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Poems In Space: “Au de Cologne/Sour Theater”

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Abstract

Engaging the masterclass “Eau de Cologne/sour theater” that took place in a recent master-level studio-course of architecture, this paper examines the role of poetry in exploring the stories of a place and in building students’ capacity for storytelling. The masterclass, which lasted for ten days, is titled after a line from Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist poem “Proclamation without Pretention,”^[i] chosen to draw attention to the sense of smell in space. Indeed, the students employed poetry to address an element rarely addressed in architectural education: smells and olfactory atmospheres. The masterclass was a collaboration between an architect and a poet and built on pedagogical precedents that have looked into poetry, poetic language and storytelling from an architectural perspective. A few such examples, forming a foundation for the “Eau de Cologne/sour theater,” were: the work of Ciudad Abierta in Chile, a School of Architecture founded in the 70s by poets and still educating future designers;^[ii] John Hejduk’s fifth-year course for poetry writing, at Cooper Union in the 80’s and 90’s;^[iii] the post professional “History and Theory” program at McGill University’s Department of Architecture under the influence of Alberto Pérez-Gómez, that until 2020 was concerned with the reconciliation of ethics and poetics in architectural practice;^[iv] the pedagogies of the Chair of Methods of Analysis and Imagination at TU Delft’ Department of Architecture, where interdisciplinary connections with the literary world (with poetry being one of foci) are regularly tested within the context of the studio;^[v] and the School of Architecture in Strasbourg, where poets work with architects to build design studios.^[vi] Structures in the language of poetry Departing from these precedents, the masterclass started with an introduction to poetic terminology and language structures, discussing how they can connect to architectural storytelling. We worked with selected poems like Harryette Mullen “Wino Rhino,”^[vii] or Tony Hoegland’s “Lucky,”^[viii] which took the students from the scale of the city to that of the home. We talked about imagery, meaning the elements of a poem that invoke the senses (or any of the five senses) in order to create a mental image, and explored the potential for imagery in an architectural description of space. We tested for example how students can create an evocative and sensorial description of an imagined space appealing to the audience’s senses and emotions. We defined the differences between abstract and figurative language, explaining the capacity of the latter to appeal to our experiences and capture our imagination more vividly. We discussed how by connecting two similarly unconnected elements or notions, and thus creating a metaphor, we can open up imaginative possibilities for spatial thinking. With metaphor serving as a design tool we envision unexpected combinations of spaces, programs and materials, in ways that can forwards our architectural sensibility to approach urgent societal needs. Connecting these notions tighter with a focus on smell and olfactory atmospheres, we invited the students to envision spaces where smells and tastes are dominant, like for example their own kitchens. We asked them to create sentences that describe these spaces and their smells, through imagery and metaphors, and edit them by incorporating their peer’s feedback (Figure 1). “The morning breath of oatmeal suffocating the kitchen air,” the “blue-collar coffee maker pulling double shifts on the heavy counter,” and “the vanishing species of jars full of herbs in the open cardboards” emerged though the student’s joyful and surprising responses to our prompts.^[ix] The white space around a poem The introduction continued with the connection between poetry and the space of the page. As the students soon comprehended, the white space on the page of a poem can be equally important as the poem itself, working along with the poem to communicate its content. Precedents from Dadaists and Surrealist poets,^[x] or contemporary examples of concrete poetry,^[xi] guided the conversation on the way words, lines and sentences can occupy a page and the effect that different spatial configurations can have on a reader. Our emphasis was less on literal visual representations and more on abstract but imaginative formations. Olfactory word maps Following this

initial work, we invited the students to walk the hallways of our School and create maps of scents, smells, and aromas. The maps were meant to be made by words alone, communicating in parallel the way the smells spread in space, both in plan and section (Figure 2). Multiple iterations led to results that offered a unique reading of the place. The charted smells revealed traces of stories related to activities that were no longer present in space. The smells revealed stories connected to people's customs and everyday routines, expressing their voices, like the "microwave stories," as the students called them, that talked about specific foods consumed specific days of the week. The smells of materials used in bulk in our School for model-making were reminiscent of given course's syllabi and assignments. Moreover, the noted smells brought forward memories of other smells familiar to the students, smells from their homes or the city that served as references in order to describe the School olfactory landscape. The maps led to the creation of narratives that communicate the life of the building, with the students using techniques like personification to give voice to inanimate elements, like the microwave, the floor, or the toilets. Writing a poem in space Building on these narratives, we asked the students to proceed with the writing of a poem. The poem was meant to portray smells of the School, their presence in space, the way they influence our experience of it and the way they connect and bring forward memories of smells from other places. The poems had to include imagery, figurative language and metaphors, capturing smells from the space of the School and the spaces of their memories. This connection between the smells pointed to the fact – and made the students aware – that, olfactory memories interfere with our perception of smells enhancing our experience of place. After multiple iterations and editing of the poems, the students started imagining their poems in the three dimensions of the space of the School. Their task was to write their poems on selected surfaces of the building (thinking always of the white space like in a page) or create surfaces that could become part of the School (temporarily) hosting the poem. The poems had to be communicated to all building's users. Questions of scale and word's materiality imbued the conversation. The students soon realized that the content of their poems and the medium used to write their poems in space could creatively inform each other. Poems written on balloons, that were set free to float in space, expressed the fleeting and fragile character of the olfactory experience of fresh air at the entrance of the School. Words from poems hidden in unexpected cavities of walls and floors (Figure 3), talked about pungent smells from the wood and metal workshop and reminded us how olfactory atmospheres can be pervasive and difficult to get rid of. Threads of stanzas were weaved delicately among building element, like shatters and blinds, narrating the smooth transition from one olfactory atmosphere to another (Figure 4). A poetry reading for architecture The masterclass came to an end with a poetry reading. We walked across the building, to the locations that the poems were written, and the students recited their work, giving as also hints on how to discover the poems in space, if needed. The guests were both architects and poets. The conversation oscillated between the immaterial word of poetry and the material word of architecture and the way the one informs the other, cultivating architect's capacity for a storytelling that is poetic and inclusive of many voices. By engaging with poetic language, poetic structures and poetry writing in space the students honed skills on storytelling for architecture. On one level, they discovered and narrated the stories of the place itself, sharpening their observational skills. On another level, they created and shared stories of the place's olfactory characteristics, employing poetry to express elusive but important spatial qualities. Such knowledge not only fine-tuned their sensibilities as future designers attuning them to the stories of others and how they can be traced, but also empowered their capacity to communicate in expressive ways, ways that can transmit palpably to multiple audiences the spatial qualities they imagine when designing.