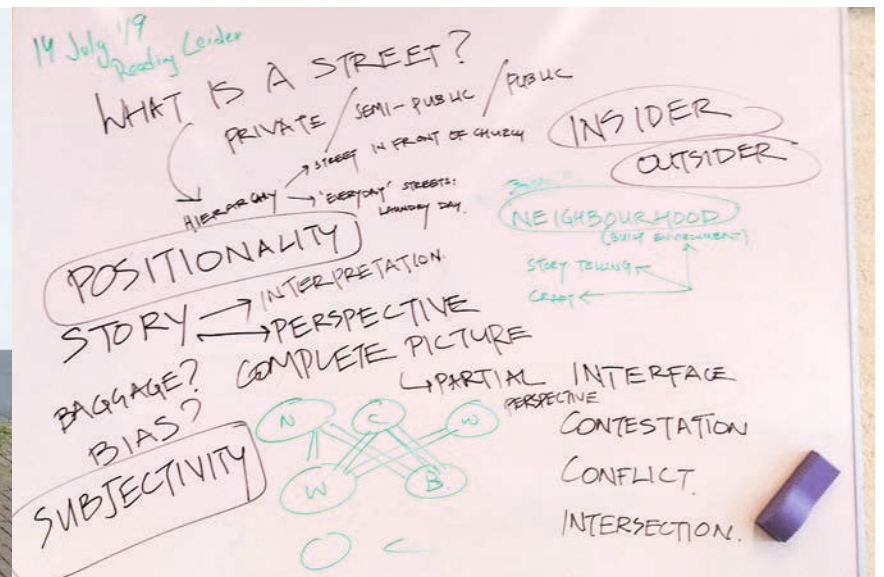


Looking back at 'Reading Leiden: An Experiential School'

11-15 July 2019, Leiden



In the period of 11-15 July 2019, the Humanities across Borders¹ programme organised its first summer school, *Reading Leiden: An Experiential School*, for the researchers associated with its projects in parts of West Africa, Asia and South East Asia. The aim of the school was to collectively experience and test the heuristic pedagogies encouraged by the programme. The school was both an experiential and experimental exercise in learning through in-situ immersion. The participants were divided into three groups through which they had to filter their experience of 'reading' Leiden. These were: Neighbourhood, Storytelling and Craft. For each day, a theme was identified and the activities of the day were organised accordingly.



Top: Orraya curious about herring, at the Saturday market. Photo by Aarti Kawlra.
Above: Who's heritage? What is heritage? Krupa Rajangam.
Left: Exploring built structures through Then and Now. Photo: Cheryl Jacob.

Walks, lectures and workshops

On 11 July 2019 Laura Plezier and Willem Vogelsang guided the group through eighteen sites around Leiden, recalling their history, stories and design. The theme of the day was 'town and gown', focussing on the transition of Leiden from its industrial background to a city wherein a university has come to play a central role. The sites visited included the Beestenmarkt, Lakenhal, Brug, Marekerk, Harteburgkerk, old Brill offices (publisher) and the Bakkerij, Hooglandse Kerkgracht, Hooglandse Church, houses of the Pilgrim Fathers, the Burcht, Korenbrug, Stadhuis, Politiebureau, Van der Werf park, house of Jan Steen, Pieterskerk en Hofje van Lannooy, Academie Gebouw, Hortus botanicus, Gravensteen, and some more as we came across them. The walk was peppered with personal anecdotes and details that helped the researchers 'read' Leiden.

For most participants the tension between Leiden's Catholic past and transition to a Protestant space in the seventeenth century, also reflected in which churches (Protestant or Catholic) were allowed to be built or who could access facilities like alms-houses and orphanages, were surprising. Such differences highlighted how these can also cross cultures and boundaries of space. Rather than the seeing them from the 'western' gaze, the key was in experiencing Leiden through the researcher's own gaze. This perspective was encouraged throughout the school and was a liberating experience for many.

Su Sandy, an MA student from Myanmar: "I came to notice that things and words in our daily-life have their own stories and we can learn about the history and the communities

behind them". While at the eleventh century Burcht of Leiden (fortress), Laura encouraged us to imagine it not as we see it in 2019, but to locate ourselves around 1650 when it was turned into a theme park and a labyrinth. To experience the same place as a defence structure, a theme park with statues and a labyrinth, or a pub where now two majestic trees grow, helped us to understand and experience how a city interacts with the built structures and the different meanings a place can have at different periods of time.

