

DOUBLE-MAKING

PLACE-MAKING

*Dissident Bodies, Deviant Acts, &*

*the Queer Art of Undefining Urbanism*

*Thomas Stempka*

...where does the city end and I begin?



# Trouble-making Place-making:

Dissident Bodies, Deviant Acts, &  
the Queer Art of Undefined Urbanism

Thomas Stempka

PhD in *Design & Communication* - BAU/UVic-UCC

Supervisors: Mariona Moncunill Piñas

Rubén Martínez Moreno

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# Abstract

Flitting erratically across Europe for four years, this thesis started off trying to tackle the question, "What is Queer Urbanism?" Armed with the canon of queer (spatial) theory, the author's attempt to create a cohesive, straightforward PhD were dashed after a series of missteps and misfits blocked/paved the way. Movement was the only constant, displacing their body whenever they could to find a way forward (or sideways...sometimes backwards). When personal tragedy struck, the grief and ghosts were (against better judgement) invited along to join in on this fool's crusade. Along the way, a cast of characters from their past and present assisted in the research, artistic practices, and healing processes. Sardonic sincerity speckled with a smattering of whimsical irony, the author used their provocative and/or perverse actions to sketch a figurative and literal portrait and/or landscape of performance, drawing, and objects which challenge the needs, wants, and uses of their environment and users. As sorrow coalesced with sass, not to mention running out of time and money, the research took a playful approach to reading the room(s). Desperately trying to fashion some semblance of balance in this lopsided world, poetry provided the warm embrace of dark magic which was badly needed. Possibly read as a fleshed-out version of Michel de Certeau's 'Walking in the City' or, maybe, a *dérive* mapped out in asinine anecdotes, or one queer being's impractical guide to everyday life & death in the city.

**Keywords:** Queer, Urbanism, Performance, Grief, Practice-based Research



moltes gràcies a:

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## PRELUDES TO THE SITUTATIONS-ish

1. Let this thesis be a lighthouse for those lost, or a labyrinth for those who want to get lost, in the maelstrom of academia.
2. Unfortunately, everything that follows is 100% based on lived events from over the past 4 years.
3. Every word has been selected with the precision and care of a matriarch preparing a family dinner for 38.5 of her closest kith and kin.

# Introduction to the Instigator

Standing at 2 meters (6'6") and 110 kilograms, I am far too ...substantial to feel comfortable being called an *enfant terrible*. As such, an *éléphant terrible* is a much more fitting term. An anti-academic sub-par-excellence, I have spent most of my 38 years on this spinning rock involved with some sort of higher—or lower—learning. Whether teaching or studying, my penchant for causing headaches to the hierarchical nature of education is tempered only by my fondness for mental expansion.

I was a four-time college dropout by the age of 24: quite an achievement if I do say so myself. In 2005, the architecture professors at Cooper Union told me I should be a clown in the art school after 2 months of class. Trying my luck with another US school, I received a full-tuition scholarship to attend the State University of New York – University at Buffalo, where I lasted 2 days; my guidance counselor felt that I was just there because of the grant and told me to follow my dreams to study in Europe, rather than staying in the Rust Belt. To Europe! I came and completed one semester of classes in the Foundation Year of Design program at the New Design University in St. Pölten (a suburb of Vienna). The head of the school told me my talents were being wasted on the industrial design track and that I should move to Vienna to hone my artistic skills. My next victim was the University of Applied Arts Vienna/die Angewandte, which gently pushed me out of the Fine Arts/Printmaking department after one and a half years: "You are printing on Tetrapak! If you refuse to print using copper etching, you need to leave." In Vienna, I heard whispers of a strange school up the Danube in the Austrian-Rust-Belt city of Linz, where I would shelter in place off-and-on for the next 7 years completing my BA and MA in Space & Design Strategies. Technically in the Department of Design at the Kunstuniversität Linz, this program was spearheaded by Elsa Prochazka, a criminally underrated Austrian architect who reveled in dismantling the male-dominated power structures of architecture: "What is exciting about architecture is that it continuously derails."<sup>1</sup>

Hitler and I have two things in common: we both left Vienna due to a judgmental fine arts scene and spent our formative years in Linz. Luckily our similarities end there. My Linz cohort was a small group of 8 miscreants from 4 continents. Our classes were taught by sociologists, sculptors, web designers, photographers, poets, and the occasional architect. A bi-weekly *jour-fixe* group-critique made for an incredibly productive, intensive schedule which quickly knit us into a family. On any given

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<sup>1</sup> Prochazka, Elsa, quoted in Gerfried Sperl, 'Elsa Prochazka's Discrete Architecture', *Prochazka*, [https://www.prochazka.at/interviews/sperl\\_e.html](https://www.prochazka.at/interviews/sperl_e.html), Accessed: 19.7.2025.

presentation day, you would see conceptual body art, drag performances, guitar concerts, poetry slams, architectural models, animations, and squeamish short films. Fun farcical fact on our studio space: the Kunstuniversität Linz's main buildings on the *Hauptplatz* were meant to frame Hitler's plan to make the city his fifth Führerstadt – transforming his childhood hometown into a cultural giant to replace Vienna. Depending on one's predilections, it could be a distressing, depressing order to sit under the roof of a despot's duplex battling the architectural demons. Or, as in my case, one could embrace the absurdity of the situation and exorcize the spirits via a slew of queer artistic conjurations. Old Adi (Adolf) would have *hated* it.

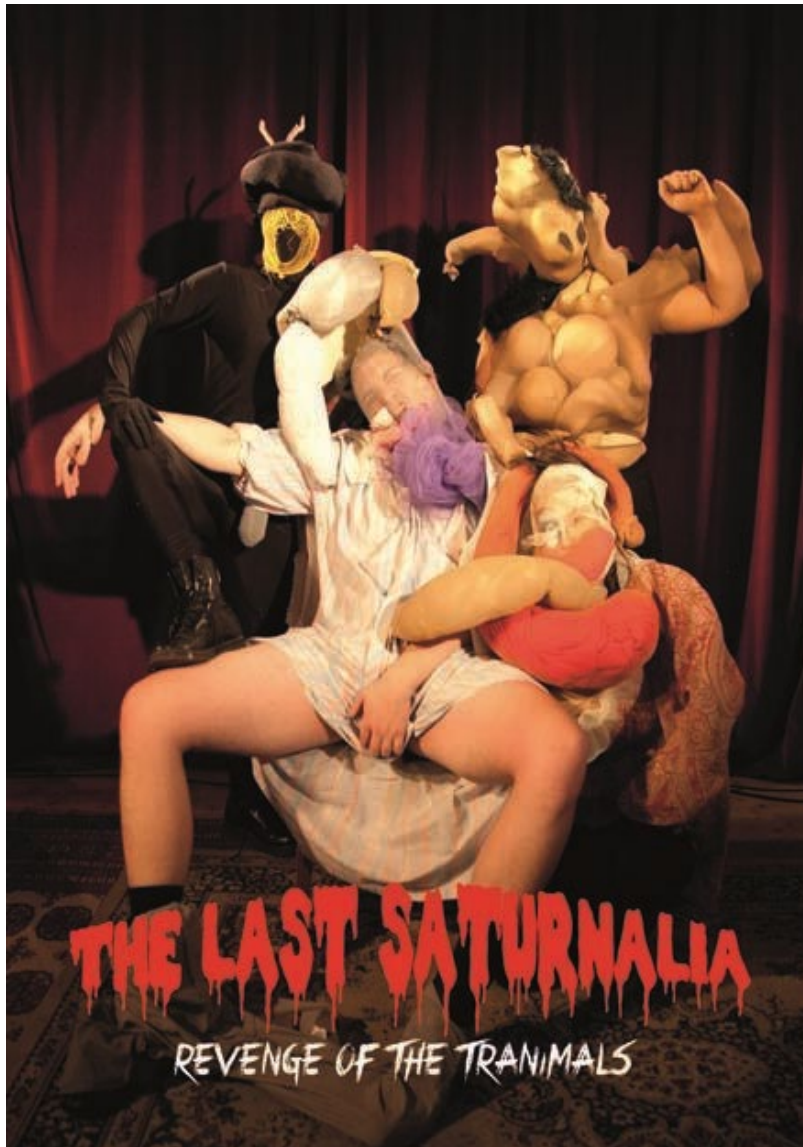


Fig 1. Poster for short film *The Last Saturnalia: Revenge of the Tranimals*, 2012. Credit: author

After my stint in the Austrian capital of steel production, I was at a crossroads, deciding whether to continue this art-based path or give it another go with architecture proper and try for a MA in Urban Design. I wrote my academic crush Michael Sorkin (R.I.P., old friend) to see if he was available for a coffee to chat about my future prospects (he oversaw the Urban Design program at the City University of New York). Working in various factories in central Pennsylvania to pay for my studies, I would fly/in out of New York twice per year. Over 2 years, I met Michael four times, sometimes for a quick 20-minute walk around his beloved West Village and sometimes for a coffee in his luminous Tribeca studio. The last time I saw him was in 2019, after being accepted into his Urban Design program.

“You still haven’t paid your tuition deposit; I assume you’re having second thoughts?”

“Man, I just completed an artistic residency in São Paulo, and it was great, but I’m at my wits end with Fine Arts. I’m having fun with the projects, but I’m forever on this fence going back between art and urban design. Sure, I enjoy making these funny art projects, but I feel like I’m not really doing anything productive.”

“What fence are you talking about?”

“The line between art and design, I’m constantly...”

He raised his finger as a wizard raises his staff to shush me with his Matrix-esque wisdom.

“There is no fence, it’s all in your head. And if there’s a line, you are very tall, step over it. *Voilà*, problem solved. Architecture could do with being more wonky.”

When I made my grand return to architectural school in Barcelona, 15 years after my previous failed attempt in New York, it was shocking to see the vast majority of my professors and fellow students were head-over-heels enamored with whichever mid-century modern designer we were covering that day (in program ironically entitled “Contemporary” Design!). The most memorable day happened when we collectively watched a documentary about Dieter Rams’ *10 Principles of Good Design*. When asked by the head lecturer “Can anyone tell me why these 10 principles are still valid in contemporary design?” I smashed the hand-raising-button on Zoom with all the precision of Picasso.

“Yes, Tom, please go ahead. Why do you think Dieter Rams’ 10 Principles are relevant in Contemporary Design?”

I paused for a minute, sensing that this wasn’t the joke I originally thought it to be.

"Um... by definition, they're not relevant in contemporary design? They're from the 1970s. We could get into a discussion if they should be labeled as 'modern' referencing the so-called 'Modern Design' movement, but 'contemporary'? Absolutely not." Clearly, I had been brainwashed as a visual artist by those commie-loving-liberals at art school; I was taught to burn my idols, not revere them.

"That is an... interesting point you make, Tom. Anybody else have any thoughts?"

Then came exactly what you would expect from a bunch of design-sheeple: "THEY'RE ALL SO RELEVANT! ... WE NEED MORE 'GOOD' DESIGN ... I LOVE HIS SIMPLICITY! ... IT'S ALL SO TIMELESS!"

The phrase "good design" ruffles my feathers even more than "good art" because so many designers *really* think their funky colors and rounded edges have some miraculous powers.

I'll tell Dieter Rams exactly what I told Moses 30 years ago, when my parents foolishly sent me to an after-mass religious bible study class: "Take your 10 commandments and shove them." Once an iconoclast, always an iconoclast.

## Introduction to the Investigation

Without giving away too many spoilers, the project began in an earnest attempt to answer the question “What is Queer Urbanism?” and place myself in the Pantheon of queer academics. In my first year as a PhD student, I raced across Barcelona with the intent of walking the length of every street within the city limits to comprehensively survey the *ciutat*. I applied for every scholarship and grant to aid in the production of a string of street performances/actions on an infamous Barcelona boulevard (Avinguda Paral·lel) and contacted every inspirational artist I could find via my social circles and academic networks. Then, reality set in. Being over 35 years old with “not quite legal” residency renders one quite ineligible for scholarships in Spain. And, in this economy, the days of getting colleagues to collaborate and being paid only in free meals and drinks are over.

After my first year, the clear-cut path to creating a sequin-dripping, iron-clad defense of Queer Urbanism was to evaporate faster than a bottle of poppers left out in the Barcelona sunshine. Nevertheless, this child of high school teachers who has self-financed their 15-year-higher-educational career working 12 hours shifts in various factories—(special shout out to my 9 month stint as a night shift metal inspector at the world’s largest steel wheelbarrow factory in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for supplying the funds for this latest European excursion)—was well versed in the art of perseverance and working with limited funds.

After nine exhausting, failed attempts at getting institutional funding from Barcelona/Catalonia/Spain, I had to ask myself, “Why am I still here?” Reaching the second or third stages of the interview process yet always coming up short. My love/hate relationship with the city in full bloom, constantly rearing its beautiful, maddening face from around the chamfered corners.

As fate would have it, my insatiable desire to keep moving took my Barcelona-based research project to far-off lands. Constantly unfixing my location, simultaneously jumbling the familiar with the strange shapes and forms I haven’t seen in years, returning with a vodka-infused vengeance. An uncanny fusion of past/present/future. A queer excursion into space & time’s tomfoolery. Emphasis on the Tom.

Since starting this specific research project in 2020, the number of publications, conferences, exhibitions, etc. flying the good flag “queer” has increased tenfold. What was once a peripheral niche bubbling up has become a fully-fledged glitter-covered tumor on academic discourse. This attempt at queering methodologies was cemented in 2023’s *Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies*: “the question of queer methods offered a paradox of sorts, for to establish a method

is to impose order, to set out a framework, to construct a logic.”<sup>2</sup> And from this paradox, the struggle became to queer my own methodologies on my own accord while also framing them in a way with just the right amount of historical antecedents so others could follow these hoof-steps.

With an overly mapped-out world at my fingertips and earbuds, the idea of writing strictly about the notion of Queer Urbanism felt dated and quaint. When I started exploring this topic in 2020, I was told by my professors at the Escola Tècnica Superior d’Arquitectura de Barcelona that any research into queer-ing urbanism was “pretentious” and “unnecessary”. For me, the astonishing part was not being written off by a tribunal of five seventy-year-old white dudes from Museum-Continent-Europe (“the Taliban of Catalan design” according to my favorite professor), but rather their ignorance of the fact that what I was dealing with was far from groundbreaking. From the installations and interventions of Storefront for Art & Architecture’s 1994 “Queer Space” exhibition to Aaron’s Betsky’s *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*<sup>3</sup> in 1997, the queers and spatial theorists have been bedfellows for quite some time. For a more exhaustive look into how queer and feminist theory has wormed its way into contemporary thought/the Zeitgeist, I refer you to two articles from *Queering Architecture*: Olivier Vallerand’s ‘On the Uses of Queer Space Thinking’ (which includes the most exhaustive list of references on the topic and brings up the importance question of “who has been represented in queer space theory, to think about how class, race, and gender have framed many of these discussion”<sup>4</sup>) and, for a more historical context, Marko Jobst’s ‘Queering Architectural History: Anomalous Histories and Historiographies of the Baroque’, (which juxtaposes queerness with a historic context, specifically in Baroque Serbian religious architecture<sup>5</sup>). The aim of this project is to build on these recent balusters of queer design theory to Invite you on a disjointed, Mediterranean coast-to-coast journey [with a slight detour to the Alps] of one artist’s meanderings into this sub-cultural sub-structure. A travelogue-esque take on a modern artistic-research practice-based thesis. While the theoretical anthologies examining “queer” and “space” do an incredible job at publishing a wide range of perspectives,

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<sup>2</sup> Jobst, M, and Stead, N., ‘Introduction’ in (eds.) M. Jobst and N. Stead., *Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023, pp. 1-12, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Betsky, A., *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, HarperCollins, 1997

<sup>4</sup> Vallerand, O., ‘On the Uses of Queer Space Thinking’ in (eds.) M. Jobst and N. Stead, *Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), pp. 15-30, p. 27

<sup>5</sup> Jobst, M., ‘Queering Architectural History: Anomalous histories and historiographies of the Baroque’ in (eds.) M. Jobst and N. Stead, *Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), pp. 50-66

creating a common thread across authors from around the world, sometimes we crave more than just a snippet: we want to devour the entire capricious chronicle.

This research endeavor recognizes the limits of being written by one person who is read as a cis-white-gay-male in a European context. Neither claiming to be comprehensive nor complete, it finds its strength in guiding the reader from the initial seeds of an idea through to a relative sense of completion: reliving the entire lifecycle of the research process in agonizing detail, (genital) warts and all.

Let it be clear: this is not an attempt to bash you over the head with quotes and names of contemporaneous thinkers to justify my actions or misdeeds. Every reference/footnote should be taken not as a new thread sewn into the narrative or a way to increase anyone's Google Scholar Index. Rather, each is a person/place/thing/saying that has walked by my side over the last 4 years, if only for a fleeting moment. These blips, quotes, and people have conversed, laughed, and/or cried with me despite the distance and/or format.

This thesis tries ~~its best~~ to protrude into and expand on the knowledge of what we refer to as "urbanism" by *undefining* it. It gloriously remains missing-in-action as a verb from the Oxford English Dictionary and Miriam-Webster – only "officially" defined by Wiktionary as: "To remove the definition of; to return to an undefined state"<sup>6</sup>. Some in the field, such as F. Kaid Benfield, anoint themselves "urbanist" because they're members of the Congress for the New Urbanism<sup>7</sup> and speak mostly about building developments and zoning allowances. However, at least as early as 1938, "urbanism" was outgrowing the boundaries of explaining the physical aspects of the city<sup>8</sup>. Stemming from Michel de Certeau's description of a city as a surface constantly being rewritten by the pedestrians<sup>9</sup>, we have grown to understand the city, and public spaces, as a palimpsest<sup>10</sup> – a continuously clashing mix of past and present memories that is built upon over and over again in the same location, an architectural collage of history. From this departure point, this thesis does not try to give a clear, concise definition of urbanism, it prefers to explore the possibilities afforded to it in the forgotten corners of the city.

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<sup>6</sup> 'undefine', *Wiktionary*, 18.8.2024, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/undefine>, Accessed: 10.6.2025

<sup>7</sup> Benfield, F.K., 'A very personal take: I'm struggling with the word "urbanism," and here's why', 5.8.2024, *Medium*, [https://medium.com/@kaid\\_81901/a-very-personal-take-im-struggling-with-the-word-urbanism-and-here-s-why-2913b160c39b](https://medium.com/@kaid_81901/a-very-personal-take-im-struggling-with-the-word-urbanism-and-here-s-why-2913b160c39b), Accessed: 8.7.2025.

<sup>8</sup> Wirth, Luis, 'Urbanism as a way of life', *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 44 (1938), pp. 1-24

<sup>9</sup> de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (trans.) S. Rendall, University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Golda-Pongratz, K., 'Place-making from the urban palimpsest', *Estudis Escènics*, 44 (2019), pp. 371–85

Likewise, for your viewing displeasure, there will be no simple definition to help you along with this project regarding that cumbersome locution: queer. It is used 194 times in the following pages and, fittingly, cannot be boiled down to a single definition. To deal with this issue, I call upon the queer goddesses of yesteryear (2010), Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash; when an editor asked them to clarify the terms “queer” and “queering” for their book *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, they responded:

These terms will not be clarified, as to clarify and define these terms is to limit their usage just to these understandings. We are allowing authors to use and define the terms how they choose. Rather than policing queer, we think such a definition is inappropriate. We will not be reifying this slippery concept and its plethora of possible uses and its temporal and spatial contingency within 300–500 words.<sup>11</sup>

As it was, shall it forever remain. “Queer” appears on these pages 194 times in varying circumstances and, as such, there are 194 different definitions of the word depending on their context. I leave it to you, to make of them as you will. Use their context clues, or better yet, make up your own definition as you go. This “q” word and its permutations and/or undefinitions will pop up throughout this paper like the weasels they are. Skin them as you see fit.

I present the following chapters not as case studies or projects but rather as situations, sinkholes, and stanzas. Each title aims to undefine urbanism, not redefine it. Pedantic? Perhaps. But this also stands as an important delineation that the project demanded towards the end...er, stop-break of the ongoing research-cum-hole I cannot seem to dig myself out of. I would say that this was all completed with the eyes of an expert, but with 20/140 myopic vision (alongside the dual blessing of astigmatism and world-blurring deutan/protan colorblindness), I rather rely on my felt sensitivities rather than only that which is seen.

Despite my visual shortcomings, it must be said that my bodily privileges grant me access and safety not afforded to all. A figure of stature, white-skinned, and read by strangers on the street as cis-male, no matter how genderqueer I feel under my flesh. This is the pinch of salt that should be taken with what follows from here on out. This is not an attempt at a one-size-fits-most comprehensive study of a queer body in a decidedly un-queer friendly world. This is a regurgitation of my personal experiences

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, K, & Nash, C.J., ‘Queer Methods and Methodologies: an introduction’, *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, 2010, Ashgate Publishing, p. 8

navigating the ins-and-outs and apprehensions of fulfilling the Spanish Ministerio de Educación's PhD academic requirements on my own accord.

## Placing the Research

As can be expected, I've received a wide range of feedback on this thesis. However, it still amazes me the number of times I've heard "that's risky!" when explaining my decision to go the hyper-personal-auto-narrative route to explain all the intricacies of the projects involved. Arts/practice-based doctoral research has bubbling over since the early 2000s, as if intertwined with the trajectory of queer theory... so why not combine both of these forces of evil once more to add to the growing collection of queer voices... et voila, ... but what does that actually look like and/or how to birth this demon bastard child?

As a queer artist with a knack for troublemaking and provoking all sides of most arguments, I have been told by many a person that I'm just wired differently. When people question my taste levels, fashions and/or dark humor, I get an loving kick out of their face of disgust. I place myself proudly in the lineage of the Situationists, John Waters & countless other misfits from across the spectrum of the creative fields. Sometimes referential, always a mess, I find my inspiration for my projects and research from a wide range of sources, which will slowly unfold over the following pages. Queering the thesis in this regard can quickly be summarized as challenging prescribed notions of the "right" way to find a methodology, wondering why these methods must be described clearly – especially if the source material and/or subjects studied are so murky – and, lastly, *mixing it all up*. Either by accident or by design, the research methods I started off using quickly became a chimera dissected by Frankenstein, challenging the initial thrust of my research. I am hardly the first, nor 401<sup>st</sup>, PhD student to want to refract, reposition, and obliterate the "traditional" trajectory of a PhD thesis. A perfect guide to 24+ other messy queens can be found in *2022's Doing Rebellious Research In and beyond the Academy*<sup>12</sup>

But for now, for the moment, for the sake of academia, for the sake of the Ministry of Education's qualifications board, I humbly offer a succinct selection of doctoral precedents as building blocks for this here thesis y'all.

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<sup>12</sup> Burnard, P., Mackinlay, E., Rousell, D., & Dragovic, T. (Eds.), *Doing rebellious research: In and beyond the academy*, Brill, 2022

## Arts-Practice-based Research:

When creating anything, I follow the Artist Placement Group's maxim "The Context is half the work"<sup>13</sup>. Although, half is probably an understatement. A closer approximation can be found by the On The Edge Research group's description: "We seek out overlooked insights from the margins of cultural life, whether in extreme rural settings, in neglected corners of our cities, or at the boundaries between disciplines, territories and environments. We work internationally to understand the local. We examine individual experience to inform strategy. We lift the dead stone of orthodoxy to see what lives in the warm earth below."<sup>14</sup> On The Edge grew out of the Gray's School of Art (Robert Gordon University) in 2001 by Anne Douglas and Chris Fremantle. This research group fertilized the seeds for a then-nascent arts-practice-based PhD program.<sup>15</sup> Such projects included Reiko Goto Collins' 2012 thesis: "Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Place. Talking Tree: Won't you take a minute and listen to the plight of nature?"<sup>16</sup> Her exploration of sound and environmental art works culminated in the invention of Plein Air<sup>17</sup>, an easel, connected to living trees, which collected datasets and translated them into soundtracks to Momma Nature<sup>18</sup>. Both OTE's and Goto Collins' approach to attempt a comprehensive social, ethnographic and artist research survey into their subjects naturally laid the pavers for countless other romantic academics (hola!) to follow. They walked so we could dream.

## Writing-centered Research:

The traditional thesis used to be the sole arbiter in determining the pass/fail of a PhD student, but with the influx of practice-based research projects traditional set-up (Intro,

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<sup>13</sup> Henry, C., 'New Documentary About Glaswegian Art From 1985 Announced', *Artlyst*, 1.4.2024, <https://artlyst.com/news/new-documentary-about-glaswegian-art-from-1985-announced-clare-henry/>, Accessed: 10.6.2025

<sup>14</sup> 'About', *On the Edge Research*, <https://ontheedgeresearch.org/about-2/>, Accessed: 15.6.2025

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, A., 'Context is Half the Work': Developing Doctoral Research through Arts Practice in Culture', in (eds.) Cartiere, C. and Zebracki, M. *The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space and Social Inclusion*. Routledge, 2015, pp. 141-56.

<sup>16</sup> Goto Collins, R., *Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Place: Talking Tree: Won't You Take a Minute and Listen to the Plight of Nature?*, Robert Gordon University, PhD thesis, 2012, <https://rgu-repository.worktribe.com/output/248252>

<sup>17</sup> Goto Collins, R., 'Eden 3: Plein Air', *Collins & Goto Studio*, 2012, <https://collinsandgoto.com/projects/eden-3/> Accessed: 15.6.2025

<sup>18</sup> Goto Collins, R., 'Plein Air | Sylva Datum Musica', *Bandcamp*, 13.06.2020, <https://collinsgotostudio1.bandcamp.com/album/plein-air-sylva-datum-musica> Accessed: 15.6.2025

Literature Review, State of the Art, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusions, etc) needed a good shake down. Harriet Hawkins broke down the emergence of practice-based PhDs in Geography at the Royal Holloway University of London in 2020's *Geography, Art, Research: Artistic Research in the GeoHumanities*. She breaks down the importance, power, and differences bubbling up from the Field, Studio, Laboratory, Community, Residency, Thesis, and Exhibition aspects from a variety of completed PhDs.<sup>19</sup> Of note here is her breakdown of Lucy Mercer's 2019 thesis, entitled "Speculative Emblematics: An Environmental Iconology." Mercer wrote a collection of poems in addition to the "official" thesis about Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* (1531) [a hybrid collection of illustrations accompanied by short explanations/poetry – which could be seen as a post-medieval version of a contemporary arts-based-thesis, had it been submitted in on time). In the written text she writes "this thesis is not proposing a critical approach concerned with any one definitive question... Instead the idea of a Speculative Emblematics is constructed on the axis of a quality, namely obscurity."<sup>20</sup> Escaping the evil clutches of that old stalwart of a thesis: THE question. We students from the future thank you for your valiant work, Lucy.

Somewhere between these two PhDs pullulate my written words. Part explanation of my own artistic work, part poetry, part tearing-down-the-wall-of-bricks-meant-to-protect-the-heteronormative-hierarchy-shielding-Urbanism, and an unhealthy 3 teaspoons of macabre humor-dressed-as-creative-therapy. Harnessing the power from both arts-practice-based and writing-based approaches to a thesis was the only logical conclusion, situating itself amongst the other misfits of academia. With life doing its darndest to throw every wrench within reach at my spinning vortex, the thesis became not only an output/tool to extrapolate what was going on around me, but, also, within me. Stress, personal agonies, bouts of imposter syndrome which magically arise during the lonely moments when I was just. Trying. To. Relax.<sup>21</sup> I wanted to keep the style and approach to my research as natural as possible, allowing for conversations between me and my various locations as I displaced my body around Europe looking for the next sweet hit of academia. As can be expected, these environmental dialogues didn't go as planned. The grim reaper came knocking and Tonya Harding-ed my knee half way through the process, peeling back another layer in the onion of my life. Limping

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<sup>19</sup> Hawkins, H., *Geography, Art, Research: Artistic Research in the GeoHumanities*, Routledge, 2020

<sup>20</sup> Mercer, L., *Speculative Emblematics: An Environmental Iconology*, 2020, Royal Holloway, University of London Doctoral Thesis, <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/publications/speculative-emblematics-an-environmental-iconology>, p.20.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, J., 'Feeling Like a Fraud? Let's Talk About PhD Imposter Syndrome', *The Savvy Scientist*, 3.7.2025, <https://www.thesavvyscientist.com/phd-imposter-syndrome/>, Accessed: 20.7.2025

and hobbling through the final stretch, I found (relative) solace in placing my research not only in relating it those who came before it, but also as a form of therapeutic self-exploration and care.<sup>22</sup> By the time all the lived-in experiences, art projects, clown walks, and bodily bruises had set it, it became clear to me a memoir-esque retelling of the past 4 years was in order, to ring every last drip of sweat from the proverbial academic terrible towel. Again, nothing new in the realm of doctoral possibilities here<sup>2324</sup>. Doing a deeper dive in the midst of writing led me to Paula Keogh's stunning *The Green Bell* which recounts her relationship with a fellow patient in the psychiatric ward – and, relevant here, stemming from her 2013 thesis.<sup>25</sup>

Take these examples, mix them violently whilst listening to your favorite tune and fold them gently into a non-stick casserole dish (ceramic preferred), bake at whatever-the-hell-temperature-hell-is-set-at for 4 years agonizing years and you have a fine crust to support my own thesis which you can enjoy at any picnic by the motorway.

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<sup>22</sup> Watts, Laura A., *Inward and Onward: An Autoethnography on the Lived Experience of Love, Loss, and*

*Grief in a Doctoral Program*, 2023, University of Northern Colorado, PhD Dissertation, <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1951&context=dissertations>

<sup>23</sup> Dunn, L., 'The Aesthetic Memoir', *Lily Dunn*, 14.10.2021, <https://lilydunn.co.uk/the-aesthetic-memoir/>, Accessed: 21.7.2025

<sup>24</sup> McDougall, G., *Madness to Memoir: The Creative Cure*, 2021, University of Glasgow, DFA Thesis, <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/82686/>

<sup>25</sup> Keogh, P., *The Green Bell: a Memoir of Michael Dransfield*, 2013, La Trobe University, DPhil Thesis, <https://doi.org/10.26181/21853116.v1>

# METHODOLOGY-ish

The methods and tools which I have galvanized over the course of this project are nothing new: walking as research, one-on-one interviews, artistic projects (performance/outfits/drawings/sculptures), and creative writing. For all the ingrained fabulousness and absurdity, I wanted to make sure my projects were (relatively) grounded in the real world. The novelty comes in the manner of how they evolved over this span of time and their relation to circumstances at hand and the manner in which they are described and/or written about. This unwholesome amalgamation of methods will be impossible to replicate outside of the contexts in which they are presented, but researchers are welcome to do so at their own peril.

## Walk the Walk

“Usually at the beginning there’s a mood of reluctance and distrust, doubts about what we are doing, the fear of wasting time. But in the end, for those who stick with it, there is the growing pleasure of finding new paths and new certainties, of building thought with your own body, acting with your own mind.”<sup>26</sup>

- Francesco Careri

Be it because I am both a broke-ass bitch and blessed with long gams, walking is my true spirit-animal. From my walks to Aldi to get the latest 30%-off discounted goat cheese coated in rosemary, or up Barcelona’s Montjuïc for a gentle handjob from a stranger whilst looking out over the city, or rushing in late to an art gallery to ensure the procurement of at least 3 free glasses of wine, this simple stride is the greatest free tool we have in our arsenal of bodily functions. Other than the brain... and the eyes...and the mouth...You know, they’re all quite useful, but I just fucking love walking

Crural convoys across the concrete! Gallantly gallivanting into the great beyond! Or just going from point A to point B. Mundane in its default state, each walk we take has an infinite number of outcomes. A walk to the supermarket becomes a criminal caper if we must chase down the phone thief running past us (Barcelona’s specialty). A walk

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<sup>26</sup> Careri, F., *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2002

after getting a clean bill of health from the doctor can take us to a bench we never saw before, taking in the beauty of the local fauna. Or, a walk after losing a loved one can transform into a hyper-meditative take on the finer points of why nihilism is the only viable option for our incessant march towards the River Styx...or some I'm told.

As someone who has spent their life obsessed with cities, and with a bank account that has less digits than my right hand, walking is simultaneously a form of meditation, recognition, discover, investigation, love, confusion, indignation, wonderment, education, self-love, vexation, admiration, and understanding. And that's just the first 298 steps into a 10,000 step day.

Not only to appease my personal predilections, walking has long been the moveable muse to artists, architects, thinkers, writers, and laymen. Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* provides a historical exploration on how walking has influenced all facets of life – "The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak."<sup>27</sup> De Certeau registered the everyday act of walking as a means of production of personal space within the larger realm inhabited by millions of others. By simply crossing the street we write & rewrite our own stories into the pavement, expanding on the ghost stories already in place. The above quote was taken from Careri's *Walkscapes: Walking as an aesthetic practice*, which gives an exhaustive rundown of the various guises of walking-as-artform, from the Dadaists to the Situationists' *urbanisme unitaire* and *dérive* to the STALKER MANIFESTO – a call to arms to transform walking into poetic relationships with your surroundings. A more academic look in walking as a research can be found in *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method and Practice* – filled with essays looking at more specific ethnographic studies confronting Race, Gender and Social Class<sup>28</sup> - and *Walking through Social Research* – containing essays which are more critical on *how* the walk can be explained (see Mike Michael's "Walking, Falling, Telling: The Anecdote and the Mis-Step as a 'Research Event')<sup>29</sup>. In the academic realm, Kajsa Lawaczeck Körner's 2016 PhD thesis defended the idea of walking as an architectural practice as both methodology and practice, even if she did include the regretful take that her study "does not see walking in itself as a subversive action or a mode of critique of society,"<sup>30</sup> confronting De Certeau's take on the inherent power of walking.

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<sup>27</sup> Solnit, R., *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Penguin Books, 2001. p.3

<sup>28</sup> Brown, E., and Shortell, T., (eds.). *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method, and Practice*, Temple University Press, 2016

<sup>29</sup> Bates, C., & Rhys-Taylor, A. (eds.), *Walking Through Social Research*, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Lawaczeck Körner, K. *Walking Along, Wandering Off and Going Astray A Critical Normativity Approach to*

With my dog-eared copies of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*<sup>31</sup> and *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*<sup>32</sup> in hand, this project started off with the grand idea of walking every street in Barcelona. Why?

1. It's cheap.
2. It's manageable, I can chip it off bit by bit.
3. It's what I love doing.

When it's not 30-plus-degrees and humid during the summer, Barcelona is one of the finest walking cities in the world. Yes, while Abu Dhabi may officially be the "World's most walkable city of 2025" according to TimeOut<sup>33</sup> (making all the sense in the world in a city that averages 42°C [108°F] in the summer and is decidedly booty-shorts-and-nipples-out-unfriendly), the Mediterranean breeze will forever have my back.

For this project, I created a semi-scientific method in mind which I called "activated walks". As the research was still in its initial phases, I wanted to build a foundational knowledge of Barcelona by carving the sidewalks with my boots. Even with "queer" in the back of my head, these would start out as a basic form of solidifying my bearings and relationship with the city. Master Chef André Soltner allegedly said one must cook a piece of meat one thousand times before one begins to truly understand it. Transferring this to urbanism, it was clear I had to walk these streets over-and-over again before they would unveil themselves to me. There is no book, nor quote, nor map which can replace the assault/massage on all senses that a walk in the city can provide. From a distant alarm to the couple fighting over today's purchases to the rolling tumbleweed made of leaves & newspapers to the broken bench, each of these precise characters must be individually *and* collectively observed to understand the street as a laboratory. To separate the quotidian from the everyday, I had to consider these "activated walks" were separate beasts compared to my daily strolls. The rules were simple:

1. There was to be no "final destination". No walks to meet friends, nor relaxing walks along the Ramblas. Recalling those loveable situationists' beloved

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*Walking as a Situated Architectural Experience*, 2016, Lund University, Doctoral Thesis, <https://lup.lub.lu.se/search/files/5452796/8812575.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Rousseau, J. *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Penguin Classics, 1980

<sup>32</sup> de Quincey, T. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics, 2003

<sup>33</sup> Kelly, L., 'These Are the Most Walkable Cities in the World', *TimeOut*, 17.4.2025, <https://www.timeout.com/news/these-are-the-20-most-walkable-cities-in-the-world-according-to-locals-041725>, Accessed 5.6.2025

*dérives*, these were (relatively) unplanned walks, letting the city/traffic/winds guide my hooves as I hog-trotted across the city.

2. No phones. Preferably I was to leave my phone at home to resist the temptation to look for any incoming notifications or messages. However, slave to the age I sometimes am, I allowed myself to keep my phone for emergencies (or to pay for emergency vermouths along the way). To keep the temptation at bay, I allowed myself to be armed with my trusty mp3 player, but only with one earbud in at a time (walking with Brett Anderson, Jarvis Cocker, and Patrick Wolf's beats did provide the much needed boost on those rather long drifts) to bathe in the urban symphony/cacophony.

Following these simple rules, any movements in Barcelona could be counted towards my final count of uncovered pavements. From November 2022 to November 2024, I clocked in 1,244km across 1,239 of Barcelona's 4,518 streets during these "activated walks". Until this final date, they provided moments of mental clarity and meditation. Wondering out loud how the various guises of the city could possibly meet any "standards" of Queer Urbanism. After I reached a basis of understanding of these streets, I started to decipher and decode more exact bits of these walks. To bring it back into my research, I set out to make a list, one per week, of objects I could understand as being queer (broken bench, ripped off posters, random children's dolls hanging from a tree, etc). This, in turn, posed numerous questions around the nature of an object "being queer" (queer read as noun) versus "being queered" (queer as an action). Jack Halberstam noted this in 2018: "you can queer something, but you cannot fashion an identity around queerness"<sup>34</sup> [whether "queer" in 2025 is understood more as a noun or a verb is much more murky as it becomes commodified, pink-washed, and more socially accepted].

After personal tragedy struck, my joyous wanderings turned sour. What were once passionate strides become grief-filled foot drags with the occasional bout of ugly-crying as the passerby looked on in disbelief as this 2-meter-tall clown broke down in public in the most romantic way possible. Even at the most downtrodden, while no longer counted as "activated walks", these reflective steps set the stage for the words you are currently reading. In some respects, I could say the research didn't stop that fateful day in November, rather, they transformed into free bouts of therapy. Instead of counting windows or people drinking overpriced mocha lattes a la George Perec or wandering in a definitely-not-drugged-stupor-I'M-FINE of Thomas Quincy and/or Thomas

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<sup>34</sup> Halberstam, J., 'Unbuilding Gender Trans\* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark', *Places Journal*, October 2018, <https://placesjournal.org/article/unbuilding-gender/?cn-reloaded=1>, Accessed: 10.7.2025.

Bernhard, I was ignoring the outside world, and exploring the most existential crises possible. Finding the will to go on, not only in the academic arena, but in life itself became a battle. Well, thanks to you, my philosophical pavers, I am still here cursing the reader with my words.

## Talk the Talk

When I'm not reveling in my solitude, I have been known to be quite a chatty little Nancy when properly riled up. Hailing from a part of Pennsylvania known for its love of small talk, be it with the grocery clerk or parking attendant or the meth head on the park bench, I was never one to shy away from starting a conversation with a stranger. Start with a compliment, and who knows where it will end up. A kind of verbal *dérive*, if you will.

A lone wolf par excellence, I am generally most happy when alone, but even the most solitary soldier among us enjoys a well-driven conversation. Or a disaster of spoken diarrhea. It all ends up being an amusing tale to tell. As the original plans for walking every street in Barcelona, as my project unfolded, the original plan went from a series of formal interviews with "experts in their fields" to a realization that I didn't need these formal interviews after spending 4 years talking my lower jaw off to anyone within earshot showing the most minute amount of interest in my project(s).

While I will forever hold my copy of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* close to my heart, the anecdotes within fell flat. Nothing makes me harder than a phenomenologist waxing poetic about tables and chairs, but when her tales of family gatherings ramble for pages about a specific line: "Look, there is a little John and a little Mark!"<sup>35</sup> I am left wondering: what were the circumstances of this family gathering? What brought you to the table in the first place? What were you eating? What was the general mood of the room? Where and when are we talking about? Were you eating lobster? And, if so, how much butter did you use?! While it's impossible to completely describe every situation, this thesis tries its best to draw its jagged red line through all the misadventures that led me here. A trail of cookie crumbs for the reader to follow, yet also devour. Avowed enemy of anything generic, I infuse the following tales with robust details to bring you *into* the story. I don't want you to stop and smell the chocolate milk; I want you to chug it and feel the lactose invading your upper colon.

