

Homing Objects: From Writing to Making

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Abstract: Can architects design with words? Can they move from words to models and then hands on making, bypassing the medium of drawing altogether? Can they use language to imagine future scenarios and spatial possibilities in different ways than through drawings? “Homing Objects” was a recent four-week workshop that tested these possibilities within the master level studio course *The Space of Words*, at Delft University of Technology. The workshop asked architecture students to fabricate unprecedented domestic objects that were dreamed up and “drawn out” through language. At stake is our wager that writing tends to essential aspects of the architect’s imagination that run the risk of being severely diminished in a world captivated by the ocular dominance of compelling images. We argue that, especially when it comes to cultivating the future architect’s imagination, language can push beyond what something “looks like” and refocus attention to what something “feels like” more effectively than drawing in a number of ways: Language can engage multi-sensory qualities, experientially-layered aspects of space. Language can likewise more explicitly engage with the temporal thickness of space and experience – ranging from ephemeral conditions and rituals, to traces of memory, as well as human and natural histories. Finally, language can precipitate a haptically-focused making process, which further cultivates the architect’s imagination by drawing on and building onto tacit and embodied knowledge about materials and making.

THE CASE FOR LANGUAGE IN ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINATION

An often remarked fact about our discipline is that architects do not build buildings, they make drawings.¹ The architect’s drawings can be explanatory, instructional, utilitarian, imaginative and at times utterly mysterious to those not initiated in their language. Drawings can also be speculative, subversive, and have been deployed for bringing forth potential futures scenarios. In the profession and especially in architecture schools the drawing is celebrated for precisely its capacity to present wildly imaginative highly seductive imagined worlds. At the same time, we are

caught in the current of a voracious consumption of titillating images that inundates our daily digital lives. They often serve to validate the “relevance” of work achieved at architectural schools and in design practices alike, by privileging the popularity and swagger of their respective social media accounts. Yet we know that when it comes to making architecture there is much more at stake than how something looks or photographs. Such stakes are further amplified in the training of future architects.

“Homing Objects” was a workshop dedicated to a design process in which the cultivation of the future architect’s imagination sought to bypass the dominance of the ocular by excluding drawing altogether and was instead tended to through writing exercises and hands-on making. “Homing Objects” asked architecture students to fabricate unprecedented domestic objects, “drawn out” of language. Our wager is that language can, more effectively than drawings, cultivate an architectural imagination that is attentive to the experiential, multi-sensory, multi-dimensional, and temporally thick existence of objects and spaces. These aspects build up the depth of human experience and are fundamental to architectural training, yet they can easily be drowned out by the attention span of seductive images. In working with language and building domestic objects students were prompted to re-examine the habits and rituals of home. The design of these new objects prompted students to look closer into their current domestic spaces—usually small student dormitories—and create something that would meaningfully reconfigure their sense of home in ways that could be more imaginative, more creative, more humorous, or just more practical.

The term “homing” was borrowed from messenger pigeons, which are trained to both deliver a message but also return home. “Homing” intended to turn “home” into a verb and an act, emphasizing the performative dimension of domesticity that weaves together habits and memories to engender new possibilities of (re)enacting and (re)finding home. “Homing” sought to also foreground that everyday domestic objects are witnesses to the rituals and habits of homemaking and they often carry intimate stories and memories. We wanted students to sharpen their attentiveness to these seemingly unremarkable habits and to imagine them anew, together with the unique objects



Figure 1. Moke-ups tested in place (left two images) leading to the construction of the final object for the tilt and turn window, which the students called the Watchtower. Notice the moving of the handle in the right two images. Students Nöelle van Kouwen and Christopher Clarkson. Images on the left by Nöelle van Kouwen and Christopher Clarkson, images on the right by Misscha Mannot.

they would create. We also wanted students to develop a tacit knowledge of joinery and one-to-one detailing. The workshop was part of *The Space of Words*, an exploratory master level design studio funded by the Comenius Fellowship Grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education and Culture. The course focused on a design process that combined language assignments with wood-working and culminated in two full-scale timber-built spaces that injected the space of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment with pockets of domesticity. The promise of *The Space of Words* was to employ language as a descriptive, imaginative and design tool that together with hands-on making would guide architecture students to represent and reimagine the domestic. “Homing Objects” was one of four workshops in this process and was taught by three architects combining expertise in architectural theory, building technology, and timber construction.