The walk around Leiden was followed by a lecture by Paul Rabé (coordinator of IIAS's Urban Knowledge Network Asia - UKNA), who located the growth of Leiden as a university town, and helped us to recognise the tensions that emerge in spaces where such transitions take place. Thomas Voorter, IIAS, led the following session with a discussion on the dynamics of creating narratives through the online HaB 'Accession Card' (the HaB digital repository in the making). Day 1 ended with a brief by Maria Zwanenburg, an independent indigo practitioner and artist, about what to expect on the second day and how craft is an embodied practice. The focus of day 2 was 'craft practice'.

On 12 July, the second day, the researchers went to the Museum de Lakenhal.² While on the first day the information was more historical, the tour of the space that once ensured the quality of the woollen cloth produced in Leiden, gave the researchers a deeper sense of craft practices. Jori Zijlmans, the textile curator, patiently explained the processes through which the quality was ensured before the cloth went to market and the importance of the guild in the trade network. Through her explanation, we could also de-sanitise the many paintings that adorn the Museum, where the dyers and

weavers all look squeaky clean and happy, and child labour is portrayed in very subtle forms.

This tour was followed by a mad dash through the rain for a lecture by Maikel Kuijpers, who as an archaeologist looks at the production of craft in the Bronze Age. His documentary *The Future is Handmade*³ shows how craft is actually "a way of exploring and understanding the material world" and as Maria reflected, "craft is a different type of knowledge [perhaps] different from academic knowledge but knowledge nonetheless". The lecture brought out a range of reflections for many of the researchers who come from spaces where traditional crafts still play a major role. At Taiwan National University of Arts, the course Blue across Borders was introduced in 2017 (supported by HaB) with the aim of bringing a shift in the perception of art and craft, and to take the students out of the classroom. Through a blend of classroom teaching, workshops and working through the process of dye making and dyeing, indigo is used to explore and understand the world through its many layers.

In continuation of the theme, two other visits – Museum Leids Wevershuis⁴ and a craft brewery Pronck⁵ – brought different types of realisations. Win Win Soe from Myanmar found it revealing that in her country handicraft does not find much space in terms of exposure or preservation even though it is found in all corners, whilst in Leiden, currently mainly a university town, crafts (specifically weaving⁶ and indigo dyeing) are being preserved through the efforts of individuals (often volunteers) as sites of memory and cultural heritage after they were mostly lost in the 1970s.

On the second field visit of the day to Pronck, we were exposed to yet another revival of a craft, which had become lost

in the twentieth century Netherlands with industrialisation: beer production. Benjamin Wegman, a former tax lawyer turned brewer, explained the brewing process of the seven flavours of Pronck beer. Mesha Murali (research assistant, Centre for Community Knowledge, Delhi), shared the following words: "Craft was an area that I had very little knowledge and understanding of. When we were told that we would be looking at 'craft' as a methodology, the first thing that came to mind was that we would be looking at 'traditional' practices. This understanding of craft came from the way craft is perceived in India, as a practice that is 'traditional' and dying out. However, after our visits to the Wevershuis and Pronck brewery in Leiden, a different meaning of craft started to take form. The discussions and presentations during and after the visit made me realise that craft has more to do with technique, ideas and scale than just history. For instance, the brewery that we visited sold 'crafted beer', but had no link to the traditional forms of making beer. From the equipment used to the factory itself, everything was 'modern'. But since there was a certain time investment and thought put into the kind of ingredients and resources sourced for the production of beer, the people working at the factory saw it as craft rather than factory production".

The second day ended with a briefing by Surajit Sarkar (Associate Professor and Coordinator at the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), Ambedkar University Delhi) about the theme of 'storytelling'. He guided the group in how one can read a place and what to observe or take note of.

The third day started with an exploration of the Saturday market in the city centre. During the previous days the researchers had experienced the craft, culture and history of

Leiden, but the Saturday market was a riot of experiences – sensorial, business practices, cultural and kinaesthetic. As Dutch participant Milan Woudstra shared after hearing the experiences of the others: “Being with a group of international students from very different countries and cultures also stresses the fact that what I consider to be normal, is not normal or a common practice and sometimes even special for others, but it also made me realize that there are many similarities between us despite the ethnic differences and distance between the countries we live in. Discussions and questions (some of which I was not able to answer) about words, phrases, practices, and traditions in Leiden made me think more deeply about why we do the things we do and what it means to do them”.

