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Learning from Literature and Heritage: Stories of Shared Futures Yet to be Told

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Abstract

This editorial is an introduction to the issue of Footprint 34, 'Narrating Shared Futures'. The issue is dedicated to a transdisciplinary encounter between literature and cultural heritage, namely, here we seek to understand how literature can help us unpack complex meanings of places of heritage, and use that knowledge to imagine, design and produce shared and inclusive futures. We elaborate on three notions that appear in the title of the issue – 'narrating', 'shared' and 'futures' – and then we explain how each of the articles featured in this volume contributes to the proposed framing. We conclude with a brief discussion of ways in which the past, present and future are constantly being made in-the-now through both literary and design techniques.

Keywords

Literature, architectural heritage, narrating, shared, futures

'Architecture's primary function throughout history may well be to provide a communicative setting for cultures, one that speaks both intellectually and emotionally to embodied consciousness, disclosing attuned places for significant human action.'¹ Alberto Pérez-Gómez's claim may sound bold or even provocative, particularly given that buildings are often reduced to pragmatic institutional shelters and 'tools of political domination, technological efficiency, or economic gain.'² This later approach, the theorist argues, is the 'consequence of a mentality that rejected poetry as a legitimate form of knowledge and denied the importance of myth for man in coming to terms with the ambivalence of life itself' – a claim with which we fully agree.³

In contrast to these damaging trends, places of architectural heritage have the capacity to condense our emotional and intellectual consciousness, to overwhelm us with mythical stories and inspire poetical thinking. They can provide the stage for cultural polyphony, where various cultures can enter a rich conversation about the aesthetics of the place, heated debates about the meaning of its architecture, and fruitful exchange about the values of its spatial configurations. Architectural heritage augments our sense of belonging, gives meaning to the spaces we inhabit, and provides socio-cultural scaffolding for life itself.⁴ Contrary to common understanding, architectural heritage – codified or not – is also in a constant state of flux and not stagnant in the past. Its meaning continually evolves due to changes in the culture that brought it into being, disrupted social contracts, temporal decay, or planned interventions. Every time we engage with a place of heritage, either bodily or architecturally, we alter how it is perceived, understood or valued. How can we then ensure that the future worlds we will build, using heritage as their base, will be inclusive, tolerant and open to all?

With such an understanding of heritage in mind – an evolving architectural entity with a capacity to combine

its past stories with its present narratives towards future architectural scenarios – this issue of *Footprint* resorts to literature. It turns our attention to the poetic language of literature as a legitimate form of knowledge and attempts to answer a crucial question: How can literary stories help us envision possible architectural schemes for places of heritage? How can the voices of different authors, coming from various backgrounds and cultural contexts, help us envision new possibilities for places of heritage? The title of this special issue, 'Narrating Shared Futures', touches explicitly on the above questions, adding the significant parameter 'shared' to the conversation. But let's look into these three notions one by one.

Narrating

As Margaret Atwood states, human beings make sense of themselves and the world around them by narrating and sharing stories.⁵ When we run into a friend or an acquaintance we have not seen for a while, our usual questions – 'how are you doing' and 'what have you been up to' – are implicit invitations to tell their recent stories.⁶ With the development of new digital technologies and social networks, it has never been easier to become a storyteller and publicly share our thoughts (for better or worse). The publishing of books and short stories has surged in recent decades, newspapers suggest lists of novels and literature every week, podcasts feature writers reading their work, bookstores showcase new novels on a weekly basis. The never-ending popularity of literature old and new explains first-hand our need to make sense of our world by hearing but also sharing stories.

In this issue we take a closer look at narrating from both a literary and an architectural perspective. When it comes to literature, we see it as the extraordinary human capacity to create stories about imaginary worlds that can inspire our current lives.⁷ When we think about it architecturally, we trust architecture to create perfect conditions for narrating the lives and experiences of the people it is designed for. We aim for an architecture that can narrate multicultural perspectives, opening up a world of mutual respect and cohabitation. We believe in an architecture that can provide meaning by preserving the values of the past, making sense of the ever-complex present, and projecting a better and more inclusive future. We align our thinking with philosophers like Edward Casey who argues that narrative cannot be independent of place and architecture, since when we tell a story, we cannot do so without anchoring it into spaces, buildings and landscapes.⁸ Some of the contributors to this issue make this inextricable link between narrating and place by focusing on narrating as a way to extract complex meanings from the (built) environment we inhabit.