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Although less commonly used in space-making practices, language—the most elemental mode of human expression—can be a powerful tool for imagining spaces and human experiences. Philosophers from the field of phenomenological hermeneutics like Paul Ricoeur (1975, 1979) and Richard Kearney (1988) have argued that imagination is primarily linguistic, meaning that we rely on language to construct images in our mind’s eye.² More recent studies in philosophy and neuroscience, like Alva Nöe’s *Perception in Action* (2009) and Harry Mallgrave’s *The Architect’s Brain* (2013) have shown that the literary imagination—imagination instigated by words and language—is the operative principle in the spatial imagination, or that which allows architects to envision possibilities for new spaces.³ Renowned architects including Juhani Pallasmaa, Rick Joy, and Daniel Rosbottom affirm in their practices the potency of language for imagining and designing spaces.⁴ When teaching architecture, Rick Joy has been known to challenge students to employ language in a very creative way. At the Harvard Graduate School of Design, in the fall of 2000, he

asked his students to “verbally describe their projects” and not “bring their drawings and models into the review space.”⁵

More examples enrich the conversation when it comes to the use of language in architectural education. Professors John Hejduk (The Cooper Union, USA), Douglas Darden (University of Colorado), Louise Pelletier (UQAM School of Design, Canada) and Klaske Havik (TU Delft, Netherlands)—to name some of the better-known ones—have introduced language, through varied language assignments, as a part of their pedagogy. Moreover, language has been an important tool in their research. Hejduk used language to imagine and describe characters and programs in his famous Masque projects, while as an educator he run a fifth-year course, asking students to write a poem each week.⁶ In *Condemned Building* (1993) Darden deploys narrative writing to design ten buildings that provocatively “turn over” architectural canons.⁷ For Pelletier, whose own work *Architecture in Words* (2006) explores the role of theatre and fiction in defining character in architecture, writing assignments have always been instrumental when it comes to teaching architecture.⁸ Havik takes cues from literary techniques used by authors to enrich the architectural imagination in both pedagogy as well as her own writing practice.⁹ In all these cases though, poems, narratives and writing assignments have always been assigned complementary to drawings and models. None of the above approaches has focused exclusively on working with language instead of drawings in order to imagine and design architecture.

The Space of Words embarked to do exactly that, building upon these strong and inspiring precedents. The course explored the potential of language for imagination and design and bypassed drawing, building on the fact that “language allows a freedom from the relentless exactitude of drawing,” as Adrian Forty puts it in his work *Words and Buildings* (2000).¹⁰ While we take for granted that drawings are necessary for the construction of architecture, historically this has not always been the case. Before the Renaissance buildings were not built by first producing scaled



Figure 2. Cooking with Kitchen Coop, students Marianna Angelini and Babette van Tilborg. Image by Mischa Mannot.

drawings but by marking a future plan directly on ground.¹¹ The world's most impressive cathedrals were likewise never contained in scaled drawings before construction and were never fully "seen" until built. The medieval master mason relied on proportions and a series of geometric templates, something similar to a music score of cumulative building-upon.¹² With these historical and theoretical precedents in our armory "Homing Objects" challenged students to create new domestic objects by imagining and designing them through language.

WRITING 1: FAMILIAR ESTRANGED

The workshop opened by asking students to bring some of their own domestic objects. The objects had to fit in the students' backpacks and satisfy some of given criteria including: something in the objects should intrigue the students; something about the objects should arise a strong emotion (delight, frustration, fear, joy, curiosity); the object should be connected to some memory (that could be the student's, but not necessarily). Without any introduction or background information, these objects were placed on a table creating a studio-specific cabinet of curiosities that would serve as the catalyst for the first writing exercise.

Before writing, and as a warm-up, we read out loud a few literary examples that focused on objects. Amongst them were excerpts from Ben Nicholson's *Appliance House* (1990), Francis Ponge's *The Voice of Things (Le parti pris des choses, 1942)*, and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914).¹³ This reading was followed by animated discussion of each author's descriptive tactics as the texts

offered a wide variety of voices and contrasting approaches to writing about objects. For instance, Nicholson and Ponge both wrote short texts about bread. Ponge's bread, a crusty French loaf, is presented as a luscious landscape while Nicholson's shrewd description of bagged, pre-sliced, processed bread operates as incisive cultural criticism.

