

# Architectural Writing Laboratory: A Design Learning Experiment

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**ABSTRACT:** Writing is a spatial act - exploring different writing modes may unveil new modes of architectural thinking. When contextualised within the architectural framework, writing takes on a transformative role, capable of opening up possibilities for non-visual relationships and interconnected networks, thereby inviting critical inquiry and discourse. In architectural schools, where the design studio is the central focus, this area usually remains less explored, particularly in undergraduate programmes. However, practising architectural writing brings opportunities to students; for instance, they are introduced to and become familiar with spatial thinking in a literary space where their typically visual preconceptions do not operate.

Pursuing this perspective, this paper explores how effectively using writing as a design tool can uncover new and unconventional perspectives on architecture and proposes architectural writing as an interdisciplinary learning tool for guiding future architects and architectural design researchers. These issues are examined through an in-depth study of pedagogical objectives and outcomes of the *Architectural Speaking and Writing* course, a mandatory subject for third-year undergraduate students.

The course is structured as a writing laboratory that closely examines forms of architectural writing as primary instruments for finding a critical voice, engaging in critical dialogue, and communicating with the wider public. Through introducing the design of the course structure and analysing the writing exercises, this paper addresses the crucial role that diverse mediums and methods of expression play for students to connect their internal narratives with external realities in architectural education while altering the dominant position of the educator towards a facilitator.

**KEYWORDS:** Architectural writing, architecture education, architectural design research, critical thinking

## INTRODUCTION

Architecture and writing alike participate in the imaginative creation of new worlds. They document and represent these realms, inhabiting and occupying them through projection. Both areas contribute to the establishment of settings for lives and narratives, recognising that every architectural proposal is essentially a form of fiction before it materialises. Similarly, every written fiction hinges on the construction of a coherent setting and context within which a narrative unfolds. Emerging from these intersecting possibilities, approaching architecture through the lens of writing forms a creative space, paving the way for unconventional considerations in architectural thinking and practice.

Visually-dominant architectural design tools may provide only a limited capacity in fostering and articulating design thinking, potentially neglecting non-visual dimensions within architectural discourse. This limitation not only narrows the scope of architectural pedagogy and practice but also underscores the critical role of architectural writing, which, by incorporating a situated perspective, enables a closer engagement with individual creativity while maintaining a necessary degree of critical distance. In this context, the inclusion of architectural writing may provide a valuable mechanism for addressing the shortcomings of visual-centric approaches and ensuring a more comprehensive exploration of architectural concepts.

From this perspective, the discussions advocating architectural writing as a design tool expand within the discourse of architecture. This expansion has been influenced by various conceptual and critical frameworks originating from diverse disciplines. Specifically, Donna Haraway's (1988) "situated knowledges" from science and technology studies, Elspeth Probyn's (1990) discourse on "locality" in gender and cultural studies, Jane Flax's (1991) "standpoint theory" derived from psychoanalysis, and Rosi Braidotti's (1994) theory of "nomadic subjects" within philosophy and feminist studies have contributed to this influential framework. All these nurturing discussions have drawn upon the notions of spatiality and positionality to explore concepts of subjectivity, situatedness, and materiality, intending to challenge dominant methodologies within their respective fields. These paradigm-shifting contributions have also amalgamated in the frame of architecture and lead to the emergence of many spatial and architectural writing experiments. Key examples in this context include "site-writing" by Jane Rendell (2010), the exploration of the textual artefact in architectural design research within the works of Katia Grillner (2004), "situated writing" by Mona Livholts (2020), and the development of the "ficto-critical approaches" in architecture by Naomi Stead and Hélene Frichot (2020).

Informed by the above mentioned discussions, we have restructured the Architectural Speaking and Writing course, a mandatory subject for third-year architecture students in the Spring term of 2022/2023. While the course was originally integrated into the curriculum with the objective of introducing students to the theoretical concepts and current debates in architecture, we believed that narrowing the focus towards architectural writing would foster architectural design learning of third-year students. The overall curriculum of the faculty has been shaped centering around the studio course, complemented by other courses supporting the studio's outcomes. Within this operational framework, our intervention in the course has served as an exploration of the potential role of architectural writing as a design tool, positioned to articulate students' design processes and studio practice.

In regard to students' extensive studio culture and experience, the course has been redesigned as a *writing studio*, a laboratory for spatial thinking and writing. This shift has meant a flipped approach, inviting students to be active participants, to be more precise, *active authors*. As third year students, they have already been exposed to many external truths and opinions; thus the reflective conduction of the course has posed a distinct challenge for them. Inspired by the situation, we have organised the course in three modules: (1) finding your own voice; (2) engaging in a dialogue/ encountering the other; and lastly (3) communicating with the wider public.