In the 'Destruction of Architecture', Federico De Matteis

examines in depth the 'rubble literature' of Heinrich Böll, Stig Dagerman and Hans Erich Nossack, who captured in their work how people felt and reacted when they encountered the destroyed German cities after the end of the Second World War. Narrating the damage, pain and fear that the bombing inflicted on people and built heritage allowed these authors to make sense of a broken world. According to De Matteis, literary accounts can provide us with 'embodied and affective cues ...: not merely the material description of things, ... but its resonance as mirrored in the attitudes, gestures, postures, practices and thoughts of those who were affected by the tremendous destruction.' He continues that

to sound the deeper stratum of existence, it is necessary to turn to more subtle and sophisticated tools, more apt at expressing the nuanced, the unspeakable – all that may otherwise be lost. Literature, as a practice of describing reality, can reach to this magmatic cache of sensations, bringing them to light.

These narratives help us empathise with others, help us become present, and help us imagine how to come to terms with contemporary catastrophes and related traumas – which unfortunately still abound.

Samuel Holleran in his 'Library of Stones' looks into death and mourning from the perspective of epitaphs and the stories they carry, understanding them as narratives of vernacular literary culture. He argues that these gravestone inscriptions served as an 'inspiration for literature that brings necrogeography into tension with programmes of growth', namely, modern 'designed' cemeteries and memorial parks, which he sees as a 'shared space that is the product of social imaginaries, including idealised notions of landscape, memory and storytelling'. By contrasting this conversation with the idea of a permanent stone archive derived from Saramago's *All the Names*, he enters the debate about how cities should, now and in the future, deal with spaces of memory and eternal rest. Holleran asks 'how future cemeteries might exist as hybrid spaces, with physical and digital markers intertwined', and hints at 'how storytelling and narrative in cemeteries might shift the way built environment practitioners think about the relationship between these two types of archives'.

In our interview with author Moira Crone, 'On Science Fiction, Heritage Architecture and Other Demons', she discusses how fictional narratives can incorporate places of heritage in ways that are subversive, unexpected or provocative. In her science fiction novel *The Not Yet*, Crone uses the example of the historic French quarter in New Orleans to explain why the preservation of the city's most famous neighbourhood was necessary for the plot; in her view, this specific place of heritage holds meanings

that are so strong that they have to be respected, even in science fiction scenarios. She discusses the difficult and cruel history of plantation homes in Louisiana, as well as moments in which the strict racial hierarchies broke down, creating possibilities for different ways of co-existence among their inhabitants. The interview offers a glimpse into the creative process of a writer who has never looked at fiction as the only possible way of narrating a story.

Like architecture, literature can utilise multiple ways to communicate stories from the past, whether fictional or factual. This also happens through more impromptu forms of narration, like the oral histories of indigenous cultures and communities. Groups of women in Oaxaca, Mexico, recount mythological stories to the community's young kids in the public square (Zocalo) during the late afternoon hours, passing on the cultural stories that are part of their identity and character. Similarly, Marcel Proust's famous narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27) gets lost in memories of his childhood, almost involuntarily, the moment he dips a small madeleine cookie in his tea. A vast and paramount work of literature acts as a connector that empathically blends our experiences and memories, regardless of our cultural background.

Shared

The world we live in is a heterogeneous one; its great diversity is both a source of an incredible cultural and linguistic richness, and of inherently related conflicts. These heterogeneous multicultural environments are often – despite our sometimes romanticised views on multiculturalism – characterised by conflicted and contested meanings we attribute to heritage architecture.⁹ Rampant globalisation, economic dependency and linguistic hegemonomies propelled by powerful nations sees dominant narratives suffocate voices of miniscule and underprivileged populations. The invisibility of marginalised and oppressed communities leads to the slow disappearance of their intricate cultures that took millennia to develop. The search for common ground, shared values, shared possibilities, shared cultures, for the smallest common denominators of tolerance and understanding can, we think, be a cornerstone for constructing more just and inclusive futures.

This characteristic capacity to mediate our shared views of the world is one that architectural heritage has in common with literature and its multiple narrative forms. As Heidegger well points out, the poetic world of literature is not a conveying of pure interiority but a sharing of world.¹⁰ 'The poetic imagination liberates the reader into a free space of an unlimited connectivity, suspending the reference to the immediate world of perception and thereby disclosing 'new ways of being-together-in-the-world'.¹¹ Following along the same path, Gadamer highlights that

works of art are forms of knowledge and not mere aesthetic objects whose only purpose might be to move us or inspire us. As soon as we stop viewing literature as a mere object and instead see a whole world through it, we realise that art is not simply sense perception, but shared knowledge.¹² This notion is picked up by some of our contributors who develop further the idea of the 'shared'.