With our conversation fresh in their mind, the students' first writing task was to write a paragraph-length text about three objects from the ones collected in front of them. They were prompted to hide the objects between the lines—that is, write about the objects without disclosing what they were. The goal of this oblique writing was for students to focus their attention away from the obvious and cultivating new ways of looking at objects. This task also brought forward aspects of the objects that cannot be contained by their image alone. We explicitly encouraged students to leverage the potency of language to construct ways of seeing that are multi-sensory, multi-faceted, and temporally thick. This can be observed in some of the students' first texts:

Chiselled from the hearts of mountains and reformed
to sit snugly besides her brother's cheek to cheek,
she has silently borne the burden of thousands of
rushed rubber steps that sarcastically say, '*dobry*
den.' Pearlescent and passive, removed again from
the excel sheet of the street, she sits now proudly,
though heavy at heart from the memories she carries
of those she once loved, and the home she will
never return to.¹⁴

and

A small secret in my space
A secret that brings serenity and ache
Cold on the surface but soft in the core
Unknown what it hides and what his meaning is for

It has special markings which tell tales from far beyond
Its coat brings you the queen's crown
he takes you to places which can be enchant-
ing or dangerous
He himself comes from earthy lands
he shows his special strengths if you enter him carefully
But you must be open to experience his spells
he will invade your body and fill it with purple fairy dust.¹⁵

Notice how these two texts bring forward multiple temporalities of each object. In the first, Christopher Clarkson points at the geological time scale of the mountains that are the object's provenance, the working of human craft, the repeated rituals of walking, and the way that the object becomes part of human memories and personal histories and can be imbued with longing. In the second text, Roos Scholten uses language to build an aura of mystery and enchantment around the object and weaves



Figure 3. Kitchen Coop: a basic kitchen kit that consisted of belts and a number of interchangeable joints, students Marianna Angelini and Babette van Tilborg. Image by Mischa Mannot

it into the time-space of the fable and the fairy tale. Because the objects are hidden between the lines, the texts amplify opportunities for creative projections that expand beyond the objects themselves. The texts are open ended and allow the imagination to come up with many possible objects, bringing forward what Paul Ricoeur has described as “a surplus of meaning.”¹⁶

WRITING 2: OBJECTS COMBINED

With the second written assignment students started moving towards the design of the new/unprecedented domestic object. We invited them to describe in words, a new invented object that draws on characteristics of the three different objects as they emerged in the first exercise. We encouraged them to be especially attentive towards what sensorial qualities (textures, colors, scents, sounds) from the existing objects would be important to their new object. We likewise emphasized attentiveness towards the temporal aspects of their desired object such as the rhythms and rituals of possible use, the temporalities of the materials of which it could be made, how long the object itself might maintain its present form, and the history or events in which the object might have played a part.

We noticed with this exercise a kind of “sketching” in language in which students tested out multiple options or iterations for their

potential objects. This is the point in the process where students were organized into teams of two or three. The short vignettes below come from the same team:

At fist full of air, waiting to wrap itself around you. Silk surface of soft fabric, fond of the idea of pleasing others. Carefully woven caterpillar’s nest, enveloping your body. Erasing its shape while revealing its depth. Flexibility of assembly allowing transformations. Aerial skin. It comes to life, awakens to become a partner in movement. (an element for an intimate ritual, multi-sensory experience designed for mindfulness)¹⁷

A cocoon. A million stories to tell, but too wise to burden us. Smooth in surface, round shapes. About the age of a mountain. (a “secret holder”? passed on from generation to generation?)¹⁸

Notice that the texts describe not only sensorial qualities of the potential objects, but their performative aspect: what the objects would do, and how they might engage humans as well as time. In other words, even these very first texts already focused away from what the objects looked like, and towards the



Figure 4. Students Selma Beltifa, Maja Liro and Justus Schäfer building up the Totem Pole during a performance at the final reviews of "Homing Objects," Delft University of Technology, November 2022. Image by Pierre Jennen

experiences they would make possible. There are many more texts we can share from this group. These all orbit around a few recurring themes about memory, traces, potential objects that build layers over time and tell stories accrued over multiple generations. After many iterations of texts—students wrote a lot more than they ended up keeping towards the final project—and models, this group eventually came to build a Memory Totem, which we discuss further down.

WRITING 3: DOMESTICITY RE-EXAMINED

The third writing assignment approached the design project from a slightly different focus by asking students to examine their own current domestic environments, identify needs and/or desires, and imagine new objects that might satisfy them. Let us clarify here that by new or unprecedented objects we were not encouraging students to seek novelty for the sake of novelty. Our intention was that students sharpen their attentiveness to seemingly unremarkable spaces, and in doing so they discover fresh possibilities for seeing and creatively re-imagining and re-making the everyday. The second and third exercises functioned as two possible avenues through which students would draw out and focus the needed or desired new object. For Nöelle van Kouwen and Christopher Clarkson, it was this third assignment that led them to their eventual built object. Notice that the not-yet-existing object is not named, but presented through what it could offer to the inhabitant of a ground floor apartment. It was an object that “could prevent a tilt and turn window from being an easy way to break into a house.”¹⁹