Each module consists of two weeks of lectures, one week featuring a guest speaker, and a minimum of two designated writing exercises to be held in-class. This structured format aims to provide a comprehensive learning experience by integrating theoretical content, real-world perspectives, and practical application within the course curriculum. The modules revolve around four core themes to be thoroughly internalised throughout the semester: interdisciplinarity, situatedness, subjectivity and critical inquiry. Although these themes are interwoven throughout the modules, each module is specifically dedicated to the in-depth exploration of a single theme.

In the first module, emphasis is placed on subjectivity as students actively engage in hearing their own voice and exploring their personal perspectives. This involves a reflection on how objectivity is constructed and the recognition that knowledge formation is influenced by acknowledging and multiplying one's standpoint. They are introduced to the concept of situatedness, highlighting its contextual relevance within architectural discourse.

Moving to the second module, the focus broadens to include both situated and interdisciplinary perspectives, involving other disciplines and other media in search of establishing dialogues with other voices. Concurrently, an introduction to critical inquiry provides a foundational ground for a deeper exploration of spatial debates and concepts.

The third module brings critical inquiry to the forefront. As students are tasked with setting up a dynamic critical distance towards their work completed throughout the semester, reflecting upon it, and proposing spatial curation, a revisit to subjectivity permits a deeper examination of personal viewpoints. This sequential structure is designed for a thorough and progressive engagement, mirroring the steps of an individual's journey to interact with the world around them: initially identifying their own voice, learning to amplify it, engaging with others, initiating a conversation, and ultimately sharing it with a broader audience.

Based on this approach, this paper explores the potential of writing, when employed as a design tool, to unveil new and unconventional perspectives in architecture. It proposes architectural writing as an interdisciplinary learning tool for guiding future architects and architectural design researchers. These issues are examined through an overview of pedagogical objectives of the abovementioned course modules and outcomes of modules' writing exercises.

## 1.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Acknowledging the pedagogical value of architectural writing, this paper adopts a qualitative and exploratory research approach to examine the outcomes of the Architectural Speaking and Writing course, held during the Spring term of 2022/2023. The course was modified to accommodate a hybrid learning model due to earthquake-related conditions in Turkey. It engaged a cohort of 86 students, providing them with the option to attend either in person or through online platforms. Spanning 13 weeks, the curriculum was structured into three consecutive modules, each covering an intensive four-week period.

As above mentioned, the course is structured as a writing laboratory that closely examines forms of architectural writing as primary instruments for, firstly, finding a critical voice; second, engaging in a dialogue; and third, communicating with the wider public. The first module probes the roles of authors and readers, delves into narrative constructs, and investigates the dynamics of reader-writer relationships. Transitioning to the second module, the focus shifts to learning to effectively communicate with diverse entities, be it people, places, objects, or situations. The process involves viewing these entities as complex components, seeking mutual comprehension, and collaboratively generating solutions. This module prioritises engaging in a dialogue with the other and aims to design writings where both parties of the dialogue can equally be heard. In the final module, the emphasis lies in extending communication beyond the self and engaging with the external realm - the wider public, and the built environment.

These modules are founded on active participation of the students via specialised writing exercises to allow students to critically assess and cultivate creative approaches in their own design thinking processes, building upon the insights gained from other courses within the architecture curriculum. In the writing exercises of the first module, students discover various uses of media as a tool to represent and expand their design ideas and encounter non-

linear narratives. They reflect on their subjective experiences, by *revisiting a memory space*, to develop objective spatial information without using presumptive language. In the later exercises, they are introduced to the specifics of curating media with guest speakers, and engaging in a dialogue through on-site writing excursions to exhibitions, such as *Istanbuls today* at the Pera Museum, before they are asked to design a *reading room* - an interface between the physical medium of their productions and the literary medium of their conceptions.

This paper explores the significant impact of varied mediums and methods of expression in architectural education, facilitating students' ability to bridge their internal narratives with external realities. By presenting the course design, objectives, and outcomes of specific writing exercises, it highlights a shift from the traditional educator-dominated approach to a more inclusive role of the educator as a facilitator. The following sections delve into the structure of the three modules, showcasing a writing exercise from each to illustrate how these strategies enhance learning.

## 2.0 MODULES

### 2.1. First module: finding your own voice – revisiting a memory space

*Finding one's own voice* is an expression that refers to the process of discovering and expressing one's unique perspective, opinions, and individuality. In various contexts, it can involve developing a distinct writing or speaking style, expressing personal values and beliefs, and articulating thoughts and ideas in an authentic and genuine manner. Finding one's voice often involves self-discovery, reflection, and a conscious effort to communicate in a way that individuals navigate societal expectations and stereotypes to articulate their authentic voices. To achieve this, students delve into concepts such as multivocality, intervening into narrative, reader/writer relationships in this module.

