiming space occurred when we confronted the writers with de architectural or urban plan. Where text is normally used to describe the utility of a room, the materials or a building's typology, the writers opened up dialogues between their texts and the urban space or room. Not surprisingly, the notions they addressed came forth out of their lack of private space and the marginalized position they are in.

One of the strongest pieces that evolved out of this project combines the issue of claiming space with the poetic and spatial qualities of language. Within a set of three poems, or rather Three Home Suites, Antonette Rea build upon the foundations of two fictive homes a personal narrative that is titled Home Sweet Home. These three poems together address the way his/her life could have been, and finally became. A life in which private space was sparse, and where this curiosity was replaced by a blank sheet of paper and the possibility to be read. ⁹

Although the writers of Thursday Writing Collective share their stories in various genres, each text can be read as a treatment of space. The collection of these treatments has resulted in a publication that contains multiple characteristics in which the spatiality of language and the concepts of space have been questioned. There are poem and stories that describe the poetic qualities of space, and there are spatial metaphors. We have experimented with dialogues between the writers that resulted in some odd sizes of paper, ranging from the size of a business card to a strip of a few meters. These restrictions - or opportunities - have led to the use of different language as influenced by orientation and scale.

⁸ Thursday Writing Collective & MLPPROOSTEN|ARCHITECTURE edited by Elee Kraljii Gardiner (2013), The Stanza Project, Vancouver: Otter Press, p. 19

⁹ idem, p.42-47 (This pieces will be presented at my presentation and can be found on my website www.mlpproosten.net)

Mark Proosten, architect, Writingplace abstract, Transcription: telling places

Creating a home in a text is a radical act that could be seen as different from drawing up a house or an urban plan. Nevertheless, when we position these two disciplines –creative writing and architecture – together, we inquire the notion of space in a manner that recognizes issues of social justice as well as aesthetics or form. In a world where our ideas about the urban space are influenced by virtual reality, media, and politically preferred images, the voice of a marginalized group is extremely valuable. The collaboration and the publication of The Stanza Project resulted in a 108-page artefact of the exploration of a heterogeneous group of writers confronted with issues of marginalization, urban space and the notion of home. A notion that we found within the most stable environment for these writers; the spatiality of language.

References

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