

Writing Cities. How do views shape words, how do words shape cities?

Second Writing Cities Workshop

London, 1-3 June 2009

The purpose of this workshop is to reflect on how the way in which we view cities has a bearing on how we write and ultimately produce knowledge about the city, and how our words in turn might have an impact on cities.

We are inviting graduate researchers from LSE, MIT School of Architecture and Planning, MIT Science Technology and Society Department, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Law School, who have the city as their object of investigation to engage in a reflection on the views, understandings, and sensibilities that underpin their research and writing on the city, and the implications of their writing for the city. How can our study of the city or specific cities contribute to a general reflection on writing about cities? And how can our writing contribute to shaping cities?

When trying to grasp how our views eventually shape our words and our words shape cities, there are five aspects that we may want to reflect on:

Concept

How do we conceive of the city? (As a whole? As fragmentary? As a political unit? A kaleidoscope? A group of human beings? A structure? As a functional entity? A dysfunctional entity? An organic unit?...)

What material or symbolic elements are we most interested in? (Buildings, streets, people, spontaneity, consumption, food, shops, order, crime, surveillance... ?)

Aim

What deeper preoccupation sustains our interest in the city? (Is our aim to illustrate an unknown aspect of the city or a particular city? Is our aim more analytical, that is, do we aim at a better understanding of certain phenomena? Is it critical? Is it propositional or normative – do we aim to change things?)

Is our preoccupation more political or aesthetic in nature?

Mode

How do we approach the city? Do we look at it 'from above' (government, institutions, legal framework...) or 'from below' (street life, communities, neighbourhoods)? Can we distinguish between the two? Is it possible to look at how the two intersect, how their boundaries are negotiated? How do we take these distinctions/representations into consideration when we write?

Which of the five senses are we mainly relying on? What evidence – accounts, conversations, images, documents, sounds, smells, tastes - do we collect? What do we do with our collections?

Form

How do we turn our concept, deeper preoccupation and empirical collections into writing? What challenges do we encounter? What does it mean to be creative when writing about cities? Aside from words, are there other forms of writing? Do certain concepts, aims or modes produce certain forms or styles or should such a notion be challenged?

Impact

What is the real impact of our writing on cities? Who do we write for? Who do we actually reach? Will our words be translated into policies and regulations, or perhaps educational material and fiction? Does our writing actively contribute to change the city or specific cities?

We encourage participants to reflect on one or several of these dimensions with regard to their own research, but we also welcome more general reflections on what it means to write about the city or specific cities.