

Klaske Havik, Kris Pint, Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner (eds.). *Vademecum – 77 Minor Terms For Writing Urban Places*. Nai010 Publishers, 224p.

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Received 9 November 2020 | Accepted 22 November 2020 | Published 26 February 2021

Abstract

This review discusses the recently published book *Vademecum: 77 Minor Terms for Writing Urban places*, edited by Klaske Havik, Kris Pint, Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner. The book is the product of an interdisciplinary collaboration of 38 authors, and consists of a collection of terms that offer alternative understandings of urban space and places. In the review, I discuss the topic, structure, and relevance of the book, I suggest different ways of reading it, and I connect it with related genealogies in cultural and spatial studies. Overall, the wide geographical and disciplinary spectrum of *Vademecum* makes it a good read for anyone engaged with the complex object of landscape.

Keywords

Urban complexity, landscape studies, interdisciplinarity, narrative methods, knowledge networks.

Go with me; in Latin, *vade mecum*: an invitation to the reader, the design practitioner, the cultural historian, the urban dweller, to use this book as a companion in exploring the city. The *vademecum*, a collective work of 38 authors, offers new perspectives in the understanding of urban space and urban places. The term, used since the 17th century to describe manuals that can be carried in a pocket, fits nicely with the aims of the book: this compact guide can function as a companion to the field, thus suggesting a merging of theory and experience. Its structure reminds that of a glossary or an encyclopedia, comprising 77 entries in alphabetical order. In content, it is rather a collection of minor terms. Minor means flexible, used in a variety of ways, and not consolidated in the theoretical discourse. Terms are selected and written in a way that highlights multivocality and collaboration beyond geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

The book is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars, involved in the European Union's Cooperation in Science and Technology Action network Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European

City. The group is interested in exploring the interrelations of narrative methods and urban development. They understand urban space as a complex expression of material, temporal, and spatial relationships between people and the built environment. Indeed, the histories of the city and urban studies illuminate the need to establish a relational approach towards urban complexity, rather than focusing independently on its spatial, economic, or social aspects. The *vademecum* achieves so, by bringing together authors from architecture, anthropology, political science, film studies, literature, linguistics, art history, geography, and all the intersections of the above. In writing the terms, attention is paid in the ways these have been used within different academic, literary, and artistic discourses, as well as on their potential future uses. This collective process suggests going beyond the constitution of the author, the expert, the grand narrative, the foundational theory. Instead, it shows that knowledge is produced from multiple actors, who remain historically and geographically situated but bring their voices together in an assemblage of information, stories, and experiences.

In the introduction, the editors present the interests and relevance of the volume and reflect on the idea of a collective and networked production of knowledge. They show the urgency of seeking alternatives to traditional, constituted models of spatial development, and of bridging the world of theory with the one of practice. In an ever-changing urban environment, professionals in the fields of architecture, heritage management, landscape architecture, spatial planning, and policymaking should imagine new ways of thinking and doing, by challenging normative frameworks and constituted practices. The editors explain how the focus on minor terms can be crucial in this process: minor is used in contrast with major, to describe words the meaning of which is not consolidated within the academic discourse, thus remaining flexible and open to multiple interpretations. The use of the word *minor* draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on Kafka's minor literature. The editors cite literary theorist Ronald Bogue, who understands minor literature as written in the context of cultural minorities, and as such, involving particular appropriations of language and alternative imaginations. Similarly, architect Jill Stoner describes minor architecture as emerging from the bottom of dominant power structures. In *vademecum*, minor means "the local, and possibly the alternative, the disenfranchised or the overlooked" (Havik et. al. 2020).