On a hot summer day, the sun beats down on my apartment. Baking. Opening the window and letting a cool breeze pass me by is a relief, I can finally breathe. That said, having it fully open creates a feeling of being exposed to the world outside. Outside, where strangers walk through the heavy shadows in silence and feed off of my privacy. My open window is not an invitation to you, or anybody. Setting the window half open (opening above and hinging from the bottom) allows a best-of-both-worlds situation in which my shelter remains intact – clearly my own – save a small opening through which air can travel freely. Inside, I can rest easy, safe from those that lurk beyond my window, and yet, I’m able to feel a connection to the larger world. By placing the _____ on the window handle I’m able to experience this without any fear. That individual that stares into my space from afar is no longer a threat to my space.²⁰

One of our main observations moving through these three kinds of writing exercises was that some of the approaches were more fruitful than others for students, and that it was helpful to have several approaches as to relieve the pressure that each exercise had to be “productive” towards the eventual object. This way

the students could ease into this creative process of writing and appreciate it as a “meandering” of tentative possibilities.

MAKING HOMING OBJECTS

With such texts on our side, we moved towards the process of making the objects, which were to be primarily out of wood. Wood was the dominant material for hands-on building throughout the entire studio sequence. Other materials could be used but they were to be clearly secondary to the wooden components of the object. Wood was chosen as it is a low-threshold material: it can be worked with hand tools and even students with little or no experience can right away engage with relatively sophisticated detailing techniques. This requirement also built towards the final assignment of *The Space of Words*, the construction of full-scale domestic interiorities made out of timber.

The students were invited to bring to life their imaginary objects through iterative working models made predominantly out of paper, cardboard, and wood. We insisted that their eventual objects had to function in the ways they imagined, which required careful consideration of joints and construction details. The models and mock-ups were always tested in the actual place and conditions that students wanted their objects to exist or perform. During the consecutive iterations we always focused on the objects’ domestic use and performative aspect. We insisted on finding the technical solutions that could make these objects truly functional (Figure 1).

Kitchen Coop is an example of an especially performative object that operates at the time-scale of making a meal. Marianna Angelini and Babette van Tilborg lived in small student housing apartment shared by three roommates. The common spaces like the kitchen were minimal, and in the moments of rush hour even a basic morning ritual like making coffee was a struggle. In their text, Marianna and Babette adopted the perspective of their kitchen floor and narrated the chaotic steps and awkward pirouettes the floor witnessed in the constrained space of the tiny kitchen. Emerging from this writing they wished for an object that would provide for a more ordered and elegant choreography of the daily happenings of the kitchen and would allow the roommates to cook together without constantly colliding into each other (Figure 2). Their resulting object was a basic kitchen kit that consisted of three belts (one for each of the roommates) and a number of interchangeable joints that connected the belts to each other and directed specific movements required for meal-making: turning around by 180 degrees to reach the fridge, or bending to reach pots from the cabinets (Figure 3).

A domestic object with a much slower performance time was Memory Totem, which we mentioned earlier. Selma Beltifa, Maja Liro and Justus Schäfer were inspired by the idea of everyday domestic objects that were once used regularly and ended up forgotten in attics and at the back of closets. These were rather unremarkable objects that even though no longer “useful” had accrued emotional value over time by becoming entangled with

intimate memories of home. In their writing the students observed with bittersweet melancholy that these objects have “a million stories to tell, but [are] too wise to burden us.”²¹ This reflection guided them towards the creation of an object that would welcome those “now-forgotten” obsolete artifacts and give them again a prominent place in the home (Figure 4). They described their desired object as “a cocoon,” that it would have the “age of the mountain,”²² and would continue to build up over time in layers. These intentions eventually lead them to Memory Totem, a re-interpretation of a totem pole that would have recesses and alcoves to place obsolete, memory-rich objects (Figure 5). The pole would start out short and would have the capacity to grow in height as more object-holding segments would be added. As the years would go by this pole would rise to the height of the home, nesting within it an intimate history of family life.

CONCLUSION

We opened this paper with three provocations: “Can architects design with words? Can they move from words to models and then hands on making, bypassing the medium of drawing altogether? Can they use language to imagine future scenarios and spatial possibilities in different ways than through drawings?” “Homing Objects” explored these questions through a design process that guided students from imaginative writing to iterative making. The result was fully functional unprecedented domestic objects that through their performative aspect, creatively reconfigured domestic spaces.

