

## **Performing Urban Archives – a starting point for exploration**

**Cecilie Sachs Olsen**, Queen Mary, University of London, UK

‘A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira’s past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.’

(Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*)

This is the story about why the event *Performing Urban Archives* came to be – the event that forms the starting point of all the contributions to this special issue section of *cultural geographies in practice*. *Performing Urban Archives* took place at Queen Mary University of London on June 10, 2015. Following Calvino, the description of the event as it unfolded that day should also contain its past; let me start with the context.

The idea of seeing the city as an archive – to approach it as layer upon layer of compacted material and social detail that is in endless transformation – implies a certain way of ‘looking’ that has the potential to challenge pre-determined and fixed understandings of urban space in favour of openness, instability and multiplicity. It may lead to a re-imagination and new understandings of our material surroundings.

Present technocratic visions tend to portray the city as an organisation of external and neutral objects that are severed from social relations. Waste, for example, is seen as a manageable object that is somewhat external to society. Hence, waste is open to technical and institutional solutions by the municipal management. However, as Moore [1] points out, by rejecting the argument that waste 'just is' one may deconstruct the category of waste and recognize the often unjust and highly exclusionary socio-spatial orders produced by waste in relation to for example the modernist shibboleths of cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation.

Urban materiality does not only bear witness of exclusionary orders, it can also function as a medium for sharing and establishing relationships that brings one closer to the crowd. Traces of use help us associate ourselves with the collective practice of preceding users showing confidence in the traces they leave behind, for example the complicity in infringement when sticking a piece of chewing gum onto a spot littered with other pieces of gum, the gradual forming of a path providing a shortcut over a lawn, or the double door where the one handle that is polished from use indicates that this is the side that will open.

Seeing the city as an archive opens up for examining these various social processes through which the urban environment is produced. As Pearson argues [2] there is a need for a field of enquiry that involves a renewed sensitivity to the material fabric of the present and attention to those details distinct and

differentiated that signal our presence. *Performing Urban Archives* is as an attempt to open up this field of enquiry through an explorative approach that combines theoretical reflections with practice-based experiments. As such, the contributors to this special issue aim to experiment with new abilities to create knowledge by emphasising creative discoveries that may provide new ways for thinking and writing about how we inhabit urban space.

The central questions we elucidate are:

*How does the notion 'the city as archive' relate to the politics and practices of urban space?*

*How can approaching the city as an archive open up for new urban imaginaries?*

*What can this approach tell us about the relationship between people and the cities they inhabit?*

*How can approaching the city as an archive challenge fixed meanings of the tangible and physical aspects of urban space?*

*How can objects and artefacts articulate certain urban practices and experiences?*

*In what ways may artistic practice play a role in opening up for seeing the city as an archive?*

A range of scholars, artists and practitioners from various fields answer these questions: artist, Richard Wentworth, known for his photographic semi-diaristic

archives in which the urban landscape is framed through the arrangements of objects that he encounters in his day-to-day journeying around the city; professor and writer, Michael Sheringham, who has written extensively on everyday life, memory and the archive; my own artist collective zURBS whose focus on constructing 'alternative city archives', in which the role of the archivist is given to the residents of the city, has informed much of my thinking on the idea of the city as archive; performance scholar, Johanna Linsley who tackles issues of documentation, archives, labels and classification through performance projects with multiple versions and outcomes; artist and performance scholar, Emma Bennett, who investigates how figural language can destabilize the boundaries between the literal and figurative, practice and theory; cultural geographer, Harriet Hawkins, who does research on the geographies of art works and art worlds; architectural theorist and practitioner Joseph Kohlmaier, who works with urban imaginations relating to sound, architecture and the city, and finally writer, performer and performance scholar, Katie Beswick, who looks at the representation of housing estates in performance practices and the idea of the social housing estate as a ruin.

In keeping with the explorative nature of the event, the invitees were not asked to deliver an academic paper at the event itself. Rather they were teamed up in order to engage in different forms of conversations revolving around their experiences and reflections on the city as archive [3]. Furthermore, zURBS facilitated an urban

exploration in which all participants ventured into the surrounding urban area of Mile End in order to test out ideas and approaches to how one can archive the city.

The papers in this section of *cultural geographies in practice* attempt to continue the conversations and explorations that were initiated at the *Performing Urban Archives* event. Richard Wentworth and Michael Sheringham engage in a discussion that explores how we can get a better grip of urban experience by looking at the city as an archive. Richard's artistic and practice-based approach here compliments Michael's more analytic reflections drawing on philosophy and literature. Johanna Linsley and Emma Bennett jointly contemplate the possibility of translating a performance on which they collaborated into text. The performance, a lecture titled *The Present Becomes Us*, is based on a science fiction premise: what if the Future is a geographical location which derives its materiality by stealing potentiality from the Present? The premise was created by Johanna, but the lecture was performed by Emma, using the subjunctive mood, and opening with the lines 'This is a performance lecture by Johanna Linsley, or it would be if she were here'. The text explores questions about temporality, geography and the places where histories are made, so that a complex and embodied notion of the archive subtly emerges. The voices of the two writers(/performers) are not strictly delineated, so that in this dialogue as in the performance, a porous and ambiguous understanding of presence and identity remains. Harriet Hawkins and myself reflect on the

performative workshop that was conducted by my artist collective, zURBS. The workshop sent the participants into the city to look for objects and material traces of social practices in order to explore questions relating to the legibility of the urban environment. Harriet observes the workshop from a participant's perspective, whereas I discuss it as a facilitator of the workshop. The final paper brings together three short 'provocations' presented by Katie Beswick, Harriet Hawkins and Joseph Kohlmaier. Between them, these provocations investigate the idea of how the archive of the city can be 'tapped' through a number of performative acts from a broad range of different perspectives, including the role of 'archival art'; performance, practice and competition in the context of the city; the body as an archive; the foundation of the city as a performative act; street dance; stream of consciousness and the city in the psychological novel; and the role that documentary practices can play in regaining political territory.

Like the city itself, these papers produce a dynamic archival space that expresses the simultaneous coexistence of many different and possible experiences, perspectives and stories that consist of loose ends, missing links and uneven, conflicting, unassimilable but related elements. As such, the papers point to how talking about the archive involves talking of 'might' and 'if', of mess and what is missing, of tensions and contradictions, of gaps and bridges between different worlds, of stories lost and stories retold, of slippage and fluidity. What binds it all

together, however, is the attempt to examine how looking at the city as an archive may open up for alternative urban imaginaries that investigate what urban space is and means.

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### **Notes**

1. S. Moore, 'Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2011, pp. 1 - 20
2. M. Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

3. These conversations were moderated by urban geographer David Pinder (Roskilde University) and performance scholar Jen Harvie (Queen Mary, University of London).

### **Author biography**

Cecilie Sachs Olsen is co-founder of zURBS and PhD researcher in Geography at Queen Mary, University of London. Her research revolves around how art can be used as a framework to analyse and re-imagine space and politics. Cecilie has been working as a research assistant at the Institute of Critical Theory at Zurich University of the Arts, as well as at the research project Urban Breeding Grounds at the Chair of Architecture and Urban Design, ETH Zurich.