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FACHBEREICH SOZIAL- UND
KULTURWISSENSCHAFTEN
DER HOCHSCHULE DÜSSELDORF

MASTER-THESIS

AUTHENTICITY:

AN ARTISTIC RESEARCH ON POWER OF THE GENERIC

THESIS AM
FACHBEREICH SOZIAL- UND
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Personal Motivation

Raised in Moscow, a megacity with a 12 million population, I have always been fascinated by the intense mixture of architectural layers and cultural symbols of the city. A state within a state, Moscow obviously has a strong image formed under the influence of numerous socio-political conditions and is constantly developing its city landscape through time. For more than twenty years I have been soaking its atmosphere and every time I try to recall the experience of it in my memory, I see the complete picture with hardly any “quality loss”. For me this could be a pure example of authenticity – a word, embracing concepts of image and feeling into one, paradox of something both evident and invisible at the same time.

Since I moved to Germany, specifically the Region of the North Rhine-Westphalia one year ago, I landed onto a completely different geographical and cultural terrain. Normally, I prepare myself to the site specificity of every city that I happen to find myself in; being aware of its historical preconditions and other contributors to its identity formation strike me as extremely important. This time was no exception. Moreover, my intention was to take up the challenge and see if I could fit in and get used to the given circumstances, in other words try to understand my new surroundings and find common grounds. Living and studying in Düsseldorf, I was able to travel through the whole region by train on a regular basis, and I took the opportunity to the fullest extent. As I have worked in Essen and observed local life, as well as that in the nearby cities, I started asking myself such questions as:

What is special about this place? What is special about any city of this region and why do they look so alike, almost identical? To what extent do these cities differ from each other and how? Is there a constellation of yet unknown to me details that makes each of them special? And if those details are not as obvious from the beginning, does it indicate their generic nature?

All these concerns have led me to my actual point and strongest interest, which can be formulated as follows: Is it critical if, for a neutral observer, a city seems not to be special at all? There might be some possibility that the absence of a strong identity

gives it some advantage, which the other “popular” cities lack. Maybe generic character of a city can be even considered as its power liberating it from prejudice and appropriation of false identities. If so, how can this power be captured physically and transmitted to a single human being?

1.2 Setting the Problem

Urban Identity is normally seen as an integral part of a modern city, as something that makes it stand out and be remembered. The essence of the city is seen as a composition of its peculiarities. However, modern cities’ transformation trends put a question mark on the subjective ability to differentiate their images in the nearest future.

As I was collecting information on the subject, I have realised at some point that existing body of literature concentrates, for the most part, on the problem of the city identity instead of shifting focus towards the opposite, namely the phenomenon of the Generic and its impact on both socio-political and mental levels. However, the topic is constantly gaining importance and relevance, as modern cities, for the reasons that will be listed below, are becoming more and more similar to each other. This research goes beyond the celebration of the authentic and draws attention to the phenomenon of the generic which is, in fact, not completely unknown, though its substance still remains rather vague. The questions that I would like to shed light on in my paper are thus as follows:

To what extent is a city perceived as itself? How do generic elements influence city landscapes? How do they contribute to the formation of a city image? Can the Generic be seen as something omnipotent and empowering? I would like to investigate the final concern through undertaking an artistic experiment and creating a visual narrative for a generic context.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into three sections. It begins with the literature review and presents the most relevant studies on the subject of Authenticity and the Generic in relation to the context of urban cities. The aim of this part is to collect information and define a series of the problems that I am going to address in the course of the research. In the second part, dedicated to methodology of the study, I move onto the explanation of my methods choice and the reasons why these means of investigation are most appropriate in the given context.

The mysterious nature of the subject and distinct subjectivity that it is approached with made me consider the form of the artistic research. The last section of the work contains clarification of the research context and introduces the case study city in its historical perspective. This chapter deals with my artistic project and touches upon the creative outcome produced in the course of research.

Finally, I bring together results of the research and reiterate my understanding of the significance of the authentic and generic. I reflect upon the contribution that this knowledge could make to further studies on the modern city image and the controversial impact of the generic at the scale of contemporary landscape and subjective human perception.

2. URBAN MORPHOLOGY / GENERIC & AUTHENTIC

The body of literature on cities and urbanism seems to be inexhaustible, as the range of disciplines relatable to urban studies includes sociology, economics, history, geography, tourist studies, architecture, planning and so forth. Transformation of city forms and structures over time is a matter of concern to scholars and artists from all over the world, and the amount of exchange and discussion on various sub-topics within the field only adds to the complexity of the issue. Furthermore, cities are closely intertwined with ongoing contemporary challenges, such as the climate change, technological progress, pandemic crisis and many others. As a consequence, existing ideas and approaches are incomplete and unable to provide for a full and common understanding of the contemporary city.

With this in mind, I am going to begin with an overview of the concept of the city as such and, as far as possible, give an idea of how it was and how it is understood and experienced nowadays. In the following subchapter I would like to examine the general body of literature addressing such issues as Authenticity and the Generic through the prism of urban city identities. As my strongest interest lies in multidisciplinary aspects of the problem and the understanding a city as an interplay between all the above-mentioned areas of study, with emphasis on the atmosphere of city spaces and its influence on the emotional level, I don't intend on tracing the whole academic research on the urban sociology, which would fall beyond the scope of the paper.

Though the problem of authenticity has been receiving much attention and various approaches to the issue have been suggested over time, there is still considerable ambiguity with regard to the opposite phenomenon – the generic – as well as its meaning for the society and human perception. In the last sub-chapter I am going to succinctly present the concepts of the authentic and the generic using most relevant studies and provide the substance of these concepts.

2.1 Urban Morphology

Urban morphology can be described as a study of urban forms and transformations undergone by cities throughout their history, their characteristics and spatial patterns at various levels and scales.¹ In the following paragraphs I will focus on some ideas and attempts to provide systems and classifications for urban morphology.

The Chicago School of Urban Sociology in the beginning of the 20th century supposed that city was a unity, capable of adjusting itself to constant shifts in population numbers, demography and the physical environment.² Louis Wirth, one of the representatives of the School, believed that the three variables of a city were size, density and heterogeneity. With every change in one of the variables the identity of the city is supposed to change, and with an increase of any indicator the city becomes more urban. This was an influential theory of urban thinking until the appearance of the new urban sociology in 1970-s, representatives of which either paid attention to social relations (gender, race, class) as a factor of city form shaping, or gave priority to its symbolics and cultural meanings.

Theorists Michel de Certeau and Henry Lefebvre delved into the micro level of the urban living and examined the importance of everyday activities; the latter conceptualised the complicated interplay between rhythms of everyday life and global markets as a macro level. Lefebvre was also fascinated with the city rhythms – traffic noises, signals and symbols, seasonality – and considered them an essential part of urban experience and a prerequisite to formation of spatiality. Different activities make sense only conducted at a certain time. For example, adverse weather conditions encourage tourists to travel or poor weather increases sales of raincoats. Lefebvre argued that space can be imagined as a triad of material, imagined and lived spaces, which he called a combination of the *perceived*, *conceived* (or conceptualized) and *lived-representational* space, in other words, a triad of material, imagined and lived spaces.

Kevin Lynch proposed an interesting method for the evaluation of cities' forms and suggested that each of them could be decomposed into three interrelated

¹ Chen, "Urban Morphology and Citizens' Life" (accessed on November 26, 2020)

² Stevenson, *The City*, 11.

components: *identity, structure and meaning*.³ As a city undergoes constant changes, each component acquires new features and thus necessarily influences the other ones. Identity can be understood as a sense of place, a degree to which a place can possibly be recognized and recalled in memory, be distinct from others due to its vividness and set of particularities. As a result, the city exists in people's minds. Lynch outlined five elements, which constitute these mental images of cities: Paths (lines of motions like streets, pavements, railroads), Edges (barriers like walls, shorelines, buildings), Districts (two-dimensional areas), Nodes (anchor points, areas that one can enter), and Landmarks (prominent objects as signs, public art, etc.).

Analysing the anatomy and urban conditions of contemporary cities, Deborah Stevenson suggests dividing a city into three layers: *conceptual level* (city as an idea), *material level* (city occupies real space and is formed in response to some macro and micro processes) and *experienced level* (lived, sensory and enveloping dimensions of a city).⁴ The key to the deeper understanding of the authenticity lies in taking the invisible – the experienced level – into account, which means treating a city as a living organism with its intertwining relationships and dynamics.