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 83

In 2010, Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash asked the basic questions positioning “queer” in the greater academic discourse of methodologies in social science: “If, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather ‘data’ from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires? [...] How does this perpetual destabilizing position us as researchers and what can we make of this destabilization?”<sup>36</sup> How do we embrace the constant, if not inconsistent, tremors that “queering” subjects provides? In her chapter ‘Brown, Queer and Gendered: Queering the Latina/o ‘Street-scapes’ in Los Angeles’, Lorena Muñoz corrected Ahmed’s missteps by painting a clear picture of a conversation that takes place between these lesbians in South Central L.A.<sup>37</sup> After a series of ‘proper interviews’ in public, Muñoz goes to the interviewee’s house and the formal pretenses faded away, leading to a more raw conversation.

As the plans to unfurl a series of projects across Barcelona’s streets, I planned to set up urban picnics with a laundry list of artists and thinkers I found inspirational. These were meant to take place on my beloved central artery of Avinguda Paral·lel. This was to be a mutation from the “activated walks”: no longer just walking the city, but integrating bodies into the urban infrastructure, mobile research incubation turned into a living laboratory. Plunked down in the middle of Barcelona, I offered each comrade a free dinner and drink to be shared on a picnic blanket strewn across the sidewalk in exchange for 1 hour of their time. I had hoped to sow seeds of prospective future projects with these people, creative friction which could manifest itself as part of my research, or additional artistic endeavors. As it turned out, most of them refused to give me the time of day. Whether issues of economics, logistics, or time, 7 out of a planned 10 interviews were cancelled, often minutes before they were to take place (thanks, post-pandemic social anxiety!). Three preliminary interviews went ahead, but 2 out of 3 of the conversations lacked the desired spark I was looking for. Proof enough that, even though you may admire someone’s work and/or written words, talking to someone in real life is much different than via email.

Back to the drawing board.

The planning of these interviews took its toll on me over 2 years. I had way more interesting conversations about the various cities I was in with the random drunk at the bar than these culture vultures. *Et voilà*. Maybe that was my path forward? Why was I

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, K. & Nash, C.J., ‘Queer Methods and Methodologies: an introduction’, *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, 2010, Ashgate Publishing, p. 1

<sup>37</sup> Muñoz, L., ‘Brown, Queer and gendered: Queering the latina/o ‘street-scapes’ in los angeles’ in (eds.) K. Brown and C.J. Nash, *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, 2010, Ashgate Publishing, pp.55-67, p.55

searching for the justification from them when the most I could squeeze out of these human sponges was a couple of drops of putrid water? Maybe cases of clashing personalities or asking the wrong questions: dark lord knows. As the undertaking reached foreign shores, I started to rely on the more informal conversations as the lifeblood of my project. From the initial emails to collaborate with foreign entities until the final showcases, the spontaneous shouts, guffaws, and interactions-which-can-only-happen-after-6-shots-of-rakija-at-3-am gave me a much wider outlook. Gone were the pre-planned questions asking about how they felt about Henry Lefebvre's influence on modern city planning. These were replaced with the delicate dance of explaining Queer Urbanism without mentioning the word "queer" because that Albanian with a swastika tattoo on his neck probably wouldn't like me telling him that Pristina is redonkulously queer to my eyes. He would, however, invite the owner and his friends over from the neighboring table if I told them I was an artist looking for "weird places in the city that make you love Pristina".

Looking back at the WhatsApp conversations, email chains, and sketchbooks full of notes, it was a sort of vindication of my failed earlier attempts. As this thesis started to come ~~undone~~ together, the idea of the interview became more and more abstract. As the existential dread set in, and looking inward became ever so more pointed, why was I so worried about interviewing people? Why shouldn't I interview the park bench next to my beloved Plaça d'Osca here in Barcelona? It has seen me criss-cross the plaza approximately 387,021 times since moving here 5 years ago, surely it has something to say...and I have a feeling the local boozers haven't asked it how it was feeling lately. And so, I embarked on a.... let's say more artistic? Poetic? Approach to the interview as a research method. Not stopping at my local neighborhood park bench, on each of my travels, I would try to find the most awe-inspiring/sexy piece of street and sit there quietly, waiting for it to make the first move. Occasionally, the chatty little garbage cans would just. Not. Shut. Up. Othertimes, the Austrian fences were as shy as I remembered them 10 years ago. These interactive interviews with infrastructure would fuel the latter half of my project. Delving into my more Bachelardian impulses and my sardonic yet completely sincere leanings, the interviews with the various cities provided a final word. I leave you with an invitation: When you rest your weary eyes from this here text, take a moment to have a chat with your local park bench... You may be surprised to hear what it has to say.

## Art the Art

Much like with my problems with the canon of queer theory, I wanted/needed “easy” visuals to show people what I could mean with Queer Urbanism. Instead of waxing poetic for 3 hours to a future-collaborator, I could quickly show them photos of these artistic endeavors to help visualize/explain my research in 2 minutes flat. From sculptures to performances to fashion to furniture design, I ran all the gamuts of art from the course of my career and, naturally, they slipped into place in this project as my preferred methods of visual creation.

Allen Wrexler’s sculpture is another’s installation is another’s piece of furniture is another’s performance and, as such, he has provided invaluable inspiration drawing/erasing/building/unveiling the lines between art, architecture, and design. His *Picket Fence* (1985) was a piece that played with the classic idea of the American “white picket fence” ideal—an object that came to signify the romance of an idealized, country-esque suburbia, while also in fact forming a violent barrier marking one’s property off from their neighbors’. This fence was twisted & manipulated to create seating areas, tables, and arches from the various pieces of wood, transforming the outdoor barrier into a communal domesticated space allowing for both sides to coexist jovially.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Chat Travieso and Yeju Choi created a living community ecosystem by adding their structure *On A Fence* (2013) to a chain link fence on New York’s Pier 42. By workshopping, planning, and building the form with the locals, it served as more than just an aesthetic improvement, it carved out seating areas, bike parking, blackboards, and sandboxes to engage the locals and visitors to this post-industrial urban landscape.<sup>39</sup>

Allan Kaprow’s *Essays on The Blurring of Art and Life*<sup>40</sup> clearly describes the playful delineations and subversive power of performance art when he describes his “TRAVELOG” (1968) series,

to those not interested in whether it is or isn’t art, who may,  
however be interested for other reasons, it need not be  
justified as an artwork. Thus in a performance of 1968 that  
involved documenting the circumstances of many tire changes

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<sup>38</sup> Simone, A. (ed). *Allan Wexler: Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design*. Lars Muller Publishers, 2017. p.40

<sup>39</sup> Travieso, C., ‘On a Fence’, *Chat Travieso*. <https://chattravieso.com/work/on-a-fence>. Accessed: 15.9.2025.

<sup>40</sup> Kelley, J. (ed). *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life: Allan Kaprow*. University of California Press. 1993.

at gas stations in New Jersey, curious station attendants were frequently told it was a sociological study (which it was, in a way), while those in the cars knew it was also art.<sup>41</sup>

The aforementioned professor-of-a-lifetime, Elsa Prochaska, introduced her fellow countrywoman VALIE EXPORT, a name none of the numerous foreign students in Linz were aware of. Being raised in the English-speaking domain in the 1990s, Allen Kaprow, Joseph Beuys, and other male (surprise) Fluxus associates were all I heard while in the US in regards performance art. However, during my eight years in Austria, I was able to view her transgressive female body prowess-in-public-space in innumerable exhibitions and shows. She scandalized Austrian society and the Viennese streets with her works *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968), in which she wore a curtained box as a blouse and invited strangers on the street to reach in, in a critique of the fetishization of the female body, confronting the male gaze hands-on<sup>42</sup>, and *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik (Action Pants: Genital Panic)* (1968), in which she cut a hole in her pants, displaying her crotch to the public and may-or-may-not<sup>43</sup> have walked into a Munich porn cinema with a gun, pointing the gun at random people's heads in a polite yet calm manner. Part of the power and lore of performance art lies in the re-telling of the stories. For those involved, it was often unclear what was happening, an art piece often being the last situation imagined. As with VALIE EXPORT's exploits, her words, which were captured on camera, allowed her to build an archive of feminist power, and those words that were never caught on camera transmuted her into a Goddess.

Speaking of goddesses, no mention of artistic practices, for me, could exclude Leigh Bowery. Noted performance artist-cum-cum-fashion designer in London in the 1980s, noted for his bizarre maximalist outfits and antics on stages. My personal highlight was during a performance at an AIDS charity cabaret: *Heart's in the Right Place* at the Fridge in Brixton, London (1990). Walking on stage on top of his friend Baillie Walsh's shoulders and covered in a cloak, creating an oversized queer body,<sup>44</sup> Bowery jumped down and attempted to create a human water fountain out of his anus. However, due

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.176

<sup>42</sup> Albertina Museum, 'Valie Export | Body Sign Action', *YouTube*, 22.1.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVoPPpY8TqQ>, Accessed: 9.10.2025.

<sup>43</sup> Torres, D.G. 'The performance that never was', *A\*DESK*, 4.12.2012. <https://a-desk.org/en/magazine/the-performance-that-never-was/> Accessed: 20.9.2025.

<sup>44</sup> Vranou, S., 'Leigh Bowery: Glitter, Shit, and the Performance of Decadence', *Staging Decadence*, 5.2.2024, <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/leigh-bowery> Accessed: 20.9.2025.

to an enema/bowel malfunction—gays, we all know this can happen—he painted the audience a delightful shade of brown. Of his performance, Bowery noted,

If you've got AIDS it doesn't mean you've lost your sense of humour, does it? I didn't want to make concessions just because people were ill or dying. I was quite pleased with the hostile reaction. If anything, I want to make reactions stronger. If I have to ask, 'Is this idea too sick?' I know I'm on the right track.<sup>45</sup>

My personal works created over these past four years could be called as much "sketches" as "objects" for me, as they were forms of sketching/fleshing out the ideas I encountered as the research stumbled forward. Comedic scenes or artistic sketches, I'll leave it for you decide. No spoilers here, but each piece was created as a direct response to the context in which it took place – often in public spaces, but also publicly-accessible rooms. No galleries or museums here. I'm Thomas Stempka, not Thomas Hirschorn:

If I want to work in Public Space, as an artist, I then must agree with Public Space. In a gallery, museum, private collection or when participating in an exhibition, I don't necessarily have to agree. But when working in Public Space, to agree is a necessity which makes the world so demanding. Agreeing means to agree with the mission. I must agree constantly and at all times, because only if I agree with my mission in Public Space, can I cooperate. I must cooperate with reality in order to change it.<sup>46</sup>

More reading on the arts as research methods can be found in Patricia Leavy's *Method Meet Art: Arts-based Research Practice*, which gives easily understandable descriptions and examples of harnessing the Visual Arts, Dance/Movement & Performance as research methods to expand research from the page into the real world.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Bowery, L., quoted in S. Tilley, *Leigh Bowery: The Life and Times of an Icon*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1997, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Hirschhorn, T. 'Where Do I Stand? What Do I Want?' *ArtReview: The Annual 2007/8*. ArtReview Ltd, London, 2007

<sup>47</sup> Leavy, P., *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, The Guilford Press, 2020

# Weaponizing Words

The final, and most beguiling/entertaining (for me), research method was the application and execution of the written word. As you can infer from the words you have ingested thus far, this is not my grandpa's thesis. Done as much for my own pleasure as for my academic goals (and hopefully not your displeasure), this project has been much more a labor of love. All-encompassing, devilishly distraught, suffocating-at-times, and, yet, brimming with giggles and pensive sighs as I thrash this keyboard. As an aging faggot with dim prospects of pro-creation and no interest in having a pet, this 4-year-old (project) is the closest I have to a toddler and next of kin.

"BUT IT'S NOT WRITTEN LIKE AN ACADEMIC THESIS!", I hear screamed from the peanut gallery.

"Thank you!", I kindly reply to the perceptive peanuts in the back of the room.

Eschewing the formal prose generally associated with a doctoral thesis, I was drawn to this specific PhD in Design under the auspice of allowing me to freely express my research in an unorthodox manner. In my humble (unaccredited) opinion, I find most theses (especially [ironically?]) in the creative fields to be written with the joy of a beige-painted room full of Scandinavian minimalist furniture. Different strokes for different folks, I suppose. But fear not! Even if you are a lover of taupe, may you find at least a glimpse of gratification or a cheap chortle from these humble groups of letters before your eyes.

Hyper-personal and autoethnographic in nature, I hope the descriptions reel the reader in and invite them to a palpable sense of being *in* my research itself. For *that* is the reason why this exists in the first place. Not to be buried in the back of the Universitat de Vic's online PhD archive, but to be *felt* by as wide of an audience as possible. Yes, this thesis is institutional by default, and for that I apologize, but this self-loathing will massage its way out throughout these pages.

Despite the painfully stale opening lines (Imagine! An article starting with dictionary definitions!), Mike Michaels' "Anecdote" speaks about the art/methodology of anecdotalization: "in which the making and enactment of anecdotes is a means of interrogating the research process itself."<sup>48</sup> On the use of a "no data" anecdote he explains his coming to terms with a "disastrous interview episode"<sup>49</sup> in which the

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<sup>48</sup> Michael, M., 'Anecdote' in (eds.) C. Lury and N. Wakeford, *Inventive Methods: the Happening of the Social*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 25-35, p.29

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31

interviewer's desire to talk about his understanding of ionizing radiation was bested by the interviewee's rambunctious cat & dog. The reference to "no data" is a sure sign of the author's level of an oh-so-professional social scientist, but his points remain valid, the "unintended" participants in an "necdote often transform the story into new. What could have been a dry, scientific interview about radiation is now a tool in teaching us about the joy of anecdotes ("anecdotalizing the anecdotalization" as he puts it). And so it is with the situations/anecdotes that follow in this paper. Though you can replace the dog and cat with street benches and bollards: the environmental context was just as important as the humans involved.

Although I presented this project earlier as a singular single-person narrative, it would be an oversimplification to reduce it to these four words. Every body, creature, and object I ran into it has an equally important part of this narrative as my own body. This project takes the roll of a happy pig rolling around in the muck, relishing in what Donna Haraway deems the Chthulucene: an age of multi-species stories and practices on this planet embracing both the biotic and apiotic<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it is these "unconventional" relationships between people and their environment which give life to my writing: "Stories for living in the Chthulucene demand a certain suspension of ontologies and epistemologies, holding them lightly, in favor of more venturesome, experimental natural histories."<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, Haraway provides another source of linguistic inspiration in the importance of and situating autoethnographic narratives as more-than-valuable perspectives: "I am arguing for the view from the body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured, body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity."<sup>52</sup> As such, when writing about the city, we must take into account stories from bodies as well as everything which could be understood as bodies: pedestrians, urban infrastructures, and buildings as equals, not just background scenery. Admittedly, there is, but, a small subset of people who can *truly* relate to a garbage can, and this is where the autoethnographic storytelling mode finds its niche in academic writing. Most academics would probably agree that our writing does not have a wide reach among the general populace, even though these field-stretchers are (sometimes) dealing with issues that touch all of us. Turning laboratory and artistic research practices into digestible tidbits is the goal here: the question is not only how we can reach a larger public with our works, but how can we make sure they are understood and accessible

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<sup>50</sup> Haraway, D., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016, p.55

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88

<sup>52</sup> Haraway, D. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, (14.3), 1988, pp. 575-599.

to a larger public? The more personal the story, the more personal the reactions, at least to my eyes and ears. Talking about abstracted versions of “the city” are all well and good, but when we say “New York” or “Barcelona”, et al, we personalize the story, just like the difference between saying “a person” vs “a friend” vs “my best friend Grant” can help the reader associate the succeeding words in a much more personal way, inserting them in the author’s line of view.

While I am no friend of prescribed do’s & don’ts, Heewang Chang describes the most common pitfalls of autoethnographic writing as: 1) excessive focus on self in isolation of others; 2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis/cultural interpretation<sup>53</sup>. Self-Isolation marked a great number of our lives during 2020-2022 during the rolling COVID outbreaks/quarantines/curfews in place around the world, and my case was no different. Unable to leave Barcelona due to an irregular immigration status for 2 years, by the end of 2022 I made my first research trip to the Balkans, and kept on bouncing around various European countries over the next 3 years. Partially to shake up the pent-up frustration of staying in only one port-of-call, my research trips to Kosovo, Austria, and Albania also formed a transformative relationship between my personal research and storytelling. Every story told reached new ears which, in turn, led to cross-pollination, institutional invitations, and an ever-widening batch of new sources to pull inspiration from. Admittedly, I often fall into the entrapments of Chang’s 2<sup>nd</sup> pitfall due to my love of storytelling. This thesis has been chopped, divvied, and served up in a slightly overplanned manner for my liking. These first chapters note a great deal of the theoretical background on the topics at hand and form a general chassis for the road ahead. The storytelling aspect which takes over from these conceptual congregations was imagined as an aforementioned *dérive*, as I found it the most useful, compelling, and concise form of explaining four years of research in a relatively limited amount of space. Some conclusions which fomented along the way have been peppered out as they bubbled up, with the knowledge that they would be dealt with in more detail at the end. As with any long city walk, the ruminations made whilst in motion provide seedlings best sprouted after the walk ends and we roost, whether it be a bench, bed, or patch of grass.

From Michael Sorkin’s lost-in-time ruminations, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*,<sup>54</sup> to Rem Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York*,<sup>55</sup> Architects™ have been weaponizing words not just to explain their works, but as means to offer the reader a hand-held walk through their specified passages, mostly surpassing the importance of any single building they’re responsible for. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian arcades which Walter Benjamin based his

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<sup>53</sup> Chang, H., *Autoethnography as Method*, Left Coast Press, 2008, p.54

<sup>54</sup> Sorkin, M. *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, North Point Press, 2013

<sup>55</sup> Koolhaas, R. *Delirious New York*, The Monacelli Press, 1997

*Das Passagen-Werk*<sup>56</sup> continued their bemusement in Susan Buck-Morss' extrapolation *The Dialectics of seeing*<sup>57</sup> published in 1989, long after most of them have been destroyed.

Taking cues from the environmental observational style of George Perec's *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*<sup>58</sup> to Gaston Bachelard's poetic meanderings bean flicking between space and memory in *The Poetics of Space*<sup>59</sup>, this thesis is a descriptive deep dive into the accumulated misgivings, adventures, and missteps across every street and plaza encountered in this research project.

A love letter to a trash can, an adieu to a loved one, and "fuck you" to a street bench. Buried in between the more traditional chronological-ish chapters herewithin are an amicable and candid gang of poems, which have formed a jumping off point for further investigative/reflective poetry to be added to this thesis as an addendum and eventually a stand-alone collection.

Poetry emerged as the best way for me to balance a scattershot approach to the various situations and locations I found myself in over the past 4 years, as the broken, semi-lawless form seemed a natural mirror of my own research. Beyond the lines themselves it has grown past a form of literature into a research method itself. In her chapter "Poetry and Qualitative Research" from *Method meets Art*, Patricia Leavy tells us "poems push feelings to the forefront capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass"<sup>60</sup>, a most evocative way of presenting data. My included poetry runs the gamut from the various forms of narrative poetry: research poetry, interpretative poetry, investigative poetry and ethnographic poetry<sup>61</sup>. Cynthia Cannon Poindexter perfected the use of poetry as a research method in her twin poems "I've Been Knocked Down, but I Haven't Been Knocked Out" and "Lessons Learned Hard Are Best Learned". Taken from two separate interviews with an AIDS patient and his partner, they use the words taken from the interviews with minimal interpolations from the interviewer. Cynthia re-formatted the responses to summarize each interview into manageable, powerful morsels:

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<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, W. *Das Passagen-Werk*, Suhrkamp, 1982

<sup>57</sup> Buck-Morss, S. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1991

<sup>58</sup> Perec, G. *An Attempt at Exhausting A Place in Paris*, (trans.) M. Lowenthal, Wakefield Press, 2010

<sup>59</sup> Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*, (trans. M. Jolas), Beacon Press, 1994

<sup>60</sup> Leavy, P., *Method*, p. 63

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

One thing I believe  
From the bottom of my *SOUL*  
And that's you can die from a broken heart  
He's my *EVERY*thing.  
And *AS* you can see, I can't talk about it *LONG* without crying<sup>62</sup>  
- (excerpt from "*Lessons Learned Hard Are Best Learned*")

With her use of the interviewer's words, it also brings forth the question: who is the *true* author of this poem? Sure, Cynthia formatted it, but the words came from Pat. Posing this question is enough and shows the strength of the work. For me, that exemplifies the beauty of poetry, an easily digestible, condensed format able to highlight these relationships.

As it is between these two partners, poetry seamlessly collages conversations and relationships of all possible variations: even with our environment. From Baudelaire's Parisian shadows to Cavafy's Alexandrian glances to Whitman's Manhattan to Lorca's Harlem sidewalks, poetry has shown an acute appreciation for the built world, from the lonely pebbles swimming in pizza grease to the skyscrapers corralling the latest lightning-filled tempest to the grandma waiting patiently with her shopping trolley at 7:56am for the bakery to open. An entire world can be built from two lines, as in Ezra Pound's 1912 take on the Parisian underground:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Elsewhere, Julian Brolaski's condenses Brooklyn's poisoned & putrid Gowanus canal in 96-page referential & obtuse opus, *Gowanus Atropolis*.<sup>63</sup>

abreast the stoic ends  
of manhatta, lashed  
in biometric concrete  
asphalt green  
of the asphalt plant  
even further in the industrial landscape

Far from just describing places with multi-syllable adjectives, these authors translate the genius loci into the printed word, allowing for a temporary interdimensional sojourn. While ever-the-proponent of site-specific works and the indelible impression that *being*

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 97

<sup>63</sup> Brolaski, J.T., 'abreast the stoic ends of manhatta', in J.T. Brolaski, *gowanus atropolis*, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2011, pp. 71-73, p.71

somewhere is the only way to fully comprehend it, words are the next best thing. And such is the confinement of this thesis, sent via pdf to readers around the world, trying to harness this academic cortège into a succinct, swallowable romp meant to elicit smirks, sorrowful sighs, and occasional bout of uncomfortable laughter.

"We are so busy devouring information that we forgot how to dance with ideas."<sup>64</sup>

A 248 word write up in a travel guide can never compete with a freshly grilled plate of seafood on a side alley in Durres, just as a poem can rarely compete with a mysterious wink and caring half-smile from a passing stranger on the street. However, capturing city scenes on the page adds an archival element that cannot be overlooked, as is the ease in which we send a 200-page pdf halfway across the world with the click of a button. And so it is with this work. When my program's director asked me recently: "What format do you think this project will take? I imagine something performative... or even an exhibition?" I didn't hesitate to correct her: "No, it's a book. The last 4 years were quite enough for me. Now it's time I put it all together and release the unabridged director's cut." Beyond the adage that there are five people who read a thesis: the author, the director and the panel, a (relatively) compressed written work lends itself to reaching a wider audience that a blink-and-miss-it performance can't. "Performance" and associated values/misgivings will be dealt with in a later chapter. For all my hot air about creating an unorthodox thesis, I am painfully aware of the irony in keeping the final format "traditional". This justification does seem a bit ham-fisted, but it comes with the territory, I suppose.

From the well-worn canonical books in my tote-bag to the graffitied phrases on walls walked by, poetry proved itself to be a most fervent companion as I crisscrossed the Mediterranean on this voyage. It gave the harrowing final months of writing this tome a lightness hidden under all the pages, trials & tribulations. A chance to marvel at the marble and offer one last tango with the telephone phone.

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<sup>64</sup>Georgy, R.F., *Notes from the Café*, Parthenon Books, 2014 p.67

## Final Words on Words

My research doesn't end with these words. Take what from it what you will, or take what you won't. It can be sassy and disruptive and loving and confounding, just like the city itself. I would never expect anyone to agree with all of the arguments and opinions shared within these pages. Eschewing strict, clean methods meant to squeeze out quantifiable juice would not do justice to the subjects at hand. We are dealing with queer *theory*, not queer *facts*. Even if you are to take umbrage with my approach, anecdotes and/or wordplay (HEATHEN!), at the very least I hope you enjoyed these weaponized words  $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> as much as I had splaying them across the screen.

Each of the methods has been presented separately for comprehension, but the truth is none of them can truly be deciphered by themselves. I have omitted some of the one-off methods in this section to keep it as concise as possible, picking the methods which appear in every port-of-call in the following pages. Throughout this process, every individual has questioned, instigated, joined forces, challenged, and supported the others. Each method built off the previous exploits of this research project. Walks morphed into conversations which created sculptures that informed a workshop which was transcribed into words. Likewise, a conversation while walking as a group in the workshop was lifted by poetry. Likewise, an article about the workshop inspired an artwork. As did a conversation with the city. Hence, my feelings towards this chapter. Half-joking about it being my least favorite chapter, the incredible intermingling and relationships therein have often been a thorn in my side in my various presentations about this research. Juxtaposing them here, however, has shed some light on a final reflection which could be summed up by saying: this project has become a methodology in and of itself. Displacing myself and undefining these various forms of method led to incredible discoveries along the way which would never have happened if I let the overreaching narrative of my initial ideas of sticking to Barcelona take root. While I can decry my general lack of funds for this project, it is fair to say if I had been awarded €10,000 from the onset, this research would have been much more boring and traditional. I hesitate to say that I birthed "new" methods in the biblical sense, but there is a sense of innovation in allowing the mishaps, dramas, cuts, and bruises to have their own space within the project, pushing it to places I never would have expected in 2021. The Artist Placement Group's favorite slogan: "Context is half the work" could easily be reflected in this research as "Context is half the methodology". Like site-specific artworks, I present

these as site-specific methods. The activated walks *were* Barcelona, the design workshop *was* Prishtina, and these words *are* my balcony on Carrer Riego.

I can imagine that this muddling of methods and practices seems precarious at best. However, this is not a cop-out to dodge any criticisms of these explanations/non-definitions. Quite the contrary, it would have been easier to dole out oversimplified definitions for each of these methods and make for a much more manageable chapter. They are presented here with all the gusto and confusion they appeared to me as this project progressed. A four-year research project with an anti-designer at the helm was bound to be raptured into entropy. As Vallerand explains, “we need to imagine approaches that refrain from looking for a single truth behind design impulses and instead welcome uncertainty, experimentation, and productive messiness.”<sup>65</sup> Preach it, sister.

As noted philosopher/Nobel Prize Laureate/drag queen Mizz Cracker once deduced: “There are no accidents in fisting,”<sup>66</sup> and so it was juggling the embers of these methodological forms. There were no accidents in this project: all disasters, half-truths, whispers, dead-ends, paper cuts, and twisted ankles were necessary to give birth to these words.

There is merit in sharing the pessimism. Everyone is experiencing it. Helps us all feel our way through it. A commiseration. An articulation. It makes it okay not to pretend that some big hope is going to save us. It’s about how a person saves herself, inside of this darkness, at the end of the world, by finding some way to exist within it.<sup>67</sup>

-McKenzie Wark

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<sup>65</sup> Vallerand, O., *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020, p.169

<sup>66</sup> Mizz Cracker, ‘10s Across The Board’, *RuPaul’s Drag Race: Season 10*, World of Wonder Productions, 2018

<sup>67</sup> Wark, M., *Raving*, Duke University Press, 2023, p. 85

## Precursor to the Situations-ish

When does the bench become a bench? Somewhere between the desire to sit and the first drawing? When it is constructed? Or when it's finally built? And when it's built but no one is sitting, does it stay a bench, or does it transport to some phenomenological purgatory for unused objects, a Wunderkammer for the unloved? And when the wood rots and the nails fall out, rendering it unable to be sat upon, can we still call it a bench, or does it become a ghost: a place we used to sit & reflect, now faded into the dreams it helped cogenerate?

Neither allegory nor rhetorical questions, I am asking you to let these questions fester and settle as you continue on with this text. From a very old Greek fellow named after a plate to Graham Harman's O-O-O's and aah's, philosophers have walked around talking about chairs for longer than words themselves. However, this treatise is no cerebral showdown between Platonic Realism vs Object-oriented ontology, I prefer you to think less about why we call it a "bench" in the first place and more about the last time you sat alone on bench under the shade of a tree or burning flames of the sun and cried. Or when you were as giddy as a bumblebee after hearing extraordinarily fantastical news. Or when you were at your most distraught, questioning that extra whiskey-and-coke and the blacked out non-memories that followed from the previous night.

The aim of this work is to invite you along on the savage caper that was my last 4 years delving into the ins, outs & sideways of what "Queer Urbanism" could/should/won't/shan't/will mean. In the process, the way was lost more times than I can count, but, in the various rabbit holes I found myself, I stopped and wondered: "Why am I following a rabbit?" At those anxious, imposter-syndrome-filled intersections, it wasn't always a question of the 6F's: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn, Fine, & Faint. More often the way forward (or sideways) was another F: Find (and sometimes Fuck). In those unexpected moments, however difficult it was, the option which came most naturally to me was to assess the situation/rabbit hole, just start digging perpendicularly. Exhausting? Absolutely. Rewarding? Not always. Yet it was in the moments of struggle that the muck of the rabbit hole became a mirror. Moments of realization, self-deprecation and a never-ending hunch/awareness that everything is oh-so-silly, but that inherent silliness is what makes life worth living 86% of the time.

As someone who proudly calls themselves an "Anti-Designer", spending four years working on a PhD in Design probably seems foolhardy. And it probably is / was. Yet, under the sleazy shadow of academia, I was able to access spaces / audiences which would have been off-limits to anyone else. Nary a day went by without questioning my

“moral” principles and chosen path to these three letters. Is the best way to challenge academia from within? For some, such as myself, academia does offer a sort of social cushioning. When people see “PhD Candidate” after my name, there is some sense of respect and appreciation (of various levels of sincerity). And so it remains, this anti-academic academic acknowledges the limitations and hypocrisy involved in challenging the hierarchy of our built world via a diploma issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education.

Whether seen as apologue, allegory or anecdote, each of the following situations delve in well-worn paths lit by Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* and Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces*. This unholy trinity has long been the wind beneath my broken wings. A breeze rendering me unable to fly, but refreshing, nonetheless.

When describing his fellow author, CA Conrad, of *The City Real Imagined*, Frank Sherlock wrote:

Conrad prefers to be private in  
a public place. I can’t help but  
go public in a private place. He  
wrote poems on the South St.  
Bridge. I recited poems to a refrigerator.<sup>68</sup>

Why choose when you can have both? The following pages can be read as a merger of these two poets’ approach in writing, or as a real-life version of de Certeau’s “Walking in the City”, or as a neoteric literary *dérive*. Thomas Bernhard explained in *Old Masters* “Surely it is better to read altogether only three pages of a four-hundred page book a thousand times more thoroughly than the normal reader who reads everything but does not read a single page thoroughly.”<sup>69</sup> And so it is my dream for you, may you find at least three pages that penetrate your nucleus which speak to your inner demons and/or angels.

I rarely consider myself a gatekeeper to anything, but there was a point of realization that maybe it’s not so bad. After all, aren’t they the ones with the keys? Maybe the best way to barge past the other gatekeepers/guardians of culture isn’t to throw stones at them... it’s to make extra copies of the keys and hand them out to everyone, even the ones who don’t ask. May these situations be your key into my own personal rabbit hole. Feel free to dig sideways at any point.

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<sup>68</sup> Conrad, CA, and Sherlock, F., *The City Real and Imagined*, Factory School, 2010, p. 36

<sup>69</sup> Bernhard, T., *Old Masters*, (trans.) E. Osers, Quartet Book, 1989, p.27



15 MINUTES IN THE CITY

...if I may be so forward to address you as such.  
It's certainly not the first time we met  
You don't remember me, do you?  
The bridge, the pylons?  
Screeching sirens ... making sure the backdoor's locked?  
A vision, if I was a soothsayer, or a sage  
A place, for I am neither.  
Changing the weather won't wrestle me  
from your infuriating embrace  
Come hell or high water...  
Well, sometimes cum.  
Sometimes hell.  
Often high.  
80% water.

Precipitating this reunion  
Sights unseen  
Flooding every unimaginable channel  
Not quite what I envisioned laying those first bricks.  
You? Not so sure.  
Torrents and currents.  
Tumble dry.  
Hand wash never.  
30° maximum... bitch, please...

A jester jests  
He falls  
He crumbles  
A foreign land  
Giving solace  
In cryptic mumbles

Arguing the finer points of existential rights  
to his metal deities:  
Telepathic telephone pole, how majestic!  
Gleaming garbage can, rat-nest of the gods!  
Bang, swoosh, gurgle, dkgal;gh

Fair points (most of them)  
Perfectly perpendicular streets and chamfered corners  
Never able to comprehend the futures we dreamt  
Never able to comprehend the futures we etched  
Before the sun set the concrete at the construction site  
Between glaring interludes of silence

To one, it's a bollard's ballad  
A virtuous attempt to understand the street  
To another, a frenetic word salad  
Meant to bewilder the place where space and place meet  
Difficult to digest or easy to swallow  
It's a matter of context, my love.  
My imprudently-salacious  
Can be your moral high ground  
A sign to yield  
Or one to follow

Instead of circumventing this wayward pole,  
Sit down, block traffic  
Soak up the scene  
Beguiled by this Ballardian bollard,  
Remind yourself  
Sometimes sitting on the sidewalk  
Is just as necessary  
As a solitary stroll

*Perfectly perpendicular streets and chamfered corners  
No humor in their right angles.  
No joy at the crease where the asphalt kisses the pavement goodnight.  
No love in their eyes.  
I suppose that's what sets us apart.  
15 minutes is never enough, but it's a start.*

Let the keepers keep their gates,  
Let these lines act a key to the city  
For all who wish to enter  
When does a word end?  
With the last letter?  
Or when it stops ringing in our head?

When does the city end and we begin?  
When we refuse to breathe in unison?  
Or, when it forgets us?

Armed with the might of metaphor  
I can try to persuade my latent logic of an intersection,  
A chair, a bench, a memory, or an amalgamation of all four  
Armrests propping up these weatherworn elbows,  
Trying to convince me of its unrecognized splendor  
For a moment, I believe its nonsense  
Even if the woodworm's piles of dust grizzle another story

What good is it, writing an elegy  
if the one person who deserves to hear it, refuses?  
What, then, of verse spoken to a bench or a chair?  
Those who, instead of comforting, could only stare?  
How can one be so enamored with this dominant city?  
When it gives not one fucking ounce of love, of humor, of pity?

From the ear to the ankle,  
How fast it travels  
Twice denied before a rebuttal  
Hardly a fair battle.  
Stuck behind a podium  
How fast it unravels  
Hip flexing, ditch the heels,  
It's time to leave.  
It's their loss  
No heed to the lights or traffic  
As it was meant to be,  
It's just you and the street.

Salivate and satiate those pangs boy,  
Give me that oil!  
Give me that meat!  
Oh, angel of death  
conceal me in your shadow  
As I gnaw these squids into oblivion.  
Battered rings of Neptune's finest  
circle my battered tongue.  
Secretion meets repletion.  
Inhale the allioli from thy nails,  
Remember there is work to do!  
Let undefinition clog your cognition.  
Not a negation of two.

Paradoxical thoughts  
Beget reflections unlettered  
Paradoxical diarrhea  
Breeds terror unfettered

Alas, the cursed mountains refused to claim my body  
Unlikely surviving dozens of voluptuous curves.  
Maybe next time, Albania.

When the Pristina moon hit my eye,  
I needed a goddamn pizza pie  
Extra meat, as only Balkan men can supply  
Forthwith! But where to?!  
A street, a number, or two?  
Maps says no.  
Seventeen paces from a hair salon long gone, second star to the right  
Of course, why didn't I think of that?  
Tip of my tongue.  
"Pepperoni" Drippings.  
On with the show.

Real estate agents in shiny ties  
Ignoring my pleas, as if they were lies

I guess it makes sense  
People who sold buildings for a living  
Go stone-faced so quickly.

One drag queen brings a laugh,  
Three drag queens silently force the chiseled jawlines  
Into quizzical whispers  
Maybe convinced, at least half

A foreign prompt to which you could never subscribe  
but it helps to soften the blows  
as I navigate these alleys unescorted  
blocking out the echoes, the pavers' purrs,  
when there was no distinction  
between the bricks' divides  
and our parallel strides.  
Four of a kind,  
evidently too much to ask for.  
The last kiss on the forehead  
still burns with ardour of the first  
burning, harder, as these words are read  
Yet, I relish this sting,  
unable to forget the last words you said.  
Who wants to cry in the city,  
with its glares, stares, and unnerving lights?  
Give me the sea,  
where waves confuse tears for one of their own.  
Yet, I'm here on our bench,  
where they refuse to cease.  
I hope when I lost my foil  
you found your peace.

1 step to the left, 2 steps behind  
Following my instructions to the T.  
Completely unlike you.  
Even more unlike me.  
You waited for the lights to align  
Not knowing what I was waiting for.  
Hushed breath  
Trains squealing in the distance  
Circuit completed.  
What provoked the silence  
while you traced my retinas?  
Aligned in the light's synchronicity  
I bathe alone in the electricity.  
When I look to the left,  
It's the same as what's behind.  
The city that defined us  
Confines me in kind.

No,  
"after you", I insist.  
*"Tu primer, veí"*, you purr.  
Holding the door for a stranger rings hollow  
They don't pinch my ass as a thank you.  
No pretending to slam the door on their face  
to make them jump.  
When I swoop in with a vampirical neck kiss,  
*I'm* the crazy one now  
For you, I was the knight in sequined armor.  
They just want to call the cops.  
No one whistles from the street  
To make sure I get my leche  
before Aldi closes at 9 pm  
Another weekend, another bender  
with no chocolate milk to calm my innards.  
I stare into the mirror  
Waiting for your swipe  
to wipe away the forgotten leftovers  
of last night's lipstick.  
A wet, dirty bathroom towel is no match  
*for your saliva-covered thumb.*  
Fitting you requested no funeral,  
You knew you'd haunt our streets  
Difficult prick until the end.  
Except,  
there is no end.  
There is no "after you".

Even then it permeated through every pass  
Could I rekindle that time of innocence  
Or just rehash the distant past?  
Stomp the cobblestones until  
The burnt kebab meets the tram  
Scorched flesh to match this desire for cheap polyester  
Rummage the buckets,  
until you find that sofa from a dentist office in 1992,  
All they see is jagged lines with flecks of beige  
you're so much more, my braided bride  
some makeup, *et voilà*, ready to take the stage  
tie down the roof and line up the bottles,  
Who doesn't love a tippie at noon?  
Wrestle branches and find your place  
An evergreen sanctuary to wait out the moon  
Everyone has their way with you  
And you'd have it no other way  
Strangers speak as if they don't know  
You've lived next to the Gasthaus all along,  
wiley seductress in a Biedermaier thong  
Wrap your arms around my neck,  
Sway from shoulder to shoulder  
As if we were never lovers.  
Drop the fluted glass,  
get some fresh air on the lawn  
Doze among the muted grass,  
Wilted leaves will revive you by dawn  
Another spin, a shot, two more twirls  
Tanz bis zum Morgen  
No one here is asking about your morals.  
Facing the river,  
You dim the blaue Donau to a murmur:  
Party's over, Cinderella.  
Raumteiler awaits your decrepit return  
Skip out on cleaning duty,  
Slip out the back, it's not of your concern  
Past the balcony gefüllt with Anschluss haunts  
Hauptplatz conceals more than it flaunts  
Hide between lines for a couple hours more  
Let the schnaps waltz you back to Wien  
Stahlstadt, I'll always be your whore

Surrender to this boulevard  
Ignoring the urban fabric,  
their most cumbersome calling card  
Surrender to this dormitory  
Flacid reminder that  
every address can untell its story.

At least we float along in this basement  
Bunker of love, of trust, and, yes, displacement  
Ten acts of death, of life,  
true bonds begotten  
This place has fallen,  
but refuses to be forgotten

Forgotten vestige of summers past,  
No more concrete embrace, no sail, no mast  
Formerly known as their pool.  
Only a bulldozer would be so cruel.

Three hundred meters away,  
a house  
Two times he visits,  
forgetting his spouse  
Five stories of brick which  
bleed salt and yellow  
Leaving one sad,  
awkwardly romantic fellow.

Let them take the letter.  
We'll take their streets.  
Not just one, we'll take them all.  
As with a word,  
A letter doesn't disappear  
When you remove it from a sign.  
Remember how it rings,  
A most persistent Ohrworm,  
An umbrella divine.

Foreign tongues in my backyard  
Going coast to coast, side to side  
The amber skyline his only guide  
Once more in the same city?  
Who said I was leaving?  
Extra tissues, but not for grieving

Unfolding dimples greet the elevator,  
Stern features to fool the *Bawaab*

Six lanes of traffic are no match for these four legs  
Shuffle to where the lemons meet the sand  
Imagining an earthquake just to touch his hand  
Probably better that we depart now

Another rendezvous, another walk  
Fitting that we chose the street with the books  
Of shuttered cabinets and questionable looks  
An anecdote to show me how little I know  
A gentle push confused for a deathblow  
Of muttered secrets, a shattered dream  
An alley not of fear, just pistachio ice cream

Who knew these sizzling livers  
could mend this battered heart?  
Alex is no longer another shore.  
I still hear her every time  
When leather brushes stone.  
Friction to show the stubble was real.  
Fiction no longer needed.  
Proving there is a road,  
Proof there is an after you.