We showed how writing enabled students to direct their imaginative focus towards what objects and spaces do, how they feel, how they move us, and how they support human experiences, thus diluting the importance of what they look like. Writing likewise helped students be more attentive to the temporal thickness of objects and spaces. It allowed them to notice that they bear traces of memories and histories, that they sustain habits, rituals, and events. Writing brought forward that things, materials, experiences, and humans exist and behave in manifold scales of duration and wear. Moving directly to making (and constructing their full-scale objects) students built an embodied knowledge of wood and detailing materials that precipitated imaginative, playful, and practical outcomes. Unlike drawings, in which objects can indiscriminately accept any desired “look,” materials and hands-on making speak back. They offer productive resistance to what’s (not) possible and lead students to discovering opportunities they would have not previously anticipated.

We looked to bypass the medium of drawing in this process not because we do not love drawings, but because they are too easily drowned out in the torrential outpour of seductive images that invade our screens and usurp our (architecture students’) thoughtfulness and attention. We recognize that there is a difference between architectural drawings and mere image production. We likewise recognize that given today’s building technologies, drawings are more easily bypassed at the scale of

small domestic objects than they are at the scale of full-fledged architectural projects. It isn’t that students didn’t at all make sketches or quick drawings to work out details of their objects.



Figure 5. Detail of Totem Pole. Students Selma Beltifa, Maja Liro and Justus Schäfer. Image by Mischa Mannot.

We simply asked that they communicate their intentions to us through writing and models. In removing drawings from official deliverables, we relieved their process from prioritizing “looking good” and focused their attention on objects that touch well and work well. This performative and haptic aspect is also essential in full-fledged architectural projects. However, we argue that training and learning to conscientiously engage these aspects in design is essential at full scale, which is, especially at first, much more accessible at the intimate dimension of objects.

ENDNOTES

1. For a discussion on the role of architectural drawings in the practice of architecture see David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture Is Its Own Discipline," in *The Discipline of Architecture*, eds. Andrzej Piotrowski and Julia W. Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 83-102.
2. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), first published in French in 1975, first translated to English in 1978; Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," *Man and World* 12, no. 2 (1979): 123-141; ; Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
3. Alva Nöe. *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Harry Mallgrave, *The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity and Architecture* (New York; London: Routledge, 2013).
4. Juhani Pallasma, *The Thinking Hand, Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (Chichester: Wiley, 2009); Rick Joy, *Desert Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002); Daniel Rosbottom, "Delft lectures on Methodologies," (lecture at TU Delft, October 2019).
5. Rick Joy, *Desert Works*, 20.
6. John Hedjuk, *Mask of Medusa* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); John Hedjuk, *Education of an Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
7. Douglas Darden, *Condemned Building: An Architect's Pre-Text* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).
8. Louise Pelletier, *Architecture in Words: Theatre, Language, and the Sensuous Space of Architecture* (New York; London: Routledge, 2006).
9. Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014).
10. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 37.
11. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
12. For instance, the construction of the Milan Cathedral (built at the turn of the 15th century) was subject to heated debates between local builders and foreign expertise brought from Lombardy. Even once the construction began, the archbishop called a conference in order to decide "the length of the pilasters, the height of the church, of the windows, doors, and other things." These debates centered around whether what we would today call the "section" should be inscribed in a square or a triangle and according to which proportions. The arguments were founded on a mix of structural intuitions combined with the spiritual dimension of geometry (ie. the Trinity, Platonic solids). James S. Ackerman, "'Ars Sine Scientia Nihil Est' Gothic Theory of Architecture at the Cathedral of Milan," *The Art Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (1949): 84-111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047224>.
13. Ben Nicholson, *Appliance House* (Chicago, Ill: Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, 1990), 31; Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, translated by Beth Archer Brombert [1st ed.] (New York: McGraw-Hill Book, 1972), first published as *Le Parti pris des choses* (Paris, 1967); Gertrude Stein and Juliana Spahr, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. Seth Perlow (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014), first published in 1914.
14. Christopher Clarkson, text for "Homing Objects," *The Space of Words* master design studio, Delft University of Technology, Angeliki Sioli, Anca Matyiku, Pierre Jennen, November 2022. For several of the students English was not their first language. We are including the students' texts as they wrote them, with very minor spelling adjustments when these were obvious.
15. Roos Scholten, text for "Homing Objects," Ibid.
16. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
17. Selma Beltifa, Maja Liro and Justus Schäfer, text for "Homing Objects," Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Nöelle van Kouwen and Christopher Clarkson, text for "Homing Objects," Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Selma Beltifa, Maja Liro and Justus Schäfer, text for "Homing Objects," Ibid.
22. Ibid.