For quite obvious reasons urban sociologists have never been able to produce a unified system that would make some judgement on city's image possible with the same set of criteria; it would be like seeking a "theory of everything" only in the context of urban studies.⁵ According to the architect Aldo Rossi, whose main interest lied in the transformation of the European city, it is pointless and naïve to be limited to the tangible features like a city layout or geographical position and ignore meanings and historical events connected to it, as they are contributors to the city's soul. Collective memory of a city becomes "the guide to its structure"⁶, buildings embody the past and the future of a city in the present. Thus, Rossi and other researchers believed in the importance of the subjective within the city framework, the role of human experience and interaction as a part of the city authenticity.

³ Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 10.

⁴ Stevenson, p. 3

⁵ Stevenson, p. 10

⁶ Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, p.7.

2.2 Authenticity in the Urban Context

The generally accepted definition of *authenticity* – quality of being real, true and genuine⁷ – sounds much easier than the concept that hides underneath. Being true is the quality quite complicated to crystallize; it can be interpreted as being true to oneself, remaining oneself and sticking to the identity.

In the context of urban landscapes identity is normally expected to be an essential ingredient for a modern city, a characteristic that makes it stand out or at least provides to the observer something to associate it with. Upon arrival at a new place, in this case a contemporary city, the first thing people are likely to get the idea of the city as a whole picture and burn this image into memory with all its particularities. However, filtration itself is rather specific: one can admire distinctive features such as buildings, squares and public spaces, claiming that they are special, while others find them absolutely unremarkable. One can draw a conclusion that a certain set of patterns is enough to call a city authentic while others may experience strong flashbacks to other places and associate individual details with those of other cities they have seen before. Who would be right and who would be mistaken? Or is any judgement on the authenticity subjective either way?

Emotional engagement is as important in experiencing a city as the built space.

Cities can inspire, discourage, motivate, create a sense of belonging or alienation and enable certain actions. “People identify individually and collectively with where they live, with a particular house, in a particular street, in a particular neighbourhood, town, city or region.”⁸ Walter Benjamin, the critical theorist whose field of interest included connection of city and memory, was first to introduce the figure of *flâneur*, a person who experienced urban life through the act of strolling along the streets and absorbing meanings, hidden beneath the city fabric.⁹ Benjamin believed that space had a doubly nature: “On the one hand, these are the projections of a mental picture

⁷ Cambridge Online Dictionary.

⁸ Stevenson, p. 3

⁹ Stevenson, p. 106

to the real world, and on the other hand, the material world is turned into a signifier of psychological space”.¹⁰

The same lines are followed by Edward Relph, a present time humanistic geographer with a strong interest in the complex interplay between human experience and physical places. In his best-known book *Place and Placelessness* (first published in 1976), he questions the definition of place as merely a location. Relph explicitly examines notions of space and place, the interrelationship of human every-day experience, meanings and emotions with their surroundings, thus paying attention to the sense of place and its meaning for people. Juxtaposing possibilities of authentically or inauthentically experienced places, he draws a conclusion that the authentic sense of place of the modern era dissolves in the shadow of *placelessness* – a phenomenon of the extension of insignificant landscapes and replacement of the world’s diverse places with anonymous casual ones.¹¹ Thorough description of typical for generic cities anonymous spaces will be given further.

As a multi-layered entity, contemporary city consists of buildings, cultures, social structures and memories, “cumulative reality in space and time”,¹² “historical time superimposed on each other or different architectural strata.”¹³ Aldo Rossi believed that a city is capable of transforming urban reality and can “change its face even in the course of one man’s life”. In his studies of different morphological approaches one can see criticism of attempts to catalogue architectural elements that a city consists of and treat cities like fixed entities¹⁴, as their functions shift according to circumstances. This opinion was shared by M. Christine Boyer, who points out that time puts its imprint on the already existing physical structures and all human memories and cultures are being incorporated into the everchanging context. In her analysis of the city memory and transformation she claims that the city’s name might be the only constant against the built landscape, which is a field for architectural and urbanistic experimentation, quite a controversial issue in the postmodernist context. The city identity is “embedded within the layers of sentiments and meanings derived

¹⁰ Laanemets, *Places That Remember*.

¹¹ Seamon, Sowers, *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph, p. 46.

¹² IEREK, “*The Identity of the City*”.

¹³ Boyer, *The city of collective memory*, p.19.

¹⁴ Khachatryan, *Architectural Context Part 3*.

from various symbolic sources within the city, such as the built form, culture, history and the meaningful association of all these.”¹⁵ Hence, unfolding and looking at the layers of the city is the way to explore its authenticity.

The Danish architect Jan Gehl, famous for his reflections on the interaction between the built form and well-being, as well as the influence of the environment on human behaviour, understood life as a starting point of every architectural object.¹⁶ In communicating with their built environment, people establish relationships to their surroundings, apply to them cultural meanings and their imagination. Consequently, the built form appears to be more than a physical structure in the spatial dimension – a representation of the community, embodiment of the inhabitants’ collective memory and an indicator of their respect of historical context preservation.¹⁷ Drawing upon the famous Lefebvre’s concept of the production of social space, urbanist Francesca Piazzoni argues that authenticity is a *practice-related condition*, dynamic relationship among people, places, and meanings which unites the conceived, perceived, and lived dimensions of space.¹⁸

Sometimes the competition among cities makes planners in the pursuit of economic benefits and desire to give the city a “unique” image develop special strategies or invite world famous architects to create outstanding landmarks. An emblematic case is the *Bilbao effect*: the opening of the Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry in Bilbao was a huge success and the wow-factor of its appearance not only made the Spanish city and the architect world-famous but also set an example of how “cultural investment plus showy architecture is supposed to equal economic uplift for cities down on their luck.”¹⁹ The crucial issue which is overlooked in this situation is that a tourist begins to consider visual symbols as representations of authenticity. In recent years the issue of city branding has gained in importance. *Brandscape* – an accurate term coined by John Sherry in 1986 – is a combination of *brand* and *landscape* and is used in the situation where advertising products and city spaces occurs at the same time, which can be perfectly illustrated on the example of the Times Square

¹⁵ Shrestha, “*Expression of cultural Identity*”, p. 492.

¹⁶ Brammer, “Q&A: Jan Gehl on Healthy Cities and the Real Meaning of Architecture”.

¹⁷ Elewa, *Conserving historical areas through the roles of main cities*, p.474.

¹⁸ Piazzoni, *Authenticity Makes the City*, p. 155.

¹⁹ Moore, “*The Bilbao effect*”.

and its overwhelming billboards in New York. Nowadays the city image can be easily rebranded and manipulated, its cultural meanings minimized to slogans and mottos aimed at attraction of tourists.

Speaking of the authenticity and sense of place, one cannot leave out the concept of *genius loci*. Originally meaning *the genius of the place*, the Latin term *genius loci* is nowadays used in the sense of unique atmosphere of a place.²⁰ The Norwegian theorist Norberg-Schulz in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* suggested that *genius loci* can be understood as a totality of four dimensions: the topography of the Earth's surface; the light conditions and the sky as natural conditions; buildings and the combination of symbolic and existential meanings in the cultural landscape.²¹ From the author's perspective, each place represents an archetypical architectural act, so the identity of the city implies distinctive meaning and importance.

All of the above-mentioned ideas provide different approaches to the concept of authentic. However, considered altogether they seem to have one thing in common: the authenticity of a city is an unrepeatable phenomenon in the state of constant change. Sharon Zukin's understanding of authenticity is that of a complex tension between old, historic, deep-rooted elements and new, creative, innovative forces²². The concept of authenticity demands personal experience which cannot be exported or taken outside the city limits. Authenticity should be considered on a deeper level through the prism of multifaceted characteristics. A universal approach has not been found yet, so the scholars and researchers keep suggesting their ways of observing the phenomenon depending on the context and particular needs.

2.3 Challenges to Urban Authenticity

The analysis in the previous chapter has shown that for a city – a complex mixture of material, spiritual, social and political conditions – authenticity cannot be just an

²⁰ Oxford Reference.

²¹ Architabanerjeeblog, "*Genius Loci*".

²² Zukin, "*Reconstructing the authenticity of place*".

attribute of the physical place. Before proceeding to the concept and issue of the generic, it is important to reflect upon the current challenges to the urban authenticity and trace the origins of the issue.

We are living in the era of the city dominance, also called the “golden age of cities”,²³ characterized by rapid density growth and high level of urbanization. It is no longer surprising that 68% of the world population are supposed to be living in urban areas by 2050,²⁴ which also means two-thirds of people will be facing challenges of life in globalised cities.