I'd rather spit into a stranger's mouth  
than vomit these words onto paper,  
Yet, here we are, amics.  
You both have haunted me for years  
In your own fiendish ways.  
One, stalking the barri  
where we succumbed to each other's snores.  
The other, talking in tongues  
as I traveled to distant shores.

Forgive me this time  
Spent upon my soapbox  
Heroizing sobbing streets  
And throbbing ~~eeek~~ talks

May the urbanism  
that brought us together  
that bound us  
that binds us  
Liberate our walks,  
If only for some hours.  
A momentary glimpse  
of a city to call ours.  
Give us a taste  
which we crave  
which we devour  
Let us lick the concrete,  
A bench, and, why not?, a tower  
A picture without a photo  
can still be considered photography.  
So let us codify our walks  
as pure architectural cartography.

Remember these words,  
As you venture from here to there.  
Dwell on them at home,  
on your bed, naked, and bare.  
Cross-examine that walk to Aldi,  
Is it quotidian or is it queer?

# 1. NEGATING URBANISM

"This is not urbanism."

Wednesday, June 19, 2024, a date which will live in infamy...for no one except for myself. These four words were uttered with the precision of multiple and simultaneous daggers to my heart, brain, stomach, and back. Standing before the PhD program tribunal wearing a self-made, see-through traffic cone shirt and asphalt-printed pants, my fantastical urbanist witch ways failed to sway the jury to my undefinition of "urbanism", much to my consternation.

The black-cloaked duo of despair noticed the dismay and anger welling in my evercreasing furrowed brow as I spat back: "What?! What does urbanism mean to you?!" as politely as I could...all the while inside my inner demons wanted to rip out and return the daggers: "So, I guess you have the power to define 'urbanism'? Aren't you a graphic designer?"

At her side, another dark angel of negation dressed cap-to-toes in a cascade of boring black fabrics—the safety fallback look which should be forever read as "sad beige"<sup>70</sup> for those with design degrees, (not to sound like a bitter Betty, or worse, a racist...I can't be a racist, some of my best friends are designers!) tried to intervene after a couple minutes later by telling me: "I think what she meant to say was: "This is not *real* urbanism"". My eyes nearly bursting all vessels. "Everything you are explaining has

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<sup>70</sup> McCusker, K., 'The sad beige aesthetic: why has the world suddenly turned taupe?', *The Guardian*, 9.1.2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/jan/09/the-sad-beige-aesthetic-why-has-the-world-suddenly-turned-taupe>, Accessed: 6.6.2025

to do with the city, but it's not what we think about when we think about urbanism, maybe you should change the words you..."

"That's it, thank you!" I disrespectfully accepted this reasoning.

As a cooler head unfortunately prevailed, our back-and-forth faded off in a more disarming manner. Neither side giving up an inch, our high heels dug into the cracks of the exposed concrete floor. As I slunk away from the podium in my sexy traffic cone-cum-freakum dress and glistening 15cm sequin heels, the reality set in: 3.5 years into this PhD program, and I was still being written off as an affable performance artist who dreamt of being an architect. Flashbacks of my academic past lives came rushing back: in 2005, being told by Cooper Union's Architecture Department that I belonged in the art department after 2 months of classes spent arguing freestyle drawings and poetry are more important than structural engineering, and in 2011, when my Fine Arts professor at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna told me I belonged in the architecture department after two years of printing fantastical cityscapes on garbage and tetra-pak boxes in lieu of paper and copper etching..



*Fig 2. The sexiest traffic cone, 2024. Credit: author*

With these daggers still drawing blood, I needed to meet my therapist ASAP. Waiting for me outside, thankfully, she sat there gleaming in the Barcelona sunshine: Madame Asphalt. Escaping the institutional walls of my university, breathing the poisoned Mediterranean winds as I pounded the pavement... any remnants of the intellectual wounds quickly licked by the streetscape.

As so often done before, an urban waltz was needed to cleanse the spirit, calm the anger, clear the mind, and get a sandwich. Wandering around Poble Nou's *xamfrans*<sup>71</sup>, each intersection turns into an overly designed jumble of traffic lights, angled parking spots, and official pedestrian crossings (which require an ever-so-inconvenient extra 50 steps to either side unless you dare to continue walking in a much more logical straight line across the beveled corners and in the face of a €500 police fine). This much "heralded" (by architects) street plan was created to allow a better flow of light (yay!), air (yay!) and traffic (boo!). A distinct Barcelonian built form (which ironically was very contested in its day as it was forced onto the city by the Madrid central government who feared Barcelona was trying to out-*grandeur* the capital city's own expansion plans), these *xamfrans* have become indelible visual markers of the city which have been confronted, challenged,<sup>72</sup> and remedied by pedestrians, artists and the *Ajuntament* (city hall).<sup>73</sup>

Where some see a beveled intersection, I see a pedestrian provocation. With absolutely no extra €500 in my bank account to pay such a fine, I strode straight across each intersection, cutting the 45-degree corner with aplomb: this is not a city drafted in 1859, it's the city beneath my feet in 2025. "*Sous les pavés, la plage!*" my dear old *Parisienne* friends screamed in 1968. Despite my proximity to the current Barcelona beach, I'm fairly certain "*Sous les pavés, les briques toxiques des anciennes usines!*" is more fitting... though it doesn't have the same ring.

Block by block, I trotted past the ceramic paint-by-number stores, overpriced cold-brew coffees, painfully cool graphic design studios, and pay-through-the-nose private universities that proliferate in this coastal corner of Barcelona, quietly listening to what Madame Asphalt was telling me: "Urbanism is as much yours as anyone else's, pumpkin. Let the naysayers say 'nay'. That's their problem: they believe the definition

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<sup>71</sup> Ildefons Cerdà's 45-degree angled cuts into his "celebrated" 1859 grid-based expansion plan which makes up a majority of current day Barcelona

<sup>72</sup> Casinos, X., 'La Barcelona del xamfrans', *The New Barcelona Post*, 25.3.2021, <https://www.thenewbarcelonapost.cat/barcelona-xamfrans/> Accessed: 6.7.2025

<sup>73</sup> 'Projectat un xamfrà més ampli i agradable al carrer d'Aragó amb Bruc', *Ajuntament de Barcelona*, 21.7.2023, <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/eixample/ca/noticia/projectat-un-xamfra-mes-ampli-i-agradable-al-carrer-arago-amb-bruc-1308974> Accessed: 7.6.2025

started and ended with Cerdà's *urbanisme*, which first appeared in *Teoría General de la Urbanización* in 1861."

Finally reaching my fortress of solitude, I thanked Madame Asphalt for today's session and entered the Cementiri del Poblenou. Past the labyrinthine stacks of marble squares, dead Catalans and a million bouquets of sun-bleached plastic flowers, I brought out my *bocata de calamars* and sat next to my second therapist of the day, Senyor Petó de la Mort (Mr Kiss of Death). Lording it over these stacks of bones 'n stones since 1930, he has a privileged position here in one of the finest cemeteries in all of the city, if not Europe. Originally built to mark the grave of some rich Catalan, it adds a demonic-cum-homoerotic tinge to this peaceful picnic spot for those of us with a taste for the gloom. With the *pa amb tomàquet* and greasy calamari rings dripping down my lower lip, I regaled him with the tattered tales of my morning presentation. While not in complete agreement with my words nor actions (being the angel of death, he obviously wished for a more violent outcome), his marble eyes came alive and gave me the stank eye to look down at his feet, where the inscription read:

*Mes son cor jovenívol no pot més.  
En ses venes la sanch s'atura y glaça.  
Y l'esma ja perduda, la fe abraça,  
sentint-se caure de la mort al bes.*

*But his youthful heart can no more.  
In his veins, the blood stops and freezes.  
His spirit now lost, faith embraces him,  
And he feels himself fall from death's kiss.*



*Fig 3. Bocata de Calamars in the Shadow of the Kiss of Death, 2024. Credit: author*

Ever the dramatic Angel of Death he be, Jacint Verdaguer's words did strike a nerve. Dealing with my own two angels-of-despair-design hours earlier, was I really going to stand by and let their pretensions and definitions try to define "urbanism" for me? Or should I treat them as I do every xamfrà I come across? Follow the *panots* [Barcelona's flower-imprinted concrete tiles which line most of the city's sidewalks] to the zebra crossing and patiently wait for the green light to cross the street? I'm never one to shy away from an unnecessary 100 steps to go out of the way, but they should be 100 steps taken of my accord, not prescribed by the traffic gods.

I took the angel's words to my decidedly un-youthful-38-year-old heart. Let not these critics make me lose the faith, let my high-cholesterol-prone blood stop only when clogged with calorific treats and not from definitions from yesteryear. For the time being, I'd rather be by death's side, a healthy arm's reach from his luscious lips.

And so, to the designers who tried to bog me down with their conventions and daggers, *thank you*. Not only did you provide me a wonderful chapter title to start this written journey/book/thesis, but you also reminded me why I stay true to the course despite these archaic obstacles. Challenging accepted cultural/academic norms and mores has been an integral part of my DNA since I was a young little *queerdo faggot*.

As a strange child reared in the most generic of American suburbs who wrote book reports in high school on the importance of shadows in public spaces à la Camillo Sitte's *The Art of Building Cities: City Building According to Artistic Principles*<sup>74</sup> and the magic of screaming on the streets à la *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, my references always leaned to the darker and louder bits of architecture/urbanism/art/design. Over the last 4 years of walks, mystery, tears, and nightmares, my body of work and I have fit into a niche that could best be described as *Queer Urbanism*, if such a pigeon-hole were truly needed. In a land of keywords, hashtags, and click-bait, it is a phrase that has been bantered about since Kian Goh's "Recurring Re-Queering: From and Towards a Queer Urbanism" (2011)<sup>75</sup> listed queer/LGBT+ events and places in New York City, recounting the life, death and rebirth of the Christopher Street piers from their historical placement in LGBT+ gay lore as cruising spots, to their destruction brought about by gentrification, and finally to their spiritual afterlife, with their stories and mythologies still acting as beacons for youth looking to an historically erased populace.

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<sup>74</sup> Sitte, C. *The Art of Building Cities: City Building According to Its Artistic Fundamentals*, Reinhold Pub. Corp, 1945.

<sup>75</sup> Goh, Ko. 'From and Towards a Queer Urbanism', *MVMTBLDG*, 27.3.2021, <https://mvmtbldg.wordpress.com/2011/03/27/from-and-towards-a-queer-urbanism/> Accessed: 7.6.2025

It was a conscious decision to leave this phrase - Queer Urbanism – out of the title of this thesis. No stranger to weaponizing/selling/using it myself (see later chapters on my workshops/articles which include it in their titles/abstracts), I aim to differentiate the concept of “Queer Urbanism” and the “Queer Art of Undefined Urbanism”. A more roundly academic take, perhaps. Referencing *The Queer Art of Failure*, absolutely. Keeping it in the title would have kept eyes strictly on this not-straight-forward topic in mind. Replacing it with “undefined”, a word that does not appear in any of the “acceptable” English dictionaries (Miriam Webster, Oxford, *et al*), yet does appear on Wiktionary, which defines (har har) it as “to obliterate or confuse the definition or limitations of.”<sup>76</sup> No matter which definition of “queer” you hold to your heart (or other body part, no judgements), the power to simultaneously create/destroy/define/undefine/confuse/conflate/obliterate/give birth to/abort/celebrate the idea of breaking the boundaries of a concept could be read as quite *queer* in and of itself. The importance/unimportance of using queer will be dealt with throughout this tome. For the time being, I give you absolutely no limitations on how to imagine these 5 letters when placed together: Q-U-E-E-R. Positive, negative, adjective, noun, verb, idea, vibe, dream or nightmare, it is up to you to decide. Far from being a gatekeeper, the joy of this word lies in its ability to obfuscate, bewilder, annoy, and confound those who encounter it. Far from taking the easy way out, I hereby grant you the power to read into this word as you will, taking its context into account, moving forward. And from the semantic pulpit, I fall back to earth. *Au-dessus les pavés!*

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<sup>76</sup> ‘undefine’, *Wiktionary*, 18.8.2024, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/undefine>, Accessed: 10.6.2025

## 2. DRAGGING URBANISM

Every actor needs an audience  
Every action is a performance  
It all takes courage, You know it  
Just crossing the street  
well, it's almost heroic  
You're so flamboyant

- Pet Shop Boys, 'Flamboyant'<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Pet Shop Boys, 'Flamboyant', *PopArt: The Hits*, Parlophone, 2003

"Who here knows the city of Baltimore?" Roughly half of a 100-strong audience raises a hand.

"Who here can mention a single building in the city?" ...silence.

"Who here has seen one of John Waters' *Trilogy of Trash* movies: *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*?" Roughly 34 raise a hand. "And this scene in particular?"

*\*plays one minute of Divine dancing across the sidewalks of 1970s Baltimore in Female Trouble \**

"Now, all of you have seen a bit of Baltimore, can you describe any building you just saw?" ...silence.

"What did you see?"

"A large lady dancing." ... "An orange trash can?" ... "Divine in leopard print."

"So, if I were to ask you again about Baltimore, what would you say?"

"Streets full of drag queens," mumbled a student in the back.

This exchange took place December 16, 2022 in Pristina, Kosovo at IPAU 2022, the 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on Architecture and Urbanism hosted by Faculty of Architecture, University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina". Not only was it the first international academic architecture and urbanism conference hosted in Prishtina, but it was also my first conference as an invited speaker. When I saw the open call for papers around the theme "Architectural Identity of the City", I thought it was a perfect opportunity to showcase my kooky brand of urbanism on the academic stage. From my first trip in 2016 to take part in the Stacion – Center for Contemporary Art Prishtina's "Summer School as School" program, I was smitten with this beguiling Balkan city. Under the guise of a three-day painting workshop, I ended up staying for 2 months, taking in whatever workshops they offered (thanks to a scholarship from the Austrian Sparkasse bank) in 2016 and then returned for another month at Stacion in 2018.



Fig 4. IPAU Conference, University of Prishtina, 2022. Credit: author

En route to the conference, I was blessed by a freak winter storm during my London connection, which meant that I was re-routed on the only flight leaving that week to Tirana, Albania. Just a hop, skip, and 6-hour bus ride through the Accursed Mountains (actual name) in the dead of winter. The plan was to have a week in Pristina, but fate dropped me in a foggy Tirana with the promise of a free hotel courtesy of WizzAir. As per usual with Air Wizzles, no hotel in sight and a 10 pm landing time led me to catching a ride with some other lost tourists to the center under the promise of a random Albanian gentleman offering “good room, good price.” Unlike my Luton Airport ordeal, I awoke to pleasant surprise: a bustling metropolis filled with cranes, buttery *burek* for breakfast, and an incredibly helpful grandma who led me by the hand onto the local bus route—(“taxi” is not a word I utter by choice)—to the grungiest of international bus stations (R.I.P.). With only 36 hours before I was set to present, I needed to make my way across the Albanian mountain pass in the daylight or else I’d spend another night in Albania’s capital. No stranger to bizarre Balkan misadventures during my time as a student in Austria, I took each misstep in stride as best one could. Shuffling through my notebook to make sure my first big-time presentation was as graceful as possible, I watched the cluttered cityscape through the bus window as the Tirana sprawl clawed its way into the hills. Despite my weather-, academic- and travel-

based state of consternation, the 3 hours spent getting lost in the waltz of Tirana's construction zones left an indelible impression of wanderlust, begging me to return.

Arriving 14 hours before the conference, I wandered the bleak winter streets of Prishtina with the same gusto as those furtive summer excursions to Kosovo in 2016 and 2018. In 6 years, incredibly, everything had changed; yet, at the same time, nothing had changed at all. Prishtina is an urbanist's wet-dream/nightmare (depending on your levels of faded ex-Yugo and/or Balkan-hyper-capitalist romance): a rabbit warren of lanes that refuse to appear on Google Maps, decidedly irrationally "numbered" streets (18A is just as likely next to 28C as 291D), asphalt valleys hugging the hilly landscape surrounded by an intoxicating mix of horribly generic new-build highrises painted with cheap faux-second empire facades dripping in peeling, plastic balconies. The list of superlatives could go on forever. Sitting in the second cheapest accommodation I could find, legs tired and eyes weary after hours of scribbling presentation notes, I gave into the temptation of delivery pizza—(much like "taxi", "delivery" rarely drips from my lips).

"Përshëndetje! Can I please have a family-sized pepperoni delivered to '40 Egnatia' Apartment 3B, please?"

"Alo! Sure... but what is that address? I don't know any Egnatia..."

Imagining/certainly butchering the pronunciation, I spelled it out in the chat.

"Egnatia... I still don't know, can you please drop your location pin in the chat?"

\*perfectly situates the pin amidst the Yugo tower blocks\*

"Ahhhh, I don't know what Egnatia is, but you are at Henry Deli & Makeup"

Befuddled, as my photographic memory could not recall seeing neither a deli nor make-up saloon on this forlorn apartment block, I replied "Sure, I'll wait outside," expecting an evening without my beloved greasy friend.

Wouldn't you know, 8 minutes later, I'm freezing on the street prepared to walk to a nearby kebab place, when I get honked at by an unassuming sedan. "Hey American boy! You are here, you didn't lie!"

"Well, I dropped a pin, but I still don't understand why this is Henry Deli & Makeup?"

“Ah, true. Well, down the street, a man named Henry used to run the best deli in all the Balkans, and over here, my cousin owned a makeup shop.”

“I didn’t see any Deli or makeup shop.”

“They closed years ago, but everyone remembers where they were.”

Matching the grinch-like smile brought upon by the smell of greasy Balkan sausage-slathered pizza, I couldn’t help but fall in love with this description of my address-for-the-weekend. Fuck Google Maps, this is how it’s *done*. Not the most convenient for outsiders, but when the simple task of giving an address turns into time-travel, *I’m sold*.



*Fig 5. A Heart Kosovar Welcome, 2022. Credit: author*

Twenty-one centimeters of raw, pure, unadulterated Balkan meat and pizza later, I found myself walking briskly past my favorite building in the world, the National Library

of Kosovo. With its dignified, yet slutty metal rooftop lingerie holding down its beautiful white domes, it blew me a kiss, wishing me luck on my presentation on the finer points of Drag and Cinema's effect on the architectural identity of a city.

*Cue the conversation which opened this chapter.*

The audience, full of distinguished academics, architectural students and real-estate developers, seemed confused by my presentation. Some giggles, some uncomfortable foot-stares and most notably a wide range of side glances to their neighbors. As mentioned in the last chapter, this has been a common occurrence throughout my academic career. Sensing their skepticism and always willing to break the comfortable silence, I finished the presentation with a clip from *Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait*, in which Barcelona plays second fiddle to José Pérez Ocaña's absolute babe-in-a-flamenco-dress as they float down Las Ramblas, pushing along a baby stroller, flashing their genitals and tantalizing everyone they come across. As this was playing, I did my own stroll, using the aisles of the audience as my own personal Ramblas *du-jour*, flapping my *albanico* in their faces, giving them a little taste of the Mediterranean breeze on this cold winter day. And ever-so-discreetly shaking my booty in sexy red satin pants just for good measure. At least this got the audience a bit more... stimulated. After my little walk-around, I awkwardly walked up to people and asked them point-blank: "Where did the Ramblas end and Ocaña start? What is at the bottom of the soles of their shoes? Are we supposed to ignore the flowing dress, which took up a square meter as it flowed in the wind?"

The more well-dressed members of the audience replied: "Las Ramblas is the walkway; they are just actors on the stage of the city."

"So, Las Ramblas is just a bunch of pavers dropped into the dirt? Just a stage? If we took one paver away, would it still be the same? If we took 7 away, would it be the same?" Sensing my moment to pounce, "If we took Ocaña out of the video picture, would it be the same place with the same reactions?"

The suited developers, while still a bit uncomfortable with my un-consensual shoulder touches, started to shake their heads in agreement/disagreement. This was what I was here for: planting the seeds of doubt into the architectural foundations of this conference. What did they mean when they said "architectural identity of the city"? Just facades and architectural elements? If we recreated the exact same stones and benches of Las Ramblas in the middle of... Zaragoza, would it be the same? What

about Melbourne? Prishtina? How do we balance the political, cultural and geographical sense of a place within the space?

To prepare for this presentation, I asked some friends in Barcelona if they could name any building on Las Ramblas. "The Liceu Opera house, Mercat de la Boqueria." But when I asked them to actually describe them, most were unable to give a sense of measurement or materials. As "good" locals, they rarely traversed this famed walkway in the heart of Barcelona. Simultaneously decrying it as "lost to the tourists", yet refusing to take up space on it themselves. Las Ramblas is one of the most famous streets in the world, yet it's so much more than just a street, or a bunch of pavers bounded by cars and trees. The site of the Barcelona football team's celebrations, and also the site of the first LGBT+ protests in Spain. Every June 28<sup>th</sup> since, it remains the focus of the Manifestació per a l'Alliberament LGTBIQ+ - *Orgull Crític* (Critical Pride) march, a decidedly anti-capitalist, anti-institutional antithesis to the corporate, booty shorts and GHB-fuelled festivities of PRIDE BARCELONA.



*Fig 6. Critical Pride March – Barcelona, 2025. Credit: author*

I digress! Back to Prishtina! Unsure of what to make of this flashy faggot in front of them, the floor started bubbling with whispers between audience members. Silencing them for a final round of questions, I showed them a final slide: two side-by-side maps of Prishtina and Barcelona.

"Which city would you say is more queer?"

"Barcelona!" they screamed with hesitant joy.

"Why?"

"It's full of queer people, freedom..." Yada yada yada.

"Ok, so I understand the city is full of queer people... but let's have a look at the city without anyone on its streets? That was your argument earlier about Las Ramblas and Ocaña, wasn't it? If we just use the idea of "architectural identity" that most of you stood behind earlier, would you say Prishtina or Barcelona is 'more' queer?"

Scanning the room, I was losing them: "OK, that is a bizarre comparison, I'll admit, but let's look at something tangible... the streets on these two maps. Prishtina is a hot mess of spaghetti junctions and imaginary (for Google) streets, whereas Barcelona is made of one of the most famous gridded street networks in the world... which of those two *sounds* more queer?"

Now they started to follow my trail of burek crumbs.

Explaining my earlier issues whilst ordering pizza, they volleyed back with their own, spurting out stories of their own experiences with this mysterious Balkan capital: neighbors self-demolishing buildings due to arguments, informally building a kitchen on top of the sidewalk *et al.*

"So, you think Prishtina is queer?" asked the director of the Architecture department.

"Prishtina is *queer as fuck*. Architectural transgressiveness at its sexiest", I retorted.

"Well, how would you feel about doing a workshop here investigating this topic", she asked. Jackpot. Ye old plan worked like a charm (see: WORKSHOPPING URBANISM).

Clearly affirming to the positive, a hand shot up in the back from another well-dressed gentleman, with more than a whiff of bougie-academic-from-a-major-metropolis: "Slightly off topic, but this reminds me about the current situation of Hell's Kitchen in New York City, where I have a condo ... [ed: of course he had to mention this vital piece of information]. The plight of gentrification is one of the most pressing issues facing the gay population in New York. 'Queer Urbanism' sounds like it could encompass this also. Could you speak about how this relates to your research?"

"Sure! ... It doesn't," I cackled back with just a smidge of sinister sass. Reading the room and remembering that I was here to network, I continued: "Well, not directly to my research *per se*. But I find the example you chose a little suspect. While my heart *clearly* aches for anyone who can afford the outrageous rents in Manhattan, it's a ridiculous idea. Hell's Kitchen was not 'founded' by the gays. It was gutted in the '90s by Giuliani's redevelopments and historically inhabited by immigrant populations until then. The gays were the OG gentrifiers here I'm afraid. Blame the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center if you want, but the '70s were a long time ago. Gentrification is forever intertwined with urbanism and the queers, but let's not pretend we're innocent here. The fags are often a plague of locusts, a harbinger of higher rents and overpriced cocktails."

Taken aback from my intimate knowledge of NYC, this dapper fellow responded: "Oh, so you have been to NYC before?"

"Yes, I lived there in 2005 when I studied at Cooper Union." Even though I dropped out of the architecture program after 2 heart-wrecking months, I use this flex whenever the claws come out in an academic discourse.

With no more questions left, I shuffled off stage (...err, the raggedy eighties-inspired geometric carpet which lined the floors and walls of this particular hotel) and marched into a splendid Balkan buffet of assorted puff pastries and overly salted meats. As per usual, I waltzed through the hotel lobby and perched myself in the most obscure seat overlooking the city. Quietly absorbing the grey-hued vista in front of me, I noticed one of the program assistants inching closer in silence, no older than 19 years old:

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, sorry, but I really liked your speech, but I have a question for you..."

"Shoot"

"Well, I'm from Prishtina, and it was nice to hear a foreigner's take on the city like yours. I'm straight, but I think the idea of queering academics is very important...but it also keeps some of us away"

"What do you mean?"

"If you had a workshop called 'Queer Urbanism', I would never join."

“Why is that?”

“I don’t want people to think I’m queer. You are from Barcelona, it’s fine for you, but it hits different here.”

“I get it, I’ve been to the Balkans many times.”

“What I want to ask you is... do you think that word is important in your research?”

“Of course, it’s a catchy tagline/hashtag, whatever, but it’s part of who I am and how I approach the city.”

“... did you know that if you didn’t use that word in your speech, more people would have come? Wouldn’t that have been more subversive? Maybe just use ‘Tactical Urbanism’ and surprise them?” I was surprised at the candidness of this stranger-in-a-headseat, but it did make total sense in my twisted mind.

*“I was talking with some other friends from the architecture department, and they said your possible workshop here would be fun, but they wouldn’t join if you advertised it as a ‘queer event’. So, what is more important for you? That you call it queer or that we change the city?”*

*That* got to me. Oh, how 18 words can floor a 2-meter-tall being. This question would haunt me for the next 3 years, hiding behind every corner and curtain.

A few clock ticks after the student left, the dapper NYC-er asked if he could sit next to me.

“Sure,” I responded with a hesitant side-eye.

“That was some speech, didn’t expect to hear anyone talking about Divine at an architecture conference in Kosovo.”

After some small chit-chat about my background, he told me that he was in the process of looking for authors to include for an overpriced-academic-anthology reader about Urbanism.

“Unfortunately, it’s not paid, but it’s a good chance for some exposure. We are looking for an article about the LGBT+ community, and, after seeing your sass up there, I think

you could write something enjoyable for the reader. Unfortunately, I don't like to *write* about these kinds of topics because of my academic stature. I may be a gay architect, but I don't want to be known as *the gay architect*, if you know what I mean. Someone who... um... dresses and acts like you probably doesn't have an issue with this, right?"

"I believe it's called internalized homophobia"

"I'm not homophobic, I'm gay!"

"*Right.* Well, I'm happy to play the fag fiddle, man, let's talk later."

Gobbling up the crumbs of my buttered borek, business card in hand: S.U.C.C.E.S.S. I got what I came for from this conference: leads for both a workshop and a publication. Unfortunately, I was still reeling from a case of paradoxical diarrhea [look it up and beware of the signs!] brought on by some questionable foods and travel hygiene, so I retired to my bedsit before setting sail back to Barcelona the next day.



*Fig 7. Goodbye, Kosovo National Library, 2022. Credit: author*

### 3. PERFORMING URBANISM

Walk past once more, I dare you  
Flapping and flailing in this forested air  
You still pretend I fade into the landscape  
Steed of steel is what I feel,  
But to you, I remain a receptacle for your rubbish.  
Ignore me.  
Fill me.  
Ignore me.  
Fill me.  
You're just a number, another blot on the horizon.  
I'll stand my ground, even if against my will.  
I'll stand my ground, this steed of steel.

Reeling, recoiling and refreshed after dipping my toes in the Balkan architectural scene, I was greeted with a much-needed ego/heart-rush. As an official conference speaker: I guess I'm officially a *real*/academic now. With the first complete year under my belt, it was time to dig my high heels into the ground beneath my hooves. As with most wayward souls in the first year of a PhD program, I was just coming to wrap my head around the topic(s) at hand: Queer Urbanism. The canon was being milked for all it was worth, but it rang hollow to these ears. I was regurgitating stories of the Situationists' *dérives* across Paris, Ocaña's prancing down Las Ramblas, and Divine's devilish twirls through Baltimore to anyone within earshot, but the inner demons taunted me: *Tom, it's 2023, and you're still obsessed with these old fogies (faggies)*. As a lover of history and its myriad antecedents, it was time to muster up some magic to drag the spirit of these wackadoodles up to the present, to bring them *into* my research. In the first year, I crisscrossed Barcelona with the aim of walking every street in the city. For me, that was something quantifiable, something to prove that this *guiri* [derogative term the locals from Barcelona call tourists and/or tall blonde people] knew every inch of the city. Yet as with these tales of yesteryear, I needed to look into the whys and wherefores of these walks. Was I just walking for inspiration to do something? Was it a form of meditation? I started to play little games, once every walk, I would have to pick one object: trash can, park bench, potato chip bag, lost earring, and make a story about it. Not to imagine who it belonged to, but who did I *want* it to belong to? These little concrete fantasies would go on to later form the basis of the initial poems—see the poem that started this section: an ode to the most regal trash can on my street: Carrer Riego. The stories would flirt with the fantastical idea of interviewing the streets themselves. Not an Ode *about* the Trashcan, rather an Ode written *by* the trashcan to me as I walked by, depositing my day-old BBQ pizza wrapper in it every Sunday afternoon. What would they say about me? Passing 4,058-odd times, and never asking its name? What kind of monster am I? This poised, cultivated piece of sexy, translucent metal mesh keeping guard over my beloved Plaça d'Osca. This was the angle I decided to take, not walking *through* the city, but seeing my walks *as* the city. Embrace the phenomenological detective within to utilize and uncover the truths (and/or non-truths) of the city. What about this specific trashcan caught my eye? Was it the trail of 653 ants marching up from the cement searching for the remnants of the discarded Eskimo ice cream sandwich? Or was it the musty, toasted, and pungent perfume of the days-old Estrella Damm beer can pulling on my left nostril as I rushed to work?

This self-reflection started to take hold within other parts of my research: Why was I walking every street in Barcelona? To whom am I trying to prove that I *know* the city?

Shouldn't it be the asphalt which guides me along the street, not some magic list of boxes to check?

In my presentations, I extolled the values of the walk as a democratic (free and available to any able-bodied creature) way of understanding urbanism. Yes, that walk to Aldi could be seen as an 8:53-pm race against time to get that absolutely necessary bag of tortilla chips, but what about the meandering 39-minute path I took home. Under no pre-defined deadlines of closing hours, I drifted through my *barri* of Sants at a stoned rat's pace. Heroically bringing home a bag of chips to create a dazzling array of nachos for the hungry hippos waiting, the joy emanating from my body was a gift to all those who passed by. Extra winks to strangers, sexy shoulder sashays, I was redefining the same steps I had previously stomped. Thirty-nine minutes instead of the 5-minute lightning bolt race before. Freed from the restraints of being at a specific place at a specific time, I wasn't walking to the grocery store: I *was* the city.

Holding my *dérives* up to a new sense of scrutiny, I threw the old rules out the door. I was no longer to be constrained by walking ALL THE STREETS, but I would devise a new way to separate the walks *somewhere* to the walks which would count towards research. Calling these "activated walks", I would still quantify my knowledge of the city, still keep a tally of the kilometers walked during this PhD as *some* sort of number to throw at those who requested facts and/or figures.

While these activated walks would form the backbone of my research, I still craved something a bit wilder and goofier. After all, I have spent my adult life taking hours-long nightwalks through a variety of cities. Now, I needed to give some *oomph* to these pedestrian acts (har har). A lover of the less-loved pickings from thrift stores and storyteller by heart, I needed a narrative for some extra-activated walks in Barcelona. Living close-ish to Avinguda Paral·lel, a slightly depraved (by night) street full of theaters and nightclubs, it was a natural selection for my staging. Searching far and wide for any sort of funding (I'm a PhD student, give me moneyyyyyy!) from every and any institution in Barcelona, I came up with the catchy title (*clar i català*) "*Univers Paral·lel*". Calling upon the ghosts and goddesses of Paral·lel's past vices, I wanted to make a series of street performances with personal touchstones from Barcelona's creative and/or drag scenes. Even though it's lined with venues overflowing with creatures of the night, the idea was to bring the nocturnal shenanigans into the daylight.

Whilst scouring the Barcelona queer performance art scene, I came across performer Kleo La Farona's upcoming performance at the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Barcelona's LGBTI Center. Kleo used her magic to transform a street of the Sant Antoni neighborhood into an interior courtyard of Damascus to reimagine a "Shamiat"—a traditionally private

meeting of Syrian women sharing songs and dances while making a communal meal. Transferring a private affair into the public realms, this gang of Levantine genderbenders brought the Eastern Mediterranean to its western shores. With its surreal decorations and festive atmosphere, it proved a hit with the local crowd. Compared with the other more “traditional drag” performances, it elevated the event into a multi-layered cultural queering of Carrer del Comte Borrell for the afternoon.



*Fig 8. 'Shmiat' Performance, 2023. Credit: Kleo La Faraona, @kleo.lafaraona*



*Fig 9. 'Shmiat' Performance, 2023. Credit: Kleo La Faraona, @kleo.lafaraona*

Or that's what I've been told. You see, after a particularly raucous Friday night out, followed by a Saturday morning and afternoon... and evening out, I danced my way through the four alarms set with the best intentions but subsequently missed the spectacle. For better, or for worse, my love of the performing arts can (sometimes) lose out to my love of cheap vodka, lemonade, and a chemical boogie. However... I did meet up with Kleo the next weekend, where she explained her magic Syrian domestic fantasy over some vermouths.

That particularly raucous night out was brought about because it was also, after two very long and bean-and-rice-filled years, the week that I finally received my residence permit and could legally work in Spain. After two years of scratching my Visa credit card into oblivion, my piling debt made it clear there was only one choice: *ó'ó'*, blonde hair, blue eyes, (though no trust fund), it was time I found work... in Finance?

No stranger to taking up odd jobs to pay my academic dues and bar bills—(Slinging crabcakes in a food truck? Check. Chocolate taste tester? Check. Inspecting metal deliveries at the world's largest steel wheelbarrow factory? Double check.)—taking a job in Finance *hurt* a bit more. However, with no magical trust funds or inheritance awaiting me, those thousands of euros of debt I racked up were calling, and they were *wrathful*. Coupled with vociferous and vocal 'No!'s from every and any grant application I applied for (honorably mentions and slaps-on-the-back from the city's institutions proved to sting a little more on my sunburnt shoulders), this was the only way forward. *And why the hell not?* I asked myself. I had been self-financed for the last 18 years with only the odd EU-funded Erasmus Grant providing some travel money, what else is new?

With ye old bank account's numerals slowly losing their red hue-of-death, I could finally afford the overdue ceviche and tapas, but what about my studies? A 9-to-5 job is not great for creating a series of daytime street performances, is it? Eyes arid from staring at Swiss and Austrian invoices all day, feet tired from the 43-minute walk back from work. *Shit*. Where did all the spunk go? That sprightly fag who dreamt of crisscrossing the city? "Every street" and "4 hours of walking a day" quickly turned into "1 hour every other day...if I'm not tired". Gone would be the 2 pm meetings with my fellow PhD students and professors to discuss the finer points of Haraway vs Homer.

"We haven't seen you around for our weekly book clubs, is everything ok?"

"Well, since I am blessed with unstable residency and a ballooning credit card bill, you won't be seeing me anytime soon, comrades."

Creatively working under the restraints of trying to be a social creature, boozing, and a full-time job, the PhD research would have to take a more concentrated form. With

the thoughts of “Univers Paral·lel” still dancing around in my finance-riddled brain, I had to come up with something that worked its way into my newly-shorn schedule. With most of my creatures of the night working evening jobs, the collaborations started to fade into the horizon. *Time to go at it alone, baby boy.*

Still able to call some favors from other day-walkers, I devised a plan to truncate “Univers Paral·lel” into a 10-part piece taking place on those days I could work from home. Luckily, I had a visit coming up from two old art school friends from Portugal, so we brainstormed a silly little plot device to play with Avinguda Paral·lel. Kleo’s “Shamiat” was a wonderful performance, but I had no charming cultural heritage to draw from: oh, child of central Pennsylvania! Listen to the flailing waves of corn and suburban sprawl for inspiration!

Discussing with these co-conspirators, we wanted to get back to the basics of our trashy art school youth, embracing the DIY/garbage jesters within. Over some delightfully anchovie-tinted vermouths on Avinguda Paral·lel we wanted to make a lighthearted attempt at dealing with the gentrification of the street. Once replete with dens of sins and gushing with cheap booze, this avenue was being targeted by the city to become more “family friendly” with children’s playgrounds and overpriced student dormitories in lieu of broken bottles and twisted nightmares-cloaked-in-sequins. This cultural whitewashing, paired with rising rents, meant that the sanctimonious natural wine bars were chasing away the characters that made Paral·lel interesting to so many generations. On a shoestring budget and collective walks around during trash pick-up days, we had our outfits. Embodying the Univers Paral·lel (on the nose), I wore a galaxy-printed vinyl dress that would make a normal black garbage bag look sleek and sexy. Topped off with a balaclava made with a found pair of pants and oversized Basque *Txapela* (beret), my freak’em dress was ready.

My friends would be staying for one week, which gave us at least two lunchtimes to wreak havoc on Paral·lel. The idea was simple: create a black wormhole, played lovingly by Zosia and Marta, which would chase Univers Paral·lel down the street. The aim? Not so clear. We had talked about the academic and formal ideas of how we could *queer* a street, but with our shared love of improvisation and all-around nonsense, wouldn’t it be more fun to drop the academic schtick and let the city guide us?

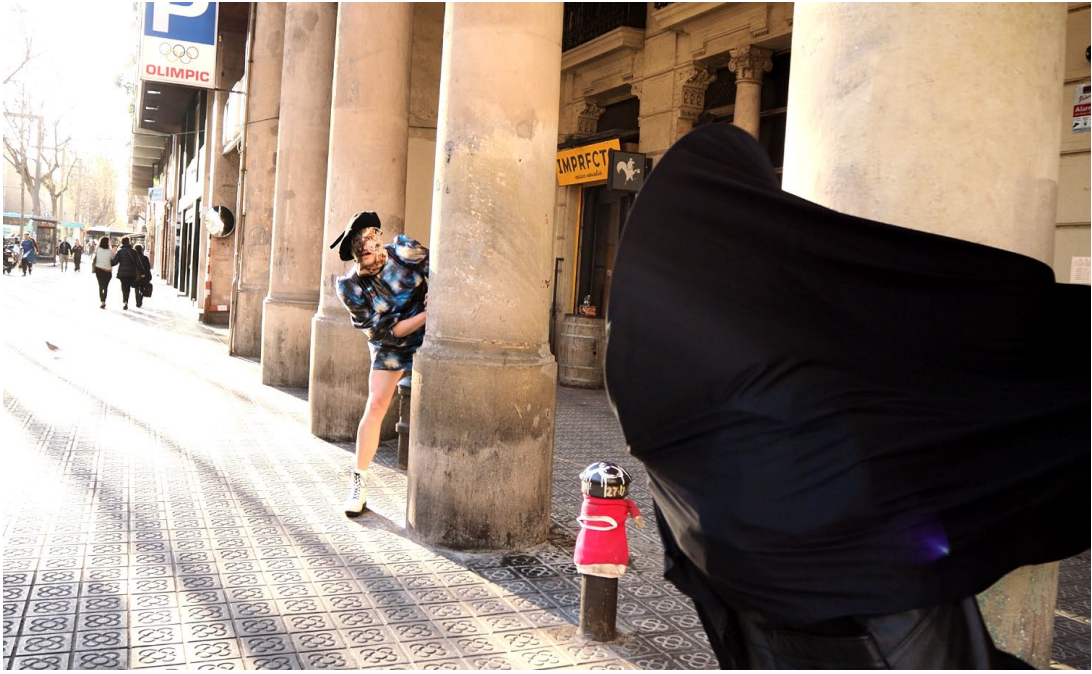


*Fig 10. Waiting Patiently on Barcelona's Línea Roja, 2023. Credit: author*

Dressed up to the nines, we decided we would start the "performance" the moment we left my house, to the metro, 2 stops to Plaça d'Espanya (the start of Avinguda Paral·lel) and then start the tomfoolery for the entire 2 km length of the street. With my faithful friend/camera man/visa-husband Adri by our side to record every misstep, we set off on our adventure. Apparently, the lunchtime crowd on Barcelona's *Línea Roja* (the metro line with the finest cross section of humanity this side of the Llobregat) was unaccustomed to seeing a 2m+ dog-face balaclava and mess of black fabric silently waiting for those two stations to go by. Upon the exit of the majestic tubular wormholes, the crowd giggled, iPhones-in-hand, and discreet finger-pointing. Starting the parade, I slowly stalked the street's walls, feeling every crumbled piece of plaster from the Plaça's faded exhibition halls between my calloused digits.