After exploring the shifting roles between the author, the reader, and narrative constructs, the first module concludes with an in-class assignment titled *Revisiting a Memory Space*. This exercise is designed with several key goals: to introduce students to writing place, to foster experimentation in forming tempo-spatial narratives, to encourage students to situate themselves in writing, and to enhance their understanding of subjectivity in writing. To effectively meet these objectives, students were encouraged to skilfully blend both imagery and textual elements in their writing.

For this assignment, students were given the task of selecting and bringing a childhood photograph. The guidelines stressed the importance of their visible presence in the photo, set against a backdrop that is identifiable and meaningful, be it an indoor or outdoor scene. This specification was deliberately set to avoid generic, featureless studio backgrounds, thus enhancing the depth, context, and emotional resonance of the photographs. Furthermore, to add layers of narrative and texture, students were also encouraged to supplement their photographs with any visual or textual elements, such as maps, tickets, or other items, that hold a connection, whether direct or suggestive, to the location captured in the photograph. Students had the flexibility to work with either original materials or their digital reproductions, bringing in physical items or scanned copies.

In this exercise, students revisited and reinterpreted a cherished memory space. Utilising a blank piece of paper, they were tasked with the challenge of articulating and reconstructing the space in their memories through text. The exercise began with a crucial reminder: memory is inherently non-linear, and remembering is a non-linear process. Students were thus encouraged to embrace this fragmented, disorderly nature of recollection, allowing for non-linear storytelling to more deeply understand and reconnect with their past experiences.

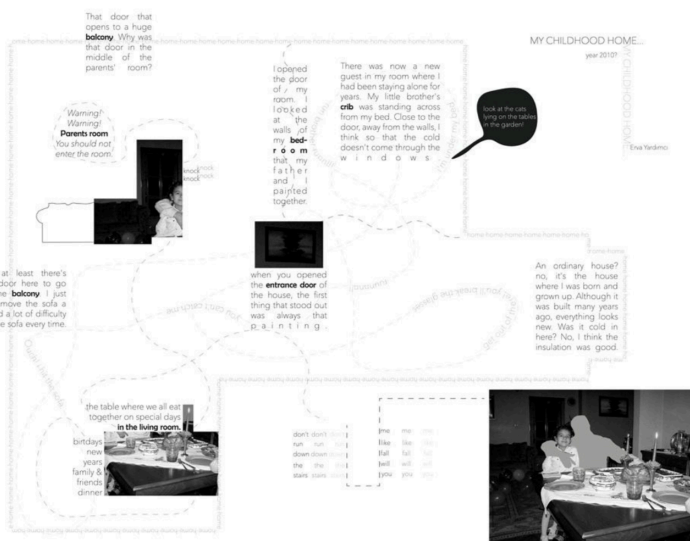


Figure 1: Revisiting a memory space by E. Yardımcı. Source: (Yardımcı 2023)

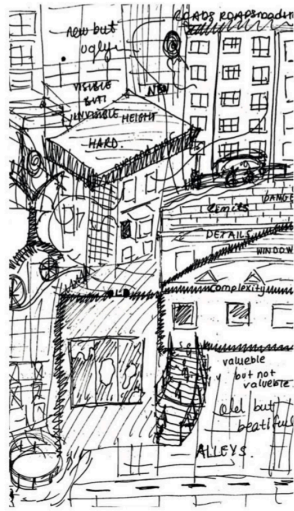
For instance, E. Yardımcı's employed the spatiality of paper-space to recreate the house from her childhood, where she resided with her family (Figure 1). Concentrating on the sensory and detailed fragments embedded in her