Globalisation and gentrification are the topics most frequently addressed by urbanists. Gentrification, a term first coined in 1960-s, is a spatial, social, economic and cultural process at the same time. A mechanism of rehabilitation of working-class neighbourhoods by higher-income developers, it is usually perceived as a controversial event. On one hand, gentrification includes the influx of creative energy, active money inflow and revitalization of poorer areas, reducing crime rates, beautification and infrastructure development.²⁵ At the same time, the process is associated with displacement of long-term residents from their communities due to rising living costs and rents, replacing small business with expansive chain stores and, most importantly in the context of identity, erasing the authentic atmosphere of the neighbourhoods. Globalisation is another crucial factor which influences modern cityscapes. It means rise of the global economy, travelling ideas and cultural exchange. Contemporary world is shaped by social exchange and ideas flowing from cities, aimed at city dwellers, inspired by urban life and furthermore driven by economic and political processes concentrated in cities. As a trend toward the development of single world culture, globalisation tends to shape unified “global cities” and questions the traditional core-periphery relationship.

Besides, the past few decades cities have been undergoing a digital revolution. Striking development of social media is the brightest example of how modern technologies not only change our daily routine and behaviour but also affect the objective city image. Social media hold the power of shaping the public sphere, for

²³ Stevenson, p. 1

²⁴ United Nations, “68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050”.

²⁵ Wainwright, “Gentrification is a global problem”.

instance, through developing so-called “social media architecture”. This latest phenomenon means that social network users design their routes in accordance to the places where the so-called “social media architecture”²⁶ is located or let their apps lead the way somewhere, show some sights and find places to visit based on Internet rating and algorithms. It also influences the way people interact with their surroundings and estimate their importance.

Megapolises of the twenty-first century offer quite obvious advantages: acceleration of all industrial relations and logistics as from the capitalist perspective, tight social bonds as a premise of scientific and technological development. At the same time, city expansion poses a threat to the society due to such risks as ethnic conflicts and anonymity, sustainability and environmental issues or even political system crises.²⁷

All in all, changes taking place nowadays have a strong impact on urban spaces that surround us, as well as our perception of them. So, do these challenges of the modernity headed by globalisation call into question the possibility of cities to differ? Does it necessarily mean that any city identity will gradually fade out and what will it mean for the society? To answer, or at least touch upon the roots of the problem and its possible solutions, I will proceed to the analysis of the concept of the generic.

2.4 The Generic City

Continuous process of globalisation encourages the occurrence of fragmentation, which in the broadest sense of the word is usually associated with segregation, disintegration and homogenization. A fragmented urban city is a set of “disconnected patches of urban fabric.”²⁸ Discussion of the undefined urban territories over the past couples of decades have raised the issue of the *generic*. Opposite to monumental or symbolic constructions, generic elements can be duplicated, converted or exchange without making any substantial difference.

²⁶ Fiocco, Pistone, “*Good Content Vs Good Architecture*”.

²⁷ Magid, “*Civilisation of Gigaplois*”.

²⁸ Angel, Parent, Civco, *The fragmentation of urban landscapes*, p. 249.

One of the greatest trends of the Post-Second World War urbanization was the urban sprawl. Introduced in America in the 1950-s, the concept of sprawl can be defined as an unstoppable “urban growth spilling out from the edges of towns”,²⁹ also associated with notions of periphery, urban nebulae, exurbia, étalement urbain or la città diffusa. *Sprawltown* is a term by Richard Ingersoll that means the motivation to find advantages in situations “that have been alienated from any trace of community”³⁰, in other words to make us of the dramatic influence of sprawl on urban mosaic. He compares the disorderliness and ugliness of chaotic urban settlements to a film lacking a proper montage and clear narrative. *Jump cut urbanism* is what he suggests as a possible perception of and solution to the problem of undefined urban territories. From his point of view typical for sprawl disorientation with its cars, billboards and placelessness has become the new normal and the new habit.”³¹

The German architect Thomas Sieverts reflected upon the substitution of the historic European city by the new urbanized form that he called *Zwischenstadt* (the in-between city) and that is mostly characterized by erasing the contrast between countryside and city. The homogenization of cities and their merging with in-between places was treated very negatively by the architectural journalist Ian Nairn. In his article *Outrage* Nairn criticizes British postwar housing standards on the whole and mindless repetition of townscape elements in particular, claiming that it even endangered the personal individuality.³² The term he coined to describe the universalization of suburbia was *subtopia*, represented in his *Route Book* as a documentation of all similar views and elements on his way from Southampton to Carlisle.

²⁹ Ingersoll, *Sprawltown*, p. 11.

³⁰ Ingersoll, p. 14.

³¹ Ingersoll, p. 12

³² Parnell, “*Ian Nairn*”.



Illustration 1: A spread from the *Route Book* by Ian Nairn documenting the way from Southampton to Carlisle. (Source: architectural-review.com)



Illustration 2: Spreads from the *Route Book* by Ian Nairn. (Source: architectural-review.com)

As an example, corresponding to criteria of jump cut urbanism he mentions the legendary project of Euraville accomplished in 1989.³³ The master plan by Koolhaas represents an ambitious program for about 800,000 square metres of various urban activities in Lille, France. Its aesthetics of highways, subways, parking lots and high-speed railways linking Paris, Brussels and London is romanticized to such a degree that the whole it reminds more of a movie setting than reality. Speed, scale, mass, volume, depth and light – all these elements serve to creating a visual effect and special atmosphere. Ingersoll claims that infrastructure may be perceived as a reimagined version of ready-made art when treated separately from their basic functional connotation. Thrill encouraged by traffic speed, intriguing neon lights or excitement encouraged by a swirl of road junction are incentives to “unconditional aesthetic pleasure” and symbolise some kind of “painful beauty”.



Illustration 3: The Euralille Project. (Source: oma.eu)

“The city is no longer. We can leave the theatre now”. This is the conclusion of the essay *The Generic City* by the most controversial architect of modernity Rem

³³ OMA, “Euralille”.

Koolhaas and an apotheosis of exploration of the generic. The concept of *Generic City* proposed by Koolhaas in 1994 encompasses the global scenario of urban problems of the end of the past century. Disappearing of the European city's historical soul as a sequence of market economy and increased mobility or the loss of a hierarchically structured city are no longer considered a tragedy but a liberation of an outdated order. For Koolhaas, a generic city breaks with tradition and freely defines itself: it is as large and as simple as it needs to be dependent on its own demands and functions. A Generic City can easily expand itself by multiplying already existing modules, it is a highest level of multiple-choice concept, borderless, impossible to map or define.

For Koolhaas, contemporary architecture has reached an absolutely special and hopeless point where erasing of last traces of specificity is already inevitable. In his opinion, houses "ohne Eigenschaften" (without qualities) and urban places with formal substance are spreading faster than ever in the human history, so the surfaces of contemporary cities are turning to some kind of an endangered species, eventually inverting the absence of any specificity, "programmatical voids and undefined sites" to the normal.³⁴ City centres are too narrow, so the periphery has become a destination for architectural speculation. Generic City keeps remains of its history only as a monument to once lost identity. However, history is treated as an industry and production of memories, like a never-ending déjà vu.

He believes in the pointlessness of attempts to reinvent the unliveable historical city centres already traumatized by intrusive preservation and process of being turned into fake antiques. Instead he suggests shifting the focus towards the abandoned industrial zones, tabulae rasae and suburban neighbourhoods instead.³⁵ City wastelands hold a vast opportunity for reinvention and adjustment to modernity which at the same time takes the load of the old cities helping to preserve their heritage. His bold idea of identity is almost rebellious: "Identity is like a mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait... The stronger identity, the more it imprisons, the more it resists expansion, interpretation, renewal, contradiction."³⁶

³⁴ Van Dijk, *The Architect is Obligated to Be an Honorable Man*, p. 336.

³⁵ Buruma, *Leave Old Cities Alone*, p. 329.

³⁶ Koolhaas, *The Generic City*, p. 1248.

Generic City is superficial: it changes its image as soon as the previous one gets worn out, it offers space for any amount of people and is able to collapse at any moment. Speaking of relevant cases, Koolhaas argues that Paris is so overdetermined in its identity that it turns into a caricature version of itself. London, on the contrary, is almost unique due its absolute lack of clear identity. What Koolhaas means is of course the multifaceted nature, openness of London and the state of unpredictable change. Barcelona from the perspective of the architect is an example of how a special city oversimplifies its identity and becomes generic and transparent.

