

Introduction

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES

Jonathan Charley

It Begins In The Library

One of the most obvious places to start a discussion about the relationship between architecture and literature, buildings and books, is in the library. I have been lucky enough to visit and work in some of the best. “Intellectual workers, raise your productivity in the interests of building socialism,” said the banner that stretched across the palatial reading hall number one in Moscow’s Lenin library, where surrounded by sleeping octogenarian Party academics I ordered banned texts. With mental images of slaves and conquistadors I spent days in the gothic splendour of the Cabinet of Portuguese letters in Rio, the interior of which stepped skywards in rows of leather bound embossed mystery. On green mats illuminated by a brass lamp I began my excavations of Marxist history in the senate house library in London, a wonderful irony since it doubled as the Ministry of Truth in the remake of Orwell’s 1984. But there are two in particular that I would like to die in. One is Borges’ beautifully insane infinite library of Babel whose precise description of the matrix of hexagonal sections I have vainly tried to draw. The other is Boullee’s *Bibliothèque Nationale*, a revolutionary declaration of the victory of science and enlightenment philosophy, that in the perspective drawing looks like it could be a kilometre long rather than a modest one hundred and twenty metres. It is a building that Walter Benjamin might well have had in mind when he wrote: "Not that they (books) come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones before you, and now he is going to disappear inside it is only fitting."¹

The Novel As Urban History

It is hardly an original proposition, but some of the best critical histories of urban life, and some of the most powerful representations of buildings and cities, are not produced by urban or architectural historians but by novelists. This is probably the first port of call for many people when they think about the relationship between architecture, literature and the city, and for good reason. Literature can enrich our

understanding of place, illustrate the phenomenological character of a city in an immediate and pressing way, and simply evoke that most precious of things, the atmosphere and experience of urban life, of moving and being in time and space. We probably all have our favourites, and like many before me I was drawn to Paris as the site of the first urban revolution and the birthplace of the eponym of violent urban restructuring, Haussmannisation. Like London, or New York, Paris generates its own literary culture and as you walk the nineteenth century city and marvel at the sightseer spectacle, you could do far worse than carry Marx's essays in one pocket and Zola's *The Kill* (1871), in the other - a literary combination that lays bare the corrupt urban speculation during Napoleon the III's reign that bankrupted the city and paved the way for the Paris Commune.² In a similar manner the collected works of J.G. Ballard, are an essential guide to the demise of the city in the latter part of the twentieth century. His brilliant examination of environmental and urban fragility in novels like *Drowned World* (1962), *Drought* (1965), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High-Rise* (1975), were like incendiary devices secreted in the drawing chest of modern planners and politicians, who oblivious to the world around them, remained convinced of their ability to control nature and marshal space and time. And it was the surreal character of late capitalist urbanisation that he would return to again in novels like *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), in which he forensically and ferociously takes to pieces the venal world of prostitution, crime, and violence that underpin a luxury gated condominium and shiny business park.

Alongside such 'historical novels', there are others that are so rich in detailed descriptions of buildings and cities that they can double up as architectural guides. I have wandered through Cairo's old city investigating the thousand-year history of Islamic architecture, from the austere beauty of the white marbled Al-Hakim mosque to the ornately sculpted architecture of the Mamluks, equipped only with Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (1956). And I have arrived in Madrid, hungry and thirsty, with no other intention than eating and drinking my way across the city in the company of Montalban's private detective Pepe Carvalho, a communist gourmet, who led us to a tiny restaurant, where as promised, an old lady of inconceivable age served truffles and wild boar stew from her front parlour. Then there are novelists who become such an indispensable part of an urban landscape that even if they write about other places their identity is forever bound up with that particular city. Literary tours

are a big favourite with tourists. Such is the case with the 'James Joyce Dublin Experience' in which the urban flaneur can dispense with Baedekers and Rough Guides and navigate the city's haunts in the company of Leopold Bloom or any of the other characters that inhabit the pages of *Ulysses* and the *Dubliners*. Equally popular are the antique bus tours that leave Mikhail Bulgakov's house in Moscow and whisk the visitor around the demented landscape of devils and talking animals plotted out in the *Master and Margarita* (1966) and *Heart of the Dog* (1925). And it is from the cobbled streets that stretch away from the pastel colours of the Jorge Amado foundation in Pelourinho that one can begin to get a sense of the exuberant African history and legacy of slavery in Salvador, his home city and narrative bedrock.