Hanna Musiol's contribution problematises what it means to think of a shared world from the stance of a teenager or a marginalised community member who engages in acts of storytelling as resistance mechanisms. Her work looks into the narrative heritage of selected communities in diverse geographical locations of our western world and diverse modes of collective story-creation. She seeks to understand the reasons for participants' specific choices and how these choices lead to shared understandings of space and shared imagined possibilities for the futures of these spaces. In her own words, her article 'focuses on narrative encounters between people, cities and stories, and ... narrative, material, and futuristic urban plotting'. Her writing lures us into a world of multiple voices with shared points of view, masterfully interwoven with her own, bringing to the surface key questions about our unjust urban practices that need urgent responses. Musiol's article pleads for urban storytelling and narrative repair to be adopted as legitimate pedagogies of futuring and the design of urban futures.

Aitor Frías-Sánchez, Joaquín Perales-Santiago and Diego Jiménez-López offer an understanding of 'shared' that moves beyond our strict human preoccupations by introducing the perspective of animals into the discussion. They look into places of heritage in which humans and animals coexist harmoniously, namely, the library at the National Palace of Mafra, and Coimbra University's Joanina Library, both located in Portugal, and the Karni Mata temple, located in Rajasthan, India. They use the notion of xenogenesis, coined by Octavia E. Butler, to examine these places and suggest further possibilities for designing spaces with interspecies coexistence in mind. More specifically, authors suggest to 'extend existing debates on interspecies co-design practices and link them to the concept of xenoarchitecture'. They propose Interspecies Interaction Protocols (IIP) to regulate human/other-than-human interactions in built environments.

Lara Schrijver, in her piece 'Understanding a Future yet to Take Shape', focuses our attention on future ecological concepts, attempting to raise awareness of the tenuous relationship between humans and the (built) environment. Through a mindful reading of three inspirational science fiction authors – Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood – Schrijver examines 'the underlying cultural logic of building on the past'. More specifically,

she juxtaposes these literary narratives with the 'holistic view' of the 2018 Davos declaration on *Baukultur*, to show 'how the built environment resonates with societal principles, aiding or hindering particular collective values'. She offers an overview of possible shared approaches in relation to urgent contemporary ecological concerns that would embrace a 'more integral view of the built environment and society', including marginalised and non-human perspectives.

Architecture relates to the place where it is constructed, with its memories, stories, forms, and materialities, and reinterprets them according to present-day standards. It touches on people's contemporary lifestyles, trends and needs, and responds to everyday social and political circumstances. As our civilisation continues to evolve, the original meaning of the work of architecture evolves as well. Countries and nations disappear and then they are reborn in some other form; cultural values change over time; new users and entire communities inhabit old spaces; new habits and rituals require flexible programmes; different interpretations and perspectives are born under the influence of (social) media and literature; conditions of use are altered by climate change and a lack of resources; original structures decay and often radical maintenance is needed to keep them alive – all of this is influencing, often drastically, the way we perceive and interpret sites of heritage. An awareness that these different interpretations exist is the cornerstone of building shared worlds of the future.

Futures

Grounded in the past and created in the present, architecture and literature ultimately are materialised in the future. Our wager is that the number one precondition for 'shared futures' to happen is our ability to imagine, describe and create spatial scenarios in which these futures can co-exist. When confronted with this task, the usual questions that immediately come to mind are: How far into the future? What is the timeline of future spatial developments? What will societies of the future look like? Should we also be concerned with how these future societies or cultures will interact with architecture and the site? These dilemmas are undoubtedly important and we would say inevitable, embedded in the very foundation of architecture as a discipline.

Learning from literature, there are also deeper and perhaps more covert questions to answer, like: How can literary techniques and writing help us imagine these inclusive futures? How can we design with the sensibility of different cultures and their (future) needs in mind? What is the ethical responsibility of architects when designing for, and with, different cultures? When co-creating with various

actors, what is the role of architects in those processes? And finally, how can contemporary building approaches, such as recycling, maintenance and care, contribute to the discussion and provide for a better future? Again, a series of authors featured in this issue offer their views on some of these pertinent questions.