French anthropologist Marc Augé studied a very similar phenomenon of *non-places* of supermodernity caused by the urban growth. These are anonymous and faceless territories which people fail to relate or establish emotion connection to, such as motorways, airport lounges, supermarkets and parking lots. A person who has got an entrance ticket may enter such place in role of a customer or driver and enjoy “passive joys of identity-loss.”³⁷ Time is caught in a trap while a driver rushes across a bridge and the only system of coordinates existing at the moment is the billboard messages and traffic reports on the radio. Lack of remarkable and special leads to the paradox of non-place: a foreigner lost in a country he does not know (*passing stranger*) can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorway, service stations, big stores or hotel chains³⁸ that may seem familiar and evoke memories of the past. To give a sense of such places he uses words *transit*, *crossroads*, *passenger*, thus highlighting the instability of volatile urban terms. Non-places are spaces where supermodernity manifests itself to the fullest.

Another important question is as follows: How do people feel themselves in the environment of the generic? Taking basic everyday actions, a city dweller unconsciously adapts to the complex city environment and its aggressive stimuli, resulting in formation of metropolitan type³⁹ – urban temperament for coping with stressful city conditions. In the generic city this process is becoming rather depressing – people are afraid of becoming anonymous, as if they have never even

³⁷ Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 103.

³⁸ Augé, p. 106.

³⁹ Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, p. 11.

As mentioned earlier, postmodern architecture is well known for playing with historical quotation.⁴¹ Attempts of playing with symbolism and allusions tend to end up as cliché or insulting the tradition. Koolhaas states that postmodernism is the only movement that “has succeeded in connecting the practice of architecture with the practice of panic”,⁴² thus meaning that no other method would ever be able to cope with the exuberant development speed. The postmodern architecture of the generic city is an embodiment of *varied boredom* which is the totally exhausted variety making no more sense.

Auge believed that non-places possessed a “power of attraction”⁴³ and distracts a passer-by from the weight of his concerns and provides some sort of calming loneliness. Journalist Grady Clay in his book *Real Places: An Unconventional Guide to Americas Generic Landscape* has collected and compared one hundred and twenty generic places like Flea Market, Vacant Lot and Suicide Spot, to draw a conclusion that generic elements “have to latitude no matter how much we take in describing them. They have no longitude, but without them we cannot navigate in today’s world.”⁴⁴

A city without history, which is “equally exciting and unexciting everywhere”,⁴⁵ liberated of any identity holds an uncontrollable power of attraction. Through uncommon metaphors and mesmerizing associations Koolhaas describes the fascinating beauty of the Generic City. It is a *smooth space* that cannot be measured in dimensions, with its pleasure of pure speed and isolated skyscrapers. Roads, buildings and nature are the key attributes of its landscapes, intertwining in a free style. Haus der Architektur Graz compared the phenomenon of Europe’s changing city landscapes to the display of an expiry date: contemporary communication forms together with new mobility possibilities and labour market leave historic city centres as merely backgrounds for touristic activities.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Stevenson, p. 106.

⁴² Koolhaas, p. 1262.

⁴³ Augé, p. 118

⁴⁴ Nocker, “*Non Places and the Generic City*”.

⁴⁵ Koolhaas, p. 1250.

⁴⁶ Hubeli, Bormann, *100% Stadt – der Abschied vom Nicht-Städtischen*, p. 186.

All in all, Generic City is a dichotomy: its controversial nature holds a huge and almost supernatural potential. Idyllic, authentic and nostalgic are all foreign concepts in context of the Generic City. Its bold appearance – picturesque deterioration – and straightforward strategy may be considered either destructive or creative, but the reality is that as a postmodern phenomenon it accomplishes its purpose and gives a pragmatic solution to the urban challenge without even proposing it.

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3 METHODOLOGY

Following the introduction and the explanation of notions necessary for my research, as well as going through the body of literature addressing the issue of the generic, I would like to explain my choice of the artistic research on the whole and its methods in particular, including the appropriateness of the artistic research in the given context. The points I am going to touch upon are the nature of the artistic research, actual contradictions related to it and the opportunities that it reveals. A comment I should make is that neither generally accepted definitions, nor rules of creation and evaluation of the result in the context of an artistic research exist, the reasons for which will be given in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Artistic Research

The debate around the position of artistic research is mainly present within the institutional framework and is treated differently dependent on personal views. As the tradition of artistic research is young and innovative, its premise in both artistic and scientific context is still not perfectly clear, as well as its right to stand aside the traditional scientific research.

An *artistic research* can be interpreted as a *result of the artist's reflection on his creative work, which adds to the accumulation of knowledge*,⁴⁷ a self-critical process of production of meaning in the framework of contemporary art. This process can be characterized by the artistic experimentality and spontaneity, diversity and appropriation of research and presentation tools and the interpretative quality of the work. Important in this regard is that artists are able to critically reflect on their perspective and place their art works in the historical and disciplinary context, thus letting art and research flow together organically. "Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes."⁴⁸ The artist should address relevant issues relevant in the research context and in the contemporary art world employing experimental and hermeneutic methods embodied in their artistic

⁴⁷ Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, *Artistic Research*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Borgdorf, *The Conflict of the Faculties Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, p. 205.

pieces and processes. Moreover, it is crucial that the process should be documented, as well as the outcome presented to the public and the research community for the supplementation of knowledge and further studies.

The question on the need and meaning of the artistic research should be approached through such aspects as rethinking the figure of artist and the potential of collaborative practices, analyse connections between art and current trends in technology, power and economic relationships and interpret works of art as products of high cultural, pedagogical and political value.⁴⁹ The art critic Mika Hannula suggests that the artistic research should be critically negotiated and accepted within the field of art education so that artists could have more courage to be experimental and even anarchist, which means that artistic research is a combination of both theoretical and artistic approach aimed at the production of knowledge. The departure point of any project is a desire to communicate something to someone and thorough exposition of the artist's motives. The exposition should give answers to the questions: Why is it important that the research is conducted in the field of visual art? What is the reason for the choice of methodological tools and how are they appropriate?⁵⁰

3.2 Methods of Artistic Research

The range of methodological approaches suitable for an artistic research is wide: there is no best option, because each research needs to be carried out in a different way depending on the case. In the context of art, it is even possible to develop one's own research method. Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, Tere Vadén presented five approaches for an artistic research: (1) conversation and dialogue, (2) analysis of media representations and objects, (3) collaborative case studies, (4) interventions and ethnography and (5) design-based research⁵¹. The first method which is called *conversation and dialogue* is described as a discursive writing aimed at ideological critique of the unattainable. Using language as a linguistic tool, artists shape viewpoints and in some way construct the world. *The analysis of media*

⁴⁹ Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Slager, *Methododicy*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, *Artistic Research*.

representations and objects is opposite to reception of the popular culture (critical reading of it) and in some sense response to the belief that art serves as popular culture and operates through collecting and analysing available raw data, both material – magazines, posters, postcards, leaflets – and media – archives of exhibitions, radio, web pages and chats on Internet, etc. Everything that encourages creative activity may be included to the list of research data. The outcome depends on the conceptual and interpretational skills of the artist. *Collaborative studies*, as the name suggests, include participation of other people rather than the researcher, so the process is seen as an open activity. *Ethnography* is about learning through experiencing, which means living in the community that is being studied, observing the world from its perspective through everyday situations, as opposed to artistic experimentality. Main sources of data in such case are observation, discussion and interviews. As far as intervention goes, the first thing that comes to mind is urban art, which occurs in public spaces, communicates a social message and is determined by circumstances and opportunities of the given context.

In the *practice-based research* practice is perceived as the most interesting part of the project. In the course of such research the artists rely upon earlier studies in the field of interest and analyses the practical background. The emphasis on the practice results in carrying out design work or studying other design projects. The very similar approach is the *design-based research*, the difference being that the design part not only concretizes the result of the theoretical one, but rather acts as a research tool in the study of the issue with sketches as its main attribute.

Artistic research may be compared to a journey with no destination. James McAllister believes that the artistic research exists in the works of art themselves⁵² due to unique knowledge about the world they contain. Professor of Visual Art and Knowledge Systems at Malmö Art Academy called artistic research a “work in progress” where the twister-word of progress links to James Joyce and implies that the end of the project can never be attained and any stage is only a stop on the way to some gross state.⁵³ This is the reason why most projects in the art sphere are ongoing. Another important remark is that the job cannot be fully scripted in advance

⁵² McAllister, *Seven Claims*, p. 22.