We continued past the gas station, running into fruit-and-veg shops, make-up stores, playing hide-and-peek in parking garages. This galaxy-tinged monster using all urban infrastructure along the way to defeat the evil wormhole that followed. Recalling everything from Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks to the Fluxus happenings, we did our best to wake Avinguda Paral·lel from its slumber. After the first complete route, the Universe and the Black Hole made peace over—you guessed it—some vermouths in the sun. Looking over the award-winning footage to see what was/wasn't captured, we called it a day, and I returned to work to save the Swiss invoices from evaporating into oblivion. Over dinner that night, we talked about our day, how we felt it was perceived. By and large, the "feedback" from the footage showed an audience smiling at these city-clowns: somewhat disappointing to this dark-hued jester.

Though I would have to work in my office-castle-in-the-sky, we planned another jaunt three days later to try and kick up some dust on Paral·lel. And so it went, 3 days later, after patiently moving my mouse for four hours as if I were actually working, I put my mouse-mover into place, and we headed out: Beret-drenched Universal Clown, the Hole, and Adri the camerathing. Slightly more aware of how the black fabric draped and how the street was laid out and used at the time, we marched back up-and-down at 2 pm sharp. This time, however, we took our liberty to interact more with the people and places along the street: wrapping around telephone poles, climbing construction equipment, a nail-biting, harrowing chase through a group of 40 French high-schoolers visiting the city for the Easter holiday, and a good handful of overly dramatic tumbles on the sidewalk. We finished with an orgy of vinyl-univers-and-black-fabric surrounding one of the classic Barcelona fin-de-siècle water fountains still in use.



*Fig 11. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*



*Fig 12. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*



*Fig 13. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*



*Fig 14. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*



*Fig 15. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*



*Fig 16. Univers Paral·lel, 2023. Credit: author*

After a good 15 minutes of resting on each other's bones, we gathered all dropped objects and headed to our favorite watering hole. Seventeen steps from the fountain, we were ACCOSTED BY A PEARL-NECKLACE WEARING GRANDMA THROWING HER HANDS IN THE AIR LIKE A WINDMILL WITH SOMEWHERE TO BE. Never one to argue with those bathed in pearls, we expected some sort of shouting match, but what followed warmed our brittle hearts: SHE LOVED US, SHE REALLY LOVED US. Let's call her...Núria. Núria wanted us to sit down with her:

"I saw you running up and down the street the other day, and now again today. Thank you. I have no idea what you were doing, but it was such a relief to see something happening on this street. It's become so boring lately, it was always a place to have a beer and see some crazy people on the street. The best kind of crazy."



*Fig 17. Chit Chat after the performance, 2023. Credit: author*

She continued, asking us for a picture so she could send her daughter, who used to do the makeup for the musical theaters on the avenue. Núria sent us on our way with a kiss and then quietly jumped into her rocket ship and shot off to her home planet. Or, so the vermouth would have me remember.

Once again homo, we looked over the pictures. Drats! The passer-by were still smiling! Even at a faster pace, daring Adri to keep up with our shenanigans, and lightly

physically assaulting some pedestrians in our way, the overall vibe on the street was that of a family sitcom-style slapstick. With my friends leaving the next day, I took my role as supreme chancellor of the Unvers and, to keep up this performance occurring every 3 days at 2pm. At least this way, I could see if there was some difference between the various days. Was Tuesday more “up for it” than a Friday because it had less going on? Would this type of performance be read as “just another Sant Antoni weekend” by the well-heeled Saturday locals?

I enlisted Adri’s help for the next two performances, with each getting a bit more rowdy than the last. Still not pleased that I was getting smiles and thumbs up from *les French* tourists in town, it was time to step up my queer game. Calling upon the interviews with the garbage can in my head, it was time not only to walk up and down to show my love of Paral·lel, but rather to *make love with Paral·lel*. Starting with the finest, muscle-iest, fiiiiiiiine telephone pole I could find, I told Adrid to stay at a bit of a distance while we shared some... intimate moments.



Fig 18. *More Unvers Paral·lel*, 2023. Credit: author

Tenderfully tonguing the fuck out of that *hard* piece of wood, feeling the splinters rearrange my guts, the onlookers took a noticeable turn. The smiles became a little more unsure, the steps a bit more hurried

as they shuffled along. *Voilà*. We parked ourselves up and down the street again, Adri a few steps behind me, allowing me to breathe with the city, syncing our sexual

energies. Reaching out to the bus stop as if it had abandoned me after a night out on too many spritzers. Grinding on that metro entrance like I wanted to mother its baby *NOW*. Each step, slide and kiss a bit raunchier than the last, the strangers kept their phones up, but I could smell the luscious salt dropping off their brows. There are approximately 29,204 ways to queer a street that don't include sexual innuendos or raw architecture porn, but boy oh boy, did it help to shift the crowd's reactions.

Two of these outings with Adri would provide me with a treasure trove of soft/hard porn images to pick from, but *still*, something else was speaking to me. We noticed that when we started shots with Adri farther away and coming in for the close-up, there was a sense of relief from the pedestrians: "Oh, there is a camera, it must be a performance for TikTok!" I could hear them huff.

This started out as a way of capturing some of the magical moments I saw from Ocaña and Divine, but it was clearly becoming a form of studying the effects and limits of "performing" urbanism and the role of what we perceive as "performance"

The next step was clear: no cameraaaa! (to the tune of *Mommie Dearest's* "No wire hangers!!!"). Dropping the camera and my favorite cameraman for a self-styled walkabout by myself, I zipped up my white moon boots and headed off to my stomping grounds again. Trying to remember my exact pattern of sexy slinks and pole-licking, I *devoured* Paral·lel once more. Each tongue-lashing slower, louder, more tantalizing than the last go around. Riding that air conditioner unit like it was the last vibrator on earth. Spanking it into *oblivion*. Or just enough to scare the grannies babysitting their kids. While it wasn't abject horror, the parents grabbed their kids and scuttled away onto the side streets. I was but a simple human being showing Barcelona how much I loved it, what could be so jarring? With all the joy of the friendly neighborhood junkie finding a fresh bag of glue, I wasn't *walking* on Paral·lel, I *was* its very lifeblood: pulsing with the pavement itself. Though all of these shimmying and sultry steps were quite fun, after the second length, I felt as if my job was done. Starting with successfully charming the pants off a grandma to a happy ending terrorizing the toddlers, Univers Paral·lel could rest well knowing it had brought some queer zaniness back to a street desperate for a pick-me-up.

Looking back at the pictures/videos from the first steps to reliving the memories of the last two, it was clear that I had completed this round of research, even though I hadn't reached that plumply round figure of 10 performances that I had set for myself. As it was with the idea to walk all the city's streets, I asked myself: why did I even start off with the number 10? Some brain-fogged idea that 10 is a complete number? Let the dog-balaclava and streets decide when it's over, not some pre-determined number. What was the difference between 10 and 6 (?) fo(u)r anyways?

Whistling away this story to the yearly commission, I was approached by a colleague who was dealing more directly with performance art (and its relation to sound design). He asked me if I was familiar with Andrea Fraser's 2001 recordings in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Nodding side to side, I made a mark in my little sketchbook to check it out. Upon further inspection at home, it was a beautiful treat for my eyes. Whereas Fraser was listening to the audio guide as she moaned and rubbed herself all over the (at the time) very sexy museum, I was letting the spirit of Barcelona take over and answering all the sexy glances the telephone poles could throw at me. There are definite parallels (wink wink) between our works and Tino Seghal's *Kiss* (2004) performance in the Guggenheim NYC<sup>78</sup>—I know the Guggenheim buildings are a bit sinewy, but who knew they would prove to such sex-magnets: mixing humor, architecture, and pure sex. Each work accurately reflected their surroundings: Fraser writhed over the cold, institutional floors and walls of the Guggenheim to the audio guide in an almost choreographed manner, smiling on cue when the narrator tells the visitor to relax<sup>79</sup> while my vermouth-infused *Univers* played off the pedestrians and the various forms of urban infrastructure. If I had known about Fraser's work beforehand, I would have realized that the hidden camera method probably would have given me "more successful" archival footage. While I won't pretend to know her actual reasons for her performance, the aim of my sexiness was not to directly confront the street/space with institutional critique; it was an honest exploration into the idea of performing urbanism and our relationship with those things we pass by each day.

Looking at these videos another time, one thing is clear: I'm going to take a 5-minute bathroom break to ...feel what I felt wrapped around that telephone pole.

Where does the city end and we begin? Are we also a part of this living organism, or can we join/leave at the slightest whim? It's easy to say that we are all parts of this thing we call a "city" with every step we take, but I prefer to take a slightly more nuanced approach, to allow for some more personal liberty. As with my activated walks, I draw a distinction between the walk to the grocery store in 5 minutes and the 39-minute wander. And so, I find the act of "performing" urbanism a bit perplexing. The difference is perspective: no (or most) other pedestrians don't know our purpose as we stride along the sidewalk. Is the lady in a red dress walking to work, out for a stroll, or out of her mind on an opium binge? Is the man in booty shorts with enlarged pupils out to pick up his puppy from the veterinarian, enjoying his own *dérive*, or on his way to get absolutely railed underneath the pedestrian footbridge? Surely, we hope

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<sup>78</sup> Naves, M. 'Exhibition Note', *The New Criterion*, Volume 28 Number 7, 2010  
<https://newcriterion.com/article/exhibition-note-5186/> Accessed: 5.7.2025

<sup>79</sup> 'Little Frank and His Carp', *The Met*,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/626861> Accessed: 5.7.2025

for the latter in the case of this man, but we cannot be sure of anything without asking him (and him telling us the truth).

So, there is a distinction to be made between what we *infer* to be performing urbanism and what we *feel* to be performing urbanism. Frankly, the idea that everyone is a vital part of the city every waking moment of every day gives off some very strong Matrix vibes, that we're all parts of cogs in a much larger machine. Whenever we take that mental note and/or change to *activate* our mind to fit this role as a performer, we open a new perspective on the city. For those among us with a more spiritual outlook on life (including this bitch/witch), it's a refreshing, if naïve, notion that we have the ability to turn this cognitive ability on or off. Following the free-flowing lady in a red dress or the booty beshorted man could lead us to a supermarket or an orgy, our own pedestrian choose-your-own-adventure-novel, inserting ourselves into their performance as an active spectator. However, if we were to put the memory of them in our mental storage space and continue along our own wandering, the possibility most often taken—lest we be accused of slightly stalking a stranger—their “performance” becomes just a side part in our own adventure *du jour*.

And so, it was with the multitudes of pedestrians I passed by during these walks along Avinguda Paral·lel. The main intent of these promenades was to knock the passer-by off kilter, if only for a second, to shake them from their own plan of action. A temporary collision course, delivered by an urbanist clown who has seen Cronenberg's *Crash* film far too many times and who never understood the desire to own a car, and, upon each time the film ended, wondered: *but what about me!?*

## 4. WORKSHOPPING URBANISM

*SCHPLATT.*<sup>80</sup> The glob of unexpected expectorate crashed into the sidewalk one meter from our feet, slinking into the crack of asphalt. The assailant? An unassuming 70-something man dressed as one's grandfather would on a Sunday walk in the park. We had just asked him if we were going in the right direction to the Corso [main plaza] of Peja. Two dissident bodies who would stick out in most environments, let alone a provincial regional capital in Western Kosovo, a 2-meter entity with a penchant for clashing patterns and dangling jewelry and Vanessa, a slightly shorter goth-tinted transwoman, were used to the stares of the local populace in this town, feeling their eyes on us while we tracked down out-of-the-way mosques and converted Serbian orthodox churches on the sides streets of this city abutting the Accursed Mountains. Having visited rural areas of the Balkans many times before, the stares from the passerby were commonplace. The shopkeepers refusing to give us WiFi passwords and walking away after ordering in a café: strange but not unheard of. However, this elder gentleman first appeared to be a much kinder soul than those others. Asking him a simple "Yes/No" question in Albanian should not have been a problem. He stopped and listened, looked us up and down, raising his weathered eyebrows to meet our eyes, spat in a surprisingly violent manner and crossed the street. Vanessa shrugged it off and kept walking, but after some steps, I turned around and saw the man pointing at us and chatting with another neighbor. A few minutes later, we found a sign pointing us towards the main Plaza, where at least the streets were full of people. We continued our walk-through town, visiting all of the ruined churches and rebuilt mosques, before catching the last bus to Pristina at sunset.

I had a weekend free in between sessions of a workshop I was holding in Prishtina. When I asked the participants where I should go on my free day, Vanessa told me Peja was the best option for a day trip, and she would be happy to join me. "You are

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<sup>80</sup> \*Note: this chapter is a version of a published article in *Dearq Journal* and reprinted here with their blessing. See T. Stempka, 'With Balkan Eyes: Surveying Pristina through Queer Eyes', *Dearq* (40) *Gender, City and Architecture*, 2024, pp. 64-72

big and foreign, if I go with you, they won't bother me and I can finally take pictures of my buildings," she implored. Big and foreign? Yes. Ready to accept the role of private security in rural Kosovo? Not quite my comfort zone. Kosovo is a welcoming place for most, especially those outside of the Balkan sphere, and especially for Americans (see: Bill Clinton statue/George Bush Avenue). Making the most of my bodily and geopolitical privileges, I agreed to travel to Peja with her on that cool autumnal Sunday. Vanessa had been working on a digital archive of disappearing architectural icons in Kosovo, the politics of which is beyond the scope of this article; however, I recognized the importance of digitizing these untold stories of cultural erasure before they are forgotten.

But, I regress, before I get ahead of myself: how did I end up back in this enchanted Balkan wonderland?

After the aforementioned conference in December 2022, I was drinking with the local architecture university's professors who told me it would be great to situate part of my research at their school: to explore what queer could mean in Prishtina and for their students. Wunderbar. Over the next five months, they refused to answer my emails & phone calls, following up on their winter offer. As I wandered the Barcelona streets, I noticed posters for two separate series of workshops on offer from local artist Antonio Montesinos and feminist artist collective FEM Kolectiva, which seemed to align/parallel with my research. Montesinos' URBANISMO FICCIÓN set itself across three cultural centers across Barcelona. Spread over the first half of 2023, these workshops were aimed at high school students, using speculative design as a research/creation methodology. By exploring the surrounding neighborhood and mapping out problematic areas, the aim was to place these "methodologies in the hands of citizens, so that they can establish their own systems of representation, territorial management and projection towards more desirable futures."<sup>81</sup> FEM Kolectiva held a series of workshops and walks in my neighborhood of Sants with a more outward feminist and activist approach with the title: "City, body, and gender." They explored the local streets in group outings, mapping out emotional responses in the final exhibition in my local Parc de l'Espanya Industrial.

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<sup>81</sup> Montesinos, A., 'Urbanismo Ficción,' *amontesinos.net*, 2024, <https://www.armontesinos.net/urbanismo-ficcion/>, Accessed: 4.5.2025



*Fig 19. Visiting the FEM Kolectiva exhibition "City, Body, and Gender", 2024. Credit: author*

Due to limitations of age, linguistic prowess (my less-than-stellar Catalan), and 40-hour workweek, I was unable to attend either of these workshops, yet after visiting the final FEM Kolectiva exhibition, I had more of a fire in my belly to do the same...but not in Barcelona. Of note, both were financed by the city hall, with Barcelona-level budgets and offerings of space. After two years of applying for every imaginable grant in the city, I had given up on local funding sources. Even with the radio silence from my Balkan amigos, I was determined to return to Prishtina to give my take on the ol' urbanist workshop. I had the good luck of having a job which allowed me to work abroad for a week & use my remaining 6 vacation days, which means that I had four full free days to execute any workshop. With a bank account constantly giving me the side eye at the cash register, I found a ray of hope through the EU's Erasmus+ funding program for PhD research, which provided a much-needed €700 grant. Still not-quite-Spanish and much-too-old (read: 35) to get any Spanish funding, it was the only option to: 1) get out of Spain for some fresh air; 2) fulfill my desire to take my research to a location where it may not be as "easily" understood as Barcelona. Desperately massaging my local contacts in Kosovo, I came across the ladies from Shtatëmbëdhjetë (17 in Albanian), a cultural center which focuses on Art & Education, Cultural Activism and Space, which has filled Prishtina's spinach-and-cheese-burek-clogged traffic arteries with art talks, workshops, and performances since 2018. As part of our conversations about my research and their institution's aims, we decided that a two-week workshop to explore the idea of Queer Urbanism in the context of urban Prishtina would be the best method to both examine the duality of the topic at head: the role of queer bodies

in the city and queering the city, in a more architectural sense. And thus, “Trouble-making Place-making” was born.



*Fig 20. Workshop Poster, 2023. Credit: author*

On the first day of this workshop, we did a round of introductions: from 20 to 45 years old, a poet, a zine writer, a stripper, an architecture student, and a cultural curator. The first slide was one which included a quote from feminist geographer Jane Dark:

"Our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass and concrete".<sup>82</sup> Then came my inevitable question: "Why did you choose to take part in this workshop?" All of these people had a deep interest in architecture/urbanism/Pristina and were intrigued: "What do you mean by Queer Urbanism?", answering my question with one of their own. "If you want a quick definition, you came to the wrong workshop; we are here to explore what it could mean." Following our first roundtable on what "queerness" meant to each of us I presented my personal canon: clips of Ocaña walking the streets of 1980s Barcelona, Divine traipsing down the streets of John Waters' Baltimore in the 1970s to more contemporary art/architecture/performance hybrids: Allan Kaprow/Fluxus Happenings in New York, Allen Wrexler's mobile architectural units mounted on his body and Willi Dorners "bodies in urban spaces" performances twisting human bodies around urban infrastructures. Presenting my own works alongside these old standbys, I asked them about the works I presented: What did they have in common? At first, the answer was "they all take place in the city", which was partially true, but then I began to prod them on their introductory musing on the term "queer". Discussing the subversive and boundary-challenging aspects of the artists, the light bulbs began to flicker above their heads: "They question their surroundings" came out of the air, perfectly timed toward the end of the session. Our first debate centered around the basics: How can we queer a street? Can we queer a street? What is more potent: temporary performance or static structures? With participants from various generations, the ideological space between personal definitions of "queer" came to the forefront, as well as questioning if we can use the term for something that happened in the past<sup>83</sup>.

I didn't want them to follow the well-trodden path of picking one single site in the city to develop an architectural project, so I gave them a prompt of 5 questions to give a wider variety of their perspectives on their city:

1. What is your happy place in Pristina? Your favorite place to think/read a book?
2. What is your least favorite place? What place makes you angry after being there for 5 minutes?

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<sup>82</sup> Dark, J., 'The Man-Shaped City', in *Changing Places: Women's Lives in the City*, (eds.) Chris Booth, Jane Darke and Sue Yeandle, Sage, 1996, pp. 88-99, p. 88.

<sup>83</sup> Preciado, Paul B., 'The Ocaña We Deserve,' *Stedelijk Studies Journal* (3), 2015, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/preciado-ocana-deserve/> Accessed: 15.6.2015

- 3 What is the location of your most intense memory of Pristina? Where did you laugh and/or cry the loudest in public?
4. If you had a hand grenade and a get-out-of-jail-free card with no repercussions, where would you throw it? What place do you loathe?
5. What is a place/object in Pristina that confuses you, something you don't understand?

Given two days to contemplate these various sites of the city, everybody sent me their coordinates on a map without details, and I mapped out a route to walk around the city.



*Fig 21. Sites and Walking Path, 2023. Credit: author*

It would be an incredibly intimate and personal tour of Pristina, an opportunity for them to showcase their city to this foreigner. What followed was a 5-hour walk full of incredibly poignant and touching stories of first love, childhood memories, accidents, violent attacks, the first spliff, and the best burek/ice cream shops.



*Fig 22. Walking through Prishtina, 2023. Credit: author.*

We finished on the footsteps of the National Library, my personal favorite space in Pristina: a landmark with galactic architectural stylings and striking lights floating above the surrounding park. We discussed everyone's spots, commenting on similar stories of our own, drawing connections between strangers in this small city. Sitting in the place where I first had a workshop 6 years previous, it seemed like a prescient meeting. In 2017, I met a ramshackle group of artists and thinkers from across Central Europe for a summer school workshop about City Symphony movies and actionist painting. I could see Marko and Nika comparing the old shots of Berlin to our recently made shots of Pristina, a bolt of déjà vu and nostalgia shot me to the present day. Harkening back to my previous visits to Pristina, I expounded upon the participants the importance of what we did that day, how and where. The importance of site specificity and innate genius loci to the learning process. Informally chatting on the steps of the library, surrounded by teenagers around the corners smoking weed in the shadows, and the couples discreetly holding hands on the benches between the oak trees, it gave us a front row seat to the ballet of the urban realm. We parted ways, fading back into the concrete

Dropping the word “queer” from my vocabulary for the entirety of the last session was done on purpose; I did not want this workshop to be about beating them over the head with these words I hold so dearly to my personal and artistic, and academic work. Quite the opposite, I felt that if I wanted them to tell stories that they felt queered their personal narratives or to pick a place they wanted to queer or felt could be considered queer, then it should come from them. Some of the older participants sensed the direction of the workshop: “This is the old printing press, which was a nightclub when I was in my 20s, and it’s been abandoned for the past 10 years. It’s been vacant for years, crumbling to bits, but we still go on the rooftop to watch the city lights... I guess this is a place that I would consider queer...isn’t that what you want?” I feigned confusion and said, “No comment, today you are doing all the talking”.



*Fig 23. Abandoned Printing Press in Prishtina, 2023. Credit: author.*

We had a four-day break between classes, and I offered my services as a guide/mentor/friend over this period in case they wanted to discuss some projects. I texted them individually with some personal highlights and a follow-up for the next session, to send pictures and bring items to make a collage. Now it was time to bring back the good word “queer”. For many queer people, the term is a minefield of personally held beliefs, and an onslaught of what others perceive queer to mean. For some of us, it’s a badge of honor, used to network and find a sense of commonality

on this strange rock we inhabit. Other times, it feels like it's just another way to pigeonhole humans: "they dress queer", "they act queer", etc. There is no right or wrong way to go about being queer: it's a choose-your-own-adventure novel. "Above all else," I ranted to these newfound friends, "to be queer is all about the personal." It's about embracing all the nooks and crannies and hidden muck involved in being human. Self-discovery, self-hate, self-love: it's all in there. At this time, some of the participants gave stories about coming-out, family issues, or their own musings on "queerness". They discussed whether they wanted to be called or felt queer. This again gave a range of responses. The lone cis-heterosexual opined that he joined the workshop to open his mind to another perspective of seeing the city. Obviously a well-versed academic, he read queer theory, but he told us that these seemed the canon never connected to him or his story. Within our sharing circle, discussing the Pristina tour and how we view/feel towards the city, he gained a new perspective on using queerness not only as a signifier but as a tool. It was clear that, due to time restraints, this workshop was not going to end with the finale I had hoped for. But I caught myself in the introspection – wasn't this exactly what I wanted? I didn't come to Pristina to complete an academic four-day workshop, ending with a classic gallery exhibition, did I? These talks and one-on-ones with the participants became more intimate, each one feeling more comfortable than the day previous, telling me their stories—one had saved up their money for weeks to attend this course, which meant a 2.5-hour journey with two bus transfers from their small farming community to be in a course where they could fully live out their non-binary existence and be called by their chosen name. Another told me about their walks around the city, where openly being a trans individual (like most of the world) was to be under constant threat, but this workshop was about giving them power to see the city as their own, and not some handed-down map of buildings and streets.

With two days left before the last meeting, and most of our time spent discussing/debating, while we had planned to build objects/make collages, the planned gallery exhibition at the end of the workshop was canceled. Most of the participants were doing this workshop after school/work and felt pressure to complete some sort of output by the end. I told them that it was not the spirit of the workshop—the spirit of queerness—to demand some pre-determined project. If they felt their idea was best explained in person, by poem, by poster, or by future actions that cannot be completed in two days, that option was also open to them. That is the other great power of using the queer lens on their surroundings: you are not held to society's or any institution's imposed viewpoint. Queerness is freedom to act on your own fragmented calendar, to act on your own time and on your own wishes. When I started this ramble, I started to lose them a little, seeing the confusion in their folded foreheads: "But let's meet Thursday and work some more and see what we can make together."

Almost an answer to their unasked question: “Why should we come anymore?” As it turned out, only 2 of the 6 showed up on the last day. The bevy of responses made it clear that perhaps my loose reins did not fit everyone correctly or—heart of heart’s hopes—that they listened to my advice and went out to disrupt their quotidian lives and are now living their best queer-ed lives.

For the two that showed up on our final workday, their engines were in overdrive, with each telling me they really wanted to show me something before the day was over. Playing a helicopter mom/art teacher, I floated around the room watching them grab the pens and pencils with such joy, throwing any unneeded images and papers to the floor without care.

The first project was a take on a public library/bookshelf in the Pristina center. Talking with this artist, they liked the idea of a communal bookshelf but felt it could share more than just books. Following the track of queering objects and uses of everyday items, we talked about how we could make small changes to the structure, adding to the use. Referencing the give/take aspect of the library, they decided to use the unused sides/back of the bookshelf as a local bulletin board to let the locals see underground cultural events, which are difficult to find details about, unless you are in the know. Placed under the shelves, in a drawer, there would be a collection of local wildflowers and vegetable seeds, allowing anyone walking by to take the seeds home, or in acts of guerrilla gardening, plant them around the city, making the streets of Pristina even more delectable.



*Fig 24. Seed Library Location, 2023. Credit: author*

Pristina Doll Haus was the second showcased project. Taking its inspiration from one of the oldest standing, barely, houses in Pristina, the structure has been a bakery, café, workshop, store, and now an empty shell with squatters on the main plaza of the city. Its original pink was to be returned to the façade, highlighting the architectural details hidden by years of decay. Pristina’s first strip club, led by the Pristina Dolls—a collective of transwomen in the city—would be the owners and performers. Provocatively designed to give a safe space/alternative fashion atelier for the LGBTQ+ community on the ground floor, and a decadent strip club above, this would be an in-your-face statement of stone.



*Fig 25. Pristina Doll Haus, 2023. Credit: author.*

From the start of the workshop, I had grand plans in my head to invite members of the creative community and those behind my residency to an exhibition with some sort of architectural project – originally planned to be an outdoor exhibition on the walls of one of the many abandoned houses that dot the center. What I got out of it was so much more: it was less a workshop than a queer mental health therapy group session. Each of these participants shared inner secrets and anecdotes, giving me a fully fleshed portrait/immersive installation of what it meant to be queer in Kosovo. Riding years of relatively traditional art and design education, I had been through my fair share of workshops. Most of them were some sort of ivory tower, knight-riding-in-on-white-horse, some neo-colonial power telling the students what was right or wrong, good or bad, architecture or not architecture. Looking back on these experiences, I told myself that this workshop exists outside of the academic restraints, no grades, no receipts to prove how “successful” the output was. In short, the architecture workshop had been queered.

Coming off the high from this successful and inspirational workshop, it was a perfect time to solidify my research and look for possible locations for a string of workshops exploring URBANISMO QUEER across Barcelona à /α URBANISMO FICCIÓN that would somehow fit into my increasingly claustrophobic work schedule. Or, I had another opportunity to apply for a more sizable EU ERASMUS+ grant coming up in 2 months. I flew back to Barcelona, belly full of spinach-and-cheese burek, my mind racing with possibilities to cement this last year of my PhD as the one to solidify my research in my adopted hometown. Despite the coming winter chills, everything was falling into place and coming up roses.

## 5. HAUNTING URBANISM

How long have they been inside you?  
Friends, foes, or lovers?  
Gnawing at your flesh, or kissing you gently,  
I'll never know how long they've been with you  
I'll never know where you've taken them  
These four legs of mystery, bound in velvet  
In the living room, next to the window?  
Where the failed garden never took shape?  
Along the pockmarked wall, stained from last week's lunch  
Your weathered face, traumatized from smiles and scars.  
Too much time spent in the sun, of that I can be sure  
It's where I found you.  
Or, at least, where you found me.  
Three circles around the park and you beckon me back  
Pining for a home, or just one last embrace.  
Maybe you were just a vessel, inviting those woodworms to my doorframe  
Gleefully gyrating across the floor until they found a new home.  
Two months in, we brought you back from whence you came  
Dreaming of mahogany, you'll never be more than laminate.  
Despite your cursed birth, you remain  
Still four legs, bound in velvet.



*Fig 26. Four Legs in Sants, 2023. Credit: author.*

"Are you sure you want to do this PhD? I know how much you hate long-term projects."

"It's the logical end of these endless years studying, why not top it off with those letters? A celebration of sorts, a cherry on top of the academic ice cream sundae. As much as I hate design, I love it just as much, almost as much as ice cream."

"... I was supposed to do a PhD to become an official Psychologist," he trailed off.

"Why did you study Psychology in the first place?" I prodded.

"I studied psychology because I wanted to understand myself... I dropped out of the PhD program because I was afraid to find out what was wrong with me."

"That's where we differ. I create to understand myself and the world, and I'm going to see this PhD through because I want to find out what's wrong with me...and what's wrong with the world," I replied with a wink and a kiss as we fell asleep in each other's elbow-y embrace.

1471 days ago, I had this conversation with my neighbor/friend/lover on a horribly balmy Barcelona night in July.

608 days ago, I had to identify his body to a police superintendent on a frigid November morning..

We met 17 days after I arrived in Barcelona, back in 2020. After months of COVID-related lockdowns, we were both hesitant to meet in person but agreed to meet on the nearby Plaça d'Oscà, in between our apartments. At first, he was just another faceless profile on Grindr, but something felt different. After jubilantly texting each other for a couple hours, I thought, *Why the hell not?* I was new in town and could use a friend in the barri.

"Sorry Tom, I have to cancel, I can't leave the house because my parrot escaped and is going crazy, destroying all of the wires in my apartment."

Well, *that* is a great excuse, I thought.

"I'm so sorry, I really want to meet you, but it's crazy here... [he paused for a few seconds] ... I know it's crazy with COVID, but I could use a hand, can you help me corral the parrot back in the cage?"

I have been told by many a man from Grindr that they could use a hand, but never under such circumstances. Never one to walk away from a strange experience, I walked the 203 meters to his apartment to a cartoonish scene featuring a man covered in scratch marks and pit stains. Far from love at first sight, I burst out laughing; "You were serious about the bird." After 17 minutes of jumping around whilst waving towels, the parrot (Gris was his name) decided to leisurely fly back to his cage as the demonic angel he was. Our first date wasn't on the Plaça as intended, but on his sofa. Very innocent as far as Grindr dates go, we talked for a couple of hours, exchanging pleasantries, informal introductions and finishing with a quick peck on the cheek to say goodbye.

"You are a gentleman."

He looked puzzled at my compliment. "Why?"

"You didn't try to grab my penis and just kissed my cheek."

"Sorry, I haven't done this in a while... do you... want that?"

"No penis grab, but I'd be done for a proper kiss to thank you for a lovely afternoon."

Papito could *kiss*. Just the right amount of minty tongue, tender lips, scruff. Check, check, check. With that more formal adéu, I bid him and his bird farewell.

Due to wave after wave of COVID outbreaks, all bars and restaurants remained closed, making it difficult to meet new people and/or socialize. Over the next few months, we would meet each other every couple of days, starting off innocently with him giving me Catalan classes in the nearby Parc de l'Espanya Industrial. Being a native-born Barcelonian, he would regale me with stories about the city of his youth as we traipsed across streets and plazas of Sants (our neighbourhood – *barri* en Catalan).

"You must be bored with this older guy telling you stories about Barcelona."

"Bitch, *please*. I live for it."

Our walks gradually got longer, leaving the boundaries of our *barri*. Weeks turned into months, casually meeting for dinners, concerts, and other things that would make a proper lady blush. He was an artist and poet as well, so you can imagine how horribly romantic it all was. As we were strongly willed people, it was turbulent at times, but the hours and nights we spent together were some of the most tender I have ever felt in my life. After my first year in Barcelona, I finished a master's degree at the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona and decided the city was pulling me in for a longer stay. We walked down to Restaurant Glaciar on Plaça Reial, where he used to play hooky in his high school days. He was always the most eager to listen to my planned artistic and academic endeavors, and even when my Spanish vocabulary grinded to a halt, he would wink his right eye, telling me he understood. We circled the Plaça's fountain three times before heading to his apartment, when we had the conversation about why I was hellbent on doing a PhD. I will never forget the sadness in his eyes when he told me his reasons for not continuing his studies. Switching the mood to bizarre joy, I tickled his lower left rib (his weak spot) after our conversation to lighten the mood.

Happily living apart on our 17-month anniversary (we were never good at traditional couple things), we decided to celebrate with another trip to Plaça Reial (*our* plaça, despite the swarms of tourists). I went down on one knee in the middle of the plaça to propose to him, to his shock and horror, with a carved steel ring I bought while visiting Morocco to celebrate my new job. A crowd was gathering around, the consternation on his face spreading from his wrinkled forehead to the parrot scratches on his chin.

"Do you promise to never marry me?" I whispered so no one could hear.

"*Sí!*" His anxiety melted into jubilation while the circle of strangers clapped, not understanding what truly transpired. "*Fill de puta*, you almost got me," he quipped as he pulled me in for a quick kiss and noogied my head. Just another example of our urban perceptions. To the onlookers in the Plaça, he had just said yes to a marriage proposal, and they would tell their friends how they saw two faggots drunken off

*canyes i patates braves* get married under the Christmas lights in Barcelona. A scene taken from Nazario's *Plaza Real Safari*<sup>84</sup>

Despite our differences, we were both eternal outsiders. Lone wolves who never found, nor wanted, a pack to call their own. We knew what we had was never going to last, but we would try to squeeze as much joy as we could out of it. In our three years together, his demons were omnipresent: sometimes impossible to ignore, other times just fleeting *xiuxiveigs* [cat: whispers], when his brown eyes turned into endless tunnels, refusing to reflect any sort of light. His tortured soul was counterbalanced only by my bizarre humor, and we made it work somehow. Our favorite conversational topic was how much we both *hated* Barcelona (curmudgeons gotta curmudgeon). He longed for the carefree Barcelona of the 90s, and I complained about difficulties finding work while waiting for my visa to be approved. Months after our non-proposal, he was becoming unnervingly tender. He knew every pulsing inch of my... PhD projects, and would fondly ask, "What was your favorite thing you saw on your walks this week?"

"I saw two broken toilets that looked like they were hugging in L'Hospitalet [Barcelona's shabby neighboring city]!"

"I know you have your own set of rules for these walks you take; you prefer to be alone... but can I join you sometime? I won't talk; I just want to watch you in your element."

"Sure," I replied lovingly, "BUT YOU STAY ONE STEP TO THE LEFT AND TWO STEPS BEHIND ME, SHUT THE FUCK UP, AND YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO LOOK AT YOUR PHONE."

We wandered my favorite stomping grounds, the L'Hospitalet neighborhoods of Santa Eulalia, Sant Josep, swinging back through Collblanc and Badal. None of that pretty Eixample bullshit, I want a night walk full of cheap booze, grit and characters, not endless brunch spots and 10-euro pours of wine. As we threaded our bodies through the decrepit warehouses near the train tracks, I would glance back at him from time to time. Without fail, he would put on that dopey face that made my knees weak: scrunched up forehead, wide brown eyes shooting from side to side, painting a horizon to get lost in, always ending with a wink. We slinked back to Sants for a goodnight Cacaolat (the tasty made-in-Barcelona chocolate milk beverage) at his apartment.

"Well, now you've experienced one of my 'activated walks'. So, I must ask you, what was your favorite thing you saw tonight?"

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<sup>84</sup>Nazario, *Plaza Real Safari*, Ediciones de la Tempestad, 2006

"When you stopped at the Torrassa metro stop for 40 seconds and looked up to the left."

"Why?"

"I don't know what you were looking at, but I know you were looking at something special."

*Stop.* That little witch shut me up. I knew *exactly* what he was talking about. I always made a habit of tracing a specific old smokestack up and down at that intersection with my eyes because the lights along the sides always blinked in the most random rhythm, dancing sunbursts on the crumbling bricks. I would stop there and wait until they all decided to blink at the same time, as if it was a green light for me to continue.

It was such little details that we noticed about each other that kept us together during all the turbulence we encountered: strong personalities who needed no one, but who, deep down, enjoyed having someone.

"What's wrong with you?" I noticed he went silent after giving me his too-cute-for-school answer.

"Nothing," he looked down at the floor as he swept the floor with his wool sock. "I just enjoyed this walk tonight, *gràcies.*"

We smooched each other on the lips goodnight, followed by his knightly habit of kissing the top of my hand as I left. I walked back those 203 meters with a full heart and nose hairs engulfed in concrete particles from the construction sites we walked through.

The week after that walk brought us even closer together I went to Pristina for a month, for the workshop from the previous chapter. When I returned from the Balkans, he was acting noticeably strange... even for him. His drinking was getting noticeably worse until he spiraled out one night in November. Slurred words, stumbling down the metro steps, it was clear the demons were starting to come back. As his good Judy, I tucked him in on his sofa, leaving a *jamón york* and cheese sandwich and a carton of Cacaolat ready for his drunk ass to soak up his hangover the next morning. Checking up on him the next day, something was still off: scattered thoughts and phrases thrown around in Catalan too fast for me to comprehend. I left him to his own devices after an hour of couch snuggles. He needed to sleep it off again. Giving him some space for the next couple of days, I stopped by his place the following Saturday with all necessary ingredients to make our favorite meal: seabass ceviche with *aji amarillo* and way too much cilantro. He seemed much sprightlier than the last time we met eyeballs. I *knew* my Cacaolat and *jamón york* did it's job. With some spicy ceviche juice

dribbling down our chapped lips, we retired to the sofa for an afternoon siesta. I awoke to his deep chestnut pupils 2 centimeters burning into my eyelids, as he asked:

"Tomás, through all of the jokes we make, I want you to answer me something, please."

"Please? Who am I the *Rey*?"

"I'm not joking."

"Ok."

"Do you understand how much I love you?"

"No," I countered as fast as humanly possible. Immediately, his sad puppy face took over, and he rolled over, filling my mouth with his silver and black curly mop of hair. Noticing that he was actually perturbed by this response, I could do what a tender clown can do: I bit his right ear and whispered: "*No entenc per què m'estimes... [awkwardly long pause to cause him just the right amount of self-doubt and strife]...ho sento. Y desafortunadamente para mí, tienes un trozo de mi corazón eternamente.*" [my Catalan/Spanish mix meaning: I don't understand why you love me, I feel it. And, unfortunately for me, you have a piece of my heart, eternally.]

He rolled over, his puppy dog eyes as watery and milky as our ceviche, and we deliquesced into one with the sofa.

"What about your PhD, how much longer do you have?"

"I should finish it next summer."

"And then what? Leaving Barcelona like you promised?"

"It's probable. This sailor needs a new port. And you? Where will you and Gris be? Sants *siempre*?"

"No, it's time for me to move on. Next year this time, we will be in the Pyrenees."

"You know I'm a city mouse and I hate the mountains... but for you, I'll make an exception."

We unmelted from the sofa and started to clean up the dishes.

"I don't know what's going on with you... but you do realize that was the perfect date, right? Ceviche, blowjobs, and snuggles on a cold winter day," I told him while scrubbing off the last of the cilantro from the cutting board.

"No, the perfect date was when you didn't propose to me on Plaça Reial."

"Touché, we are just really good at dates... when you're not an asshole."

We laughed, I walked over to say goodbye to his parrot, Gris, and he sent me off as he always did, a kiss on the forehead, then perfectly evenly on both lips, watching over me to make sure I made it safely to the elevator door, a terrifying 3 meters away. I slid across the laminate floor for one last kiss before the elevator arrived.

"*T'estimo, vei,*" [cat: I love you neighbor] he purred.

"*Jo no!*" [not !!] I hissed back, with a wink & perfectly placed peck on the mouth.

Those were the last words I heard from his luscious lips. Five days later, at 9 am, still burping up whiskey from the night before, I dragged myself back those 203 meters when his friend called me saying that she needed my extra set of keys to his apartment. He hadn't completed his daily call to his sister, and he wasn't answering his phone or his door. My keys didn't work since he had apparently locked in his keys from the inside. We called the firefighters and police who busted down the door after the most painful 27 minutes of my life.

"Why do you have the keys to his apartment?" the police captain asked surlily.

"*és el meu ... vei*" [cat: he's...my neighbor] are the only words I could stammer out of my quivering lower lip.