Christos Papastergiou's contribution, inspired by historical travelogues, looks sharply into designed futures. His work takes us on a journey around the magical gardens and interior courtyards of Nicosia as seen through the 'alien' eyes of travellers. Their key spatial characteristics, as identified by those travellers, were then used to suggest future design strategies in which the 'historically iconic element of the garden and its narrated spatial qualities [can offer] an answer to the problem of urban fragmentation and the presence of a large number of leftover plots in the city'. His project 'Nicosian Garden Network' incorporates unused sites of different sizes into a network of shared spaces that could 'reconnect the landscape, create conditions of sharing by the different communities ..., and regain its iconic presence in the contemporary city'. The intention is to learn from the travelogues and rethink the urban environment as a place that allows for serene moments of everyday encounters where the senses are heightened in small hidden urban oases.

Michael Hirschbichler's visual essay offers us a unique glimpse into the working of his artistic production and suggests the method of phantom writing for future interventions in urban contexts. He examines stories of ghosts, creatures and events in nondescript urban spaces of Japan, and proposes ways in which this rich context can find a new voice in the future and become part of future artistic creations. Hirschbichler proposes phantom writing or 'phantasmography' as a 'situated, multidisciplinary and multisensory approach aimed at understanding and designing contemporary places, landscapes and environments, acknowledging and mediating the agency of diverse phantoms and phantasms'.

Finally, our own visual essay – inspired by the design course of the same name, 'Narrating Shared Futures', that we taught together at TU Delft Faculty of Architecture – is also geared towards the design of the future. In this studio we invited students to collect and unpack the past stories of a place of their own choosing. It had to be a place that carried meaningful memories for them personally – in a way, a place of heritage for themselves. Then they were prompted to listen to this place's current narratives and, from these two points (past and present), dive into a creative exploration of inclusive future scenarios for this location. The design interventions manifest a rich understanding of how heritage can take new meanings into the future, and display the full potential of this kind of thinking,

which can be implemented not only in a pedagogical setting, but in architectural practice as well.

This issue looks into architectures of cultural heritage and how they can evolve into inclusive places for shared futures, by learning from literature. Literature, with its imaginative power, brings to the fore future scenarios (both spatial and situational) in which we can situate our lives. Writers, like architects, have the difficult and privileged task to imagine noble, unexpected or unexplored future worlds. Their imaginative powers can transport us to worlds with endless, architecturally innovative possibilities. Through their eyes we can envision appropriate action for heritage architecture – the carrier of cultural, social, ecological and economic values, as well as our past and present stories – through which we make sense of the world. By combining the study of cultural heritage and literature within an architectural framework, this issue of *Footprint* examines how the past, present and future are constantly being made in-the-now through both literary and design techniques.

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Notes

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2. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 'The Architecture of Richard Henriquez: A Praxis of Personal Memory', in *Richard Henriquez: Memory Theatre*, ed. Howard Shubert, catalogue of the exhibition co-organised by the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Canadian Centre of Architecture (Montreal, 1993), 13.
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4. Andrea Jelić and Aleksandar Staničić, 'Embodiment and Meaning-making: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Heritage Architecture', *The Journal of Architecture* 27, no. 4 (2022): 473–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2022.2132769>.
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7. Klaske Havik and Angeliki Sioli, 'Stories for Architectural Imagination', *Journal of Architectural Education* 75, no. 2 (2021): 160–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2021.1947670>.

8. For more on this, see: Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
9. Helaine Silverman, ed., *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World* (New York: Springer, 2011).
10. As quoted in Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 139.
11. Richard Kearney, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination,' in *The Narrative Path, The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. T. Peter Kemp and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 5.
12. Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), 77–87.

Biography

Aleksandar Staničić is an architect and assistant professor at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft. He was a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellow at TU Delft (2018–20), a post-doctoral fellow at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT (2017–18), and a research scholar at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies, Columbia University (2016–17). His most recent work includes the edited volume *War Diaries: Design After the Destruction of Art and Architecture* (University of Virginia Press, 2022) and numerous research articles in various journals, including *The Journal of Architecture*, *Footprint* and *Architecture and Culture*.

Angeliki Sioli is an architect and assistant professor of architecture at the Chair of Methods of Analysis and Imagination, TU Delft. She hails from Greece, where she obtained her professional diploma in architecture from the University of Thessaly and was granted a post-professional master's in architectural theory and history by the National Technical University of Athens. She completed her PhD in the history and theory of architecture at McGill University. Her work on architecture, literature and pedagogy has been published in a number of books and presented at numerous conferences. She has edited the collected volumes *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience* (Routledge, 2018), *The Sound of Architecture: Acoustic Atmospheres in Place* (Leuven University Press, 2022) and *Architectures of Resistance: Negotiating Borders through Spatial Practices* (Leuven University Press, 2024). 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 US.