⁵³ Maharaj, *Unfinishable Sketch of “An Unknown Object in 4D”*, p. 40.

and should be treated as something unknown. The flow of the artistic intention is quite unpredictable, “both possibility and risk,”⁵⁴ and is not to be put into a frame of the academic research. The final part of the research cannot give an absolute answer; however, it should summarize the present a reflection upon the experiences and justify its importance for further investigations. Dombos assumes that the original contribution of the research may be presented in any form of artistic creativity: film, pictures, sculpture, etc.⁵⁵

Specific methods for an artistic research depend on the terrain. Diverse character of the artistic field gives various possibilities. Speaking of methods appropriate for conducting a design-related research, some methods that I should are mind mapping, drawing in all forms as a means of visualization, photography, video and audio creation, experimentation with forms and materials, reflective journaling, story boards and visual diaries.⁵⁶ There is also a range of social scientific approaches that can be re-contextualized for the inquiry, such as interviews, surveys, case study or multiple sorting. In some cases, a triangulation is needed – a combination of two or more different methods of gathering information for getting a wider perspective.

3.3 Methods of Research in this Thesis

Thanks to the abundance of methods, suitable for an artistic research, I had a wonderful opportunity to choose not only the most appropriate but also the ones that inspire me the most. As a result, I chose three methods: making fieldnotes, taking photographs and collage. The latter can be seen as a documentation tool and as a technique in the creation of my final project – collage as an outcome and summary of the artistic research.

Fieldnotes

Sketchbook is a useful tool for capturing visual ideas in form of drafts and notes, digital as well as in form of a portable book. The idea of a sketchbook flows into a

⁵⁴ Hannula, *River Low, Mountain High*, p. 70.

⁵⁵ Dombos, *Kunst als Forschung*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Vaughan, *Pieced together*.

concept of reflective journal (also known as research notes, or research diary), which is a “comprehensive store of practice-based thought and action, with evidence and example”⁵⁷. Compared to sketchbook, this is a more deliberate method in the way that it includes multiple types of resources and relevant information, for instance: thoughts and reflections, references, magazine cuts, documentation, work in progress, schemes and diagrams, material samples, all dated and arranged chronologically or within a certain system. “Fieldnotes can be understood as an objective record of observations made in a particular setting.”⁵⁸

Fieldnotes can be seen as a melting pot for all of the different ingredients of a research project – prior experience, observations, readings, ideas – and a means of capturing the resulting interplay of elements. There are no particular rules for making it, everything should work for the purpose of the artist. For example, chronological order and strict timeline play no important role in the process of notetaking. Sanjek and Emerson, in the discussion of the anthropological research, suggested that *jottings* – scratch notes to be written in full later – was a good option for a notetaker, because during the observation spending much time on producing extended notes is not reasonable⁵⁹. Another distinctive feature of the research diary is that it does not have to be adjusted for the reader. Its main purpose is accumulation of sketches and ideas, which means that notes can appear in any style and manner for the author’s further use.

Photography

Photography as a method of keeping a visual diary has certain advantages in the research process. First of all, photography in this sense is not only a way to capture the present moment but also a way of documentation and reflection on everyday life. Visual narratives embraced by photos help artists to reveal the issue of their work and expand the borders for the wider interpretation. Artists also have an ability to express themselves through taking pictures by deciding on composition, angle and

⁵⁷ Malins, Gray, *Visualizing Research*, p. 114.

⁵⁸ Newbury, “*Diaries and fieldnotes in the research process*”.

⁵⁹ Newbury.

camera settings, though these tools of self-expression are not really necessary for situations where obtaining photos is a method and a process rather than the goal.

There are also a couple of drawbacks in terms of relying on photographs as a method. Photos can hardly compete in reliability with some other methods of sociological research. Photographs can also be difficult for objective interpretation and presentation. Nevertheless, these drawbacks do not refer to the field of artistic research. What really matters is the concern that photographs encompass only two-dimensional perspective, therefore, what might be left behind is a spatial experience. To reduce the risk of getting unilateral vision I follow a multifaceted approach through combining several methods of artistic research, namely photography, fieldnotes, observation and collage.

Collage

Originally, *collage* (“to stick” from the French language)⁶⁰ stands for various materials glued together on a surface, a work of art “in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface.”⁶¹ Associated primarily with the beginning of modernism in the twentieth century, collage can be found in works of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who reexamined their paintings and drawings by adding patches of different materials to them. Since then collage has been developed by artists of all fields and styles and expanded beyond the two-dimensional system. New forms of collage emerged, such as: photomontage, decoupage as craft, digital collage and collage in time-based media. Urban-inspired *dé-coll/age*, the principle developed by the German artist Wolf Vostell (1932–1998), was about all kinds of torn-off posters, often burned or smeared. The idea of deconstruction with the purpose of creating something new was actually a tradition running from the Dadaism.⁶² Vostell was one of the first artists to add television sets to his art, applying the *dé-coll/age* technique to video materials as well.

⁶⁰ Reilly, “Stick ‘em up!”.

⁶¹ Tate, “Collage”.

⁶² Tanner, “Art is Life – Life is Art”.

However, collage goes far beyond the notion of a resulting artwork, and in the context of an arts-based research the concept adopts more meanings. As a cut-and-paste technique collage is a creative “juxtaposition of ideas, elements and concepts to create new meanings.”⁶³ What seems to me interesting at this point is the study of Brockelman on the hidden potential of the collage concept within contemporary culture and architecture. The author explores collage as a condition and pure representation of the postmodern system with its heterogeneity and post-structuralism.⁶⁴

Lukas Feireiss, director of the temporary collage-inspired program Radical Cut-Up at Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam, speaking on key concepts of his creative approach in one of his lectures, brought up the importance of being critically aware of where the pieces of a collage are taken from, also mentioning the famous quote by McLuhan “The medium is the message”.⁶⁵ Philosopher by training, he accentuated that creative theory is a good starting point for artistic work, and a truly conceptual approach always implies using theory. He compared it to growing a seed without knowing what will come out of it.

The British architect Gordon Cullen, who was working on methodology for visual analysis of modern cities and gained recognition as the pioneer of the Townscape movement⁶⁶ in his book *Townscape* (1961) explained his technique of *serial vision*, suggesting that city could be experienced as consequently unfolding film stills. During his architecture career, Cullen not only produced a large number of case studies on urban planning but also worked as draftsman and illustrated several books, including his own. One of his favorite techniques was to mix images from magazines, newspapers, advertisements, catalogs together with his own sketches, thus creating an architectural bricolage.

Cullen also used to redraw photographs and edit pictures through layering drafts on tracing paper over the original sketch⁶⁷, experimented with shifting viewing angles, zoom, close-ups and text elements, which contributed to his fondness of cinematic

⁶³ Marshall, *Visible Thinking*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Vaughan, *Pieced together*.

⁶⁵ Feireiss, Lecture at Weißensee Kunsthochschule.

⁶⁶ Caves, *Encyclopedia of the city*, p. 156.

⁶⁷ Caves, p. 57.

techniques. Photomontage and modification of existing pictures were his “research tools for discovering ideas and gaining inspiration”, where choice of particular elements was dictated by the artistic intuition and the outcome determined by the intended message.

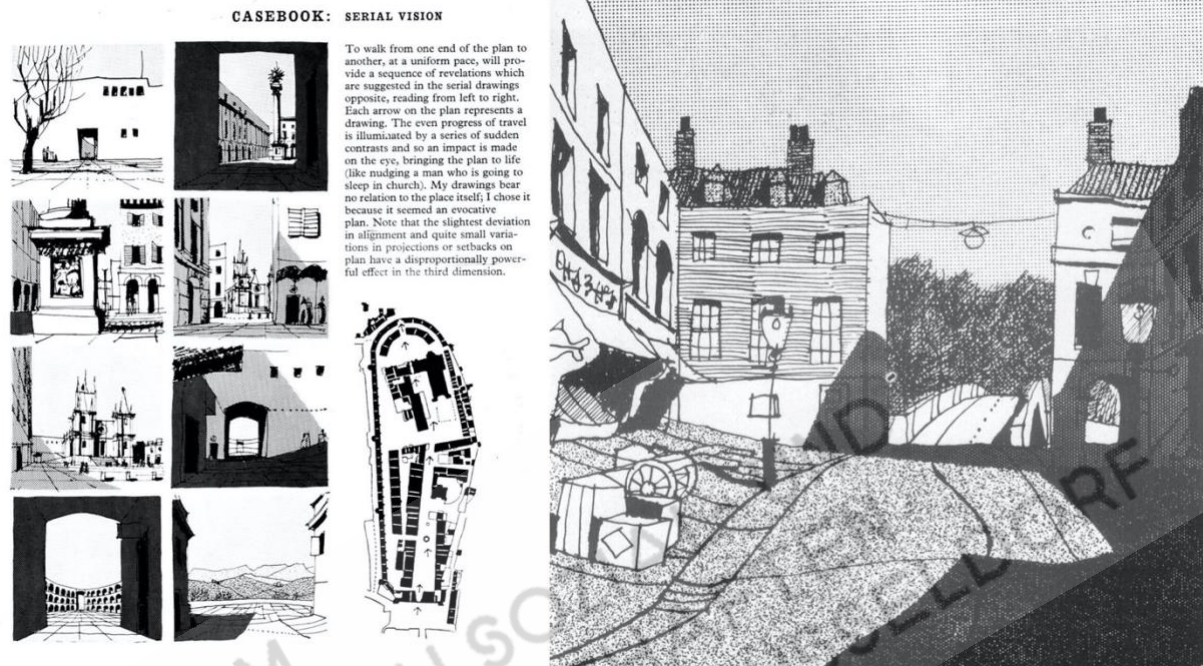


Illustration 5: Townscape by Gordon Cullen. (Source: arquitechne.com)