Chronotopic Revolutions

Beyond such relatively straightforward and playful relationships between architecture and literature there is an important point to be made. We can clearly talk about the construction and representation of architecture in literary narratives. But we can also talk about the narrative content of architecture. All buildings, whether a garden shed or a cathedral have functional and programmatic stories that are inscribed in plan, form and spatial organisation. It is a narrative richness that is all too frequently ignored by top-down histories and authoritarian design interventions. One of the consequences of this has been the emergence in recent years of a new type of narrative led architectural practice and history that is far more sensitive to the embedded stories that give meaning to a place.³ Read thoroughly from cover to cover and wall to wall, architectural narratives, like their literary counterparts can speak of many things - ideology and power, history and geography, order and control, discipline and punishment, love and desire, birth and death. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that just as there is no work of literature that doesn't have some architectural or spatio-temporal dimension, there isn't a single work of architecture, which as a practice is explicitly concerned with the manipulation of space, that doesn't possess a plot. Both architects and novelists in this sense are jugglers of space, time and narrative.

This proximity opens up an array of opportunities for conducting a dialogue between the two disciplines. We might choose to follow in the footsteps of Raymond Williams and explore the ideological character of the literary representation of the country and

the city, or in the spirit of Marshall Berman embark on a joint urban and literary journey into the heart of modernity. Alternatively we might join in Franco Moretti's quest to provide a cartographic history of literature, and map not just genres and novels, but emotions like happiness and fear.⁴ These creative exchanges are not the product of chance or accident. As Moretti argues in the *Atlas of The European Novel* (1998), "each genre possesses its own space, - and each space its own narrative", adding that, "Specific stories are the product of specific spaces" and "without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible."⁵ This idea of an historically determined structural relationship between 'space' and 'narrative' has its origins in the work of the Russian philosopher and literary historian Mikhail Bakhtin. In the *Dialogic Imagination* (1981), he argued that all literary works are characterised by a particular 'chronotope' – literally time space– and that it is through the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships, that narrative is revealed. Not only this but both time and space acquire substance as if possessed of material form: 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.'⁶ Far then from being of marginal concern, for Bakhtin, like Moretti and Berman, 'a definite and absolutely concrete locality serves as the starting point for the creative imagination'. It follows that the geography and locus of a literary narrative, whether it is a city, village or a single room, is no mere abstract landscape or theatrical backdrop, but a 'real piece of human history, of historical time condensed in space', within which the plot and the characters are unfolded 'as if they were present from the beginning'⁷.

Constructive Dialogues

What such spatialised histories of literature had shown was the very real possibility of a new type of cultural history built around the shared ideological and space-time dimensions of architectural and literary narratives. The creative possibilities opened up by such a proposition are endlessly exciting. We can for example look at how historical movements defined by a discernible shift in the form and structure of language are reflected in both literary and architectural production. One of the most well documented examples has been the modernist use of abstraction, collage, and narrative fragmentation to represent the dynamic pulse and accelerated space-time reality of the revolutionary modern city, a momentous transdisciplinary experiment in

which Russian Constructivists, Italian Futurists and German Dadaists collectively tore the image of the city apart in a cacophony of noise, image and text. We can also think of the impact on architectural and literary culture of momentous shifts in the political, economic, and technological organisation of society. How for example the machine, imagined in its twin historical role as ‘demon’ and ‘deliverance,’ has been a recurrent metaphor in both literary works and architectural drawings for over a century.

Alternatively we can document how the ever-present threat of environmental disaster has become a narrative device and call to arms for both catastrophe novelists and ecologically conscious architects.