Sensing that my world was slightly crashing down in slow-motion, she nodded and called in the horrendously handsome firefighters to bring in the battering ram. With the faintest shimmer of hope, I imagined these much-too-pretty-*guapetons* were going to knock down this urbane portcullis to reveal the smiling silhouette winking at me just as I had left him 5 days previous, just another of our jokes.

The battering ram knocked the door off its hinges and, once they had peeled back the broken frame, the captain came back shaking her head as she looked down to his scratched wooden floor, biting her lower lip, matching my uneasiness. As we weren't *officially* a couple according to the state, they wouldn't let me in the room but asked us to describe what he looked like to identify the corpse.

"Like a sexy pirate with salt 'n pepper scruff," I laughed/muttered/shrieked out, to myself. "And if you find any of my DNA on the sofa, those 3 dried cum stains were from last Saturday when he was alive, I swear!" I whispered softly, so no one could hear ... ever the clown, even in the most dire of circumstances.

The captain retorted, "I'm sorry. He doesn't have a pulse. And we found a bottle of sleeping pills on the table, the situation is clear... I'm sorry for your loss."

And just like that, it all came crumbling down.

My time in Barcelona.

My PhD.

My relationship with Sants. And his Parrot.

No stranger to extreme emotions, this one was unlike anything I had ever felt before. An elephant on my chest, a mouth full of chocolate milk that refused to escape, ears full of sand. Everything was exploding and imploding at the same time. I ran back those 203 meters one last time to the comfort of my home and drowned my confusion in 2 bottles of whiskey with my closest circle of friends.

I crawled back and forth between that sofa and my bed for 5 days straight, never once leaving the house. Flatmate-of-the-year honors to my flatmate, Thom, for feeding this blubbering walrus his favorite foods all week long, unable to muster the strength to scoop out a single serving of my mint chocolate chip ice cream. After the numbness refused to depart, it was time to go back to my cure-all: a nice long city walk. It's worked so many wonders before, *surely* it would help me in this hour of need. Knowingly steering clear of the 203-meter path I knew too well, I went on Carrer de Sants, the main shopping thoroughfare. Not but 2 minutes in, the waterworks started. My oversized Albanian knock-off Versace glasses couldn't hide this unblest mess. This 2-meter tall creature smelling of stank apartment and sorrow, wrapped in a flannel jacket soaked in tears and spicy red satin pants: a sight for sure. More than slightly disassociating on this walk I've done 23,934 times before, I was having flashbacks to my performances on Paral·lel. Not the joyful old grandma, but the parents pulling their children away from the monster. My twisted brain somehow sent this memory to my pleasure vortex, and I started smiling and cackling like a crazy person. Soaked in tears, smelling of chicken soup and armpits, yet wrapped in glamour. I put myself in the shoes of the passersby: if I saw me, I would enjoy it. It was this sense of understanding/empathy that brought me back to reality... well enough to make it back home.

Even steering clear of the walk to his apartment, everything in the neighborhood was screaming out his name. The trash cans on Plaça d'Osca were asking when they would next see us together. The telephone poles whispering amongst themselves about my disheveled looks and rank stank, starting rumors that we must have broken up. I did not need the urban infrastructure gossiping and taunting me. No corner of the *barri* was safe. *Welp, back to the sofa I shall return!*

I opened my emails to see what I had missed during this week from hell. *Oh, fuck.* I had completely lost track of time and deadlines. The previous chapter/article from

Dearq had an original due-date one week after his death-date. In my crazy stupor, I sent a long-winded email to the publisher telling them *in painful detail* what I had just gone through, but that I really needed this publication to graduate on time and needed to use the writing as an outlet for the pain. Luckily for me, whoever was reading the email at the time was full of empathy and gave me a two-week grace period to finish writing the article.

I was at a crossroads at this point. If I ever had a reason to leave a city, this was it.

Having the privilege of living a trauma-free life until this point, I had no idea what to do next. How does one start to pick up the pieces, let alone try to put them back together? How does one continue with *anything* when all you can do is sit on the sofa and eat pizza and cry? Severely unable to go to work, I was blessed by a total babe of a boss who let me work from home for the next three weeks, which allowed me to compose myself to some degree. The idea of going to a high-rise full of finance bros 'n gals asking, "Do you have a case of the Mondays?" would have led me to a bottle of sleeping pills of my very own.

Each day, I unstuck my fat ass off the sofa and forced myself to take a walk in the sunshine. Maybe I erupt into tears, but at least they dry better in the wind! I told myself: "You need to distract yourself, plunge into your PhD again." Easier said than done, every attempt I made to "re-activate" my activated walks was an utter disaster. Every time I thought about going back on that horse, the ghost would appear in front of my eyes. When I managed to walk farther afield, there it was in the distance: the smokestack that always caught my eye, the one he used to open every artery to my heart. Nope. Nope. *NOOOOPE*. Plaça Reial, Plaça d'Oscà, and Parc de l'Espanya Industrial stopped being public spaces. They stopped being private spaces. Forever imprinted in my head with all those shared walks, the sound of my two feet shuffling across the chipped marble pavers sounded unnatural: there should be two feet next to mine. Every pass was haunted by every joke, chuckle, ticklish poke, and knowing glance we ever shared. My beloved urbanism got hacked by the spirit world.

After several meetings with a grief counselor (thanks, private health insurance perks for working in finance!), I realized that there was no way *over* this situation. "Life sucks, and this will not change. It's just another situation like anything else. You'll realize this with time," she wisely told me. *And remember, how much you LOVE the situationists, Tom!*

One thing was clear: nothing would be the same. My love life, my personal life, my neighborhood, my walk to Aldi. Previously, when I had to overcome a hurdle in my life, I embraced a shake-down. If things were changing around me, I would fight back

with my own changes to counteract them. Unbalance the imbalanced situation to make it more balanced.

I sat down and made a pros-and-cons list about leaving Barcelona, leaving the PhD. Where else would I go? I *just* got my 5-year visa to stay. I had fine living arrangements. I was still a 20-minute bus ride from the beach, where I could always count on a salty breeze to dry my tears... or at least mask them. Younger Tom would have probably fucked off to South America at this point, but I needed to take stock of what I wanted from my life (and this project). That was the key. If there was something that became crystal clear, in the face of such intense tragedy, I needed to remember why I'm alive, what wakes me up in the morning, what brings me joy, why I don't want to give up like he did. So, I headed out on another walk, but this time with a new purpose. I wasn't going to walk the streets to "discover" or "define" Queer Urbanism. No, I was going to go out with his voice in the back of my head: "What is your favorite thing on this walk?" *Drop the academic armor, don't worry about the battle between Anthropocentrism vs. Object Oriented Ontology. Do as your heroes the Situationists did: drift, baby, drift.*

And how I drifted.

Thank heavens and hells that Barcelona is blessed with a mild winter suited for walking. I must have clocked in a hundred kilometers over the next month (but I was not counting, as it was an official decision that the "activated walks" were dead in the water—too much tainted juju associated with that now). Each walk was a reminder that I wanted to stay tethered to this rock. My de-activated walks after his passing were some of the most difficult movements I have ever had to make, even with Barcelona's (mostly) deliriously delicious flat terrain. The void where his figure used to walk two steps behind me is now filled by strangers who know nothing of our history, who know nothing of the person who used to fill the space they occupy now. It's wonderful for them, as I wouldn't wish this burden on anyone else. However real its presence is felt behind my eyes as I walk, I'm unable to turn around fast enough to catch a glimpse of it. Either that, or I have an air pocket behind my cornea. I should really ask my optometrist for a glaucoma test.

Why did I go into such detail about this personal part of the story? Because it's just as integral as any other part of my research. It's the part that helped me realize I wasn't just transcribing my academic pursuits: it cuts much deeper. What I consider urbanism goes beyond journal publications, conferences, over-priced academic readers, maps, buildings, and sidewalks: it's the very essence of urban life itself, thorns, warts, and all: from every broken street bench to every broken promise.

The impulse to leave became an impetus to stay, which made it imperative to continue. It was not only what he wished for me in his goodbye letter, (“use your imbalanced mind to balance out this unbalanced world”), but what I wished for myself that night on our bed: to find out what was wrong with me and this world, and, perhaps, make it a more enjoyable spin.

Begrudgingly, I trudged along.



*Fig 27. Dos veïns de Sants, 2021. Credit: author.*

*Francesc, tinc ben clar que aquestes paraules et trobaran allà on siguis. Recordaràs la nostra última cita quan em vas dir: "Tom, he escrit 3 llibres, ja n'hi ha prou... Però et vull demanar un favor: sé que estàs omplint el teu primer llibre amb les teves boges aventures i viatges... però, si us plau, no t'oblidis de dedicar-m'hi un capítol".*

*Bé, amb això pots donar per complerta aquella vella promesa. I ara ja saps que el teu impacte va molt més enllà d'aquest capítol: és la sang, el verí, el colesterol i el sucre que flueixen per les venes d'aquest projecte.*

*Fins al propera àpat, estimat amic. Continua sent cert el que et vaig dir al sofà en la nostra última cita: t'estimo eternament, Arrisat.*

## 6. REMEMBERING URBANISM

Quixotically trying to quash these goddamn ghosts pestering me on my de-activated walks, I tried my darndest to keep my head as straight as a faggot can. Life goes on, even when you're getting blepharitis in both eyes because you can't stop crying. *Right?* After a welcome respite from checking my emails, reality slowly started to poke its grubby little fingers into my daily routine. As I was finishing up my article, I realized there was *another* goddamn deadline approaching. Franny checked into the waiting room from Beetlejuice at the tail end of November and I got the article's original November 30<sup>th</sup> deadline pushed back to December 13. *Perfecto!* Especially since I apparently had already agreed months ago to create an installation starting December 14 with the local hippies who run a converted textile factory. My grief counselor and therapist told me I needed to keep busy and to bury myself in creative activities. I told them I have 2 deadlines in addition to my PhD work *AND* writing the eulogy, to which they replied: "Maybe you're taking on too much at once." The world doesn't stop for anyone, Núria.

Luckily for me, I was indeed planning for this exhibition over the past couple months, and it was just a matter of setting up the installation, as the parts were ready to go (great timing to finally have a punctual project!). The initial open call was from Arts Can Batlló, a wonderful organization in Sants that oversees the cultural curation of the former textile factory-cum-community center, Can Batlló. Beautifully decrepit—a compliment unfortunately rarely used to describe the building in Barcelona—this complex sits a peaceful 10-minute walk away from my *casa*. They were looking for projects from local artists in the summer of 2023, and I had applied with a project called *Parets de contes: teixits parlants* [Wall of Stories: Talking Fabrics]. During my 1,504 kilometers of activated walks over the previous year, I not only came across inspiration and copious amounts of cheap booze, but also some very confusing pieces of clothing. Simultaneously a curious phenomenologist, collector of forgotten street treasures, and Oscar-the-grouch-at-heart, the various pieces of clothing on my night walks often confuddled me. Sure, the pile of some dead grandpa's belongings in groups of black plastic bags next to the dumpster had a logical story behind it, but that

sequin bra hanging on the tree branch by the bank? The clearly-not-child-sized ripped jeans on the 3-meter gate to the kindergarten? The dozens and dozens of single shoes left in the tree troughs on Carrer de Sants? Where was the matching sequined top? The ripped t-shirt to go with the jeans? The other shoes? I would make up stories in my head for each piece of clothing I found and, when I deemed the imaginary tale in my head to be good enough, I would collect the forgotten fashion and take it home with me. Much to the chagrin of my flatmate-of-the-year, Thom, the sheer amount of couture I was amassing was fast becoming much too much for our humble abode in Sants.

Knowing that any more striped stockings or faux fur would create domestic drama, I started to sort out these urban leftovers. The skirts, jeans, and tasseled boots would wiggle themselves into my dreams and/or night terrors. Each story I concocted whilst walking (the bored househusband who threw his sequin bra into the tree in anguish after his wife refused to pay him his daily allowance after pegging him senseless, the ripped jeans torn off an angry lover after the school musical, and, naturally, each single shoe could be explained due to the slasher stalking the neighborhood with a machete and incredible appetite for feet, hacking away people's left leg to get his rocks off) danced around in my head before I decided that I was slowly descending into TLC tv-show-hoarder-levels of madness (and that was before the ghost attacks!).

My proposal was accepted as a kind of social sculpture/installation. Using the bare bones of the building structure itself, I would create some sort of yurt-like structure made out of the found fashion hanging from clothespins on the same wires we neighborhood folk dry our laundry on. Making sure everything was spic-'n-span, I washed and folded each piece of clothing and brought 6 *heaping* bags to Can Batlló. Finally freeing my flatmate of my mess (*YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THOM, I NEED THESE RIPPED STOCKINGS FOR MY PHD!*), I started to study the second-floor space that I was given for my installation. Noticing the three beautiful wrought iron columns in the middle of the room, I used my double degree in Spatial Design (and unwavering laziness) to deduce that a triangle was the easiest shape to form in the space given.



Fig 28. *Can Batlló*, 2023. Credit: author.

A centerpiece for the open floor plan, while not obstructing the comings-and-goings of daily activity in this busy cultural center. *Sorted*. Or, so I thought. The social aspect of the installation entered with the idea that people could come and go as they please through the sculpture, leaving their own unwanted garments and taking what they wanted, whichever textile *spoke* to them. After a day of setting up this *triangle du couture*, I realized that it was *just* that. A triangle of clothing hanging from wires. Yes, every piece has spoken to me while walking across the city as part of a PhD research campaign, but if I was just a innocent bystander without any previous knowledge of any of my narratives, it was just another silly sculpture.

Calling upon the gods and goddesses of the building, we decided that it needed something more. *Site-specificity, you FOOL! Why are these garments here and not in an art gallery? Or, better yet, WHY DID YOU KIDNAP THEM OFF THE STREET TO USE FOR YOUR OWN PURPOSE, YOU FAGGOT? What are they feeling at night when the lights go out and no one is around? Sure, they have some fashionable new friends to dance the night away with, but they were seen on the street at all hours of the day.*

Naturally, I didn't want them to feel unwanted and unloved in their new home, so I decided they needed something to bring them back to their youth. While I cannot be sure where each piece of clothing was conceived and/or birthed/spun, I am sure they had faint memories of the sound of heavy machinery. Like a human baby listening to

adults speaking without understanding them, I could manage a sound that would ring uncanny to these walls of knitted goods. Playing the part of the sexy librarian (in my dreams), complete with slutty horn-rimmed glasses and oh-so-unbuttoned shirt, I sashayed down to the local neighborhood archives, L'Arxiu Municipal del Districte de Sants-Montjuïc (conveniently located another 5 minutes away from my house on—you guessed it—Carrer de Sants).

Paper-cutting my finger nubbins on the archived materials housed in what seemed to just be old shoe boxes, I found the section on Sant's former glory: textile factories. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, my neighborhood was the thriving center of the Catalan/Spanish industrial revolution, churning out around enough tactile threads to wrap around the world 893 times (as no one but me says). The Parc de l'Espanya Industrial from the previous chapter (boo!) is a faded monument to the old *barri*, as it used to be the largest such textile factory in Spain, but then Barcelona decided in all its Olympics-mania-ness to destroy the final bricks of the historic structure, only leaving a small entrance building in the current public park as a reminder that this city used to create and export things other than tourist massification. The Can Batlló complex is one of the last of the grungier survivors of this expunging of industrial history, currently standing as a group of mixed-use buildings housing a number of local organizations and the new Parc de Can Batlló which wistfully blends in the old storage warehouses beautifully into the urban fabric with its open-air gymnasiums and gardens full of rosemary and rat poison. Enough historical meanderings, back to the boxes!

I glossed over the newspaper articles and neighborhood mailouts to find some old brochures for art projects which had taken place over the years. Before the internet age squeezed us by our collective balls, these glorious pamphlets were the best source of social media and are thankfully kept by the sexy Arxiu—(bless you!)—librarians in a way that Instagram *could never*. I found a pamphlet from Artixoc which created a community-led re-telling of the Can Batlló story. All fifty of the actors were taken from the surrounding neighborhoods of Hostafrancs and Sants and, over two weekends in 2017, the factory buildings were filled with period actors and the sounds of the steam-powered mills churned once more. *That* was what my piece was missing: sound. After some more digging and helpful conversations with the librarians, I learned there are not official recordings of the old Can Batlló machines, but they put me in contact with the kind people of the Can Marfà Knitwear Museum, located in Mataró (30 minutes north of Barcelona, another heart of the Catalan/Spanish Industrial Revolution). And so, I marched up to Mataró to see what they had in terms of sounds of the steam

powered cotton mills. They told me Can Batlló used the same machines that can be found in an online archive of Catalan industrial sounds.<sup>85</sup>

So, I had my recorded machine sounds to lullaby the T-shirt-triangle to sleep. But they still needed something a bit more modern, in case they didn't remember that far back. Imagine being a bolero from the 1970s! Sure, the four-year-old H&M shirt will remember the spinning mills, but that poor, senile bolero! To placate the more doddering dapper duds, I knew what had to be done. As with the elders who take over Plaça d'Osca at 2 pm with their nurses by their side, the aged hoserie needed to be surrounded by the youthful jubilation that often takes over public space in Spain. As I crisscrossed this Plaça approximately five times a day, I have heard it all. From the painful groans of the ladies-who-lunch swapping stories of their unfaithful partners to the shrieks of the youth laughing at TikTok videos to the friendly neighborhood crackhead asking for money to buy a sandwich and more crack: each conversation and footstep bounce between the balconies and balustrades which encircle.....er, ensquare my beloved plaça. Out with my phone, I recorded twenty different five-minute recordings at various times of the day to make a sort of soundtrack of the plaça. This way, the clothes in Can Batlló could not just be reminded of their birth at the hands of the spinning mills, but also their previous lives on the street. A full circle-of-life moment for them.



*Fig 29. Can Batlló – Parets de contes, 2023. Credit: author.*

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<sup>85</sup> 'About this Archive', *Acoustic Heritage Collective*,

[https://acousticheritagecollective.org/archivomnactec/arxiu\\_en.html](https://acousticheritagecollective.org/archivomnactec/arxiu_en.html), Accessed: 10.7.2025



Fig 30. Can Batlló – Parets de contes with Flatmate-of-the-Year, 2023. Credit: author.

Installing the exhibition in a matter of three days, mixed with the journey to the archives and the museum was a great kick-start to my butt, still imprinted with the familiar criss-cross pattern of my Ikea sofa. It almost helped me forget....*ah fuck, here we go again.*

\*Cue the ugly crying\*

Goddamn ghost gets me every time. Even while swimming in the beauty that is creation, the spectre waited for me in the shadows of my mind. But, maybe, it was time to tie a proverbial concrete shoe around this spirit and tether it *to* my installation, not just my mind. The lonely shoe would have a partner.

Days after my world was bitch-slapped by the grim reaper, I was bequeathed some of my neighbor's clothing and household items. Those items were supposed to bring this phenomenologist a sense of closure and love but instead felt like a python squeezing my pharynx. His tank top from the '90s, constantly dribbling bits of thread around my room, akin to the most fucked up easter egg hunt while cleaning my room. His vintage Valentino underwear, which looks like a party in the front, but nothing but chafing in the back. The therapists told me to incorporate him into my art, right? Well, let's pull off alllllll the bandages at once!

While fastening the garments onto the clotheslines with all the care of a child hanging their stockings up for Christmas, those goddamn tears came back with full vengeance. I guess I didn't realize how long his cologne would linger amidst those weaves. Even though I was still intent on allowing any visitor to swap out the clothes, I thought it would perhaps be best if I put his threads up on the third rung, out of anyone's prying hands. The borrowers/Spanish could never reach such great heights. Mixing business with pleasure with academia with grief is not really recommended, but those are the cards I've been dealt. At long last, my friends and I clipped the last pins, completing the triangle-yurt. The halls rung with the ebullient sounds of children playing fútbol on the plaça, the yapping grannies gnawing the ears off their nurses, all mixed with the incandescent cries of newborn thread being ripped out of the cotton mills and... what's that grumbling in the background? Ah, yes, Greg the crackhead, still asking for sandwiches and a lighter at midnight. Everything in its place at long last.

Waiting with my friends and the organizers, I was proud of what was accomplished in just a few days of running around the city/province, retracing the history of Barcelona's forgotten architectural histories with my fingertips and eardrums, while weaving together these forgotten fashions into a sort of goodbye for them. Bringing them back to some kind of newborn memories. Reminding them of their birth, life... and death, I suppose. Realizing that, with the scant number of visitors the exhibition was bringing in, these pieces of clothing were likely not going to be swapped for anything new. That sequin bra was probably going to the landfill after the lights go out in Can Batlló over the Christmas holidays, marking the end of this 2-week social sculpture. So is life, mon chéri sequin bra, *c'est la vie*.

On the final day, I was taking down the pieces, and a family appeared asking if the show was still on. The machines still machining and the sounds of the plaça still plaça-ing around us, I told them I was slowly taking it apart.



*Fig 31. Can Batlló – Pareds de contes with neighbors, 2023. Credit: author.*

“Why are these clothes here?” the child asked.

I gave him a 5-minute explanation that this building used to be where they made thread for all kinds of clothing, maybe even something in their house. I told him it was a way for me to say goodbye to these strange pieces I found while walking around the city, giving them one last moment in the spotlight before they moved on. He looked back at his parents with only a look a child can give, as if he was on his way to make a grand discovery in his grandma’s closet later that evening.

“That dress looks silly.”

“Do you want it? You can have whatever you want.”

"No thanks, it's not mine!" He didn't clearly understand the assignment. Or my poor Spanish skills didn't quite make it clear to this little munchkin. I kept unpinning the clothespins one by one, remembering the initial stories I had created when discovering each piece. A sense of calm came over me as the final clothesline sultrily squiggled down the column, recalling the moment I wrestled the bra strap from the tree branch all those moons ago.

"Adéu!" I heard the little boy say before running down the stairs.

As I was out of his sightline, I chose to believe he *did* understand after all and bid his farewell while waving to the pile of clothes.

Adéu, indeed.

## 7. REKINDLING URBANISM

Another day, another deadline. The infernal Android alarm sounded off *again* three days after the exhibition in Can Batlló. This time, it was a reminder to apply for the EU-backed Erasmus+ fund. As a self-funded student of questionable legal status in the eyes of the Ministerio de Educación, combined with my magical skill in never procuring formal institutional sources of funding, my day job as a Compliance Specialist was the only form of stable income afforded to me. However, the ancient EU-ropean goddesses offered a total of 12 months in short- and long-term funding for PhD students if one can squirm their way through the Byzantine forms and websites. With my brain still bedeviled by my friendly-but-tormented neighborhood ghost and my wrists still twitching from the comedown of constructing my installation, I *needed* to escape Barcelona. The tears were becoming slightly less obtrusive in public, but mild Barcelona wasn't extreme enough to knock me off my rocker. Racking my brain for possibilities for collaborations, I ran down the laundry lists of possibilities where I had some connection to the local art/cultural illuminati scene:

1. Vienna, my home for 7 years on/off.  
 Pros: Beautiful Jugendstil architecture; decadent streets; familiar; boozy bars open until 5 am; a well-funded cultural scene.  
 Cons: Dull 70% of the time; semi-full of Nazis; bitter taste in my mouth after being banned by the immigration court 5 years previous.
2. Linz, my other home for 7 years when not in Vienna  
 Pros: Small city vibes; beautiful location on the Danube; great locations for meditation; the place where I started on this foray into Arts in Public Space/Spatial Design  
 Cons: Dull 90% of the time; mostly full of Nazis; a reminder of why I left Austria
3. Prishtina, lived there twice for a couple of months each visit  
 Pros: Recently made contacts there via the conference and workshop; friendly local populace; affordable food made with *a//*the love; small but vibrant, young queer art scene  
 Cons: Fish out of water; don't understand a lick of Albanian; Grindr boys be crazy/closeted/married-with-6-children and generally bad kissers
4. Berlin/London, never lived in either, but visited at least 10 times each  
 Pros: Weltmetropole, great cities to get lost in; amazing array of cultural activities/events to tide myself over  
 Cons: Redonkulously spenny, a bit overplayed in the cultural/urbanism milieu

Looking over the list of possible home cities for my Escape-from-Barcelona, Vienna and Linz offered the familiar choices, including free places to stay with friends. Prishtina would fit the narrative, but I had just been there 3 months before for the workshop. If I was to complete a 9-month research stay there, it would maybe tip the scales of my project into a Barcelona vs. Prishtina comparison/showdown. While not completely opposed to this juxtaposition of two capitals of European insurgent nationalism, it seemed a bit forced and, honestly, the thought of living/visiting such a sexually repressed/culturally conservative place for a long period of time is not my idea of a good time. I can only wear so much flannel; sooner or later, I need to blast out my nips in some sequin bolero madness.

Berlin and London are my old stalwarts. Constantly in my heart and frequently poisoning my liver, I had possible connections in each city to work with some relatively well-known practices and collectives. However, I was already writing about Barcelona... did I *really* want to involve another of the GRAND EUROPEAN LIGHTHOUSES OF DESIGN in my thesis? There has been enough written about those two cities' urban ballets.

Voilà, Berlin/London: it's a no. Prishtina: sorry, babs, but 9 months is too much... Also, your weather sucks in the Winter and Springtime.

I narrowed it down to Vienna vs Linz.

Vienna: the old grand dame that she is, home to a varied group of friend circles I remain close to after all of these years. My first stop on my grand European educational adventure in 2009.

Linz: perennial underdog. Its best claim to fame is the hometown of ARS Electronica and Hitler. A strange mix of art students and fascists. And *that* sexy waterfront promenade along the Danube: oh, lord, have mercy.

For narrative purposes, Vienna would be a logical choice, returning to where it all started. My formative art education started there at the Angewandte, and the thought of boozy nights drinking my homemade vodka mixes (Hallo, open container laws!) in Museumsquartier simultaneously made my liver shudder and my heart get all warm and fuzzy. *However*, Linz was where my art education really took a turn. In Vienna, I was in a very conservative drawing/fine arts program. As mentioned before, my Space & Design Strategies program at Linz was where I really started to question, prod, finger, and melt together art and design.

Ever the lover of a good narrative arc, to Linz it shall be! Watch out Germania (Hitler's planned Nazi cultural capital of his Reich), I'm coming homo!

Of course, this choice wasn't actually made for a narrative arc (although it does fit in nicely). After spending the previous 3 weeks wallowing, bellowing, and deluging the streets of Sants with my tears, I was still a hot mess. Losing my sense of belonging to a city that just stole my main ho, even my friendships based in Barcelona were tainted by this shadow of despondency.

We were a core group of 4 friends/colleagues/co-creators throughout my Bachelor and Master studies in Linz. Completing the entrance exam together in October 2011, we spent the next 7 years bouncing around Europe working on various projects and academic adventures but always finding ourselves back in the *Stahlstadt* (Linz's nickname, "Steel City"), sleeping on each other's beds, sofas, and floors. Amanda and Lorena concentrated on bringing boobs into the public realm with their print-and-performance-based project "Busen" (Instagram: busen.blog) [Eng: "bosom"]. Klaus, ever the DJ, concentrated on sound installations in public space. Together with 3 other friends in Linz, they founded Raumteiler in 2016. They describe themselves as a "Co-Working Space, Shop, Workshop, Jugendzentrum<sup>86</sup> für Erwachsene (youth cultural

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<sup>86</sup> Jugendzentrum – a very Austrian semi-institutional center where children and teens are given an indoor place to hang out, play board/card games; most small towns/city districts have at least one

center for adults)”<sup>87</sup>. They’ve covered most of Austria and eastern Europe with their event series Holy-Hydra—multidisciplinary raves which bring together contemporary dance, techno, and art installations, but they also run a series of events in/around their studio space on Humboldtstraße, a mixed post-industrial neighborhood near the city’s main train station.

Their most inspirational work—to me—was BUM BUM STATT BRUM BRUM [Boom boom instead of vroom vroom], a protest/party/parade they threw in June 2022, against the city’s wishes. Their studio is situated on a one-way street which, for all intents and purposes, is an inner-city mini highway. Lodging all of their official grievances, (alongside other families and businesses on the street), they chose to fight back the best way they knew how: boom boom. Since the protest laws are so strong/vague, they officially presented it as a demonstration for a pedestrian friendly city when applying. Had they told the city they wanted to throw a roving rave down the city streets, the mayor would surely have said no. However, in the post-Covid world of limited office hours and in-person applications, their cleverly worded application slid right through without any issue. Bringing their beats to the streets, the Raumteiler gang invited friends and DJ’s to join their DIY “vehicles” (self-made structures with wheels pushed by the parade-goers) as they marched through the city invoking more than a little ill-will from the city council.

Lamentably, I was embroiled in some visa issues in 2022—(a common thread throughout my life)—and couldn’t join my old comrades in their plan to take back their city. As stated before, I was gently nudged and/or exiled from Austria in 2019 due to a misunderstanding on my residency permit application. After spending almost 8 nearly consecutive years in the Alpine Republic, Frau Poppers—(great name for a whimsical human being; however, in this case, an evil troll from hell)—told me that I forgot to notify the Austrian authorities that I had spent 3 months in Brazil while completing an art residence at the FAAP – Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado in São Paulo in 2018. With a kindly one-year ban in effect from the EU starting in April 2019, I was forced to bounce around the Americas before finally coming back to Spain in October 2020. Watching the personal and artistic growth of my old colleagues’ work from abroad was a point of inspiration. Pushing through the personal trauma and quickly approaching the deadline, I saw this as a chance to not only flee Barcelona temporarily, but also a chance to rekindle old relationships. Final decision: *in Linz beginnt’s* (the city’s slogan: in Linz it all begins; however, in this case it was *in Linz geht’s weiter* – in Linz it continues).

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<sup>87</sup> ‘DER RAUMTEILER, RAUMTEILER - LINZ, <https://www.raumteiler-linz.at/>, Accessed: 5.5.2025

After dealing with all necessary signatures, video calls and quickly planned proposals, I found myself in Linz one month later, reuniting ye old gang, 13 years after our initial meeting during the on-site entrance exam. There we were: drinking spritzers around the very same table we used to present our work during our uni crits (in the years between, our department moved to a new building and the Raumteiler gang was given the old tables/chairs from our school's studio). As with all last-minute proposals, I kept the initial idea very vague on my Erasmus application. It would involve my current research into Queer Urbanism, but I wanted to involve Amanda, Lorena, Klaus & Co., like the good old days. They explained that they had the yearly events already planned and, luckily, they fit perfectly into my own work/study schedule.

June: the yearly Sommerfest, a literal block party thrown as a thank you to their neighbors for putting up with their late-night hijinks and a chance to bring all ages and backgrounds to their studio.

September: the yearly Holy Hydra rave-in-a-church, celebrating the Linz cultural scene in the underused Pfarrkirche Urfahr-St. Josef church (beautifully situated on the banks of the Danube, 102 meters from our old department's studio where we spent oh-so-many sleepless nights).

After discussing the possibilities with the team, I wanted to steer away from the overly planned, overly academic processes that filled up my PhD schedule until then. With all the *Sturm und Drang* of Sants still in the rearview mirror, it was time to jump into the Delorean-in-my-mind and take a time warp to the days we used to make something out of nothing. Art-on-a-budget was (and continues to be) my *modus operandi*. Partly practical (¡hola, miniscule bank account!), partly aesthetic (hello, forever-fan of John Waters' *Trash Trilogy*), it was time to just have *fun*.

Tears firmly held at bay (until the occasional PTSD flashback), I would return to Linz over the next 9 months to meet with my Raumteiler comrades during their monthly meetings until my lightbulb moment. Wandering the *Altstadt*'s many thrift stores, I came across my old favorite: Arge Trödlerladen at Bischofstraße 7. A charity shop which benefited the town's homeless population, it was (and continues to be) full of treasures from the last 100 years. With most goods marked at €2 or less, I was, once again, a kid in a candy shop.

Speaking with the various wares across the multiple rooms, I found myself entranced with the textile bargain bins. The clothing? A Wunderkammer of old *Lederhosen* and *Dirndl* and fur coats. They were whispering to my more aesthetically leaning ear, but I didn't want something so obviously Austrian. In the back corner, silently humming a pleasant melody, was the box of sofa covers and curtains. Rummaging through the piles with all the zeal of an Austrian digging for their family's stolen Nazi paintings

from the bottom of a lake, there I found her: my beautiful white whale....er, kitschy '80s printed curtains. God bless the grannies who kept them in mint condition 40 years later... Now, it was time to spin these threads into visual gold.

With the Sommerfest 2024 fast approaching, I was graciously given the Raumteiler's giant tables to use. After hearing about the various activities during this party: live bands, local food trucks, human chess, photo booth, I decided against a full-on performance. Despite the occasional toe-dipping into the spotlight, I am much more of a cackling audience member than limelight lover. In terms of the Muppets: even though I am often confused with and emotionally adore Miss Piggy, I gravitate more towards Statler and Waldorf, the old trouts heckling from the back. I asked the gang about the invitees/audience; they mentioned the neighbors, the kids, the dudes from the kebab shop down the street, the café workers, *et al.* Noticing a gap in the list of those invited I asked them:

"So, you're throwing a block party in the neighborhood... but you never invited the buildings?"

Used to my architectural pornographic projects from the past, they simply told me: "You are the guest of honor, you can invite whoever you want."

I had bought the various textiles not knowing how they would be arranged into a project, but now it was clear: I would drag them up in makeup, making them the most beautiful belles of the ball. From moribund martyrs of interior design to celebrated queens of urban design, I would mirror the neighboring buildings by drawing their façades on to these flexible fabrics. My days were filled with remotely working from my laptop during business hours and all night priming/painting/drawing, with an unhealthy amount of local schnaps in between.

On the day of the shindig, I brought out *my* guests of honor: Miss Schubertstraße 34, Miss Goethestraße 22, Miss Hauptplatz 1, and Miss Scharitzerstraße 16.

Dressed to the nines, these urbane beauts glistened in the hazy Austrian summer glow on this particular June afternoon. With the Danube's breezes slowly waltzing them between the trees, they found themselves situated throughout the courtyard. Up there! In the tree! Over there! On top of the swing set! Down there! Smack dab in the middle of the grassy sitting area! And what's that in the sky? A bird? A plane? Nah, it's just Miss Scharitzerstraße 16 flapping around like she owns the Stahlstadt sky.



*Fig 32. Raumteiler Sommerfest – Miss Schubertstraße 34, 2024. Credit: author.*



*Fig 33. Raumteiler Sommerfest – Miss Goethestraße 22, 2024. Credit: author.*



*Fig 34. Raumteiler Sommerfest – Miss Scharitzerstraße 16, 2024. Credit: author.*



*Fig 35. Raumteiler Sommerfest – Miss Kunstuniversität Linz, 2024. Credit: author.*

Helping the Raumteiler gang with the final preparations for the food, drink, and furniture arrangements, they asked me:

“Is that it? You’re just hanging them around the party?”

Expecting a more explosive and/or skin-baring performance, I replied: “I’m just letting them do their thing. I invited them here; I’ll ask them later what they want to do.”

As the courtyard filled with more and more neighbors, I kept stock of how my invitees were being treated. The being in the tree? Occasionally getting fingerbanged by a guest drawn into her shimmering beauty, no doubt wondering what he was wearing (my old standby mix of primer, titanium white acrylic and mixed with some gravel I found on the street to give her some urbane flair). The being on the grass? Well, some of the neighbors must have seen the kink in her eyes, in front of everyone, sitting on her face, just as she loves. Those on the sides seemed a bit shy, just silently sticking to the periphery, being the wallflowers alongside the other flowers.

Twirling with some old friends, I found myself happily lubricated, figuratively and literally, sitting down on the grass next to one of my creations/invitees. The couple getting rim jobs from this particular painting, knowing that I was their creator/inviter, asked me what their story was. I explained that I invited some of the neighboring buildings, who preferred to meet the locals on their own accord.

This particular building was Miss Scharitzerstraße 16, an especially special guest, as she was my temporary shelter 12 years before. My friend Ulli let me stay in her apartment while I was looking for a place to stay in my first semester, so Miss Scharitzerstraße 16 had held a special place in my heart ever since.

Noticing she was almost done with this couple, I held my ears close to her windows and she, in classic fashion, told me she needed to open up a bit. I offered her a drink, but she said she wanted to *really* open up. So, I grabbed the scissors and started to cut out her windows, letting the grass flow up inside her. The couple, shocked that I had just taken scissors to their picnic blanket/lover, asked what I was doing.

“She told me to do this.”

Slightly taken aback, they asked, “Do you want any help?”

Returning to the studio, I gave them both pairs of scissors to make their own incisions. Incisive, inquisitive citizens surrounded us, asking if they should do the same to the other invitees/paintings around the premises. The Linzers are many a thing, but after a couple of drinks, shy is not one of them.

As we waltzed around with my special guests and scissors, the paintings started to breathe. Opening up the only way they knew how. Even if all of the guests passed in front of each other, the people and the buildings were finally being *intimate* with one another.

The scissors stopped chomping as the wine kept flowing, so much so that there are precious few pictures of the last hours of this *fiesta*, let alone of my guests of honor. You'll just have to take my word for it; oh, how those buildings twirled around their neighbors! It's amazing what a building is capable of when finally freed from the shackles of their foundation. Lathered in the Linzers' perspiration and neighborly tenderness, the buildings were finally finished.

Playing hide-and-seek with the paintings while cleaning up was an urban wild goose chase. Miss Scharitzerstraße 16 was back to her loosey-goosey self, all alone in the shrubbery next to a few cans of Ottakringer beer, one leg protruding from the petunias, face down in the mulch, as if she had been kissing the dirt all night long. Some things never change.

With the first event out of the way, and a tightly packed summer schedule for both the Raumteiler gang and myself, we would continue to chat until it was time for their yearly big bang: Holy Hydra. It was scheduled on the same weekend as the closing weekend of the ARS Electronica festival, providing for an off-ARS experience (and tapping into the one weekend per year when Linz refuses to sleep until Monday morning). Steps from the permanent home of ARS, I helped Klaus, Amanda and Lorena in the spatial set-up. I wasn't just a PhD researcher; I was also working three shifts at the bar (hello, free drinks!). We set up the final details, filling the beautiful baroque church with sculptural installations from local artists and helping with the soundchecks for the bevy of bands and DJs set to play.

"Tom, do you want to hang your drawings around again?"

"*Nein. Lass sie tanzen*" [let them dance].

From curtains to Humboldtstraße's neighbors to intimate acts with neighbors, they were finally ready to be unveiled to the Holy Hydra ravers. With some necessary makeovers to make them more... flexible, they were ready to drape themselves over the visitors. Walking around with my four special guests over my shoulder, I stalked the dancefloor looking for those I deemed worthy of waltzing with my lovely paintings, before running back to make my shift.



Fig 36. Miss Hauptplatz 1 on Break, 2024. Credit: author.

Arm in arm with my flight-of-the-weekend, Miss Scharitzerstraße 16 aided with my bartending skills, lending a helping hand to my generous pours. Running between the bar in the Parish Office to the main dance floor under the main cupola, in another repeat of my life, I failed to take any pictures, so lost in the music and libations and beats and camaraderie. Not great for future posterity, but I wasn't creating these outlandish architectural costumes for future consumption: they were made of the moment, by the moment, for the moment. This is not an innocuous idea meant to dissuade those who question my lack of archival footage; it is a firmly held belief, if I'm capable of such conviction. If it's not possible to view *en vivo*, I find it much more interesting to listen to how someone explains an image rather than merely seeing it.

As the night gnawed away at my worn-out black cha-cha heels (eat your heart out Dawn Davenport), Saturday turned into Sunday turned into Monday just like the old student days. Happily losing my cell phone halfway through my second shift, old man time mutated into one of my old drinking buddies in the Urfahr neighborhood. My hands and feet freed from the restraints of those fascist big and small hands always judging from my wrist, it was high time to bask in the glory of the old days with my old friends, comrades, lovers, and neighbors (and every imaginable union of the above).

Cleaning up after the weekend-long festival while still under the influence of the chemicals spewing forth from Linz's smokestacks, a colleague found my phone after it had been hiding for 1.5 days behind the pews in the backroom. I didn't ask what it had been up to in the dark backroom for it was none of my business. Likewise, it asked me nothing; we just quietly looked at each other, understanding that this weekend was *necessary*. There are few things that a good dance-a-thon with close friends can't fix. We were sweating out the poisons faster than we could ingest them while stretching out muscles we forgot we forgot we have while dancing with those we refused to let go of. Dancefloor therapy at its finest.