Mixed media as a usage of various materials gives a good opportunity to oppose different realms: abstract and realistic, imagined space and built space. At the traveling comprehensive exhibition *Cities on the Move (1997-1999)* curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru viewers were invited to a journey through the mutating urban landscape of East Asian cities in rapid flux through the city-related projects in different mixed media forms. More than seventy artists, filmmakers, and architects critically reflected upon the exploding population growth, ever-evolving modernization and globalization, overwhelming implementation of new technologies. Some of the works were sculptures, installation art, panoramas showing hyper-architecture, performances, video, photography and paintings. Sophisticated interplay of media communicates additional meanings and opens up a broader perspective to a viewer. Subjective pieces collected and arranged in one collage together contribute to the emergence of an objective composition.

Installations by Sarah Sze consist of daily objects and projections rearranged with an intention to create an immersive environment and new perception experiences that mesmerize the viewer. Her artwork *Centrifuge* gives an opportunity to teleport from an exhibition space to a vibrant city environment through a constellation of various materials, shadowplay and lighting tricks.



Illustration 6: Centrifuge by Sarah Sze. (Source: Haus der Kunst)

City's materiality can be imagined as a story of its development, its interpretation can be compared to reading tree rings. It is no wonder that many artists have been fascinated by cities' generic peripheries. As far as my artistic research goes, the constellation of the three above-mentioned methods – note-taking, photography and collage – gives me an opportunity to simultaneously act as a critical observer, active commentator and designer during the process which will be thoroughly described in the following chapter.

4 THE PROJECT

The context I have chosen for my case study – city of Essen – is not an unreasonable choice. In this part of my work I will specify the context and touch upon the controversy of the generic applied to the terrain. Finally, I will outline the sources of my inspiration and provide insight to the creation of my project.

4.1 Overview Ruhrstadt

The Ruhr region, which in everyday speech is also called Ruhrstadt, or Ruhr City is one of the biggest conurbations in Europe. The metropolitan Ruhr region consists of more than twenty independent towns, which is why it is sometimes called the city of cities and is of special interest due to its fragmentary nature, formed through a significant structural change. Its identity was strongly influenced by the rapid economic growth and turbulence of the industrial development of the 19-20th centuries. After the First World War the Ruhr Region did not seem specifically distinguishable from other parts of the country, the formal German Empire. The strengthened investment and following construction boom linked to the intensive coal extraction industry took its beginning in the second half of the 1920s. As a consequence, the architecture of the region tended to manifest the bold pursuit of progress and stable development, making confident gestures in an emerging region instead of obligation to tradition.

The urban transformation of European cities since the 1970s has affected the Ruhr region as well and consequently the polycentric landscape started growing even more intensely. Disintegrated conglomerations without a distinct function hierarchy and structure, which once were outskirts, have turned into critical junctions. Over time, the dissolution of primary coal and steel industries has led to the recreation of former plants, abandoned industrial sites and old ports to cultural spaces, museums, sport and shopping facilities. All cities of the Ruhr Region can be described as average- sized and desolately mediocre,⁶⁸ among them Dortmund, Duisburg, Hagen, Bochum and Essen.

⁶⁸ De Michelis, *The Little City*, p. 17.

Speaking about the post-war transformation process in Western Germany in connection to the Bauhaus movement, Frank Maier-Solgek refers to the metaphor of *absorbing* cities proposed by Koolhaas: a global city absorbs global trends no matter how strong its identity is, so there is increasingly fewer room for experimentation and self-expression.⁶⁹ He also states that the development of the Ruhr region was specific and made a great contribution to the modern German architecture on the whole, with the brightest example being Zeche Zollverein. It also reflects the view of Paul Kahlfeldt, Professor of the TU Dortmund: “Through their appearance the buildings largely define the character of the place and strengthen its identity.”⁷⁰

Modern rapid railway system connects the cities of contemporary Ruhrstadt and makes it easy to get from one point to another for work, shopping or tourism. Catchment of places like CentrO in Oberhausen, one of Europe’s largest shopping malls, or the Arena Schalke, one of the most famous stadiums, compete with the almost invisible historic centres of the cities. Architectural historian and curator Bart Lootsma believes that Ruhrstadt needs to be approached from a new perspective to use its latent energies and existing forces. “Much has been invested in art and culture, but it is not clear whether this investment really leads to a structural change or is carried out only because there are no other ideas”⁷¹ and the visual identity seems to fail in keeping to the past industrial “fleur”. Understanding the legacy of the past epochs is essential for a sustainable development of the future and recognize the actual challenges. One of the actual trends is the region’s rapid population decline “only comparable with cities of former East Germany and Russia”,⁷² which causes the urban fabric’s intensive shrinking. The city of Essen, for instance, has lost about 120,000 inhabitants in the past 30 years.⁷³

At this point I would like to mention *Hollocore*⁷⁴ – the OMA project named in regard to the North Western Metropolitan Area comprising the Netherlands, Belgium, and the Ruhr region – gives an example of *entropy*, the condition that European metropolises find themselves in. With the population decrease these urban territories are slowly

⁶⁹ Maier-Solgek, *Zur Aktualität des Bauhauses*, p. 157.

⁷⁰ Kahlfeldt, *Architecture as Paradigm and Admonition*, p. 5.

⁷¹ Lootsma, *Ruhr City – a City that is, will be or has been*, p. 200.

⁷² Lootsma, p. 195.

⁷³ URBACT, “Essen”.

⁷⁴ OMA, “Hollocore”.

turning to “provincial sameness, leaving an urban vacuum”. At the same time Koolhaas claimed the sprawl to inevitably take the place of what remained redundant. The North Western Metropolitan Area is not a number of cities but a *Megacity*⁷⁵ of the London scale. Their grid is characterised by dense structure and lack of dominant centres and reminds of a park with stops in separate settlements. Nanne de Ru states that every town of the region “claims own identity, history and centrality, while numerous peripheries offer space for new cultures and identities to unfold.”⁷⁶ Thus, the authors’ observation points to the need of understanding the possible scenarios in a reality where constant exchange is taking place, the need to critically render the vector and negotiate consequences of the urban city development.

4.2 The City of Essen

First of all, I should make clear that I would like to abstain from presenting Essen as a generic city. As explained in the previous chapters, no fair judgement in terms of generic is possible and no definite classification allowing to make a bold statement exists. My choice of the case study is mainly dependent on two aspects: subjective personal experience on one hand and, on the other hand, a set of characteristics which make the framework of Essen a good scope for my research.

With the population of 591.807 people, Essen is the second biggest city in the State of North-Rhine Westfalia and the ninth largest city in the country. The centre of the German economic miracle in the 1950-1960s, the city is now an international economic hub and energy capital with headquarters of the two largest energy providers in Germany. The city is proud of such notable accomplishments as the titles of European Capital of Culture in 2010⁷⁷ and European Green Capital for 2017⁷⁸. Since 2001 the Zollverein Coal Mine and the mine belong in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and are perhaps the city’s most prominent landmarks.

⁷⁵ Secchi, *Medium-Sized Cities and the New Forms of the European Metropolis*, p. 34.

⁷⁶ Secchi, p. 197.

⁷⁷ Deutsche Welle, “Essen Named European Capital of Culture for 2010”.

⁷⁸ European Commission, “2017 – Essen”.