Architectural and literary narratives can clearly share ideological positions, but they can equally contradict each other in often dramatic fashion. This is particularly the case in literary works that set out to confront and dismantle the dominant narrative of the triumphant ‘European’ metropolis of enlightenment and order. There are many potential dialogues to choose from in which other voices speak loudly about a different history and tackle head-on questions of identity, race and gender. So for example we can track the radical critique of patriarchy, domesticity, and the spatial control of women, from the work of Austen and Woolf, to the feminist Science Fiction of the likes of Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy. Equally we can document the complexities of the African American urban experience in which history is literally rewritten through the epic dramas of writers like Chester Himes, Octavia Butler, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. And similarly productive critical dialogues are there to be built when we start to think about the relationships between particular literary sub-genres and ‘spatial’ typologies. In my own warped and entangled universe, I have tracked the literary dystopia and the emergence of the modern city of fear and alienation, and documented the hardworking carceral imagination that simultaneously writes novels of confinement and builds panopticons.⁸ And I have always found comfort in the stories of struggle and redemption that abound from the heart of marginalised communities inhabiting peripheral schemes dreamt up by soulless bureaucrats, whilst all the time dining out on the crazed intoxicated tales of pleasure and despair that are scratched in the bars and lairs of the subterranean city.⁹

There is so much more to be said, and these examples along with the introductory notes are simply reflective of my own particular interests. One of the main objectives of this book then is to highlight the many other ways in which we can imagine and model the relationship between architecture, literature and the city. In the spirit of this open-ended approach there is no attempt to define these terms. They are treated as generic, porous categories that in their leakiness and lack of definition help facilitate connections between diverse and distant phenomena. As David Spurr indicates in the Foreword, books like these are all about discovery, heterogeneity and a diversity of voices. They are driven by a simple and natural curiosity to pursue new knowledge that is permissive and inclusionary. This democratisation of knowledge has been central to my work as a writer and teacher of architecture and urban culture. I have always insisted to students that the Glasgow doocot – pigeon loft - is as worthy of attention as a house designed by Greek Thomson. Whatever their qualitative merits, they are both products of the human imagination and have been drawn and built by hand. They are in my opinion both architecture. More importantly if the discourse about architecture is to remain in any way relevant then it has to address the extraordinary richness and invention of the ninety nine per-cent of the built environment that seldom features in books but which people experience on a daily basis. It is similar with regards to what qualifies as literature, and the field of Literary Studies has undergone its own democratic revolution so as to embrace forms that half a century ago would have been dismissed as pulp fiction, or ‘non-literary’ fiction. These are battles that to a large extent have been won, and over the last thirty years there has been a concerted effort to narrate both the architectural and literary history of every day life.

Structure and Content

The first section of the book, *History, Genre and Form* is probably the most straightforward. It deals mainly with the types of ideas introduced at the beginning of this essay - literature as urban history, the city as a literary character, and the parallel worlds of the architectural and literary imagination. It begins with Louise Pelletier’s essay that explores the ‘estranged spaces’ to be found in the work of Ballard, Hollouebecq and Danielewski and ends with my own chapter that compares the representation of the Science Fiction city in the novels of Philip K Dick and the Strugatsky brothers. And it is a related discourse on utopia and dystopia that

underpins Malcolm Miles' chapter on the history of "written cities" where we visit the mythic south American world of Donogoo Tonka. In between there is an array of essays that take us on a journey to both familiar and unexpected places. Johnny Rodger visits post-war London with a Graham Greene story about a group of boys tearing down a house that he suggests is a commentary on social collapse. Then there are two chapters on crime fiction, that like Science Fiction, is a fantastic vehicle in which to explore parts of cities that lie beyond the tourist gaze. Peter Clandfield takes us away from the stereotypical narrative of 'underworld' marginalised communities to investigate the white-collar crime and corruption that underpin gentrification in UK cities like Portsmouth, Sheffield and London. Meanwhile Shari Daya reveals the potential of crime fiction through Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, to capture the gritty drama and 'simultaneously modern and fundamentally illegible' character of a mega city like Bombay. From India we travel to Brazil and explore the legacy of slavery and urban inequality through Ana Baltazar's analysis of popular literature and Aluísio Azevedo's *O Cortiço*, after which we cross the planet to Korea where we hear from Yoonchun Jung about the remarkable life of Yi Sang, a modernist novelist and architect. Singapore is next on the itinerary where Lillian Chee shows how literature can offer a critical lens through which to understand the monumental housing programme of the Singaporean HDB, before Angeliki Sioli unpacks the concepts of the 'cityful' and 'active perception' as she embarks on a global tour from Joyce's Dublin, to Murukami's Tokyo and Gonzalo's Mexico City.