As with the previous Sommerfest evening (and as with most nights out as a tech-wary human being), nary an archival image can be found on my phone. Months later when I asked Lorena, Klaus and Amanda if they had any pictures—(like me, they too prefer to lay their eyes on the sky and dancefloor instead of the screen)—they informed me that they managed to find one photo of my waltzing beauts. In the rapturous green glow of a religious experience, I present the only known pictures of me gyrating with my linen lover beneath the pulpit:



*Fig 37. Miss Hauptplatz 1 – Tanz bis zum Morgen, 2024. Credit: author.*

## 8. TAINING URBANISM

After working with those familiar faces in Linz, some glimmers of hope started to peel back the dark shroud that had been circling me for the past months. My fingers were tingling, reminding the rest of my body how much I enjoyed *creating* again. In the spring of 2024, a friend told me that Barcelona's Disseny Hub (Design Museum) was offering a workshop entitled *PURE GOLD – Upcycled! Upgraded!*

Stemming from a 2017 conference and exhibition in Hamburg, this roving exhibition has visited 7 cities around the world: São Paulo, Manila, Hanoi, Yangon, London & Bangkok. At each stop, the curatorial team of Axel Kufus, Annika Unger and Anja Lapatsch held an open call for local designers to join a 3-day workshop exploring various ways of upcycling found items on the street.

Annika and Anja (two bubbly designers from Germany) gave us a rousing breakdown of the previous 52 projects designed over the last 8 years. The idea of upcycling is nothing new; any poor art/design student remembers the studio projects created when canned veggies and beans made up a good size of their diet. However, the most interesting part of their project was seeing how each city and location informed the workshops' materials: Yangon's used-incense sticks transformed into office-supply holders; Bangkok's chopsticks converted into a handbag; São Paulo's beer can-cum-mini-BBQ<sup>88</sup>

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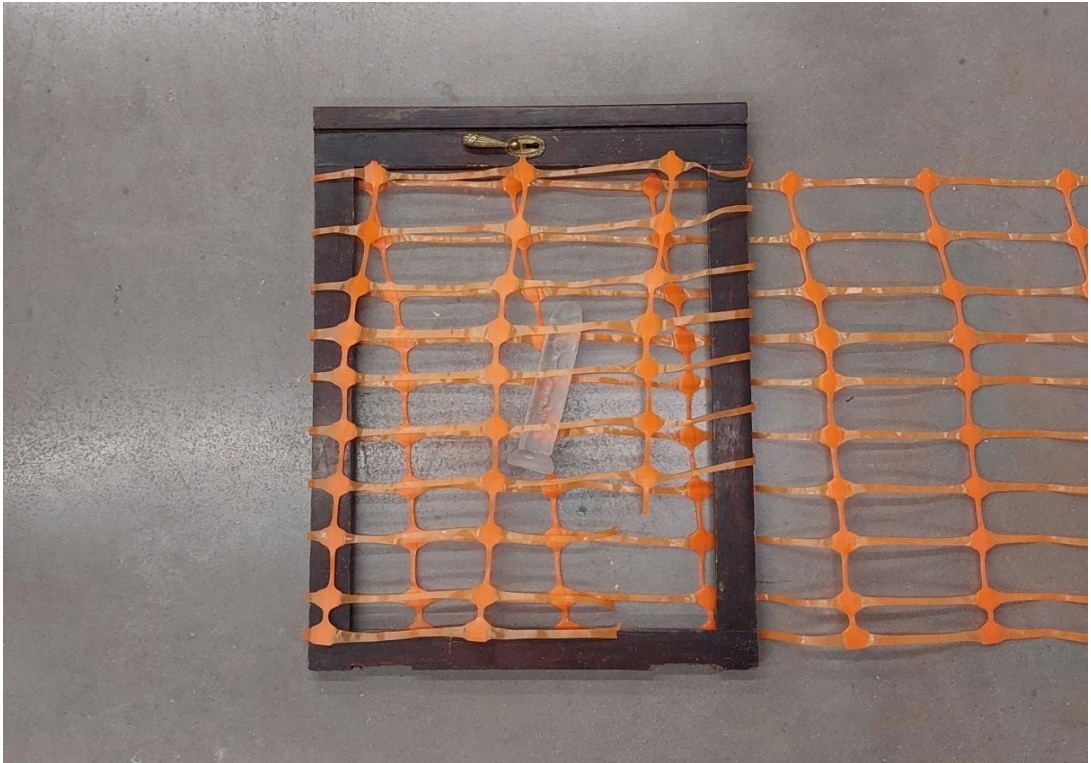
<sup>88</sup> "Pure Gold – Upcycled! Upgraded!", *Pure Gold - Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen*, <https://pure-gold.org/> Accessed: 15.7.2025

No stranger to the forgotten treasures lining Barcelona (see the previous Can Batlló exhibition), my apartment was chock-full of goodies from which to choose. At the time of the workshop, the streets surrounding the Disseny Hub were a jumbled mess of construction sites where a tram line extension tangoed around the new central park (Parc de les Glòries). Yet, walking around the steamy May afternoon gathering goodies and inspiration from the neighborhood, I realized I didn't want to just design some funky aesthetic object, I wanted to *add* something to the city (ever the romantic urbanist). Noticing the labyrinthine temporary fences and the ample amount of hunky construction workers working up a sweat, I thought I would create an offering to these lords of the asphalt a chance to quench their thirst.

Ten years ago, I dabbled as a volunteer construction worker (read: indentured servant) in Valparaiso, Chile to help build a "sustainable-design hotel". As a giant human being with back problems, I noticed the strained brows of the men when they bent over to pick up their water bottles. A table would be nice, wouldn't it?

With some found rope on the street and two store-bought meat hooks, I quickly assembled a makeshift, movable table which could be hung from a variety of materials (construction fencing, concrete walls, traffic gates, et al). Never one to shy away from adding a sprinkle of absurdity to... well, anything really, I noticed my table was missing something. Trash chic, though it was, it needed a little bit of zhuzh.

When I got home after Day 2, the Barcelona sunshine shone right through the crack of my curtains directly onto *exactly* what was needed: a dildo. As glowingly transparent as the titular animated spirit from 1995's film adaptation of *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, this specific dildo was tainted with the taint of my ghost-husband. I was happy to exorcise one of the (*many*) cursed items from my recent past. In the name of design, so shall it be done. Maybe the construction workers wouldn't quite get why I put a see-through 6-inch dildo in the table, but it put a smile on my face. It elevated a simple trash-table into a conversation piece: if the dildo falls in between orange construction fencing, does it make a noise? Can we really call it a dildo if it's been relegated to the support structure?



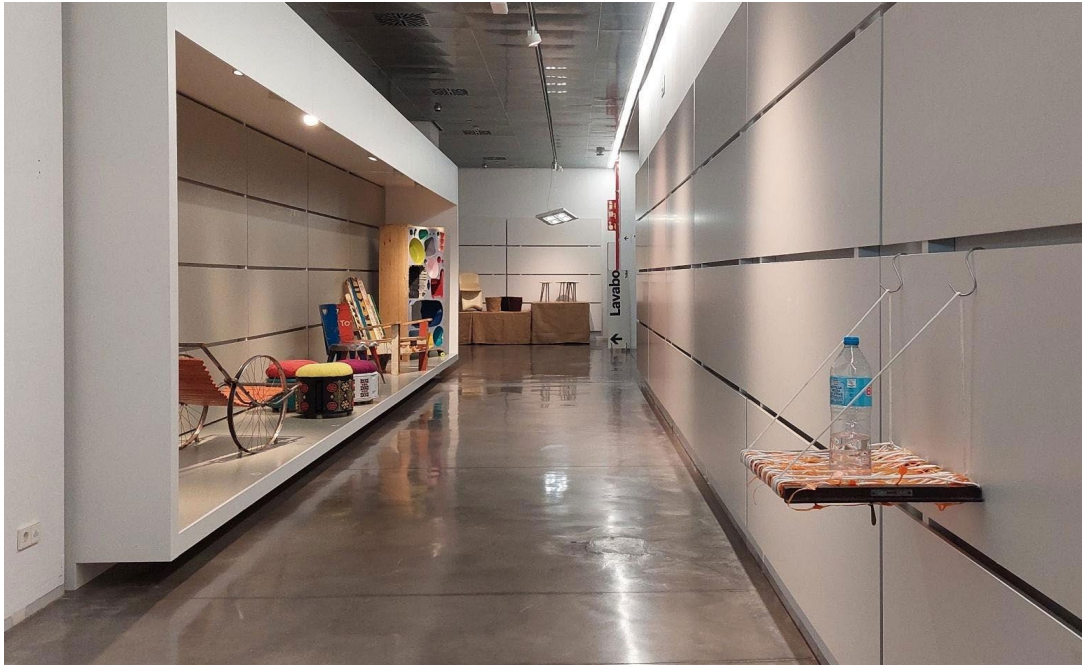
*Fig 38. Put a dildo in it, 2024. Credit: author.*

We were tasked with creating a short stop motion film about the creation process, to add to their well-curated Instagram page (IG: ifa\_puregold). As I was playing with my materials to set up the shot, Mr. Dildo safely hidden from any ghost/construction worker's prying eyes, I grew tired of the plain paper backdrops everyone was using in the workspace. Following instructions and/or a herd was never a strong suit of mine. If my project was designed to be part of the city, why the hell would I use their flat, nasty brown craft paper to cheapen my garbage table. To the streets!

In turns out the construction workers were not feeling this design fag's idea of using this table for their water bottles ('STAY AWAY FROM THE FENCE!' was a common refrain before I could set up the shot). THEIR LOSS. Traipsing around the concrete, my real-world design object was demoted to street-fashion-runway model. From the security walls to the traffic calming gates, this thirst-trap-of-a-table started to revamp herself from table to chair to thing of pure beauty:



*Fig 39. Chair or Construction Fence?, 2024. Credit: author.*



*Fig 40. Museum Camouflage, 2024. Credit: author.*



*Fig 41. Poblenu Bros, 2024. Credit: author.*

The final video can be seen on their profile in all its fresh-air glory.<sup>89</sup> When it came to the presentation at the end of the workshop: silence. Except for my cackling, and more than a couple of confused looks.

“What was your inspiration?” the three Germans asked.

“Sweaty and closeted construction workers, Allen Wrexler’s architectural sculptures....and Portlandia.” (The latter in reference to a clip from 2011 US TV comedy sketch show in which two hipster store clerks pimp out the goods in the store with a cutesy picture of a bird, sending up a very 2000s aesthetics<sup>90</sup>). Sensing some confusion, I explained that I generally take equal inspiration from high/low-brow art, my immediate environment, and (semi?) obscure pop-culture references to flesh out my creations.

“Why did you put a dildo in it?”

“Well, since I’ve been working with the idea of ‘Queer Urbanism’, the dildo has become a kind of inside joke when I explain this topic.”

“How so?”

“Well, I tend to ramble on if someone asks me about my PhD research, so I created this kind of go-to, quick response: ‘If we understand “queer” as a sort of transgressive term in general, and then “queering” an object as bastardizing the original use/idea of that object... let’s imagine a park bench. How can we change the use of it to rub people the wrong way? Put a dildo on it!’”

They quickly moved on to the next designer’s object without any further questions.

While this example was a quick, yet incomplete, definition of what Queer Urbanism could be, I have found that this humorous-yet-completely-sincere exemplar/image illustrated the topic at hand in a very “me” kind of way. Given my predilection towards its specific human appendage of reference, along with my sexually explicit sense of humor, the dildo intrinsically finds itself in many of my works. While “queerness” need not be explicitly sexual, the misfits of the art/design world have often found themselves using the power of such strong imagery to make their point. This workshop took place 100 meters from the Jean Nouvel-designed Torre Glòries (formerly Torre Agbar), which is, clearly, an oversized dildo waiting for Sky Daddy to sit on it. Valencia-based

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<sup>89</sup> ifa\_puregold, ‘Workshop Barcelona | Upcycables’, *Instagram*, 17.7.2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9hGVpnMjMf/>, Accessed: 24.7.2025

<sup>90</sup> Snierson, D., ‘Portlandia: “A brief oral history of “Put a Bird On It!”’, *Entertainment Weekly*, 9.3.2017, <https://ew.com/tv/2017/03/09/portlandia-oral-history-put-a-bird-on-it/>, Accessed: 25.7.2025

O.R.G.I.A. Collective used this very tower in their *Follarse la ciudad* series<sup>91</sup>, *Follarse La Ciudad\_El ataque de Autoerótica: La oscuridad se cierne sobre Barcelona Vol.1* [Fucking the City\_The Attack of Autoerótica: Darkness Looms over Barcelona Vol.1]. In addition to their collage/drawings/images, they designed a series of interchangeable dildo-drill-bits acting as vibrators (conveniently boxed in a travel set) to invert the masculine-feminine/public-private aspects of the Western, hetero-centric polis.

In a similar vein, in 2019, Wolfgang & Hite likewise created a series of sex toys based on NYC's Hudson Yards various buildings: "There's a lot to love in NYC's recent building boom, but the city and developers have been jerking each other off for decades, so naturally we wanted to join in the fun."<sup>92</sup> Phallic architecture (and its criticisms) are nothing new: from Dolores Hayden's 1997 article 'Skyscraper Seduction / Skyscraper Rape' article: "Perhaps the metaphor of rape suggested by the strongly phallic form of the skyscraper can illuminate the process by which American urban residents and workers have, at times, resigned themselves to this oppressive architectural form,"<sup>93</sup> to Leslie Kern's "'Upward-thrusting buildings ejaculating into the sky do cities have to be so sexist?"<sup>94</sup> A call to arms for a more gender-balanced approach to city design.

Whether my dildo table—(or is it a chair?)—is seen as a cheap joke or poetic form wrapping a dead man's dildo in construction fencing is for the viewer to decide. It has, however, led to a photo series of mine, in which I have created a series of dildos made with Barcelona Police & City Council's CAUTION tape and placed them throughout the city, allowing you to work out those complicated feelings towards the city: when this *ciutat comtal* pushes you to becoming a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown, pull down your stockings and/or jockstrap, plant your hoofs into the ground and have a seat. Fuck this city, honestly.

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<sup>91</sup> 'Follarse a la ciudad', *Orgia*, <https://www.orgiaprojects.org/follarse-la-ciudad/>, Accessed: 25.7.2025

<sup>92</sup> Plitt, A., 'A design firm created hot pink sex toys inspired by Hudson Yards', *Curbed*, 2.10.2019, <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/10/2/20895254/hudson-yards-new-york-sex-toys-wolfgang-hite>, Accessed: 26.7.2025

<sup>93</sup> Hayden, D., " in *Heresies* (1), May 1977

<sup>94</sup> Kern, L., "'Upward-thrusting buildings ejaculating into the sky" – do cities have to be so sexist?' *Guardian*, 6.7.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/06/upward-thrusting-buildings-ejaculating-cities-sexist-leslie-kern-phallic-feminist-city-toxic-masculinity>, Accessed: 20.7.2025



*Fig 42. Torres Gemelas, 2024. Credit: author.*

For legal reasons, I definitely did not place any of these dildos in Barcelona's Parc de Montjuïc, they just happened to be there when I was having an innocent Sunday walk...in the bit of the park that just so happens to be a popular cruising destination among the more bent of us:



Fig 43. *Friends with a view*, 2024. Credit: author.

The pathways depicted here are the same ones that also starred in Els 5QK's short films from the 1970s. This merry band of radical fairies defied the receding tides of Franco's homophobic dictatorship, filming a series of humorous/bizarre short films in and around the Sants neighborhood & Montjuïc's gardens-cum-cum-laden paths. I was lucky enough to watch a few of their films at a screening in 2024 as part of the open-studio program at the Hangar cultural center in Barcelona. Unfortunately, their archived video works are nigh-on impossible to find online, but viewing these *marikones* gallivanter under those repressive seventies' skies gave me a heartwarming feeling that there will always be nonsensical faggots waving fake penises around in front of a camera for a laugh.

Similarly, for my lawyer's sake, I also most certainly did *not* place any discounted Temu tentacle-shaped dildos on Richard Serra's *El muro* sculpture. Because that would be wrong and disrespectful to one of art's most beloved creators....or "a grandiose and irreverent asshole"<sup>95</sup>:

Part-referential-art-pranks, part-serious-questions-of-taste-and-design, these Barcelona City Council- approved sanctioned tolerated overlooked dildos reminded me of my master's thesis at the city's architectural school, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura

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<sup>95</sup> Saltz, J., 'Circus Maximus', *Artnet*,

<https://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/saltz/saltz12-30-99.asp>, Accessed: 5.7.2025

de Barcelona, in 2021, the year I started this PhD program. Entitled *Queer Erections: Counter-Monuments to the Counter-Culture*<sup>96</sup>, I designed a series of 'paper architecture' monuments ranging from the slightly morbid (AIDS-memorial park bench painted with acrylic-mixed-with-HIV+-blood) to the generically sweet (rainbow banners reading out quote from famous queer writers) to the completely wholesome (oversized pedestrian bridge covering a major city artery using the face and genitals of Anarcoma, a cult-figure from Nazario Luque's legendary [for those in the know] comic series, also titled *Anarcoma*<sup>97</sup>):



Fig 44. *Anarcoma Pont*, 2021. Credit: author.

After placing these dildos around the city someone placed these definitely-never-used-completely-hygienic dildos around the city, I thought it was high time to revisit these Anarcoma projects. Between working full-time, going on research jaunts, doing workshops, all-around-sulking, and sleeping, I was at my wit's end trying to finish this

<sup>96</sup> Stempka, T., *Queer Erections: Counter-Monuments to the Counter-Culture*, UPCommons, <https://hdl.handle.net/2117/356601>

<sup>97</sup> Nazario, *Anarcoma. Obra gráfica completa*, Ediciones La Cúpula, S.L., 2020

goddamn blessed thesis. Ever one for a full-circle narrative, the final physical project that I planned to include in this body of work involved Anarcoma's devilishly beautiful smile.

Sure, the dildos were meant to be sat upon, giving any pedestrian the chance to *actually* fuck the city, but how many would get that bit of plastic to greet their prostate?

\*sighs in Spanish\*

If only someone would manage to meld my obsession with Anarcoma and public space into something tangible.... Wait... what's that over there in my *barri de Sants*?



Fig 45. Anarcoma Super-Silla, 2025. Credit: author.

Whoever is responsible for this bodaciously reckless act of vandalism must have been stalking me these past few years. Somewhere, on the mean streets of Sants, lies these benches lurking in the sorrowful shadows. Serendipitously/completely unexpectedly, this was “our favorite bench”, the one I spent so many evenings talking with my now-ghost-husband when he was a little more tangible. The last public space where we had our indelible last conversation. While I may no longer have his generously lingering *lengua* and stubble to captivate my grundle’s attention, this bench does its best to replace the irreplaceable. *Gràcies* for still caring about me after all these years, Anarcoma. And a little bit to the left, please...yes, that’s the spot.

Everything’s a dildo if you’re brave enough!  
Sagrada Familia! Guanábana! Shampoo Bottle!  
Arm Rest! Road Works on the Street! Pastanaga!

- Sex Shop Boyz, ‘Brave Enough’<sup>98</sup>  
(punk band from Barcelona)

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<sup>98</sup> Sex Shop Boyz, ‘Brave Enough’, *EP (Enlarged Penis)*, Noise Merchant Records, 2022

## 9. ESCAPING URBANISM

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,  
find another city better than this one.  
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong,  
and my heart lies buried like something dead.  
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?  
Wherever I turn, wherever I look,  
I see the black ruins of my life, here,  
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.  
This city will always pursue you.  
You'll walk the same streets, grow old  
in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in these same houses.  
You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:  
there's no ship for you, there's no road.  
Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,  
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.<sup>99</sup>

- C.P. Cavafy, 'The City'

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<sup>99</sup> Cavafy, C.P., 'The City' in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, Revised Edition.*, (trans.) Sherrard, P. *et al.*, Princeton University Press, 2020, p. 28

I couldn't be sure which was more potent at this point. Was it the way his thoughtful tongue traced my back door frame, sending my sphincter muscle into a state of submission like no one before? Or was it the gooey, oozing mussel-flecked mozzarella hurtling its way from the immaculate dough down my eager, greased-up throat? Either way, my eyes said it all: careening from front to back, playing hide and seek with my eyelashes, this was a moment of supreme splendor to be cherished. After two and a half hours of having both orifices being given the royal treatment, my body was putty in his bed.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"... yes," I stammered while we awkwardly giggled, as only new lovers can.

I had spent the last couple of hours watching *Addams Family Values* in his childhood bed while receiving one of the world's most gracious and delicious rimjobs and simultaneously scarfing down a perfectly-salted, delectable seafood pizza.

"Welcome to Alexandria!" he laughed as I gathered my balance, sliding off the cartoon bed sheets into the fuzzy slippers waiting at the base of the chipped wooden bed frame. Sea legs be damned, I shuffled down the hall, past his grandma's china cabinet to the window, perfectly framing the sunset. A burnt orange sky flared across the darkened rectangles of the skyline, indiscriminately broken up by the barely visible stars and/or TV screens from the family rooms across the courtyard.

Yes, this was exactly the kind of moment I needed after such a turbulent year. The condensation from the cold Stella lager dripped down his hand, rehydrating the dried beads of sweat that planted themselves on his wrist after holding my asshole agape for hours. With nary an orgasm in sight, this gentle creature from Egypt's famous port city should be appointed as ambassador for the way his guiding hands and tongue welcomed me to his hometown.

Grindr meetups are 50/50 propositions in Barcelona, so I didn't have the highest hopes in this opposite corner of the Mediterranean. Mo, however, proved me wrong. We chatted for hours after the aforementioned tongue lashing, and he, ever the gentleman, took me on a 3-hour walk back to my hotel along the various guises of Alexandrian coastlines. From the uncomfortable glitz of the San Stefano Grand Plaza hotel to the famed Corniche abutting the "old" (a relative word here in Egypt) downtown, we passed the crass abominations taking hold over the bastardized beaches of Alexandria. Gleem Bay? A food court piercing the midnight-blue sea with all the charm of a strip mall in the suburbs of Cincinnati. Gleaming it was not. Mo was giving me the grand tour of his home-Governate-upon-sea. Currently based in Cairo, he was visiting his grandma's old apartment in Alexandria when he received the

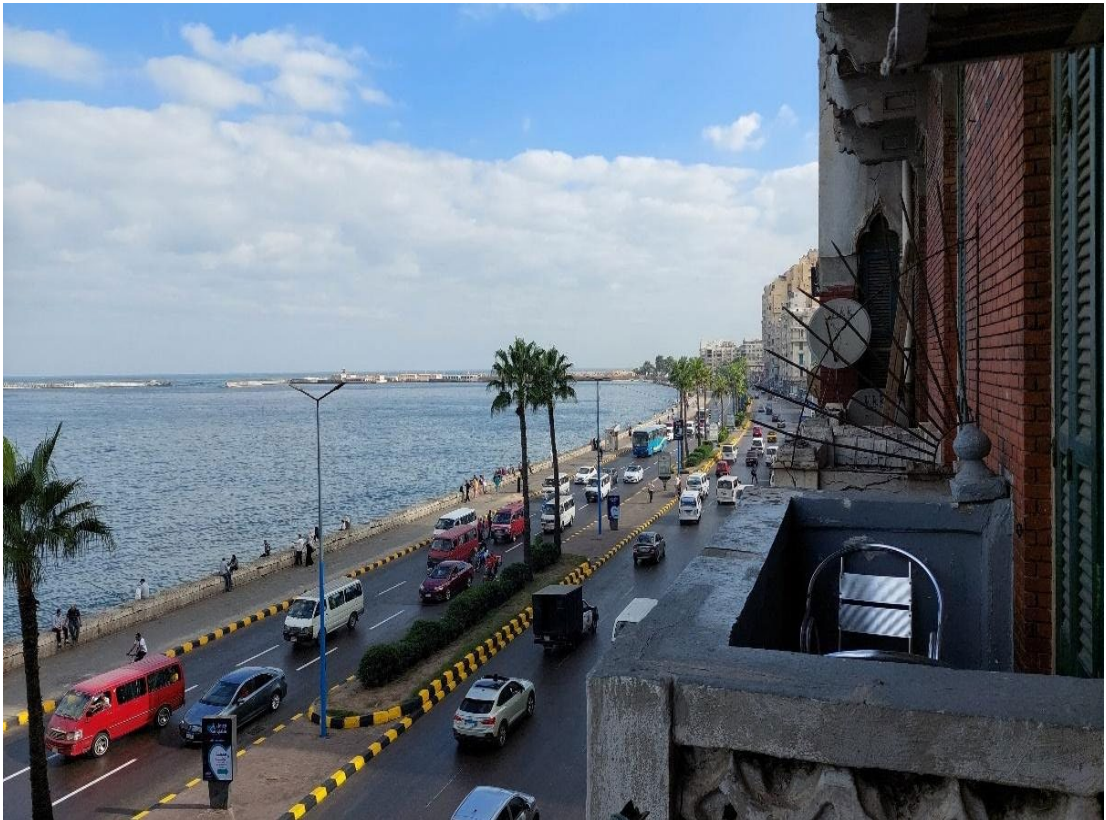
familiar (to any card-carrying gay) Grindr “brrrp”, notifying him that this wayward faggot was looking for a local to show him around. And show me around (and around and around and around....) he did. He would stop every few hundred meters to explain the horrors of the current city council’s plans to privatize what remains of Alexandria’s public beaches, filling them with food courts and overpriced shisha bars, which give off definite American suburban vibes. A coast of TGIFridays and Applebee’s levels-of-schlock (albeit with much tastier and affordable food). Occasionally, we would pass what few traditional café-gems Alexandria holds dear to its car-fume-poisoned heart. Saber El Iskandryany Café, where a few hours earlier I was sipping a deliciously milky lemon-mint tea whilst perusing the local man-wares on my phone.



*Fig 46. Saber El Iskandryany Café in Alexandria, 2024. Credit: author*

*Et voilà*, we approached my decaying palace-of-the-week, a prime waterfront location heralding the start of the Al-Raml neighborhood (a gloriously decadent art deco and

tram-filled neighborhood marking one of the many “old” downtowns of the city. With a hesitant hug, we said our goodbyes. He had to return to Cairo for work the next day, so we exchanged phone numbers, promising to keep each other updated on any future travels which may rekindle our flame once more. As a true-blue Alexandrian, he flagged down a micro-bus using the secret sign language which told the driver which neighborhood he needed to be dropped off at. A classified and confidential series of gestures which only the locals knew, adding more urban romance to a city that needed no more.



*Fig 47. Alexandria Cornish – El-Gaish Road, 2024. Credit: author*

I played a game of human-Frogger as I crossed the highway El-Gaish Road, flanking the waterfront promenade. Walking up the gloriously musty staircase with faded ads from Egypt Air from the 1960s peeling off the walls, I found myself back in the room of my dreams, in a Single-Room-Occupancy Hotel reminiscent of those from Hitchcock’s San Francisco. Sea legs finally giving out, I crashed into the crisp, chlorinated sheets before passing out to the melodious mélange of buzzing traffic, late-night popcorn

sellers screaming, and families chirping on the sidewalks below. A perfectly Alexandrian symphony at 2 am on a Tuesday.

The desire and the need to escape Barcelona was palpable after that fateful November day when the city decided to rip out a piece of my heart out and keep it for its collection. A schedule of deadlines mixed with a lack of money and vacation days meant I would have to wait for my respite to be provided. With a (small) stack of money in my hand and no more deadlines after my Austrian research stay was over, I quickly scanned the internet for a trip that would be less than €400 including airfare and accommodation for the full two weeks I had off work in October.

With most of Europe well out of my range, I had two choices: Morocco or Egypt. Both fine options, Morocco was a bit more familiar due to its proximity to Spain, so I opted for the banks of the Nile. I made my way to Alexandria, as I thought it would make for a great foil to Barcelona: both port cities of a relatively similar metropolitan-area population, both flanking opposite extremes of the Mediterranean. Naturally, there was a sense of adventure and allure to this historical city, which is rarely talked about in Western Europe, overshadowed by its Megacity upriver, Cairo. It was to be a two-week jaunt to chill by the water, enjoy the crisp Egyptian sun in November, giving me a chance to escape my Catalan ghost. Or so I thought.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, I had booked a room at an SRO [Single Residence Occupancy – residential hotel] but two streets away from the Cavafy Museum. Like any semi-literate faggot with a penchant for prose, Cavafy was a familiar name. I knew of his work and his relationship with Alexandria (and its boys), but it ended there. The day after my midnight walk with Mo along the waterfront, I kept the celebration going, indulging on a baker's dozen liver sandwiches, followed by the requisite siesta, and visiting the Cavafy Museum in the late afternoon. His former apartment was kept in pristine condition by the Kennedy Foundation, and as I walked through the column-studded portico, I was slapped across the face by his poem 'The City' splattered across the first wall. Somehow this one slipped by my earlier readings from him, but, *boy oh boy*, did it strike an immediate nerve.

Another country, another shore, indeed. I brushed off these joyful lines and explored the rest of the museum, delightfully filled with a large map of the city, with all of his favorite haunts marked out (including El Iskandryany Café). Checking out the mini library, I saw a gleaming porcelain throne in the next room, basking in sunlight. Knowing the state of many Egyptian ~~holes in the floor~~ toilets, I jumped at the opportunity to rest my weary feet and enjoy the thrill of a functioning toilet valve. After thanking the curator for giving me a good chat and a list of recommended restaurants, I spun around to see another poem on the wall, 'Come Back':

Come back often and take hold of me,  
sensation that I love come back and take hold of me –

When the body's memory awakens,  
and an old longing again moves into the blood;  
when lips and skin remember,  
and hands feel as though if they touch again.

Come back often, and take hold of me in the night  
when lips and skin remember...

- C.P. Cavafy, 'Come Back'<sup>100</sup>

Well, *fuck me*. \*cue the waterworks, bitch\*

The curator, noticing my dismay and face-full-of-tears, came over and put her hand on my shoulder:

"Are you ok?" she asked.

This time the question didn't follow a rimjob nor a seafood pizza, but I still managed to let out a "...yes," before bolting for the street and flooding the pillow in my hotel room, happily two blocks away.

After another—although this time tear-soaked—siesta, I composed myself and went out to the balcony overlooking the Corniche. There she was: the glorious Alexandrian sunset over the other-other old town. Cutting through the sounds of the traffic, the waves, and the couple taking each other to poundtown next door, the rays hit my sunburnt cheeks with a decisive wallop. Drying up the remnants of the tears that remained, I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"Oh, Tom, how *PAINFULLY* poetic have the last 18 hours been?" the ghost of a sardonic version of Cavafy whispered into my ears along with the salty sea breeze. And just like that...I grabbed a piece of paper and started to tear through my sketch book trying to recount the wacky misadventures, favorite smells, and overlooked moments of my past days in Egypt. Whether it was Cavafy's spirit, the sunset, the 13<sup>th</sup> ill-advised and possibly undercooked liver sandwich with extra chilis, or a one last breath from the long-gone lighthouse, something clicked inside me, filling me with what I hoped was inspiration. Either that, or the liver sandwich gave me worms.

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<sup>100</sup> Cavafy, C.P., 'Come Back' in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems, Revised Edition.*, (trans.) Sherrard, P. et al., Princeton University Press, 2020, p. 43

Waking up the day to a surprisingly in-form solid stool, it appeared to not be worms. All hail Miss Inspiration! It was my last day in town before heading back to Barcelona, so I went back on my phone to make one last dinner date. Having satiated my more carnal desires with the pizza (and tongue), I chatted with a local journalist to get one final dinner/evening full of local anecdotes. Another gentleman, we shared a hearty ~~plate~~ table full of various types of beans, thus assuring no backdoor funny business would follow. Also, a perfect excuse to call the date off to run back to use my toilet.

However, the legumes had spared me. Mahm told me we should go to his favorite ice cream shop in the center after walking off our dinner. As any lactose-addicted cow would, I gleefully followed. He was telling me about the difficulties in growing up gay in Alex (as the locals call it). Even though it's a Mediterranean port city, it does have a much more traditional culture, especially downtown, compared to its bigger sister, Cairo. Showing me his secret hideouts, including the fantabulous Cap D'Or Bar—one of the only old-school boozing joints allowed to open by the conservative city council, I found myself completely dislocated in the labyrinthine streets around the Roman Forum. Seemingly having a good chat, ruptured by some hearty guffaws, his eyes scanned the street, he threw his head to face me and pushed me down a dark alley.

*"We/p.* You had a good run, ol' chap!" I heard the heavenly Sky Daddy cry down "This *is* a beautiful place to die, you should be proud!"



Fig 48. In Alexandria, all roads leave to ~~certain death~~ ice cream, 2024. Credit: author

Luckily, I was not to join my ghost-husband in hell just yet.

"Just keep walking, fast, and make the first right turn."

Vaguely aroused, I thought to myself: "*Surely*, cruising isn't allowed in Alex... right?"

After another quick left, we found ourselves in front of his favorite ice cream place.

"Let's just get some ice cream and go to the Corniche, ok? I don't feel comfortable eating here."

Slightly piecing things together, I imagined he had glimpsed an ex or a friend on the street and didn't want any awkward encounters. We sat above the wave breakers, enjoying a fine cone full of pistachios and questionable lactose-related ingredients.

"Sorry for that back there, but I saw the policeman who arrested me last year. If he saw me on the street with a Western dude, he would know something's up and arrest me again... I hope I didn't scare you."

"*Scare* me? You *terrified* me.... But I'm eating ice cream next to the sea now, so all is forgotten."

His words and actions now made perfect sense. Mahm told me over dinner that he was arrested as part of shakedown of the local gay community. Using fake profiles on Grindr, the cops set up sting operations to corner the "cultural delinquents". As there is no official law against homosexuality, they drum up false accusations to blackmail these victims. He explained that they normally extort the gays for money, threatening to out them to their family and friends unless they're paid a couple thousand dollars. Mahm was let off easy, as he broke down in tears and played to his religious side, saying he had been drawn to the gay side by demons who were tempting him. The officer gave him back his phone and told him that Allah had saved him that day so that he could find the path to righteousness. But, if he was ever caught with... those kinds of videos on his phone again, he would be shown no mercy and sentenced to months in prison.

I thanked him for sharing all the stories and, again, we promised to stay in touch while he was whisked away into the night after his jedi-mind-tricks/hand-gestures hailed micro-bus.

One last time, I found myself in my salty, chlorinated bed overlooking a horizon that melted the stars into the spotlights from an array of squid-fishing boats. Again, I burst out in laughter, thinking of what just happened. *What* a vacation. What a *break*. I opened my trusty yellow sketchbook again and just wrote a couple of sentences before looking back at the pages I had filled the day before. The descriptions of the streets, the breakdowns of my favorite cafes, and, now, a short poem about dying-not-dying on the streets of Alexandria. *Goddammit*. I came on this trip to *escape* my thesis. Two weeks of sunshine and cheap seafood, I told myself, but here I find myself invoking ghosts and provoking the locals. I laid myself down to bed, reliving the moment I was pushed down the dark alley to escape the clutches of a homophobic cop that would have done lord knows what to these two faggots. Well, I mused, if that isn't a form of *Queer Urbanism*, I don't know what is.

## فَلتَعُدْ

فَلتَعُدْ كَثِيرًا وَلتَأْخُذْ بِي،  
أَيْهَا الإِحْسَاشِ الحَبِيبِ عُدْ لِي، وَخُذْ بِي -  
حِينَ تَسْتَيْقِظُ ذَاكِرَةً الجَسَدِ  
وَيَسْرِي الشُّوقِ القَدِيمِ - مِنْ جَدِيدٍ - فِي الدَّقَاءِ،  
حِينَ تَتَذَكَّرُ الشَّفَتَانِ وَالبَشْرَةَ  
وَتُحْسُ الأَيْدِي كَأَنَّهَا تَعُودُ إِلَى الأَمْسِ مِنْ جَدِيدٍ.

فَلتَعُدْ لِي كَثِيرًا، وَلتَأْخُذْ بِي فِي اللَّيْلِ  
حِينَ تَتَذَكَّرُ الشَّفَتَانِ وَالبَشْرَةَ...

## Come Back

Come back often and take hold of me,  
beloved sensation, come back and take hold of me—  
when the memory of the body is aroused,  
and past desire flows into the blood again;  
when the lips and the skin remember,  
and the hands feel as if they are touching again.

Come back often, and take hold of me in the night,  
when the lips and the skin remember...

Fig 49. Cavafy Museum – Alexandria, 2024. Credit: author

## 10. EN-SHORING URBANISM

Oh, clanking beachside cacophony  
of whizzes and whirrs!  
Tampered only by muffled laughter  
Children stumbling over each other playing tag.  
Bulldozers, so focused on moving the mountains  
of freshly exhumed muck from the bottom of the bay,  
No love as they fling the stones and compress the clay  
No time to appreciate the innocent giggles  
Chasing after what was once their beach.  
A state of limbo  
A state of flux  
Somewhere between a solemn winter resort beach  
and a buzzing construction site out of reach  
The perfect place to construct the finalities  
of these peregrine actualities.



*Fig 50. Looming, Dooming Durrës, 2025. Credit: author*

With... all my lips still humming the sounds of the waves of the Alexandrian coastline, I managed to slip one last application for the remaining 1.5 months—(maxing out all 12 months; a true child of coupon-wielding parents)—could be afforded to a PhD Scholar by the Erasmus+ Program. With the corners of my tote bag still filled with sand (and that strange black lint that has been following me for years, dozens of washes later—at this point, I’ve accepted it as part of the bag), I called my Balkan family tree to line up a research stay at boulevard media & art institute. Only having spent some fleeting days and weeks in Tirana on my Prishtina toings-and-froings, this city deserved to be more than just an absurdly blinking skyline zooming by the windows of the night bus. If one were to believe the press (“Maldives of Europe!”<sup>101</sup>, “Just like Istanbul but much cheaper!”<sup>102</sup>). Albania and Tirana are the next saviors of European destinations.

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<sup>101</sup> Symons, A., ‘The “Maldives of Europe”’: Why you should escape to the Albanian Riviera while it’s under the radar’, *EuroNews*, 26.5.2023, <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2023/05/26/luxury-on-a-budget-plan-a-beach-escape-to-the-albanian-riviera-while-its-still-under-the-r>, Accessed: 30.7.2025

<sup>102</sup> Holden, J., ‘I went to the European city just like Istanbul but much cheaper and I have to go back’, *My London Life*, 3.3.2025, <https://www.mylondon.news/lifestyle/travel/i-went-european-city-just-31098463>, Accessed: 30.7.2025

Now, I have never been to the Maldives, nor Istanbul, but these superlatives seemed a bit out of touch with reality.

When I was in Prishtina in 2022, my friends there had told me about *bulevard* and its director, a jovial Italian lady who lights up the room with her smile and blonde locks. According to their website, it was “conceived as an open editorial process, *bulevard*’s program is composed of diaries, gossip and letters, with a focus on archival narratives. These manifest as publications, performative happenings, and annual gatherings with artists, archivists, editors, and curators. *Bulevard* centers education, social justice, intergenerational feminist and queer practices, and the continuous search for spaces in which communities can meet and express themselves freely.”<sup>103</sup> In short: a perfect match for me.

Every time I find myself in the Balkans, it creates a fish-out-of-water moment, but then the locals replace the water with *rakija* and everything just *works out*. A Balkan state-of-mind. Will the bus arrive in 2 minutes? 30 minutes? Or, it stopped running this route 3 years ago and-you-only-realize-this-when-a-local-tells-you-after-waiting-2-hours-on-the-side-of-the-road? Likely, the latter option. But fear not! There will be either a kindly local willing to give you a lift for free to the correct station or an enterprising person willing to give you a lift back into town for a fee.

Landing at a mind-numbing 4 am, the instructions to my rented room were a beautiful babble of descriptions: “next to dentist, but not the dentist door, it’s green, but down the street before the café (which is closed, but there is a sign, you will see), turn left under the building past another café (this one is open, unless it’s after 2 am), when you see the wall, go left and there is the door. Not the dentist door, the green one.” Ah, yes, the fabled green door does exist! Opening my window to the ear-numbing sounds of jackhammers erasing sidewalks coupled with a blinding view of the capital’s hodgepodge of hastily built (but COMPLETELY SAFE, I’m assured...) skyscrapers, I thought: *what a place to write!*

Appreciating the fact that I was a fish out of Tirana’s plastic-bag-strewn Lana River and (relative) virgin to the city, I told Valentina that I wasn’t looking to replicate my research stay in Prishtina and complete a workshop (yet). I wanted something more free-flowing, not forced. Two days before my arrival, she told me there was a performance art workshop with Astrit Ismaili planned, and that I was welcome to join. I almost peed my pants and spit out my *rakija*. For me, Astrit was a kind of mythical figure in the Balkans. Hailing from Prishtina, they were part of the team behind the infamous (for a select group of people) “Prishtinë –Mon Amour”, one huge performative installation with 32

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<sup>103</sup> ‘About’, *Bulevard*, <https://bulevard.al/en/about/>, Accessed: 30.7.3025

different pieces, all happening at the same time<sup>104</sup> in the ruins of a former Yugo sporting arena in 2012.