**A CRITICAL DIALOGUE WITH "ISTANBULS TODAY"**

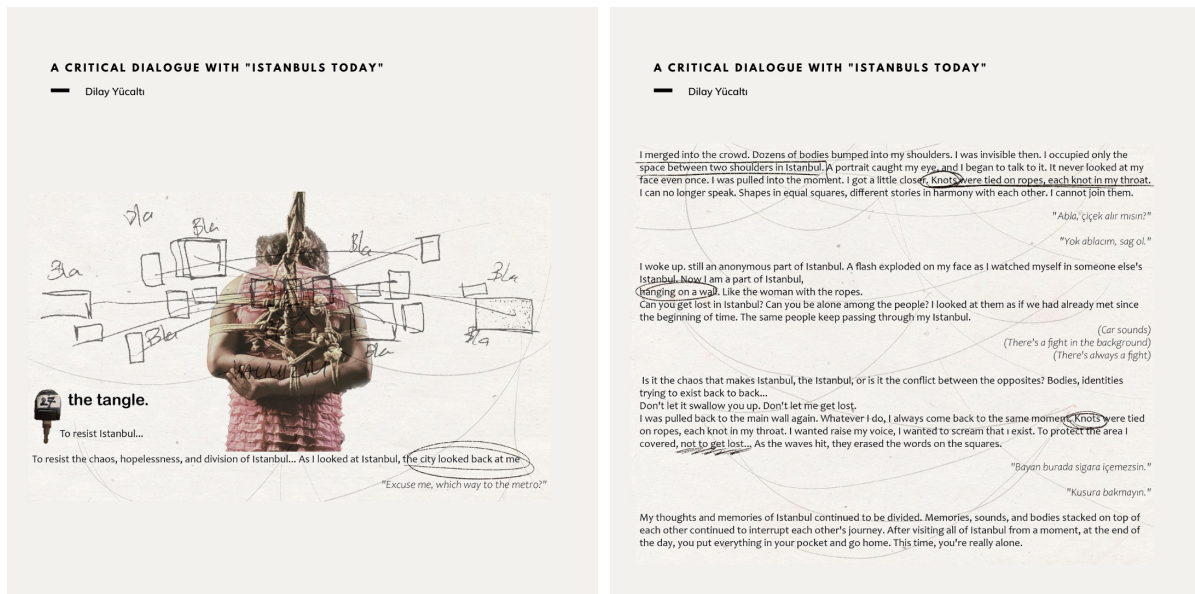
— Ekin Nakip

I visited a digital exhibition for the first time in my life. The "Zamane İstanbulları" exhibition at the Pera Museum. Whenever I go to a gallery or a big museum, I feel like I'm missing the details that are wanted to be told in the works of art, and I involuntarily worry. However, this time, the fact that I was going to travel digitally made me feel as if I had time to research and understand as much as I wanted, and to get away from these concerns for no reason. I visited the exhibition in a more systematic way. I kept in my memory more clearly what points I went through and which artifacts I was looking at. (Actually, I was already seeing this digitally thanks to my mouse.) It's like I made an extra effort to progress more mathematically. (In order not to do the things that I thought I couldn't do in the physical exhibition and that I was nervous about).



**Figure 3:** A critical dialogue with "Istanbuls Today" by E. Nakip, digital exhibition visit. Source: (Nakip 2023)

These differences sparked creativity and resulted in a diverse range of outcomes for the assignment. The real-time Istanbul experience added another conversational layer in the texts of those who physically attended the exhibition. In D. Yücaltı's text, for example, she intertwined the narrative of the artwork she chose with her inner voice incorporating real-time external conversations from passersby. She accomplished this by capitalising on the exhibition's central location in Istanbul within her text.



**Figure 4:** A Critical Dialogue with "Istanbuls Today" by D.Yücaltı, physical exhibition visit. Source: (Yücaltı 2023)

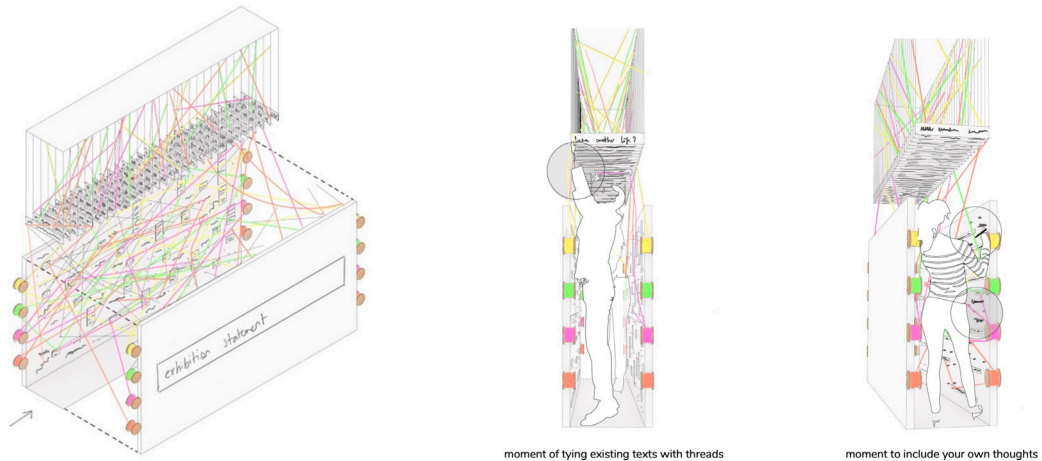
In terms of content and layout, the exercise encouraged students to think about the concept of "Istanbul today" as portrayed in the exhibition. Comparing the represented Istanbul with their personal experiences enriched their critical approach. The contemplation triggered by the artworks and the assessment of the curation's ability to uncover different layers of Istanbul aimed to elicit thoughtful insights into the city's multiple identities. Overall, the exercise was designed to encourage an exploration of both the physical and digital dimensions of the exhibition, seeking to unveil a personalised yet detailed understanding of Istanbul today.