As a result of the allied bombing of the Second World War, ninety percent of the city centre was destroyed, as well as sixty percent of the suburbs. The city's post-war development is closely tied to the establishment of educational institutions, such as the University of Duisburg-Essen, Zollverein School of Management and Design, the Red Dot Museum and the Folkwang School (today the Folkwang University of the Arts) well-known by its director Alfred Fischer (Alfred Fischer-Essen), a prominent figure in the whole metropolitan region development, protagonist of architectural Expressionism.

4.3 Essence. The Outcome

Speaking of my personal experience, I have been to Essen regularly for half a year due to work, and I lived there for a week when I was kind of in-between places after moving out of the student residence. To be honest, my first impression of Essen was of a rather boring and unremarkable place. As I arrived at the main station and left the train, I was confronted by a number of faceless grey high-rise buildings, which separated me from the rest of the city. I wondered to myself how they could appear right in front of the main hub, ruining first impression of every traveler. At the same time, I felt amused by the vulgar indifference transmitted by the buildings and felt an impulse to explore if there was more beyond it.



Illustration 7: Essen, the central station, September 2020. (Source: Author)

My office is just an ordinary flat located in a peaceful neighborhood Rüttenscheid right behind the busy street (shortly called Rü by the locals) known for its cafés and small shops. There was nothing special to be found either and the rows of three to five story buildings looked like they could be found anywhere else in Germany. I eagerly explored other neighborhoods, traveled by foot, bus, tram and metro, saw the touristic landmarks as well as more hidden places. I must admit that the Zollverein complex made quite the impression, however, I still come to understand that it looks like many other industrial sites all around the region. Essen's mayor Wolfgang Reiniger once stated that Essen was a Europe in microcosm.⁷⁹ I find this opinion quite interesting in application to my personal experience and the context of the present research. Does it coincide with my assumption that the city structure fulfils the conditions of a generic city? These reflections only stimulated my interest in the place and motivated me to choose Essen for the study and continue exploring its urban landscape.



Illustration 8, 9: Essen, Rüttenscheid, October 2020. (Source: Author)

⁷⁹ Deutsche Welle.

My long-standing interest in urban city transformation and fascination by the category of generic places resulted in a couple of college proposals within my university classes. For instance, the City Blender project: a potential computer program which, on the basis of generic city elements, would enable compilation of details to any desired amount, ending up in some copy-paste city landscape. My intention was to encourage creativity with respect to rethinking city images, to experiment with existing shapes and meanings to the extent where the interplay becomes uncanny. The final project plan consisted of coding such a program, installing it on a computer connected with a printer, providing supplies and exhibiting the whole at some generic place in a number of the cities in Northern-Rhine Westfalia including the capital city Düsseldorf which, in my opinion, is a perfect setting for the implementation.

For the conduction of my practice-led, or design-based research in this paper I put more focus on the research itself, examining notions and embodiments of authentic and generic, collecting data and documenting reality using design-oriented methods that give me freedom to experiment and offer a great opportunity to collect the useful data for the outcome. The documentation of collected experiences on all stages from design to installation is an important element of my research. I develop subjective imagery through the photographic and design process, making use of concept maps, notes and sketches. In the beginning of my work I had only the slightest idea of the outcome, which can be explained by both the nature of the artistic research and my personal desire to see where the creative flow takes me during the process.

The conditions of COVID-19 pandemic, in which my research is being accomplished, has had a certain influence on the spectre of chosen methods and the work progress. Given the minimized interaction possibilities, the university closed (thankfully, I was given an opportunity to occasionally work on the project by arrangement), cities forced to a soft form of lockdown, uncertainty about the future, I had to be sure that the work does not suffer from any unexpected circumstances. Speaking of the challenge of the pandemic and its meaning to the art field, artist Sarah Sze said: "What it is to be human in this moment is so surreal, and so extreme, that the work that could come out of it—even if we don't understand what we're making as artists now—could be such an interesting and important historical document. We have literally walked off a cliff—we're in freefall, and we'll only understand it in

retrospect.”⁸⁰ I share this position and hope that the accomplished work is on the same level of importance as the previous ones and has its advantages.

Collecting Ideas: Mind Map

The first step of the project consisted in creating a mind map to systemize all thoughts and ideas on the subject. Mind mapping in general is a convenient tool in the creative working process, usually used in the first phase of brainstorming in all professional fields, especially artistic work. Mind map supports the information recording and represents a vast range of concepts, a collection of associations, facts or pictures linked to the starting point.

The central notion of my mind map was the generic city itself, which is why I collected the highlights and the main ideas linked to this point. The visualization has proven extremely useful for the specification of the project and the further work direction on the whole.

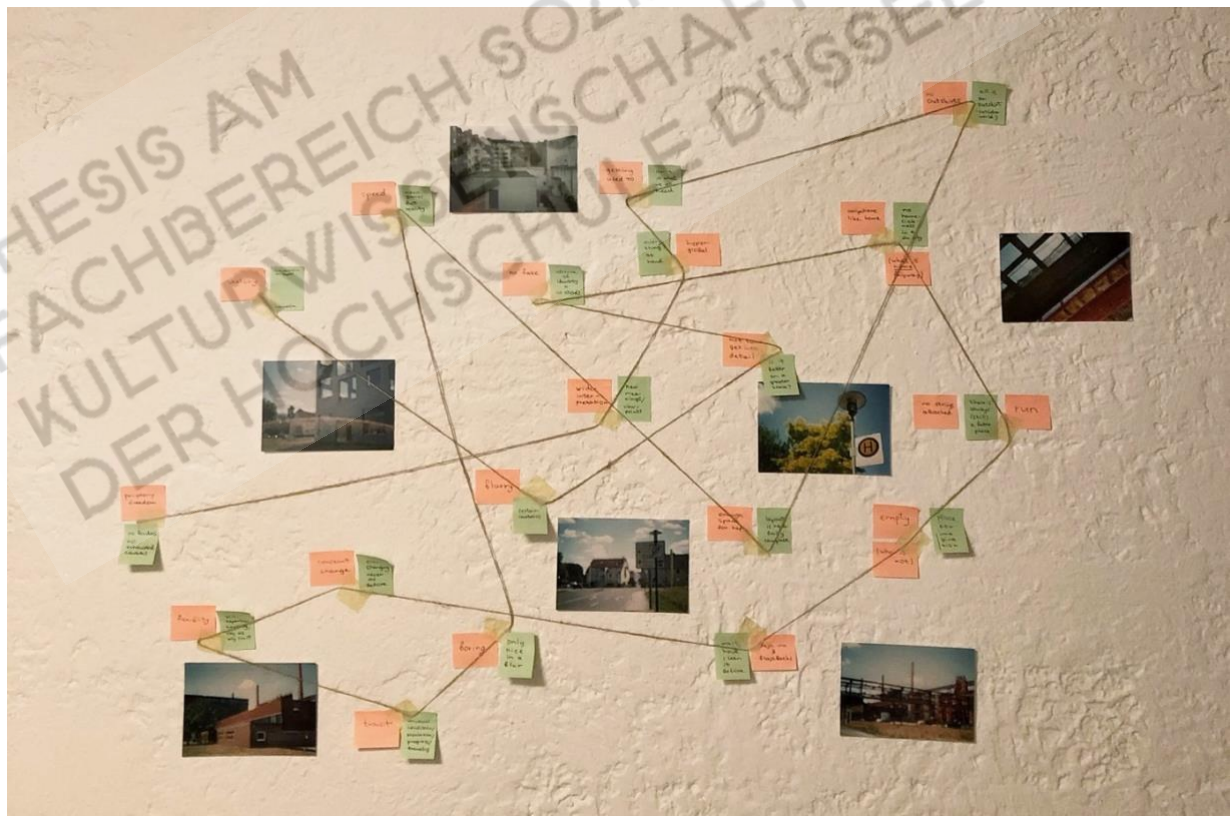


Illustration 10: Mind map. (Source: Author)

⁸⁰ Moldan, "Sarah Sze".

Documentation: Photos and Fieldnotes

The essential part of my project is documentation; for that reason, every time I went to Essen, I would document my journey in form of notes and photos and fixate any details that could evoke some thought and help me in the artistic process. With the help of the pictures taken during my wanderings I was trying to capture both some details of my surroundings and the wider perspective of the city, as well as the atmosphere of places.