A couple years after Kosovo declared its independence, this was the first time the city's cultural scene blossomed after being scarred by violence for two decades. A celebration of the city and its citizens, this mini festival attracted the attention of the *New York Times*<sup>105</sup> and a host of underground artists from across Europe. When I visited Prishtina years later, the whispers of this magical 8-week period, when the city's streets pulsed like never before<sup>106</sup> could still be heard emanating from every crack in the sidewalk. Astrit's performances and short films have been popping up across Europe ever since, often crossing my paths in unexpected places. I leapt at this opportunity to work with such an artist and joined the merry 8-person gang at boulevard on a cold, misty Tiranian morning.

For brevity's sake, the workshop was a rousing success on all fronts. Not only did each participant rehearse and perform a "complete" piece in three days, but the stories from these young queer artists, told over perfumed slim cigarettes and warm beer will stay with me forever. Valentina's boulevard shares a lot of cross-programming with Aleanca LGBT, the driving force behind the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Albania and Southeastern Europe, which meant that most of the participants were members of LGBTQ+ community, giving me a beautiful chance to hear the stories (and songs: oh, how they filled our underground bunker of a studio with percussive howls!) of a very marginalized community. The workshop was entitled *Creative under Limitations*, something I was very familiar with in my journey. Mostly taking place in Albanian, I happily took the backseat in the workshop to watch how Astrit worked with each of the participants (including Valentina and myself) and allowed each of us to work together, forming a slapdash-yet-sincere route of performances we would be showing to an audience two days later.

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<sup>104</sup> LenceK, 'PRISHTINË – mon amour : young artists reclaim Prishtina's space', *Berlin Goes Balkan*, 12.8.2012 <https://berlin-goes-balkan.blogspot.com/2012/08/prishtine-mon-amour-young-artists.html> Accessed: 5.8.2025

<sup>105</sup> Bronwell, G., 'Finding New Ways to Connect in Kosovo', *New York Times*, 1.2.2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/02/arts/02iht-scpristina02.html>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>106</sup> LenceK, 'PRISTINË-mon amour', 2012



Fig 51. *Creative Under Limitations – workshop, 2025. Credit: author*

Embracing the river trout-out-of-the-river in my new digs, I wanted to make some sort of homage to the vanishing city. Each time I visit Tirana (or Prishtina), it's almost as if it's become a new, uncanny twin of itself. The internal organs were all still there, but the outer-facing bit was just... off. Recognizable at first glance, but then it transformed into a stranger.

After taking a couple of walks around boulevard's plush location on the main New Boulevard of Tirana to find some inspiration (common thread, eh?), I started to dig a bit into the recent history of the Skanderbeg Square, which had already become a new beast in the months between my last visit and this one. Clutching my spinach-and-cheese *burek* like the lactose-and-gluten-obsessed fool I am, I noticed a faint smell of *something*. I walked around the Opera House/Italian Cultural Center towards a pedestrianized stretch of the square in front of the luxurious Et'hem Bej Mosque. There was a familiar blue construction wall stretched between the mosque and the shipping container housing a store selling Albanian "homemade" trinkets. Seeing no signs of what was to come, strange for this city full of advertising, I walked back home that evening, imagining what might have been there (the joys of visiting a country without purchasing a SIM card). Sitting on the lush '70s Albanian grandma-styled living room, I did a deep dive into the local architectural legends.



*Fig 52. Everyday Tirana goodness, 2025. Credit: author*

This blue-walled spot once housed the Teatri Kombëtar (National Theater). As any visitor to Tirana realizes, this is a city that lacks many early 20<sup>th</sup>-century buildings. This theater was a rare example of Italian modernism in the center (Mussolini may have been a horrible fascist monster, but *damn* some of his buildings are sexy). Noticing the linear façade, I knew that this was an image I could easily recreate in the time allotted (one full day left before the show, folks!). The next morning, I showed up at our little show-and-tell circle with the other queerdos and told them I wanted to do something with this theater-façade.



*Fig 53. National Theater before the fall, unknown. Credit: Architectuul CC BY-SA*

"I never met this building...but there was something that drove me to it, a kind of smell hit my nose while walking around the day before," (apparently recent events gave me heightened sense of ghost awareness, building or human... either that or the roasted chestnuts drew me to this particular site... but I prefer to believe the ghosts made me do it).

"Do you know the history of the building?" they asked, almost in unison.

"No..."

"It was the site of a major protest during COVID, they knocked it down when we were in lockdown so that we couldn't protest... but, guess what, we still protested, police be damned!" Valentina spoke these words with embers in her eyes.

Well, it's a perfect fable for me to sniff around: a loaded boat of symbolism in the hands of an urbanist faggot clown, what could go wrong?

Taking another walk around the neighborhood trying to imagine how I could recreate this vertical façade quickly, I knew exactly where I had to go: the local hardware store (as any good artfag-on-a-budget knows). I was given a couple of square meters inside our bunker/studio with approximately two walls measuring 3 meters each. Building.... Vertical lines... history... shadow... protest... body, *voilà!* Seeing the little rolls of black electrical tape on sale for 30 cents each, I grabbed everything that surly old man had in stock—(sorry, electricians of Tirana, Art needs them more than the microwave!)—and headed back to the studio. Working like a charm, I reimagined a basic form of the theater's façade in less than an hour, just before we were scheduled to go home for the night.

Walking the 208 meters back to my apartment, I stopped for the one thing the Balkans does best (other than political discord): grilled meat. The *cevap's* innocent grease was soaking my blond stubble in this hole-in-the-wall-24-hours spot full of construction workers. As can be expected in a room full of burly Balkan construction workers, this faggot was getting flushed with all that manmeat in the room. "*OUTFIT ALERT!*" my brain screamed to my now-filled stomach. Ohhh, ok. Theater, shadows, lines, façade...: construction worker. I quickly paid and left the meat joint to go back to my castle-in-the-sky (\*cue the Ian Van Dahl song\*... actually, yes, I probably was listening to it while trying on possible outfits). Only traveling with a book bag for these 1.5 months, I somehow (subconsciously or by design) managed to include booty jorts, blood-red construction boots and a jean jacket. With only a couple of hours before the audience arrived, Astrit told us: "Walkthrough *now!*" We all looked at each other, completely bamboozled. "Yes, now, go!" they confirmed. *Creative under Limitation*, indeed. None of us were ready, or even decided on the final look for that night, but

*c'est la vie* in the performance world. Starting with a drumming performance, I had 10 minutes to figure something out... I had some measuring tape, electrical tape, booty jorts, and a dream. SHOWTIME!

When the parade of eight participants found themselves encircling me, I put myself in the shoes of a construction worker meeting the ghost of a building, as one does. In the 10-minutes allotted window, I sensually ran my calloused fingers along every line of electrical tape that I had pressed against the wall one hour before. For good measure, I pushed the tape with every inch of my body, letting out a couple of oh-so-necessary sighs to show the audience how much *consensual*/fun we were both having. The scraps of leftover electrical tape laid themselves at foot of the façade, ready to be stretched across the room, forming a tangible shadow leading to this sexy construction guy. Two steps in, two out of the four rolls had lost control and found themselves twisted all up my bare legs trying to peek at my goodies, making for an (discerning) electrician's wet dream. As Astrit told me minutes later: "That was messy". Though that is normally a compliment in my head, their cadence said otherwise. They channeled their inner Tim Gunn and said: "You have 3 hours, make it work!"

"I got this," I foolishly told myself. My work always has an aspect of improvisation in it. Never one to remember lines or movements, I followed the rhythm of my body and the space around. *Vibing, bro*. Well, in front of someone I respect, my unflinching ego said: "Baby, you are not meant for this world." I can only assume my ego meant rehearsals, so I left the bunker for (surprise!) a walk around the block to clear my head... and another crunchy spinach-and-cheese burek. And chased down with a cold, clammy, choinky Ayran-equivalent.

Full of lactose and gluten, my cholesterol and energy levels were both up for this performance. Hunkered down in the bunker, the audience was lining up to hear Astrit's presentation on their work and the workshop; we heard the shuffling of feet against the concrete ceiling.

"I hear the EU delegation and US Embassy members are here," one participant shrieked as they scrambled down the stairs to warn us.

"Well, if I make a fool of myself, at least I'm doing it in front of someone fancy," I calmly told myself.

The fancy people in shirts and non-booty shorts started to mill about our basement, watching the subtle percussion performance before mine. We had (quickly) agreed on some cues among ourselves to start moving as the last performance ended. With the shirt-and-tie crowd brushing aside the curtain, I started to measure my façade slowly and sexually. However, my neighboring participant was getting all of the attention, as

she switched on three giant light desks for her performance about making X-rays with cigarette butts and vinyl records (... from what my eyes could gather). Naturally, all audience members were looking in her general direction, flooding my corner of the space with their oversized puffy down jackets. Welp, time to bring the shadow to the people. With my giant-sized frame-of-a-body, I “flawlessly” grabbed the tape rolls and rolled them straight into the audience; nary a word left these lips. With all of the might of a burek-filled beast, I grabbed the last two rolls and plowed through the audience again, this time letting out some gluten-filled sighs. The Pillsbury doughboy was back in town, baby. Confused by the simultaneous performances, which was planned, the audience finally started to give me some space to walk. Unfortunately, that meant that I didn’t have to use my elbows and thunder thighs to make space for the electrical tape. With absolutely no sense of how much time had passed, I stretched each roll of tape across the room. With all eyes on me next to the staircase/fire escape, I did what any self-respecting 37-year-old professional would do: I took off my shirt to blast my nips.

How else am I supposed to get to know a ghost building up close and personal? Through a thick, crusty cotton jean jacket? No, ma’am. Flesh-on-flesh electrical tape/ghost-building-corpse. I remained standing as the audience was led into the next room by this meatball-with-arms-taped-to-my-sides, licking what remained of the tape in front of my face, just to make the politicians every-so-slightly more uncomfortable as they brushed my ample bare bosom before descending the staircase.



*Fig 54. Teatri?, 2025. Credit: Nadia Abazi, courtesy boulevard art & media institute*



*Fig 55. Teatri?, 2025. Credit: Nadia Abazi, courtesy boulevard art & media institute*



*Fig 56. Teatri?, 2025. Credit: Nadia Abazi, courtesy boulevard art & media*



Fig 57. *Teatri?*, 2025. Credit: Nadia Abazi, courtesy boulevard art & media

"That was provocative!" a stranger exclaimed after we were drinking overpriced "earthy" natural wine upstairs.

"My tits?" I replied

"No, the building! Such a brave performance to use that symbol!"

I looked on incredulously and down the rest of my dirt-in-a-glass. Perhaps a jaded big city mouse, I figured my booty shorts and sexy gesticulations were a bit more *out there* in a country known for its stone-faced men, but not *a building*. As a building/ghost-whisperer I *loved* the fact they held such strong feelings towards it; yet as a foreign tourist/part-time-realist, "This happens every day here," I told myself. Each trip is full

of entire blocks torn down without hearing a peep from the locals. I chalked it up to my own naiveté: I couldn't understand the cultural significance of this national monument.

Days later, Valentina invited me round to her archive-in-the-sky apartment where she was meticulously archiving decades of Albanian art/queer history in her piles and piles and piles of books. A librarian's wet dream. She explained the entire story of the COVID lockdown, the construction fiasco, and the recent corruption allegations against the mayor.<sup>107</sup> She showed me an article she wrote ('How to Stage a Masterpiece'), which explained the personal stories before, during, and after the protest: "Everyone got sunburned that Sunday [...] They started with the façade. It crumbled, flaked away like shortbread pastry."<sup>108</sup> Witnessing her heartbreak, years later struck a chord. That's also the beauty of serendipity, art and/or listening to ghost-building-whispers when you hear them: what can be a series of parallel-ish lines to one person can embody the geography of resistance to another.

After an intensive week of workshops, drizzle and copious amounts of rakija, I decided I'd had enough of Tirana: time for golden pastures... this time 20km westwards to visit Durrës. Partially financially based (cheap rooms in February), partially a love of the sea, and absolutely due to my love of watching the sunset over the water—(Barcelona, damn your sunrise!)—I rented a room in Durrës, beachfront for €17 per night from a lovely old couple who told me I was the first guest since September. Ever a lover of waterfront locales with a kitchen-on-the-balcony and swimming in yellow/brown '70s accents, it was home for this kind-of holidays. Still working my dull day job in Finance, I came to Albania to douse myself in the local culture, but also to concentrate on the writing aspect of this thesis. With the deadline creeping up and nothing *actually* written down, it was time to get started.

Durrës Plazh (beach) is a gloriously decadent neighborhood 37 minutes walking south from the city center – imagine a New Jersey/Valencian beach resort from the '70s, replete with decaying, dried algae and wafts of grilled kofte and visible floating human excrement in the water.<sup>109</sup> Currently going through a construction boom all of its very own, Durrës Plazh is being marketed as Durrës Yacht Marina because... ugh.

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<sup>107</sup> Aliju, D. & Ozkan, E., 'Mayor of Albania's capital detained on corruption allegations', *Anadolu Agency*, 11.2.2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/mayor-of-albanias-capital-detained-on-corruption-allegations/3477786#>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>108</sup> Demtja, A., *Art Within Political Struggles. Solidary Artistic Practice at the Periphery: Tirana, Skopje*, Tirana Art Lab, 2019, p. 21

<sup>109</sup> 'Durrës, problems from sewage' *CNA*, 17.8.2023, <https://www.cna.al/english/aktualitet/voa-durresi-probleme-nga-ujerat-e-zeza-i371037>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

Questionable money never being an issue in Albania, they are planning to uproot the historical port and move it out of the city to make room for the absolute necessity that is Mega Yachts for the Megarich. I was to spend one week wandering the dirt mounds which lined the “beach”, wrestling for space with the bulldozers and construction workers. These mounds created a dream landscape for the local kids, running up and sliding down every inch they could climb. Gleefully swinging from the rusted pipes and worn-out tires, I was reminded of my own childhood, when a trip to the trash dump was a yearly highlight. Ah, how rusted steel gleams in the eyes of the youth!

A week later and that constant thorn in my side/flat mate Thom would visit for a road trip around Albania. He left once more and I had to decide: go back to Tirana and or return to Durrës for the last two weeks of my trip. Child of the mermaids and Neptune that I am, Durrës it was. Spreading my suitcases over “my” yellow room once more, I fell asleep to the whistle of the waves caressing my eardrums. One day, when taking my 11 am morning stroll, I looked around in disbelief. One week away, and it was all gone. No more mountains on the coast, they were being thrown into the bay to extend the beach. The dirt paths were already paved over, and new palms trees and soulless lights lined the fancy new promenade. To be expected, for sure, but knowing the general pace of the Balkans, one week was a bit much. I could no longer count on my concrete box-upon-water to sit and watch the moonlight filter itself through the clouds and ship-building cranes.



*Fig 58. Bye, beach, 2025. Credit: author*

Back to my yellow room: the amount of soot in the air kept me room-based for the next couple days. My bookbag-for-the-month not only had enough room for my sexy construction worker outfit, but also Cavafy and Francis Ponge's collected works. What a setting to drown myself in these poetic babes. Embraced by Mediterranean breezes, more spinach-and-cheese burek, and these electric lines of prose, my fingertips swayed like rarely before. Dancing across this velvety Lenovo Keyboard (AK! [!]), the stories started to sync to the eurotrash groove blasting from the bar downstairs. Dealing first with the more subdued academic chapters, these histories & anecdotes flowed much freer.

Was I going too far down an auto-narrative-esque rabbit hole to escape from? Hell, I had been through enough, why shouldn't I *enjoy* this writing process?

The next week, I had a presentation at my home university in Barcelona to present the previous year's research and state-of-the-thesis, this time remotely from my hotel haven on the Adriatic. An avowed enemy of academic presentations starting with my name, grade, and title, I was trying to make a memorable introduction. *Let's play with this distance*, I thought. I made a deal with Mariona, my supervisor: I would send her an audio recording at 9 am. She would ideally sit in the middle of the room and press "play" whenever I gave her the cue (clapping as if there was a mosquito in the room after I was done reading the poem). On the day, those in the room shifted around to get a better view of the screen, and we did all the necessary e-greetings ("CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?"). I started with a dramatic (who, me?) re-reading of a poem I wrote the day before:

Is the part where I ask you to close your eyes?  
If you had eyes to close.  
This weight: not as above, not as below  
Above, in my arms, we move on  
Sunken below: this is where we are.  
I never cared about why a chair was a chair,  
I just like to sit,  
you know how lazy a Taurus can be.  
What makes this anchor an anchor?  
No ship in sight, smelling of cat piss  
Still, it maintains its grip on these crossroads.  
Too heavy for these arms to bear:  
No looking both ways this time,  
No glance over the shoulder.  
*May that cat piss glisten in the glow of the moonlight,  
An anchor no longer.*

I ran through the methodologies and references in a crisp, succinct 15-minute presentation. *Silence*. Not knowing what was happening on the other end of the call as my screen was being shown. I explained the opening poem was simultaneously a love letter to an anchor I had met on the street in Alexandria's harbor, which recently called in on me in my dreams begging to be incorporated into a poem, and the idea of losing one's sense of direction when the situation you had grown so comfortable in—be it Albanian beach side or in your lover's arms—is yanked out from under you. The feedback turned out positive; people got teared up at my emotional rants, Mariona pressed play perfectly. The room filled of sounds that I have been recording over the last three weeks in Albania, sounds of my walks, harking back to my exhibition in the textile factory. Harnessing the moments of meditation, observation, and reflection as the soundtrack to a classroom while I harped on about writing poems about ghosts and cities while looking at the gleaming Mediterranean waters. Displacement done right. The marrow of this entire project.

## 11. \_UEERING URBANISM

“... did you know that if you didn’t use that word in your speech, more people would have come? Wouldn’t that have been more subversive? Maybe just use ‘Tactical Urbanism’ and surprise them? ... What is more important for you? That you call it queer or that we change the city?”

Three years later, and this line of questioning from the Prishtina architecture student still occupies a sizable wedge of the left side of my brain. After four years of conversations, writing, interviews, and reading, my pupils would shake every time they saw or heard the word “queer.” Yes, even I, Sir Faggot Queen of the Amorphous Rounded Table, was tired of the phrase. Decidedly less powerful than it once was, its increased usage in everyday parlance, public space, and (guilty!) academia has worn out its welcome to some, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. It is questionably used as an adjective to describe a style of dressing<sup>110</sup> and to market events run by greedy capitalists – Barcelona Queer Market, I’m looking at you! Regardless of where you stand on these various applications of the

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<sup>110</sup> O’Sullivan, S., O’Donnell, M. and Harwick, E., ‘The Outfits I Wear To Project & Protect My Queerness’, *Refinery* 29, 11.6.2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/06/10522240/queer-style-fashion-photo-story>, Accessed: 8.8.2025

word<sup>111112113</sup>, its trajectory from derogatory slur to reclaimed revolutionary cry<sup>114</sup> to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to its current overuse in a few decades, has been quite magnificent. When I was a child in the Pennsylvania suburbs in the 1990s, every week, most of the neighborhood kids played “Smear the queer” – a game in which they would run around and tackle “the queer.” I never really understood the rules and just embraced my inner Taurus, lying in the grass staring at the clouds.

In the final year of this investigation, there was a somewhat seismic change in institutional embrace of the LGBTQ+ community:

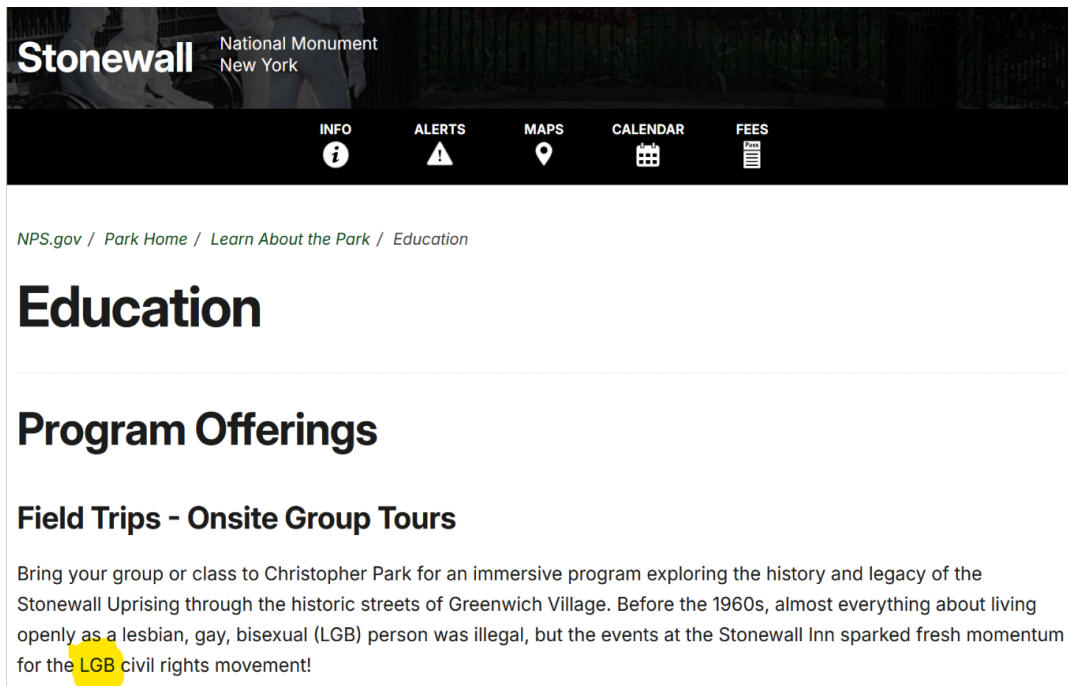


Fig 59. Screenshot of Stonewall website, 2025. Credit: author

<sup>111</sup>Ryan, H., ‘Why Everyone Can’t Be Queer’, *Slate*, 14.7.2016, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/07/why-jenna-worthams-queer-article-misunderstands-the-marginalization-in-the-word.html>, Accessed: 8.8.2025

<sup>112</sup>Wortham, J., ‘When Everyone Can Be ‘Queer,’ Is Anyone?’, *New York Times*, 12.6.2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/magazine/when-everyone-can-be-queer-is-anyone.html>, Accessed: 8.8.2025

<sup>113</sup>Philyaw, H., ‘Queer People’s Obsession with Gender Roles Is Doing More Harm than Good’, *The Body*, 12.5.2021, <https://www.thebody.com/article/queer-breaking-gender-norms>

<sup>114</sup>‘Queer Nation’, *Queer Nation*, <https://www.thequeernation.org/>

Where is the Q? Not just in this chapter title, but where is the Q on the US National Park Service's website for the Stonewall National Monument in New York City?<sup>115</sup> Well, Emperor Trump took it upon his majesty to scrub the "QT+" from "LGBTQ+" in his infinite wisdom<sup>116</sup>. After years of gaining acceptance by society and (many) governments, this was a stunning setback. Queer Erasure back in all its ugly glory.<sup>117</sup> Not to be outdone by my birth country, my adopted homeland of Spain has also, surprisingly, followed suit.<sup>118119</sup>

While not a full answer to the question from my comrade in Prishtina, this backlash is exactly the reason why, despite its increasingly questionable uses, "queer" is still a politically powerful tool, for both sides of the issue, and it shouldn't be so easily discarded by those who complain of its overuse.

This battle between the gatekeepers of queer vs. those who use the term much more flagrantly came into my head while visiting the current Carlos Motta exhibition, "Pleas of Resistance", in the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). Motta's oeuvre over the last decade includes such gems as 2017's The SPIT! Manifesto, a series of performance interventions in London which updated and transformed historical queer manifestos interspersed with their contemporary counterparts.<sup>120</sup> I was lucky enough to see these Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together (SPIT) live at Frieze Projects when visiting my friend, Will, years ago. When performed with human beings the texts sprung from the paper and the manifestos took on a new role, occupying and taking command of the space. After this visit I was made aware of his "Shape of Freedom" work, a series of façade installations where the inverted pink triangle was splashed across buildings in South America. This was, unfortunately, brought to Barcelona in the form of a giant pink triangle

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<sup>115</sup> 'Stonewall', *National Parks Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/ston/learn/education/new-index.htm>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>116</sup> Kim, J., 'Park Service erases 'transgender' on Stonewall website, uses the term 'LGB' movement', *NPR*, 14.2.2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/14/g-s1-48923/stonewall-monument-transgender-park-service>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>117</sup> Collins, C., 'Queer People Have Always Existed – Teach Like It', *Learning for Justice*, 15.3.2021 <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/queer-people-have-always-existed-teach-like-it>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>118</sup> Perry, S., 'Spanish government aims to remove 'Q+' from LGBTQ+ and ban trans women from sport', *Pink News*, 3.12.2024, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/12/03/spain-psoe-trans-lgbtq-sport-ban/>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>119</sup> Oliver, J., 'El PSOE prohíbe a sus cargos añadir Q+ a las siglas LGTBI cuando hablen en nombre del partido', *Público*, 8.8.2025, <https://www.publico.es/politica/psoe-prohibe-cargos-anadir-q-siglas-lgtbi-hablen-nombre-partido.html>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

<sup>120</sup> Motta, C., 'The SPIT! Manifesto', *Carlos Motta*, <https://carlosmotta.com/project/the-spit-manifesto/>, Accessed: 1.8.2025

painted on a walkway's wall. A slap in the face of a beautiful work. Would it have been better to encrust MACBA's clinical and horridly-white façade with a giant triangle announcing the exhibition? Obviously, but I have a feeling the ultra-rich tastemakers who are supporting MACBA's ~~ethically questionable incursion into valuable public space~~ extension<sup>121</sup> might not be pleased to see their overpriced generic white tiles in such a garish color. Banished to a passageway's wall, his work loses much of the original value; instead, it's relegated to being a Instagram backdrop behind countless faggots visiting Barcelona during Pride instead of screeching gay history at pedestrians.



*Fig 60. Pleas of Resistance Exhibition – MACBA, 2025. Credit: author*

Well, time to bring back the Q! Queer Urbanism to the rescue! Although my officially-sanctioned activated walks finished 1.5 years before, I still traverse this cursed city with a pair of mordant eyes that refuse to stop seeing every crack in the concrete. A few blocks south of MACBA, located in Barcelona's most vibrant neighborhood, Raval, lies the bookstore of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, a research institute promoting and researching Catalan culture. As the outpost of such a welcoming, pre-eminent institution, and all-around-good-neighbor, this bookstore is full of big, bright windows to showcase their openness and flag-waving morality.

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<sup>121</sup>'MACBA expansion works begin in spite of residents' calls for halting project', *Catalan News*, 19.2.2025, <https://www.catalannews.com/culture/item/macba-expansion-works-begin-in-spite-of-residents-calls-for-halting-project> Accessed: 8.8.2025



*Fig 61. Who You Calling Hostile? – Raval, Barcelona, 2025. Credit: author*

Walking by this building, one is taken aback at the majesty of these windows, but for all the wrong reasons. Firstly, the bookshelves block a clear view into the store, protecting its precious interiors from the scary riff raff and/or immigrants who inhabit the surrounding streets (or so the Aliança Catalana would have you believe<sup>122</sup>). Secondly, what are those things I see just above the sidewalk? Are those little triangles supposed to symbolize the rise of historical Catalan heroes from their graves? Ah, no, just another case of hostile architecture preventing anyone from getting too close to peering inside and/or resting their weary bones.



*Fig 62. Feeling Hostile?, 2025. Credit: author*

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<sup>122</sup> Cedar, S., 'Catalan Elections – End of dreams of independence?', *The Left Berlin*, 19.5.2024, <https://www.theleftberlin.com/catalan-elections-end-of-dreams-of-independence/> Accessed: 1.8.2025

Would it have made more sense to push out the glass windows 30 centimeters toward the street, making for a flush façade that wouldn't piss anyone off? Nah, too easy. Much better to remind the down-on-their-luck unhoused population they are not welcome to sit or lie here ... even if it is *their* neighborhood. If only there were some way around this little predicament.



*Fig 63. How About Now?, 2025. Credit: author*

Well, would you look at that, *someone* took it upon themselves to take a page from Carlos Motta's book and bring the pink triangle symbol back to the streets. Hostile no longer, Amicable Architecture to the rescue! I had the good fortune of running into the artist behind these *petit* corrections, just outside the bookshop. And, *what a dashing 2-meter-tall entity covered in clashing patterns and booty shorts he was.*

"So, can you tell me about this piece, you handsome Street Artist?" I said, in my finest rich-art-patron-modulation.

"Piece? Of Art? Debatable. I right wrongs. I didn't do it for art, I did it for the city."

"How *virtuous!* However, did you think about this pink triangle?"

"Well, I had just come down from MACBA, where I saw the Carlos Motta exhibition and his big pink triangle. I walked down the street and saw a bunch of evil little triangles taunting me, telling me that I wasn't welcome here because I don't speak Catalan, even after living here for 5 years."

"What a coincidence! I also don't speak Catalan after 5 years *però ho intento* [but I try]."

"I actually j'adore Catalan, but it's a mix of mastering two languages at once and..."

"Enough of that linguistic nonsense, tell me about the triangles, you insolent little big street artist! You see, I'm doing a PhD in Design and one of its concerns is how queer theory can tie into urbanism, how each of our micro-actions can explore the built world, especially pertaining to queer bodies, dissident actions...."

He had the audacity to cut me off mid-sentence!

"Who does a PhD in 2025, you bougie-ass-bitch? If you were really concerned about making a difference in the city, why aren't *you* out here making hostile architecture *wonky* again? Get out of your ivory tower and pound the pavement, big mouth. I simply saw a problem and fixed it. The IEC has multiple cameras installed around this building for what? So nobody breaks the windows? Why don't they just install metal *persianas* like everyone else in Raval? Are they too good for that? Instead, they prefer to mock the pedestrian, reminding them of the pedestal they place themselves on. 'YOU CAN LOOK, BUT DON'T YOU DARE COME CLOSE, THIS IS OUR PROPERTY!' is what this building is telling me. Well, unluckily for this building, I answer back: 'No, this is *our* property.' So, I did what any well-meaning street urchin would do: I measured these triangles of terror, walked around Raval collecting cardboard and formed little triangles so that everything on the street belongs to the people. Maybe I borrowed the imagery from Mr. Motta's work, but he was hardly the first to repurpose a pink triangle. I'm a faggot, too, baby, it's not a matter of his idea vs. mine, we are working in tandem in our own ways, on our own streets."

"Cool story, bro. If it really doesn't matter, why did you paint them pink? Why didn't you just use a cushion and put that on top of the triangles? If you *really* just worried about the use of this space, it seems that you went out of your way to make it something *visibly* gay."

"Well, it's a pretty solid composition and I just feel the bright pink just pops, ya know? Nothing wrong with a little zhuzh, right?"

"Right ... I would love to interview you for my thesis, if you have some time..."

"Isn't this an interview?"

"No, it's a conversation..."

"What's the difference..."

"Well, if we were to follow Derrida's definition of *différance*..."

Again, he cut me off.

“Shut it, you alliterative bookworm. Look at me, do you think I care about some dead French dude?”

My pupils traced his outline, starting from his possibly infected hangnail up his luscious legs to his meaty thighs wrapped tightly in frayed booty shorts up past his barely-exposed, fuzzy beer belly, past the grandma blouse that looks like it smells like mothballs and regret, drawing a line up his dangly necklaces to a *very* familiar face.

And that’s when it hit me. As fast as the Besòs and Llobregat River flow into the Mediterranean, I looked down at my hands, noticing the leftover traces of pink duct tape in between my sweaty palms. He was *me*.

*\* cue Christina Aguilera’s ‘Mi Reflejo’ playing softly in the background as a pigeon flies by John Woo-style\**

“Well, I should really see my therapist again.”

## 12. queer(ing) urbanism

Build your castle, stop throwing stones  
Cause those fire birds are coming down on our homes

To the lighthouse my friends  
It cannot even be a question  
To the lighthouse my friends  
We must go, we must go

- Patrick Wolf, 'To the Lighthouse'<sup>123</sup>

Michel de Certeau was hardly the first to write about the everyday practices of life and/or walking in the city. Henri Lefebvre did not invent the ideas of individual rights to the city. Francis Ponge did not build the first table.<sup>124</sup> Jun'ichirō Tanizaki was not the first to discover beauty in shadows.<sup>125</sup> Sara Ahmed may have coined the term "Queer Phenomenology", but the foundations were already firmly cemented in the ground. As it is with your grandma's most delicious stew, we need not claim credit for discovering ingredients or cooking methods in 2025 to find delight and pleasure in creating a mish-mash that captivates and confuses our senses. I have no claims over "queer urbanism", but this thesis adds to and builds on the discourse that has been brewing over the past 10 years surrounding deviant actions, dissident bodies, and queer practices in the urban realm.

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<sup>123</sup> Patrick Wolf, 'To the Lighthouse', *Wind in the Wires*, Tomlab, 2005

<sup>124</sup> Ponge, F., *The Table*, (trans.) C. Zamponi, WAKEFIELD, 2017

<sup>125</sup> Tanizaki, J., *In Praise of Shadows*, (trans.) T. Harper, Leete's Island Books, 1977

Andrés Jaque—and, by default, his studio, Office for Political Innovation—harrowingly climbed the hetero-dominance in the architecture and became the tentpole for a new breed of queer designers (though the office has a diverse workforce, it should be noted he remains *the* figurehead/main spokesperson for the studio – a white European cis-male gay – while battling a profession continuously noted for its preponderousness of the “genius”, read: male<sup>126</sup>). With works such as their Madrid restaurant OJALÁ, where “The gender neutral bathroom is conceived as a TransGender Parlour. It claims transitioning as the specificity of existence.”<sup>127</sup> Between their ambiguous designs that challenge uses of space—OJALÁ’s lower floor has an artificial beach to transport its diners to a secret hedonistic beach hideaway (*sous le restaurant, la plage !*)—Jaque’s writing output cemented him as not just a gay architect, but *the* gay architect. His exhibition *Intimate Strangers*<sup>128</sup> and article ‘Grindr Archiurbanism’ explored the digital experiences surrounding the Grindr hookup app: “Cities do not accommodate Grindr. Grindr became the city.”<sup>129</sup>

In 2025, some of his sequined armor has been whittled away, with his silence over the student protests at Columbia (where he is the Dean of the Architecture School) and silence over the genocide in Gaza. His students rebelled against the institution’s insistent opposition to an overly political year-end show by exhibiting their own counter-show at the a83 gallery in New York City, curated by secret poster club.<sup>130</sup> While it’s hard for me to feel compassion for either side in this battle: 1. Students who are part of the most ivory-tower-in-higher-education institution that charges \$107,433<sup>131</sup> for a nine-month academic year vs. 2. The Dean of such an institution, alleged champion of the underserved and architectural morality, Jaque’s naming of the Office for *Political Innovation*, seems a bit maladroit to these ears.

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<sup>126</sup> Heynen, H., ‘Genius, Gender and Architecture: The Star System as Exemplified in the Pritzker Prize’, *Architecture Theory Review*, August 2012, DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2012.727443

<sup>127</sup> Jaque, A., ‘OJALÁ’, *Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation*, 2014, <https://officeforpoliticalinnovation.com/work/ojala/> Accessed: 10.10.2025

<sup>128</sup> Jaque, A., ‘Intimate Strangers’, *Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation*, 2016, <https://officeforpoliticalinnovation.com/work/intimate-strangers/>, Accessed: 10.10.2025

<sup>129</sup> Jaque, A. ‘Grindr Archiurbanism’, *Log 41: Observations on architecture and the contemporary city*. Fall 2017, pp. 74-84, p.84

<sup>130</sup> Roche, D.J., ‘At a83, secret poster club asks: what is a school?’, *The Architect’s Newspaper*, 29.8.2024, <https://www.archpaper.com/2024/08/a83-secret-poster-club-what-is-a-school/>, Accessed: 10.10.2025

<sup>131</sup> ‘Architecture, Planning, and Preservation Cost of Attendance: 2025-2026 Estimated Costs’, *Columbia University in the City of New York*, <https://sfs.columbia.edu/content/graduate-architecture-cost-attendance>, Accessed 5.10.2025

Likewise, his takes on Grindr, while informative on users' habits and detected biases, just scraped the surface of the political implications (countries using the app to arrest gays—*Ahlan, Alexandria!*) and personal stories. This thesis dives right into that little hole he loosened up. While not at all surprising due to his academic role, I find his writing stiff and calculated: a good-looking Spanish man writing about other people who use the app...and not a single anecdote to tell from his own experiences? This is what makes autoethnographic narratives so important: they fill in the gaps with hyper-personal details so that the readers aren't just being lectured at from a podium but being spoken to with all the wisdom and charm of a shady yet quirky character at 3 am in your local bar. The type that offers you a shower of whiskey without asking for anything in return, other than some ear minutes. Queer theory loves to cite and justify, but sometimes we just crave a first-person re-telling to reel us into one's reality.

McKenzie Wark blends it all so seamlessly. Whether giving a history lesson on those pesky Situationists<sup>132</sup> or bringing their output into the current context,<sup>133</sup> she uses humor and vivid descriptions to breathe life into these dead French dudes. In *Raving*,<sup>134</sup> she takes us on a trip with an older-than-typical transbody to undisclosed rave locations (full disclosure: it was most likely Unter, a now-defunct party series in warehouses along West St. in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where we crossed paths a couple of times between 2016-2019). Her examples of "low theory" drags de Certeau *et al.* into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and make work like mine digestible for (some) academics:

Low theory is the attempt to think everyday life within practices created in and of and for everyday life, using or misusing high theory to other ends.<sup>135</sup>

Low theory is alive and well on these pages, playing with the hierarchical structure of research. Equalizing high-brow theory and low-brow trash, poetry and pop-music, this thesis does not hold one above or below the other, they are all *just there*, as much as my tattoos are baked flush with my epidermis. I use the names of my idols (yes, iconoclasts are allowed to be contradictory) not as placeholders or references:

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<sup>132</sup> Wark, M. *The Beach Beneath the Street*, Verso, 2015

<sup>133</sup> Wark, M. *The Spectacle of Disintegration*, Verso, 2013

<sup>134</sup> Wark, M. *Raving*, Duke University Press, 2023

<sup>135</sup> Wark, M., 'Interview with McKenzie Wark' (interviewed by STIR), *STIR*, 31.8.2011, <https://stirtoaction.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/interview-with-mckenzie-wark/>, Accessed: 5.10.2025

they were true co-collaborators along this journey, from walking to talking to writing to arting.

*Queer Exhibition Histories*<sup>136</sup> provides a fleshing out of this bridge between hyper-personal queer narratives and the visual arts. Karol Radziszewski's *Pedaty* [en. Faggots,] (2005) took a private apartment and filled it with murals and videos of graphic tales of gay sex, while Karolina Sobel's *LEZBY (DYKEZ)* (2020) showed enlarged photographs hanging from the ceiling resembling drying sheets:

A queer space is temporary and ephemeral – it is often an imagined alternative, mapped by a body or bodies and their spatiotemporal relations onto a recognized geography: of a city, a street, or indeed a private flat or garage. Queerness always implies a multiplicity of possible ephemeral worlds anchored in the imagination and body. The mapping of queer worlds as sets of connections, routes, and spaces can never be assumed to be complete, accurate, up to date or tangible. Home is not necessarily where it was when you last left it.<sup>137</sup>

In a moving continuation of Jack Halberstam's previously mentioned *Unbuilding Gender* paralleling trans\*architectures with Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts, Janus Lafontaine Carboni's (architectural researcher/SNSF postdoctoral fellow at Princeton – IG: @jllfcb) incredibly personal 'A Rage in My Stomach and a Dream in of a House: Trans\*Time, Cuts, and Stitches' recounts their body's transformation: "Experiencing such normative tension feels like a dissonance gap, which emerges within you, but is built by the outside."<sup>138</sup> It is through personal narratives such as this that I find it easiest to digest, absorb, and *fee*/the theory.

If we identify as "queer", it's not just an incredible and dazzling array of places on a spectrum; each of those spots holds layers and layers of possibilities and powers above and beyond their placement. It's our job to explore and reveal them, as we see fit. If there are lines separating art & design, writing & artistic practice, urbanism & architecture, queer urbanism helps us to jump, erase, step on top of, hide from, and/or snort whichever line as we see fit. It provides a nebulous tool and/or lens to view our surroundings. Some can view it as a means to inextricably link queer theory

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<sup>136</sup> Hendrikx, B. *Queer Exhibition Histories*, Valiz, 2023

<sup>137</sup> Gajowy, A., 'It Must be Great Being You Watching Us' in *Ibid*, pp. 15-31, p.30

<sup>138</sup> Carboni, J.L. 'A Rage in My Stomach and a Dream in of a House: Trans\*Time, Cuts, and Stitches', *trans magazine* – 47: soft, gta Verlag (ETH Zurich), 2025, pp. 67-73, p.68

and “proper” urbanism, but I view it as an opportunity: a chance, however momentarily, for us to *be* the city and for the city to *be* one with us.