**2.3. Third module: communicating with the wider public - reading room**

In the final module, the focus shifted to broadening the scope of communication, moving beyond personal expression to interact with the wider world, including public audiences and the built environment. Students explored the intricacies of curating media through interactions with guest speakers and practical experiences, such as on-site writing excursions. This hands-on approach provided them with valuable insights and skills in media curation.

A key assignment in this module was designing a *Reading Room*. This exercise served as a tangible bridge linking the physical embodiment of their work with the literary expression of their ideas. The task involved creating a

compact, yet immersive, 1m<sup>3</sup> pop-up space, designed to engage with and reflect upon the students' semester-long work. This space was to house various materials: in-class submissions, pre-class questions related to reading materials, and a collection of sketches and notes compiled throughout the semester.



**Figure 5:** "Dialogue Paths: In Search of Ideas" by G. Helvacioğlu. (Source: Helvacioğlu 2023)

As the final assignment, this work differed from the previous assignments as it centred on spatial design more than designing writing. It asked questions on how effectively the created space facilitates the reading and performing experiences of the showcased works. Following all these agendas, it also played a crucial role in assessing whether the course and architectural writing had an impact on their architectural design approaches or not. The exercise challenged the students to not only conceptualise a physical setting, but also to carefully consider how the spatial arrangement contributes to the interpretative and performative aspects of their academic works.

Yet, it was influential to observe how students contemplated the material translations of their literary design works and endeavoured to utilise space as an interface for conveying written content. Notably, there were attempts to integrate design elements to enhance overall engagement with the exhibited materials, as one of them exemplified in Figure 5. In G. Helvacioğlu's reading room design, it was possible to trace the reflection of the course outcomes on spatial design. In her proposal, she suggested nonlinear spatial experiences created by multi-colored strings, considering both the writer's position and the readers' positions. Through reader engagement, these strings formed sentences that could alter, rooted in her written works, transforming the exhibited materials into *open works*. This not only enabled an ever-changing atmosphere and an active reading experience but also prompted an investigation into the material translations of multivocal spatiality.

Overall, the final works involved a careful examination of the core themes discussed throughout the semester. Additionally, they reflected on the module structure by defining their own positions, contemplating various perspectives, engaging with others, and participating in multidisciplinary thinking processes.

## CONCLUSION

Over the last decades, architectural writing has become an effective tool for architectural thinking and practice. More specifically, exploration of subjectivity, situatedness, interdisciplinarity and criticality through spatial and material qualities of the text brought writing closer to architectural design processes (Rendell 2013). This recognised a new understanding of architectural design research through architectural writing and inspired us to form a theoretical architectural course which prioritises finding a critical voice, engaging in a dialogue, and communicating with the wider public within the context of architectural design. Based on our exploration within this course throughout the Spring term of 2023, we have come to the following key observations:

- Students' efforts to construct narratives based on personal experiences significantly enriched their architectural thinking and design approaches. Such writing exercises have the potential not only to improve their creative potential but also to develop their skills in participating in and contributing to architectural discourse.
- Effectively using writing as a design tool enabled students to comprehend a place through its multifaceted layers, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of the spatial context. This approach can inspire original architectural ideas and narratives by incorporating elements such as memory and experience, encouraging a shift towards hybrid representations from popular visual-centric approaches.
- This course is placed at the end of the third year in the architectural curriculum, a period by which students have become notably opinionated in architectural subjects. Adopting a fresh perspective through architectural writing can potentially diminish the inclination towards popular themes that dominate the architectural discourse while amplifying curiosity in topics that are less explored or previously unspoken.

This study shows that using writing as a design tool in architectural education can significantly unveil new and unconventional approaches. It promotes interdisciplinarity, encourages critical thinking, and embraces subjectivity, thereby guiding future architects and architectural design researchers. Nevertheless, these findings stem from a limited dataset, and further studies are essential to analyse how this influence and growing importance of architectural writing transforms architectural thinking and practice. Therefore, following this paper, structured experiments will be conducted with architecture students to study the impact of architectural writing in greater detail.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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