When we visited the same location on Monday, none of us recognised the place. It was silent, empty and lacked the vibrancy of the market. This was a glaring contrast to what we had experienced on Saturday but there was another layer of experience underneath it. For most of the participants, while the Saturday market brought out a livelier ambience of Leiden, it was far more subdued than what most of us experience in similar markets in our respective countries. As Orraya Chawan, a researcher from Chiang Mai University said, “at the Saturday market I touched the colourful lifestyle of Leiden people, like the songs of the fishmongers as they sold herring to customers, and I had a chance to talk with an old couple who were sitting around the market. Observing the everyday practices of Leiden people, for me, was a way to understand their culture”.

Amid the sounds, smells and products at the Saturday market, there was a reversal of gaze. Karim Diallo, researcher from Mali, took a photo of a mother with her three children on a bicycle. When asked, Karim explained that while he is used to women in Mali taking care of the family and being so involved, to see the same in Leiden was unexpected. The other point that struck him, and Grégoire Kaboré (research assistance Institut Sciences des Sociétés, Burkina Faso), was unlike in their countries where people make a point of driving their car to market as a marker of their status, people in Leiden ride bicycles irrespective of their status. They both experienced Leiden through reading it from their own experiences rather than through formal textual orientation.

The market exploration was followed by a guided tour of the Sint Anna Aalmoeshuis by one of the Trustees. While we learnt about the purpose and history of the alms-house, founded in 1492 as a place of refuge for poor widowed women, Fidelia Ametewee (project assistant, Institute of African Studies, Ghana) solemnly reflected on how women in disadvantaged circumstances are treated in almost all societies. We learned that everything the women owned became the property of the alms-house upon their death. This condition often cut (cuts) across borders of cultures, countries, level of development and time.

During our days in Leiden the city organised the ‘Rembrandt Days’, which included public re-enactments of daily life activities during Rembrandt’s lifetime. One of the tableaux we came across depicted the washing and drying of clothes out on the streets, as one may have

encountered in 17th century Leiden. It helped us to see the space as it once was when the city was still a textile town, not its current sanitised urban space. Some re-enactments invited onlookers to participate, and so Mesha and Fidelia became part of the guild of surgeons in Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*.

We continued on to the Lipsius building, where Aarti Kawlra (Academic Director of HaB) stitched together the experiences and observations of the researchers with the pedagogical tools of the school and the value of such tools in humanising research and underlining that knowledge sits also with the people, places, words, things, and not only tomes of academic outputs.

The fourth day (14 July) started with a mentoring session by Krupa Rajangam, conservation architect and founder of Saythu (heritage conservation and management). Her session helped us to “understand ‘place’ at the interface of the built environment, crafts, communities and local histories”. The discussions focussed on the dynamics of representation or reading a place – how does one ‘present’ or ‘represent’ what we have ‘read’, and our role in it. This was reflected in Murali’s feedback, “[l]istening to people from different cultural backgrounds share how they experienced and understood the city of Leiden, made me more conscious about my latent assumptions about the city. For instance, during the sharing session after [Krupa’s] workshop I noticed how I had taken for granted some of the aspects of ‘everyday’ in Leiden that other participants found unusual or interesting. Upon further thought I realised that this assumption of a ‘given’ lifestyle in a European city came from my exposure to various movies (Hollywood and Bollywood) over the years. I was already expecting to ‘see’ a certain kind of lifestyle, culture and architecture that the movies had depicted and when encountered by the same in Leiden they never appeared to me as something different from my home city, until pointed out by other participants. After this realisation, I was very conscious to take a step back and introspect my thoughts and ‘readings’ of the place, and how media influenced them and other experiences back home”.

