

Academic Event Report

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Event: Summer school “Urban Imaginary — Exploring Our Urban Futures”

Venue: Botanical Gardens, Centro de Estudos Educativos, Lisbon, Portugal

Date: 3rd to 7th July 2023

The “Urban Imaginary — Exploring our Urban Futures” summer school was a five-day training course organised by Dr Julia Bentz (NOVA University, Lisbon), a researcher in interdisciplinary social sciences and the leader of Working Group 3 (WG3), Arts and Outreach of the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action, SHIFT (Social Sciences and Humanities for Transformation and Climate Resilience). The event took place in Lisbon’s historic Botanic Gardens and the National Museum of Natural Science and History. Over the five days, students and academics from diverse backgrounds engaged in enlightening discussions. A total of 108 candidates worldwide applied for the summer school. SHIFT COST Action (CA21166) generously awarded twelve full grants and ten half-grants.

The summer school offered an intense lecture schedule, comprising of two morning panels and two afternoon sessions daily. Each morning session commenced with embodiment exercises led by Dr Marcus Bussey (University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia) in the open space of the Botanical Gardens. These music-accompanied sessions focused on a theme that participants were guided through. Next, there were peer discussions which allowed participants to reflect on their experience. During the embodiment sessions, activities included dance, movement, performance, silences and pauses, dialogue, monologue, poetry reading and storytelling. Participants could choose to be active or remain still. They sometimes danced on behalf of the others or observed the actions of others and their interactions with space and subjectivities.

Day One

The first day’s lecture was given by the futurist and methodologist Dr Maya Van Leemput (Erasmus University, Brussels) who discussed conflicting images of future and how individuals are continuously influenced by these images. Dr Van Leemput focused on how people are pushed towards specific changes of the future by thinking about its potentials and

possibilities. She illustrated this concept by assigning three different tasks to three groups who formed a triangle on stage which she labelled the “futures triangle”. This triangle depicted how our future is influenced by certain forces: the pull of possible futures, the push of present needs and emerging trends, along with the weight of the past, tradition and existing systems. Dr Van Leemput concluded her presentation stating that the vision of the future is deeply informed by our perceptions of the past; therefore, what is recommended when considering futures is to “look back before looking forward”.

The second lecture was given jointly by Dominika Glogowski (Director of artEC/Oindustry), an expert in visual arts, art history and art management and Dr Andreia Sousa (University of Aveiro) who holds a PhD in marine ecosystems and climate change. Both speakers drew attention to the idea of becoming more sensitive to nature through “sound” and “deep listening”. They highlighted the significance of embodied relations in the ocean through sounds of dolphins and marine soundscapes. They also emphasised how listening is a multifaceted activity that can transform both humans and nature, fostering interaction and action based on emotional responses. This fluid approach to listening and communication, as Glogowski and Dr Sousa underlined, resonates with the fluidity of water as a transportation system.

The afternoon session started with Dr Van Leemput who explored the contradictions, complexity and chaos in our environment, suggesting that they indicate a shift towards post-normal times. Within this chaos, she advocated for imagining the future for individuals to navigate themselves effectively. She also focused on the changing conceptualisation of time, which she linked to the idea that there is not just one single future but there are “futures” which are “queer”.

Dr Julia Bentz, the main organiser of the summer school, led the last session, which took place in one of the remarkable halls of the National Museum of Natural Science and History. Participants formed a circle on the marble floor and briefly shared their superpower, reflecting on their lives in relation to the object they brought with them. This unconventional introductory session set the tone for the lecture series and extracurricular activities in the following days, fostering encounters and embodied practices.

Day Two

After the morning embodiment exercises on the second day, Dr Bussey and Dr Lena Bloemertz (University of Applied Science FHNW in Switzerland) delivered a talk on how space affects humans and moulds their behaviours, which stimulated a discussion on cities

as places of transformation. Dr Bloemertz focused on the relationship between food, eating habits and urban environments.