As for the question asked by the student from Kosovo, *it depends on the context*. There are moments when we want, we *need*, to fly the queer flag to give the community visibility. Calling my workshop “What is Queer Urbanism?” may have put some people off joining it, but it equally pulled participants in from the Kosovo countryside *because* of the title. Working with slightly provocative topics in culturally sensitive parts of the world, the context and intention are everything. If I want to bring in as many people as possible, I could say “tactical urbanism” or “hacking urbanism”, and then eventually use my black magic to subvert them, but if I only have a couple of days and want to get those who are *into* the topic, I stick with “queer”.

While writing these final pages, I found myself applying for an artistic residency in Cairo and Alexandria. After talking with my friend Mahmoud, I realized that even though I would normally throw that q-word around willy-nilly, if I wanted to get past the email filters/get accepted by the program, I would need to show some cultural sensitivity in my application and portfolio. I silently took down queer references on my Instagram page, archived the more explicit content, making for a watered-down version of my art for the sake of being taken seriously by this organization. Was it a case of self-censorship? Yes. But it was necessary, temporarily, to make these changes to be considered for this opportunity. If I slapped some naked men cavorting with buildings on the front page, I was sure to be rejected as soon as they opened my email. Insofar as I very much wanted to have the chance for a studio and soak myself in the sandy, polluted Cairo air for a couple of months, all-expense-paid, I had no qualms about removing these bits and bobs to get what I wanted. Was I successful? No. They still rejected me, saying that my work was “inspirational and moving, but it doesn’t align with the organization’s values at this time.” No harm, no foul (beans) for me.

I may often be preaching to the choir, but I don’t create or write to add to my echo chamber. The friction between queer/not-queer is just another of this world’s great mysteries. Queer may define some of us, but it doesn’t necessarily have to define *every* bit of us. There are definite parts in each chapter of the main narrative thrust of this project, but I wouldn’t necessarily declare every part of every moment as queer. Queerness floats in and out of my life and my decisions whenever it wants to: I am its willing vessel. I consider it to be something greater than just a queer lens, something able to put it in front of my eyes and taken away. The essence of queer is somewhere in there behind my cornea, helping me when I need it, a dormant urge to visualize and see the city around me to help me understand the city and, yes, again, be the

city. It helps us build the city, with our feet, our hands, our eyes and/or our mind. It provides a guide for us, a floating lighthouse. We may never reach a fully realized, concrete form of Queer Urbanism (if that is even possible), but it gives us pieces of the puzzle. Whether you want to put it together to see the entire picture or just examine each piece one by one and throwing them in a disheveled pile when you're done is your prerogative.

Although I only spent 7 months of my life in São Paulo, relatively minuscule in relation to my 38 years, the city left an indelible impression on my understanding of the city, of the world, and of "queer". While in my art residency, I met a group of artists who ran the Lanchonete.org platform—(Lanchonete is akin to an urban format of the American diner – an affordable lunch counter where every walk of life is present).<sup>139</sup> It was a short meeting for some drinks before I left the city for the first time in 2018, talking with them briefly about their projects involving public spaces. Flash forward 4 years, and, while in the second year of my PhD, a colleague sent me a copy of *queer city: a reader*<sup>140</sup> knowing of my love of SP. While I flipped through the pages, I recognized the face of Lua Lucas, a fellow creature of the night, with whom I spent many nights shaking in the underbelly that is São Paulo's Centro neighborhood. As I read the articles, the parallels with my project were very evident, but with a much more professional artistic/backup support team/institutional backing. I won't lie, I had a mini heart attack, thinking that, in my third semester, my project had already been realized 6 years earlier. The imposter syndrome spurted through all of my veins. *I needed a pack of cigarettes and a loooong walk*. However, as I re-read the chapters with a more watchful eye, it became clear that it wasn't a case of my project vs. their project; this world (at the time) was still relatively lacking in queer urbanism, and there was plenty of space for both. Of note, Vi Grunwald's take on the decolonization of queer hit close to home:

So what do we mean by the decolonization of queer? For me, first and foremost, it means recognizing that our dissident bodies, names and practices didn't need to wait for a word or theory like queer to take up the fight, posing resistance and eking out existential territories of their own [...] But if our bodies, identities and practices have to bend, adjust, confirm to what this or that theory expects of us, then we are, once again, reproducing a colonized mode of thinking, only this time dressed up as liberating subversion.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Lanchonete, <https://lanchonete.org/en/>, Accessed: 8.10.2025

<sup>140</sup> Ayerbe, J. (ed.), *queer city: a reader*, Publication Studio São Paulo, 2017

<sup>141</sup> Grunwald, V., 'some personal reflections on the decolonization of queer' in (ed.) J Ayerbe, *queer city, a reader.*, Publication Studio São Paulo, 2017, pp. 22-32, p. 25-27

I immersed myself in the collections of essays and took inspiration in their projects and words, without a fear that I would be walking on their tropical territory. Aside from being on different continents and years apart in different contexts, it became clear that I didn't want to concentrate just on one city, or just one form of research (performance, at the time). Taking lessons from *queer reader*, I explored two more artistic/architectural takes on specific cities: Barcelona artist Clara Nubiola's *Pasea y Ojea*<sup>142</sup> and *Beyroutes: A Guide to Beirut*.<sup>143</sup> Both offer great insights on the city as a concept, from Nubiola's sketches, maps, interviews, and humor to *Beyroutes'* mesmerizing array of local artists explaining their works as active parts of the complicated city. As was said earlier, just because I was using my various guises of artistic research projects in my research, that didn't necessarily mean that the final form needed to take any specific form at all directly related to the artistic projects held within. After many hours-long night walks crossing back and forth over the Barcelona/L'Hospitalet border (10 minutes from my apartment) and looking at all of the collected notes, journals, photos, videos, dreams, and nightmares, this thesis took its current form. Graciously and lovingly prepared, knowing of the footsteps of past, somewhat related projects, it found its footing in storytelling, telling my story of the last 4 years. In lieu of maps, I wanted the words to take you by the hand/eye every step of the way, allowing you to trace the path in your mind.

It wasn't the project that I planned to write back in 2021, but it ended up being the thesis that I wish I had read 20 years ago when I started my academic journey to show the limitless possibilities of what urbanism can mean.

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<sup>142</sup> Nubiola, C., *Pasea y Ojea*, Libros del KO, 2024

<sup>143</sup> Chakar, T., *Beyroute: A Guide to Beirut*, Archis, 2010

## 13. queer(ed) urbanism

This thesis does not consider itself an iron-clad defense of when to decisively use “queer” or define what queer urbanism is. Nor is it strictly an attempt to undefine urbanism. It is an exploration and a multitude of methods and practices at coming to terms with ... these terms. Despite this, here is the conclusion of the thesis...

The definitive answer to the main research question “What is queer urbanism?” is....

*\*drumroll please\**

“What can queer urbanism...?”

*\* when said aloud, the final “m” should be held as long as the speaker can, slowly moving up in pitch as they stretch out the ellipsis \**

A poetic, grammatically ambiguous, slightly pretentious, (in)complete question to answer a question that asks to define the undefinable. However, we can also break it further into its possibilities:

1. What (object/action/thought/person) can queer urbanism?
2. What can queer urbanism ... (do/solve/question/provoke)?

These two questions have been dealt with at various points in varying degrees throughout a variety of styles over these preceding pages and years. This is to say, within each chapter exists at least one (possible) example of Queer Urbanism. As you may have noticed, my love of storytelling can stretch one hundred meters into one hour. So, for the sake of brevity (and your patience), I offer a concise synopsis of these examples in a very-unlike-me way – the dreaded list:

## 1. NEGATING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Dressing up as a sexy traffic cone to stop traffic
- ii. Wearing this freakum-dress from my house to my university
- iii. Queer Art of Failure Part 1: failing to convince people I *was* urbanism
- iv. Jaywalking across the “perfectly” designed streets of Barcelona
- v. Seeking advice from Mister Kiss of Death
- vi. Preferring to use “undefine” over “define”

## 2. DRAGGING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Prishtina directions – using invisible, forgotten landmarks instead of addresses
- ii. Giving a talk on queer urbanism in Kosovo
- iii. Relating Ocaña, Divine, and John Waters to architectural identity
- iv. Reflecting on Las Ramblas’ role in Barcelona
- v. Sassing back a keynote speaker about gays’ role in gentrification
- vi. A non-queer student queering my line of thought

## 3. PERFORMING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Queer Art of Failure Part 2: failing to get any sources of funding
- ii. Kleo La Farona’s transformative “Shamiat” performance
- iii. Queer Art of Failure Part 3: failing to show up said performance
- iv. Dressing up as the Paral·lel Universe and using the metro
- v. Terrifying a gaggle of French students while being chased by the blackhole of gentrification

vi. "Performing" alone and having parents pull their children away from me and my telephone-licking antics

#### 4. WORKSHOPPING URBANISM

##### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Holding a workshop on queer urbanism in the Balkans
- ii. Flipping the script and unplanning a walking trip around the city
- iii. Sharing personal stories, queer and not-queer, in the shadows of the National Library of Kosovo, among snogging teens and pothea
- iv. Queer Art of Failure Part 4: no official output, no final exhibition, a quiet last day of creation
- v. Giving each of the participants the rest of the budget to queer their cities

#### 5. HAUNTING URBANISM

##### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Being in a relationship with someone who didn't identify as queer
- ii. Inviting someone onto my activated walks, against my own desires
- iii. Waiting for the buildings' lights to align before moving on with the walk
- iv. Being denied entrance to the apartment of a loved one because of our "informal" relationship, even though I had the key
- v. Dragging my 2 meters across Carrer de Sants, drowning the asphalt in tears
- vi. Writing a letter to a ghost in my thesis

## 6. REMEMBERING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Asking a tree why she's holding a shiny bra
- ii. Inviting clothing back into the place where their relatives were made
- iii. Sneaking a dead man's tank top into the installation
- iv. Splicing neighborhood voices with industrial sounds to question the source of the stories

## 7. REKINDLING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Realizing our bizarre antics still linger on Linz's streets, if only in my head
- ii. Inviting the buildings to the block party
- iii. Transforming a curtain into one of Hitler's buildings
- iv. No official presentation at the Sommerfest, preferring to sit amongst the audience and wait for them to approach me
- v. Walking home at 11 am covered in glitter, regret, and the building/textiles past the Sunday morning church crowd

## 8. TAINTING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Transforming a picture frame, construction frame, and meat hooks into a moveable bench
- ii. "Put a dildo in it!" – horizontally laying down a dildo, making it unable to be enjoyed properly
- iii. Escaping the indoor workspace to use the city as a backdrop
- iv. Putting the chair too high to be used as a chair
- v. Not creating a strong enough weave, making any object placed on top fall over after a few seconds of standing (just enough to take a picture)

## 9. ESCAPING URBANISM

- a. Examples of queer:
  - i. Using Grindr in Egypt
- ii. Getting the best rimjob in the world while dreaming of the Alexandrian skyline
  - iii. Watching the pizza grease in his beard while walking along the corniche in the moonlight
  - iv. Being pushed off a shopping street into a dark alley by a "date"
  - v. Realizing it was to protect us from anti-gay plain-clothes officers
  - vi. Crying my eyes out in the toilet of the Cavafy museum

## 10. SHORING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Getting a grant for queer research in Albania
- ii. Taking part in a workshop in a communist bunker with a bunch of queerdos
- iii. Watching the destruction of Durrës Beach
- iv. Playing a sound recording live in Barcelona while presenting from Albania

## 11. \_UEERING URBANISM

### a. Examples of queer:

- i. Allegedly, the Barcelona Queer Market
- ii. The US government's removal of the "QT+" from LGBTQ+ on the Stonewall memorial/website (reverse queer?)
  - iii. Carlos Motta's "Please of Resistance" exhibition
  - iv. Spitting on MACBA's construction walls which are occupying public space
- v. The choice to put giant pink triangles in a very uncomfortable position
- vi. "Fixing" hostile architecture
- vii. Using symbolic pink triangles for vi.
- viii. A 38 year old faggot listening to Christina Aguilera's 'Mi Reflejo' on the street

## 14. queer(ying) urbanism

Queer urbanism is an active/passive/versatile reading & re-reading of our built world. In lieu of answers it can help us understand the built environment by questioning the power structures which allegedly govern its uses and possibilities. For me, queer urbanism is the multi-layered junction where absurdity and the asphalt world intersect and intermingle. It is the figurative and literal g-spot of any city I find myself in. For you, it could be found on another shore, another corner, another street, another intersection, and you may not even need to call it queer. My queer is not your queer is not her queer is not his queer is not their queer

Renaming these aspects of the urban fabric of our city is inherently a political and provocative choice, as is not explicitly defining its limitations and possibilities.

To answer that student in Prishtina, I ask: what do you lose by someone calling such actions/performances/situations/locations "queer"?

What is more important for you, our verbiage or *the vindication of our deviant actions?*



## 15-ish QUESTIONS FOR THE CITY



When is queer not enough?  
When does queer go too far?  
Far enough from your everyday to feel,  
But well within your eyesight  
When does this rebellion cross the line,  
Between acceptable change and all out rage?  
Where is the source of its identity,  
Who has the power to negate or to gauge?  
To every mouth its words,  
To every word its freedom.

Where do our queers overlap?  
When mine is yours, if only for a moment,  
And when that moment fades?  
Mine abandons yours,  
Yours politely declines  
Is there a victor, a queer supreme?  
Regulated by none,  
But felt by all.

Is it in the feeling of losing, or the acceptance of loss?  
Is it there in the first inkling of failure?  
Or, does it show itself when you choose  
to acknowledge the battle is lost?

When it checks off 2 out of 10 possible boxes  
Of what one defines as queer,  
Can it be 20% queer?  
Is it an all or nothing proposition,  
Or can we negotiate  
the power of its transmission?

Where will it be in 20 years,  
A flatlined vestige of the past,  
Or the pinnacle of a generation who thought  
Its power would always last?  
Who, then, decides if it's a peak,  
Or a plateau?

Is my body enough to transform space?  
Even with my size, it's quite a leap  
To imagine 100kg in 100m<sup>2</sup>  
Converting non-space to place?  
Is it a question of numbers?  
Two is a pipe dream.  
Four is a wet dream.

Is 20 out of 100 enough to  
Overwhelm the mainstream?  
How many queer legs are required  
To overcome those who other us?  
And when just being isn't enough,  
Is my power multiplied  
If they find me outrageously attired?

When does an inflated frog jump from a whimsical mascot  
To a pointed protest?<sup>144</sup><sup>145</sup>  
Are handcuffs enough to transition  
From chasing likes  
As an amphibious advertisement  
To dissident hikes  
Flaunting our disenfranchisement?  
Does your outfit, made with a queer hand,  
Lose its label  
When worn by a non-believer?  
When does the streetwear stop being urban?  
Why not ask the Atacama?

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<sup>144</sup> Lu, F., "Difficult to earn a living with dignity", *South China Morning Post*, 22.5.2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/trending-china/article/3220833/difficult-earn-living-dignity-viral-chinese-anger-frog-costumed-vendor-moved-shanghai-officials-over>, Accessed: 10.10.2025

<sup>145</sup> Zarkhin, F., "'I've definitely had spicier tamales'", *The Oregonian*, 10.10.2025, <https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2025/10/ive-definitely-had-spicier-tamales-says-portland-ice-protest-frog-that-got-pepper-sprayed-by-federal-agents.html>, Accessed: 10.10.2025

Is it still there in the Desierto Vestido<sup>146</sup>

Who owns this phrase,  
The maker that follows,  
the user that swallows,  
or the land that wallows?

Who among us hasn't been filled by a dildo?  
But, who among us has merely sit upon a dildo?  
In no sense is it cannulation,  
merely straddling your plastic friend  
(Without penetration).  
If we claim to challenge the patriarchy  
then why ingratiate ourselves with these phallacies?  
Wouldn't a street bench be better outfitted  
with big clit energy energy instead?  
Away with these dildos!  
Replace them with saddles!<sup>147</sup>

And to leave urbanism  
only to those in the profession?  
Watch our streets paved  
with the ideals of generational wealth?  
Or is it best suited for cases  
of the subversive, the stealth?  
Does it hide between the cracks of class warfare  
or is it only valid in the hands of the precarious?  
Do we find it only in the outrageous? The absurd?  
Or in the glint and gutter  
of those of us who seem contrarious?

Do we clog their sunlit streets  
Creating an urban occlusion?  
Or, do we flood moonlit avenues,  
Embracing our built-up seclusion?  
All questions for you to ponder,  
As you forge your own conclusion.

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<sup>146</sup> Carr, M. "Desierto Vestido: a territorial solution to the environmental effects of fast fashion", *Latin American Bureau*, 25.8.2025, <https://lab.org.uk/desierto-vestido-fast-fashion-atacama/>, Accessed: 10.10.2025

<sup>147</sup> Zündorf, S., 'About', *entzück dich selbst*, <https://entzueckdichselbst.com/>, Accessed: 10.10.2025



## POST-SCRIPT PART I – notes from the balcony on Carrer Riego

Gee whiz!  
Street jizz!  
Feels more dirty than it really is  
Late at night, in the park  
Gonna shoot white light all through the dark.

- SSION<sup>148</sup>  
(Cody Critcheloe – visual artist/musician)

Mirroring my favorite cities, streets, and barris, this project has been raw, emotional, goofy, obscure, full of strange characters, bad for my liver, capricious, confusing, contradictory, and, hopefully, it has burned some images into your retina to haunt you on your next walk to the supermarket.

This thesis is not about grief or tragedy or creation or performance or masquerading as a fool or love or death or pizza or spinach-and-cheese-bureks or depression or separation or reunions or buildings or streets or lactose or drawing or photography or falling out of love or sausage or blowjobs or alcohol or manholes or man holes or, hell, even *about* urbanism. It does, however, grab all these topics, feelings, ingredients, fleeting moments, and memories and throw them together in a blender only to spit them out over these previous pages so that we can share these stories, struggles, and spectacles to explore the various layers of what possibilities urbanism could hold for us, individually and collectively. It's about *experiencing and creating* urbanism. In the biggest nutshell.

As a four-year-long-long-loooong endeavor, everything— every last bump on the road and up my nose—was inextricably linked to one another. Site-specific projects would never suffice, each “individual” work needed to be site-specific, time-specific, environment-specific, and mood-specific. Not to mention my incessant need to question everything all the time, starting from: What constitutes “a work”? What about my first academic conference in Prishtina? Was it just a 15-minute speech to a

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<sup>148</sup> SSION, ‘Street Jizz’, *Fools Gold*, SleazeTone Records, 2008

group of architects, or was it a performance? Wielding my sequins and satin as only a faggot wizard can, I wanted to blur that line ... while trying to confuse those prying heteronormative eyes.

What about the before and after? Did my installation in Can Batlló start when I first began my “activated walks” and picked up the first dangling pair of panties from a tree? Or was it the moment I saw the open call and started to form the first ideas of what kind of project I could create from six large Ikea bags of discarded clothes? Though I question myself and my work without end during the process, these more existential questions often only come up well after the project has been set up, seen, and torn down. And thus, these questions and (in)conclusions come at the end of this thesis. My writing process may be cumbersome, but I want the reader to absorb as much of the workspace, context, and materials to judge each bit on their own merits.

The difference between watching a five-minute clip of my antics on Parallel versus knowing the entire build-up (lack of funds & engagement from local artists) gives you a much more intimate knowledge behind every boot step. Clock me for the Shein-bought universe dress, bizarre dog mask and beret combination, and the simple 4-meter-long black fabric meant to be the black hole? Crucify me, fashion gods! But it makes sense knowing it was from a place of spontaneous creation, begging for a bit of empathy on the viewer’s side. And due to time/space constraints—not to mention SD storage space—I was unable to film/transcribe the entire conversation we had with the kind old abuela after we were done prancing about. I spoke of the power of the written word, but it’s impossible to translate everything to this space, something needs to give for narrative purposes. And it’s impossible to put into words the combination of the natural high after you finish a performance in public space and the sound of laughter from the gaggle of French students taking pictures of us, all the while being suffocated by the abuela’s incredibly bitter rose-scented perfume. As a narrator, I had to pick my battles so as not to lose the plot (completely) and keep your attention.

And then that dude died. My blood recoiled at the thought of trying to make light of or drawing something positive from of this situation I was/am presented with every step I take around Sants. Part free therapy, part necessary part of the story, this ghost is, unfortunately, the glue that holds this whole thing together. Obviously, this was not planned, but the world keeps turning, no matter how much you try to want it to stop for a moment. When Momma Trauma came to town, oh baby, never had I ever had to deal with a flight or fight moment as vicious as this. I’ve left previous homes/cities for a myriad of simple reasons (lack of good Vietnamese food, the ocean water was

too cold, etc), but this was a new existential crisis. If he had decided to disappear in the first or second years of my thesis, there is a great likelihood I would have abandoned Barcelona, as I was already fighting the immigration gestapo on an irregular visa situation. However, in my third year, I had deeply rooted my research and myself into this city. I had made it over the hump of the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> year jitters and was riding the wave onwards... straight into a concrete wall of death and depression that would have made Thomas Bernard feel all warm and cuddly inside.

It also marked a decided change in my approach to creation/research. I was no longer just doing what "needed to be done" to complete my thesis. The wretched demons plucking my heartstrings made sure that I was painfully awake and aware of every step I made thereafter. This void has stalked me ever since, even if he refused to leave his beloved Catalunya while alive. It's been with me while tracing the Danube River in Linz, trampling through the waves of Durrës, and sitting behind me in the pizzeria in Prishtina (not to mention I know *for a fact* that little hoe-ghost was watching my booty getting the royal treatment in Alexandria).

I bellyflopped back into the research, questioning not only my place in the academic world but also the world at large. Staring down Beelzebub on the daily, I often looked down into that abyss, wondering if my time was up. Then, I remembered how much I love mint chocolate chip ice cream, drinking liver-damaging amounts of alcohol with friends, experiencing spices I've never encountered before, and getting lost in a foreign urban quagmire.

Most parts of me question the need for all of these goddamn explanations and would rather throw them into my favorite trash can down the street and not talk about it ever again. But I have so many more cities and dark alleys in this world to explore, so I decided to keep on trudging'. Thanks to the Grim Reaper, I was given a new lease on life. Although, frankly, I had no problems with my previous lease on life. Thanks Obamacare!

My decision to continue with my research was the easy part compared to the following days, weeks, and months. As I kept up my tainted walks for medicinal purposes, I had some brushes with witchcraft, which I thought absolutely needed to enter my research and thesis. While perusing my copy of Arthur Evan's *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, I looked to the radical faeries of days gone-by to help with my immediate future.<sup>149</sup> So, the streets of Sants become my laboratory. With the

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<sup>149</sup> Evans, A., *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People it Has Tried to Destroy*, Fag Rag Books, 1978

rare winter rains falling down in the weeks after *that* happened, I turned my nightwalks into collection rambles. I armed myself with a plastic cup and a cowboy hat and recreated the last two walks I took with my dearly departed neighbor. Centimeter by centimeter, my cup was slowly filling up. Over there! A mini waterfall from the construction site: *perfect*. This continued for four or so walks until I had 1 liter of water saved. Not only water, the rule was that anything that fell into the cup had to stay. Swimming in the water was a collection of leaves and the odd candy wrapper flying around on the cold December and January nights.



Fig 64. Making a haunted Eau de Barcelona, 2025. Credit: author

I had an eye on the calendar; the yearly research review presentation was coming up in a couple of weeks. My *brujería* was easy: I would ask the audience to close their eyes as I recited ~~an ancient spell~~ the first draft of a poem about losing a lover to the city. With their eyes shut tighter than a sphincter during Christmas dinner, I would spray them with this Eau de Barcelona with the aim of channeling *something* unexpected into the classroom. At 7 am, two hours before said presentation, I practiced my dark, ominous presentation to a friend in the US to get the timing *just right*. He looked at me, horrified.

"Are you actually going to go through with this? Casting a spell on your classmates?"

"Sure, it's an unorthodox methodology, isn't it *queer*?"

Queer? *Sure*. Absolutely bonkers and incredibly dangerous if I actually managed to haunt the unassuming designers who just wanted the three days of presentations to be over with...? *Yes*. And that is the story about how I realized that some methods which “occur naturally” in the process of the project should be halted before summoning a rift in the time/space continuum.

With the new lease on life and slowly coming back to terms with a decidedly un-supernatural reality, I asked more healthy questions about the next projects in Can Batlló and Linz. Combining the deeply personal did not necessarily have to be so *dark*. I remembered what it meant to create a visual treat for an unassuming public – or, at least, myself – with my hands. No more conjuring, construction was the new name of the game. Back to Linz, to my old hometown: rag-tag drunken adventures with old friends, conversations over homemade booze. *Was this a form of regression or turning-a-new-leaf?* I asked myself. Returning to the familiar after all of these years of pushing myself to new countries felt: was I falling into a hole of Austrian retrogression? The act of creation there was a decidedly more relaxed affair. No deadlines, more time to *think* about the project and how it would develop over nine months. Meeting with the Raumteiler collective, brainstorming with strangers. A welcome hug just when I needed it.

What would happen to the drawings between my visits? Would I leave them in the basement of the studio or give them to friends to hold onto? It was time to put some positive juju into the project, so I gave them to my friends’ happy homes to keep while I returned to Barcelona for work. The Raumteiler neighbors would help in the creation process, reminding me that it wasn’t necessary to take on all the work on my shoulders. The dudes from the Kebab shop would help me cut the windows as we enjoyed the June sunshine, all to the tunes of a local *Stahlstadt* punk band.

The performative bug came back after the handiwork of Can Batlló and drawings in Linz. I looked at the drawings we made/cut out of the abandoned textiles and wondered: what next? Would I be happy with just hanging these drawings/sculptures/building friends around the site? They needed to *breathe*. And, so, we decided to invite them to the Holy Hydra rave. The joy of crisscrossing Parallel in Barcelona sprang into my mind, and the other bartenders agreed to wear my drawings as we worked the bar and danced around the main stages. How would these works continue in a new setting? After months and months sitting under my bed, during the process of writing, they screamed out to me, begging for some sunshine. Weather-worn and full of fermented, dried cocktails, I took them to a familiar corner: down the street on Carrer Pujades, down the street from my university. A forgotten lot in Poblenou which has been waiting for some love ever since I came back to Barcelona in 2020, one which constantly blew me kisses on my

walk to school. Armed with the stacked drawings on my shoulders, forever making a show on the metro, the golden hour provided the perfect backup for these lovely ladies.



*Fig 65. Miss Kunstuniversität Linz & Miss Goethestraße 22 move to Barcelona, 2025.  
Credit: author*

The same corner that watched me pass by with so much vitriol after the “This is not urbanism” moment was refreshed with a jolt of joy, despite the smell of dried vodka and vomit oozing out the fabric’s pores.

New stories appeared in my dreams every couple of days, vivid visions of the continuations of my mini projects. But, where to stop? Were these actual ideas, or was I just trying to mask the loss in my life by burrowing myself in work? I took 4 and a half steps back to reflect on what has been done so far in the name of the thesis: conference talks, workshops, installations, articles, lots of booze, three pairs of worn-out shoes, and a horrible case of plantar fasciitis in my left foot. As it has been said before, I will never be someone who’s remembered for self-editing. With multiple international journeys and projects under my belt, was I keeping the spirit of the original thesis in my head or just plowing through to occupy my mind and fill up a portfolio for a future exhibition? The doubts of imposter syndrome started to take seed: Should I continue with this PhD or end it and move on? Luckily, with 37 years

of wisdom under my wings and the reality of wanting to (somewhat) root down in one city, the decision was easy. *Finish him.*

I could try to weave a narrative tying Richard Sennett's *Designing Disorder* and Beatriz Colomina's varied essays to Deleuze and Guattari via my own practices, but what for? Such academic comparisons and justifications are better left to those people who *live* for that kind of research and approach to writing. I'm much more comfortable on a three-hour nightwalk at 3 am, scribbling away poetry on a park bench while breathing in the poisoned Zona Franca grain-and-petroleum-infused smells on a Tuesday morning than pulling an all-nighter, slaving away in a library, reading Deleuze & Co., and comparing myself to those giants of philosophy and design. That being said, I still devour Señor Sennet, Michael Sorkin, and Beatriz Colomina *et al.*, but it's more as a fertilizer to nourish my brain rather than crutches for me to rely on. My references lean more heavily on absurdist pop culture, such as the lyrics that opened this chapter from my queer musical hero, SSION. I can recite all three of their albums front to back much more easily than I can recall the prose from the middle bit of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. SSION has been earworming into my cavities and tickling my ossicles for the better part of decade for the better part of decade, one of my most cherished walking partners blasting through my headphones.

While working in my mindless office job, I was given ample opportunity to just veg out and look out at my beloved Zona Franca skyline. On my lunch breaks, I would wander around the desolate streets brimming with gas stations and 1.7-meter-tall concrete fences, allowing my two-meter frame to perfectly snoop in on the workers on their smoke breaks. My colleagues asked me, "Why do you walk down there? There's nothing but light industrial warehouses and parking lots, right? Is there something we're missing?" No, it was exactly as they described: non-descript non-places. But it was in these "deactivated walks" where I was reminded of why I started this project in the first place. An empty street can be seen as just that, a vacant space devoid of life. But it's equally possible to be seen as full of promise, waiting to be filled with life: the urbanist's version of a glass of water, half full or half empty.

Ever the outlier, I often enjoy these non-spaces more than spaces with prescribed uses and oppressive history, for they are desperate vessels waiting to be filled with our deepest desires. Take, for instance, the aforementioned dildo stuck by ~~years truly~~ some disrespectful vandal on Richard Serra's ~~waste of concrete~~ inspirational sculpture in Barcelona. By itself, the stark arcs of concrete create vertical wastelands slashing through an otherwise fine public park. Allegedly one of the most protected walls in the city, the simple change of adding a luminescent tentacle dildo refracting

the Mediterranean sun turns a simple ol' wall into a possible *lover*. Someone's non-space will hopefully be taken up by all 20 centimeters of that tentacled goodness. As they say, the best view of an ugly building is when you look out one of its windows. Likewise, the best view of Serra's *El Muro* is when you thrust your love-canal *just right* and land squarely on that tempting tentacle. Beads of salty sweat dripping down your forehead, your lower colon remembering all of those horny, hungover Sunday afternoons. The best view of *El Muro* is when you are looking away... and careening to an earth-splitting orgasm because that dildo is touching you in a way that a generic wall *could never*.

Had I solved world peace with my research? ~~Absolutely~~. No. Did I start right back at the beginning of where I was in 2021, eyes brightly looking to reinvigorate the streets with funny actions? Sure. Enter the cheesy quote about the meaning being the journey itself. But, as often is the case with Hallmark Cards, there was some truth to it.

My initial bursts/obsessions of "MUST QUEER THE STREETS NOW!" seemed quite frivolous in a way with my new outlook on life. Maybe it was the mental and emotional exhaustion from the grief-ridden last year of my research, but I felt it in my bones and boner that *it was over*— well, that, coupled with the fact that I had used up all funding possibilities to travel and my student registration was ending in a couple of months and I didn't have the extra €900 to pay for another year of tuition. There was a sense of completion, but only partially so. The dreams would continue for future performances and drawings, building off the works preceding, but they would have to wait for another hopefully more lucrative and peaceful year to arrive. If certain people were still around and I graduated according to plan one year earlier, or if I had the money and ability to extend it for another year, you would be reading a completely different text. Following the way of my artistic works, this thesis is specifically entwined with the current iteration of my being in August 2025, a site-, time-, environmental-specific synthesis regorged on these pages.

My initial existential questions concerning the queering of urbanism still flop around in circles in my cortex, and, whenever time and money allow, the next planned project on the horizon aims to deal with them head on, one last heshetheybang to wrap some concrete goulashes on this research and watch it sink between the crashing waves of Somorrostro. What's the use in mentioning this hypothetical plan? To show you that the research remains unfinished, but still holds potential. A fellow artist told me it's such a shame that I didn't have enough time to see it through to incorporate into my PhD. Well, Nuria, the idea of this workshop sprang out *after* four years of research. Part of this process is learning when to walk away, even when you want something to continue forever.

The possible next step in this research is as such: a dual workshop where I would combine the various parts of this research and work with two groups of participants – one workshop under the title “Queer Urbanism” and the other with the title “Hacking the Street”. Using an extended version of my Prishtina workshop over a series of weeks and identical curricula, it would end with a simultaneous exhibition displaying the outputs of both. A kind of Battle Royale riff/answer to tango with that question which has haunted me since that foggy winter December in Prishtina so many moons ago: what is more powerful, interjecting queer theory into the streets or making palpable changes to the city?

Perhaps the easy answer after all this time was right in front of my eyes, under my nose, and callusing my bunions: the asphalt doesn't care, it remains either way, whether this future workshop takes place or not. Beneath the pavement is just more pavement.

Recalling my conversation with Michael Sorkin about *art vs. design*, I can't help but chortle and feel blissfully defeated and surprisingly nonplussed at the end of these four years. This project stands on its own two aching, swollen feet, not as a definite definition of Queer Urbanism, or spectacular answer to any question in particular; rather, it is fantabulism incarnate. To queer is to provoke, to question, to reconsider, to hope, to endanger, to confuse, to give life... maybe queer urbanism just wants you to confabulate with the city once more.



## Post-postscript:

*I mai deixes d'agafar totes les espècies que tinguis a l'abast. Els viatges I les ciutats I els parles I els costums són espècies pel teu guisat final.*

And never stop using all the spices you have at your disposal. The travels and the cities and the languages and the outfits are all spices for your final stew.

Not to beat a dead horse, or in this case, lover, but those words from my late neighbor-lover-friend put it best when I was putting this thesis together. His goodbye concluded with these instructions for me to continue my path, both in the kitchen and on the streets. As anyone who was blessed enough to enjoy the pleasure (not to mention the heartburn) from eating my spicy mango-lemongrass ceviche swimming in cilantro and coconut milk can attest, I am never one to shy away from using alllll the spices in my kitchen, and it never turns out the same twice. It's only fitting that this entity who shared so many breaths with me left the most heartfelt summary of this research project. When talking to strangers in real life at a bar at 3am or coworkers in a factory at lunchtime, I am inevitably asked "what do you do?". My answer changes as often as my explanations for this thesis: case studies of what urbanism should mean, a traditional thesis, a series of artistic works or academic investigations, a ghost story, a roving-international-clown-show, a promise to write a book, or a self-indulgent long-term therapy session. Each of these could be correct, depending on when I'm explaining it and to whom. But Francesc got it right when he saw through my academic jargon and called a spade a spade: it's a stew.

I hope you've enjoyed every last cholesterol-laden, heart-heavy drop. It was made with the utmost love.

Another round of thanks is due to all of those mentioned in the dedication pages found at the beginning of this tome. But, also to you, dear reader. Thank you for spending your time lapping up each of these hand-plucked words from the recesses of this pantaloons' innards and allowing me to spread my offal humor.

May you take my questions, thoughts, tears, murmurs, giggles, and ruminations, and run with them. This is not my final stew, and this is not the end of the thesis; it begins anew the moment you take a step out of your door onto the sidewalk to enjoy a heaping spoonful of the stew we can (now) call urbanism.

Thank you.

Danke.

Gràcies.

Vingadéu.

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*... feel free to add your own poetry here:*

*... go on, have another 2 pages:*



The following exists outside of the Table of Contents, Thank you for reaching it on your own.

A (final) reader's guide ribbed for our pleasure:

### THE SET UP:

Anyone who has seen me walk out of my local Aldi supermarket knows that self-editing is not my strong suit (depending on your perspective). Clanging bottles of alcohol, sloshing ungodly amounts of lactose, and spilling over with vegetables, the madness of my shopping bag is only matched by my clashing patterns, neon fabrics, and dangerously dangly jewelry. As an autoethnographic work, this thesis mirrors my plastic bag bursting at the seams—(Ursula K. LeGuin thought the carrier bag was the right shape for the novel, why can't it be so for the thesis?).<sup>150</sup> Everything ~~but~~ and the kitchen sink. As with most jokes, I feel an over-explanation kills the magic. Yet, I have crafted this with the utmost amount of love and, despite my soft spot for enigmas, I want to make sure you have the chance to fully understand and appreciate the hours and hours and hours spent on this document. If I wanted this thesis to pull back the curtains to demystify the PhD process, why not my writing as well?

### THE FLOW:

The first pages/sections may give the impression that the entire thesis would be more querulous than queer. However, after daily meditations and ruminations, I felt it was more truthful to the reality of the process which birthed this labor of love. Its trajectory was anything but smooth. Anger, despair, and grief were just as vital in its creation as any artistic pursuits or meals.

Apart from the "15 Minutes with the City" poetry collection and the first chapter, "Negating Urbanism", the rest of the document flows as the research did: chronologically and circumstantially style-specific. I am well aware of my shortcomings as a writer; I am unable to massively change the modulation of my voice, which is why I fit into autoethnographic writing so comfortably. It's been a 4-year journey of all the unrequisite bumps and bruises—and I'm a Taurus—why would I not want to find a writerly mode in which I am comfortable during the final lap?

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<sup>150</sup> LeGuin, U.K., *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, cosmogenesis, 2024.

## WRITING STYLE:

During the review process, one reviewer remarked—in the negative—that my writing style/verbiage was “colloquial”. To that I say: absolutely, yes.

Deploying Shakespearean sextuplets, six-syllable designations, and ruthlessly obtuse rhetoric is all well and good when the situation demands it but, from the outset, this thesis was imagined, as noted before, not for Princeton, but the pub. We have the luck within the creative fields to harness levels of freedom other spheres can only dream of. (Naturally, I believe all fields would have so much to gain to allow this freedom to access “less creative spheres” such as engineering, medicine, and law, but, alas, we can only fight so many fires at once).

Utilizing popular parlance over judicious jargon has been a cornerstone in the writing of this Keystone-State-born human being. This research project, which emphasizes everyday urban actions, rightfully reflects the quotidian vernacular. Its explicit use of (relatively) accessible English is meant to cast a wider net to include those turned off by archaic English words that rarely appear outside the ivory towers’ printing presses.

Granted, my Pennsylvucky grammar non-rules, subject/verb disagreements, paralyzing prepositions, cliches, and indecipherable idioms sometimes arose during the written process as the toxins arise from the mighty Susquehanna River every springtime. As such, it was reviewed by a Brit, a Spaniard, two Catalans, an Austrian, a Canadian, a Chilean, and a fellow Pennsylvanian, most of whom do not have advanced degrees in Architecture, Urban Studies, or Fine Arts, to weed out the overly localizations.

Heretoforewith, my dancing with the deceased detected its only tenable fellow horseman in my macabre preposterousness waltzing within the framework of the undertaking of this correspondence stratagem. Thenceforward, why jitterbug when I can twerk?

## POETRY:

Peel back what’s deemed uncertain  
Pull back the wizard’s curtain  
Spotlight the grief, embrace the sleaze  
Interrogate it all, examine what it means

The use of poetry was defended in the outset—part of a rich architectural and research tradition—but here is a slice of insight into the “15 Minutes with the City” poetry

collection. Forming a buffer between the introduction(s) and the “official” narrative research, it (hopefully) gives the reader a breather after a barrage of references and theory. A full rundown of each stanza would require too much keyboard-energy (not to mention destroy the mystery), but, for the most part, it quickly summarizes most chapters. It provided me with an additional layer of reflection as I re-read each chapter: how could I summarize this in a way that leans into my more romantic inclinations? I may have just defended the use of everyday parlance, but I cannot deny a certain proclivity for some overblown chi-chi. The visuals associated with those lines are meant to be recalled as the reader moves on, providing a sense of *déjà vu*. Visual lubricant for the story to cum. Notably, it also refrains from using the word “queer”, relating to the need/use of the word in every possible instance.

Faced with the death of a lover/neighbor/poet, it seemed the only way forward was to use poetry as a form of summarizing the simultaneous grief waves/depressive gut-punches and general numbness as I moved forward. Harnessing/manipulating the duality of prose’s directness and vagueness, poems wormed their way into the writing process as a way of prefacing the post-death chapters of this thesis. An ever-so-slight-effort to blunt the pain, finding beauty in strings of letters.

## FONT:

Graphic design has never touched my heart, not even close. It’s often the last decision made, mostly an aesthetic choice. However, I wanted this time to be different, as it is the culmination of such tumultuous upheaval in my life. For posterity’s sake, this thesis will hopefully find itself a lighthouse for the lost or a labyrinth for those willing to get lost. At the time of writing this final page, I realized it has mutated away from a love letter to “queer” or “urbanism”. It has materialized into a response to my dearly departed’s goodbye. I imagine ghosts don’t fret too much over fonts, but, in turn, the font used for this entire thesis was the font he used in his suicide note. As if he would have chosen anything else for his final *adéu*, he chose the *Futura (book)* font. Well, neighbor, you know me as a maximalist in everything I do, especially when I cook... I promised you a chapter, you got a book.

...where do you end and the city begins?