The second section of the book *Strategy, Language, and Form* looks more generally at analytical strategies and creative methods, some of which are at the margins of what is normally considered architectural and literary culture. It opens up with Alberto Perez Gomez' essay on how the techniques of literary fiction can serve as valuable tools for the creation of architectural atmospheres, and it is the concept of atmosphere again that is addressed in Klaske Havik's essay that sets out to show how literary language can illuminate the complex affective relations between citizens and urban space. Away from the 'hegemony' of the novel, Owen Hatherley provides us with a radical critique of urban development and militarisation in the South of England, narrated through the rebel poetry of Andrew Jordan, and Kreider and O'Leary tell of how poetry played a key role in the foundation of the experimental Valparaiso school of architecture in Chile. On the other side of the continent, Csaba

Deak forges an alternative history of the Brazilian city through three novels that reflect different stages in the country's economic and ideological development. It is through the similar weaving of multiple voices, that of the novelist, the architect and the immigrant, that Sarah Edwards narrates the history of the Italian Community in Glasgow. Then there is a sequence of four essays that offer a range of tactics for interpreting urban history that deal with 'literary' forms beyond the conventions of either the novel or poem. Ed Hollis looks at how the creative writing of specifications and instructions can generate not only the planning and occupation of spaces, but also the reconstruction of lost interiors. Inga Bryden tracks the historical evolution of 'writing on buildings' and investigates how fictional texts reflect the ideological dimensions of urban graffiti cultures, whilst Matteo Pericoli in conversation with Carole Hilfrich documents his Laboratory for Literary Architecture, a project in which he invites writers and architects to intuitively model the space of a literary work. Then there is Koldo Lus Arana's encyclopaedic history of the architectural comic in which he charts a passage from *Gasoline Alley* (1918), to the comics of the 1960s avant-garde and contemporary graphic narratives about the city. The book ends with Jane Rendell's account of her quest with many others, to try and save from demolition the homes of an ethnically-diverse community in London, in which she knits together fragments of speech theory, oral history and court testimony.

It was the intention from the very beginning of this project that the volume should be both thematically and geographically ambitious in its range of voices and narrative trajectories. Of course all that one can ever do is offer an edited snapshot of the vast landscape of narratives and spaces that remain to be imagined, written and drawn, and if nothing else I hope that this book elicits a desire to do exactly that.

¹ Walter, Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library' in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

² For one of the best accounts of the reconstruction of Paris see David, Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2006).

³ There was the ground breaking book by Christian Norberg Schulz, *Genus Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1979), and in 1984 the group NATO

Narratives of Architecture Today emerged out of the Architectural Association in London that set out to explode the boundaries of architecture and to embrace popular culture and street life. Then there were a number of anthologies like *Strangely Familiar* (1996) and *The Unknown City* (2001) that explored the buried and neglected stories of buildings and cities.

⁴ These refer to the classic books by Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1989) and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1985). See Franco Moretti, Erok Steiner and Ryan Heuser, *Mapping Literary Emotions* (London: New Left Review, 2016) Issue 101, p63

⁵ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 2009), p100 (1998)

⁶ Mikhail, M, Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). The essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' was first translated in 1981, six years after his death.

⁷ Mikhail, M, Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010 (1986), p49. What Bakhtin, Moretti, Williams, and Berman share, is not only a preoccupation with geography and space, but also a materialist approach to literary analysis that sees literature as the product of history, as emerging out of a concrete social and material reality. The same of course can be said of architecture and the city.

⁸ Imagine if you will a joint architectural-literary project in which the history of the prison from Bentham, to the 19th century panopticon and contemporary surveillance networks are joined at the hip with the carceral writings of everyone from Dostoevsky, to Kafka, Orwell and Solzhenitsyn.

⁹ In a similar vein I have spent an awful lot of my time tracking the development of social housing from the first experiments in Philanthropy, through the modernist experiment of the 1920s up to the mass industrialisation of house building, whilst all the time reading novels that document the lives of the working class from Zola, to Gorky all the way to the explosion in the UK in the 1950s and 60s of the 'great working class' novel. One of the reasons behind this and the project above is so as to enrich the teaching experience for students, that is to animate the history and theory of architecture and the city with other 'voices.'