The last session was led by Dr Bentz and Dr Kiat Ng (University of Porto), one of the supporting organisers of the summer school, a researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Marine and Environmental Research (CIIMAR). Their presentation departed from the prevalent idea of the subject-object separation in modern science. Dr Ng emphasised the need for a reconsideration of transdisciplinarity because reality is incomplete and interconnected. Similarly, Dr Bentz highlighted the relationship between humans and nature, drawing attention to the idea of rekindling connections between all beings. Dr Bentz stressed the notion that through deep listening, self-reflexivity, creating space and taking action, individuals can relate to the others and practice kinship. The presentation ended with an epigraph by Dr Robin Wall Kimmerer (SUNY), which is worth quoting at length as it closely aligns with the objectives and theme of the summer school:

Singing whales, talking trees, dancing bees, birds who make art, fish who navigate, plants who learn and remember. We are surrounded by intelligences other than our own, by feathered people and people with leaves. But we've forgotten. There are many forces arrayed to help us forget—even the language we speak.

For the rest of the day, participants met to establish co-creation groups before embarking on a phenomenological exploration of Lisbon. They were divided into three groups for different guided tours: sound, visual and smell and taste. The sound tour was led by Dr Sousa and Dominika Glogowski. The guide of the visual tour was Dr Leticia do Carmo (Lisbon Architecture Triennale). The smell and taste tour was led by a professional herbalist and perfumery expert, Marion Rimbart. At the end of the day, the groups reconvened at a park to reflect on their experience.

Day Three

On the third day, Dr Pedro Pinho (University of Lisbon), a biologist with a special focus on urban biodiversity and Dr Siddharth Sareen (University of Bergen), professor of energy and environment gave their speech. They talked about ways of integrating technology and natural elements into urban futures. Their presentations highlighted certain solutions for enhancing urban sustainability through nature-based approaches such as expanding the use of solar power within urban areas. Dr Pinho and Dr Sareen also raised intriguing questions like “is planting trees always a solution?” to challenge the ongoing environmental discourse and uncover limitations within existing environmental systems.

The second session featured Dr Jelena Ristic Trajkovic (University of Belgrade), another supporting organiser, who is an associate professor of architecture and the co-leader of the WG3. She discussed the development of future urban scenarios and drew on various questions relating to space and spatial scenarios. Dr Ristic Trajkovic stated that our task should be to develop the program of possibilities for everyone and design spaces for friendship and inclusivity. She also maintained that our behaviours and environment are interlinked in a way that environment acts on the way how we feel. In the same way, we have the power to change our environment through our behaviours, bodily acts and artistic practices because space is the product of interrelations.

In the afternoon, Dr Ristic Trajkovic, together with Dr Bloemertz, elaborated on alternative futures, citing the example of Barcelona's superblock model, an initiative about prioritising pedestrians over cars in the neighbourhood. They concluded that the future scenarios for cities should encapsulate reciprocal interactions among places, people, culture and time, which underscores the necessity of focusing on convivial and cohesive urban futures.

Day Four and Day Five

The participants, in groups of five, worked towards their final projects and prepared artistic and academic presentations based on what they had learned about Lisbon in the preceding days. Tutors were available to guide them in the process. On the final day of the summer school, each group presented their project, followed by an open floor session for questions, discussions, and evaluation.

Conclusion

The absence of hierarchies between scholars, students and stakeholders made the event valuable for participants. It created a space of understanding and tolerance where everyone could contemplate and collaborate towards transforming our urban futures. The programme, which incorporated lectures and training sessions, was bolstered with various extracurricular activities such as a traditional Lisbon boat tour and a guided tour of the Botanical Gardens. The summer school ended with a farewell dinner in one of Lisbon's environmentally conscious restaurants. Participants felt thankful for the meaningful encounter and hoped for further collaborations in envisioning more kincentric urban futures.

Dr Dilek Öztürk Yağcı is a lecturer at Istanbul Technical University, School of Foreign Languages where she teaches writing composition and short story courses. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin. After graduating with High Honours from the English Department at Ankara University, she earned her MA in English Literature from Boğaziçi University, focusing on narrative presence in Samuel Beckett's drama. During her PhD studies, she served as a research fellow at Queen's University Belfast, working with both the Institute of Irish Studies and the Brian Friel Theatre. She completed her PhD at Middle East Technical University, examining spatial dynamics in Brian Friel's late plays through contemporary human geography. Her research focuses on contemporary British and Irish literature, theatre and performance studies, as well as studies of space, place, and environment. Her monograph, *Re-Reading Brian Friel: Space, Place, and Text*, will be published by Routledge in 2025.