Despite my long experience with my DSLR Nikon camera, the iPhone 8 camera was opted for as a means of taking pictures due to a couple of reasons. First of all, I personally believe that mobile photography provides a special way of capturing reality. It is a convenient tool which is always at hand and makes it possible to store, edit and share pictures smoothly and at high speed. To make the best out of the smartphone I turn on my camera's gridlines and compose a shot according to the rule of thirds, which means that I locate the essential details on the intersections of the lines. However, in many cases I might break the rule intentionally to achieve a certain effect or give another message. Another habit is taking enough time to choose the right angle and focus manually. Although I appreciate the advantage of smartphones of taking pictures rapidly and discreetly, I prefer to make sure that the shot will not be spoiled. I usually use the brightness adjustment option by dragging my finger up and down and tip on the lightest part of the screen to balance the exposure so that it does not end up overexposed. If I need to capture something that is moving or if I take pictures from a train, I go for the live setting on the iPhone, which allows me to take a three second video and then choose the best frame.

As I was observing the landscape surrounding me, I realised that neither the ever-changing image behind my window, nor the image behind the camera lenses never really changes. Some of my shots were accomplished with a note, which was my way to keep the moment in memory for the further reflection. After collecting the material throughout the whole period, I designed a journal layout in the Adobe InDesign program and filled it with pictures and notes to create the desired narrative.



Illustration 11: First sketches of the journal. (Source: Author)

Outcome: Mixed Media Collage

Experiments with different mixed media collage techniques, analog as well as digital, have always fascinated me. From my point of view collage can be efficiently used with different purposes, for instance in the process of brainstorming and collecting references at hand. In the first stage of any project designers usually arrange color palettes, textures, cut-outs, pieces of material and text remarques altogether as it helps to boost inspiration, shape an idea and convey it to others.

The spelling Authent*i*City is subsequently used for the title of my paper to highlight both the fragmentary nature of the generic city and the role of collage-like approach in my work. As a starting point for the creative process I took notes and photographs collected during my multiple visits to Essen. As far as the collage goes, I have mainly worked in two dimensions before, so it was exciting to try out a new technique and add a third dimension, to recreate in some sense the emotions evoked in me in a deeper way. With this intention a sketch in Adobe Photoshop was created based on the pictures that I considered to be most illustrative and appropriate. I played with the arrangement, tried different backgrounds, transparency levels, overlay options. As soon as the the result was satisfying, I started to think of the suitable materials and conditions for the realization of such a project.

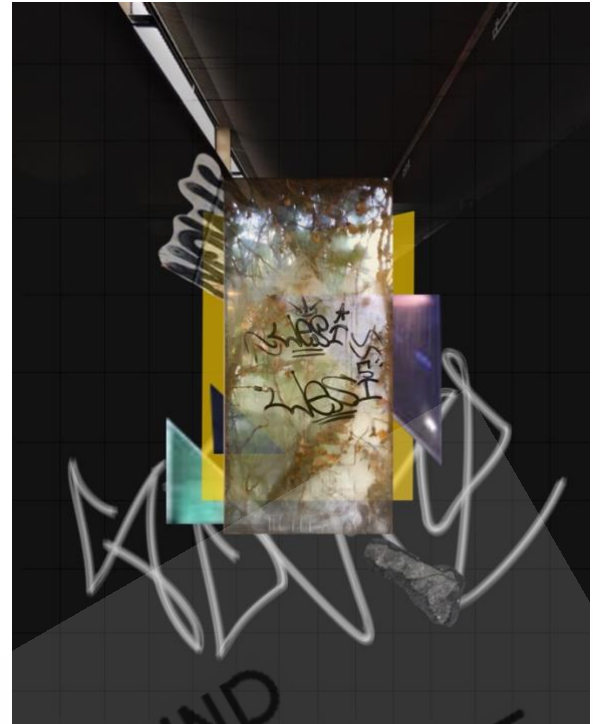
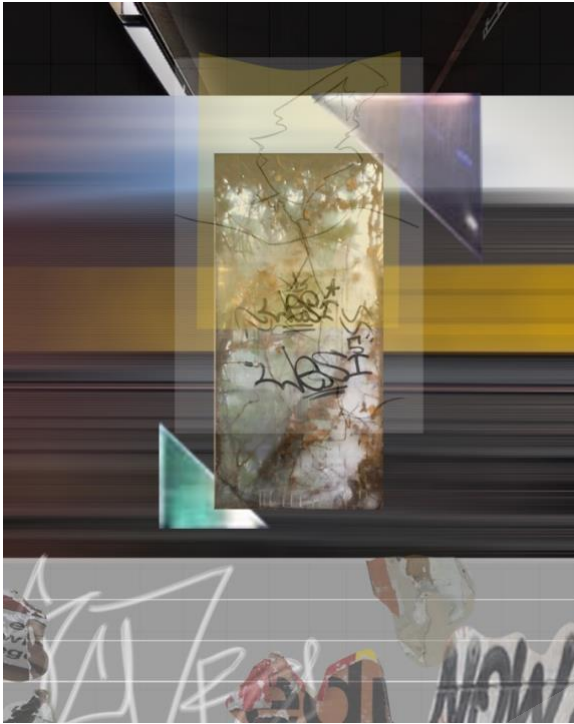


Illustration 12, 13: Digital sketches for the mixed media collage. (Source: Author)

Flashes of light zooming past my eyes, rhythmic parade of railway signs, endless landscapes blending one into another, sun flickers on the glass, empty and overcrowded platforms – all of this was an incredible inspiration source for me. In my mind a clear parallel could be drawn between the rapidly passing by scenic vision of the outside world and the evolving of the uncontrollable generic movement. The permanent state of being on my way and observing erupted into the feeling of disorientation and utter loneliness. The whole merged into one phenomenon, one image – blur. Invisible, out of control, never the original, never itself.



Illustration 14, 15: First experiments with materials. (Source: Author)

In conclusion I would like to allude the provocative play *Valparaiso* by Don DeLillo (1999). It tells a story of a businessman who unexpectedly finds himself in a plane to Valparaíso, Chile instead of Valparaiso, Indiana and this coincidence, simple ticketing mistake, makes him rethink the instable concept of being in the wrong place, of the wrong place itself as the opposite to the right one (what is the right one and does it exist?), and his own place somewhere in a “shrinking world, a world in which one place is undifferentiable from another.”⁸¹ Through the self-analysis, his fractured sense of self intertwines with the fragmentated reality he is caught in, awakening intimidating thoughts about the modern world and the humane perception of it.

This comprehensive sequence of reflections resonates with my art piece and my intention to communicate the feeling of deterritorialization through it, a feeling of saying goodbye to the nostalgic notion of place understood as “displacing the stricture of place-bound identities with the fluidity of a migratory model”. The philosophical concept of *rhizome*, used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe “the relations and connectivity of things”⁸², can be applied to the generic city: positively speaking, it embodies freedom and openness to face random encounters and unpredictable circumstances, evolving on the uncontrollable urban terrain.

⁸¹ Weber, “Theater Review”.

⁸² IAAC, “*Rhizome- Deleuze | Guattari*”.

5 CONCLUSION

The word “generic” is usually understood as something deprived of identity and absolutely non-specific, however, any judgement on its advantages and disadvantages runs the risk of being unjust. Through the analysis of the authentic and generic in relation to modern cities, this research has revealed that the generic can be assessed as a source of hidden potential and means to evoke a broad range of emotional responses. The landscape of any city may be regarded as the evidence of its existence, the sum of the layers unravelling its history, no matter how controversial or brief it is.

Another important implication I tried to make in this paper is that the homogeneity of generic territories possesses a special potential that liberates cities from clichés and certain prejudice, exempts cities from beyond the touristic guidebooks – a function that is not so evident. I believe in the peculiar aesthetics of peripheries, fractured landscapes and counter-sites, beauty of unpredictable, playful and sometimes accidental generic constellations, which are understood and admired by more and more people as they are becoming the new norm.

With my artistic experiment an attempt was made to re-interpret the established image of the generic and its underrated nature, reveal the reverse side of the ordinary, common or even ugly. I presented an alternative approach to the issue and highlighted that the sketchy copy-paste image of the generic stimulates generation of narratives and has a potential to arouse sentiment and influence perception in some way. Thus, the research and the artwork based on my personal experience are a contribution to the analysis of the urban phenomenon that needs to be viewed from another perspective and requires creative solutions.

Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich meine Master-Thesis mit dem Titel

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Düsseldorf, den 10.12.2020

Sofya Taraban

Statement

I hereby declare that I have authored this Master Thesis, titled

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independently and did not receive any unauthorised assistance and did not use any sources other than those indicated. I have not previously submitted this Master Thesis in any form and it has never been published. This Master Thesis is absolutely identical to the one assessed by the registered supervisor.

Düsseldorf, the 10.12.2020

Sofya Taraban

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