The rest of the volume comprises the 77 minor terms in alphabetical order. All terms have a spatial relevance and can be potentially taken out in the field, to enrich our understanding of urban places. The editors describe the selection of terms as not exhaustive, but positively incomplete; rather than a finite project, this is conceived as a design exercise. Each entry takes up to one page of text, written by a different scholar. The texts are elegantly curated, and trace concisely the main uses and functions that the term has undergone within diverse disciplines, as well as its potential futures. This genealogical endeavor is supported by well-selected references to the work of influential thinkers. Thus, the authors do not claim the authority of experts, but bring other voices into the conversation, letting the texts function as portals to a multiplicity of discourses. The end result is an accumulation of readings. The notion of travel seems to be crucial, both in the selection and in the writing of the terms. The disciplinary and geographical dispersal of the authors shows that the terms are traveling, in the sense that they can be borrowed and used in different places and contexts. But these travels change the concepts themselves, linking them to new significances and values.

The reader is invited to participate in this game: to read, understand, and appropriate the terms through the filters of her own experiences and questions. In an interactive process between the reader, the author, and the referenced thinkers, a discursive network is activated, which engages previous concepts and future ideas in threads of relationships. This means that similarly to every other book, but perhaps more explicitly, every

reader gets something different out of it, depending on her background and interests. Personally, as an architect with an interest in heritage and landscape, I reconnected with loved terms, such as *atmosphere*, *landscape biography*, *townscape*, or *commons*. I discovered entirely new ones, like *artialization*, *fourth place*, *mouflage* and *planthropocene*. And I saw others from completely new viewpoints, including *calmness*, *gigantism*, and *plasticity*. For people engaged with spatial research, the flexibility and plasticity of the terms might feel like a threat: it reminds that one can never keep up with the genesis, transformations, and interpretations of language that is used to write places. The *vademecum* suggests that this confusion is potentially valuable: every personal collection of knowledge and experience adds something to the understanding of the rich complexity of the urban.

The broad scope and clarity in expression of the book render it interesting and useful to a variety of readers. The collection and use of terms do not refer only to academic contexts, but also to artistic, activist, and professional realms. For city-dwellers, it can function as a compelling introduction into the complex world of spatial studies. For professionals in architecture or urban design, as a bridge between theory and practice. For experienced researchers, as a reminder of the multiple ways our use of language can change the discursive and material reality. For writers and artists, it can open multiple windows of imagination towards the city and the landscape. Depending on the different aims, interests, and personalities, the *vademecum* can be read in many different ways: Alphabetically, as a continuous read, allowing the reader to discover interrelations between the different entries. Purposefully, as a sort of glossary, when looking for a term that captures an urban process. And intermittently or even randomly, during an urban exploration, as a way of connecting concepts with experience. This might connect the reader in an embodied way to some of the major voices on phenomenology and experience, who are referenced throughout the book. We are then Walking in the city with Michel de Certeau (1984) and accompanying Walter Benjamin's flaneur (2006), not standing critically against things, but strolling among them.

Overall, I believe the *vademecum* is achieving its goal to connect the reader with urban space, schools of thought, and storytelling devices. While the editors warn the collection of minor terms is necessarily incomplete, I think the introduction would benefit from a short explanation of how the 77 terms were selected. Beyond that, the manual could be enriched by the reader herself, who could keep collecting minor terms during her readings or urban explorations. From a graphic design perspective, the book is functional and elegant, and the way the text and references are organized on each page makes reading an exciting experience. The playful nature of the book can be inscribed to the long tradition of cultural studies in exploring media that can deal with spatial complexity. Publications such as the recently launched, and widely disseminated *Feras Atlas*,

a digital storytelling collection edited by Anna Tsing et.al. can be seen as belonging to the same genealogy of transitioning beyond the conventional structures of books and chapters, looking at new narrative methods, and forming knowledge networks (Tsing et al. 2020). The vademecum successfully weaves together this need

to reconsider spatial studies and practices, with the existing richness of academic, professional, and artistic knowledge. It does that by stretching the importance of care, collaboration, and multivocality, proving the relevance and significance of experiencing, thinking and writing places.

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