Liling Huang (Associate Professor, Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, National Taiwan University) led the briefing for the next day’s theme on “built environment”. She helped the researchers bind together the experiential and mechanical aspects of taking neighbourhood as a pedagogical tool to understand places, people, and words. The next excursion led the researchers to Valk Windmill Museum. As we were staying at the nearby Mayflower Hotel, the windmill had become a familiar object. The guided tour changed that perspective and helped, once again, in gaining an insight into how objects and places can influence the layout of spaces. As the guide covered the sails and showed the knots with which to tie the ropes, we realised how such skills (and others), though not commonplace, need to be seen as part of embodied practices, a lens that each one could use in their own cultural spaces. A structure that served the purpose of grinding the flour for the surrounding

villages, the mill became a tool to understand economy, technology, urban planning, human relations and practices.

With 15 July dawned the last day of the school. For the first half of the day, the researchers were divided into two groups. One group visited the Bio-Science Park, led by Michel Leenders and Willem Vogelsang; the second group visited Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken,⁷ led by Susan Suèr. Both field visits gave each group a different perspective of urban anthropology of the same city. Susan led the group to the archival room and showed the kinds of records and artefacts that Erfgoed [heritage] Leiden holds; she then led the group to the reading room where the researchers were given folders with old pictures of seven buildings – Van Wijk, Scheltema, Zuurdeeg, Meelfabriek, Broodfabriek, Brill Publishers and Lichtfabriek. The researchers were tasked with finding them in the online archives and then locating them on the map spread out on the table. Afterwards, the group went on a walk led by Xiaolan Lin (HaB Programme Manager) to visit the same sites and see the changes in the built-environment.

The second group was given a guided tour of the Bio-Science Park. The Park was a very different kind of built-environment from what the researchers had come to expect from Leiden. The Bio-Science Park is the largest cluster of life science university buildings in the Netherlands, and the tour highlighted how an expanding campus interacts with the different stakeholders and interests.

This theme of ‘interaction’ was carried forward by two talks from two very different perspectives. The first talk was a lecture by Michel Leenders from Leiden University, on Leiden University and its expansion; and the second was by representatives of a neighbourhood group. Leenders discussed the different phases through which the university town has expanded, and briefly discussed the cost of human relations in that expansion. He talked of the on-going phase of yet another expansion of Leiden University and negotiations over relocation of residents who live close to the Lipsius building. This relocation would make the expansion possible but has been fraught with tension. In the second talk, Giny and Theresa of the neighbourhood group shared their experiences of interacting with the representatives of the university and their refusal to move to alternative places. These final lectures really aided the participants of the school, who were complete strangers to a textile industrial-turned-university town, to read Leiden through a range of experiential pedagogies. The school closed with a canal tour of Leiden and celebration.

The take-away

The five-day summer school, *Reading Leiden*, applied pedagogies such as guided walks, interviews, storytelling, craft, etc. to make sense of the world. The school was directed at the ways in which we experience the world around us and why such an approach in research and teaching should be given due place. The school participants were researchers from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali,

Senegal, India, Myanmar, Taiwan, Thailand and the Netherlands. With the exception of two participants, all are researchers in projects associated with the Humanities across Borders (HaB) programme.

What is the purpose of such pedagogies? How do we locate them? What is their value? These are some of the lines of enquiry that we collectively and individually explored in course of the five days. How were individuals, many first-time travellers to a foreign country, expected to ‘read’ another foreign place, culture, people, organisation, and site? What is ‘reading’ a place? How do we understand and locate information, process it and convert it into knowledge? How to express this to others who were either familiar with Leiden or even those who weren’t?

Fidelia observed that “participating helped me gain more knowledge into how personal backgrounds and cultures affect the approach to research, because what you already know affects what you don’t know.” Baba Coulibaly commented that HaB pedagogies “promote alternative teaching techniques grounded in local realities, by fostering closer connection with the teaching media within countries.”

The ‘reading’ of Leiden was peppered with perplexity, wonder, reflexivity (with one’s culture and an alien one), as well as realisation of similarities and differences. It pushed us to question the lenses through which we look and understand the world around us. It made us question the factors that influence our lenses and the place(s) they come from. It pushed us to understand and experience the complexity, and paradoxically, the simplicity of using concepts like words or stories, place making, crafts as sites of constructing knowledge rather than as mere examples. As Surajit Sarkar commented on the approach of the school, “it brought human experiences of the city, looking at human interactions, building understanding, discovering and appreciating human as a universal theme or subject”. The audience voiced the same observation when on 19 July 2019 the three groups presented their ‘reading’ of Leiden at the Roundtable *Reading Leiden: Some Insights from the Humanities across Borders School*, at ICAS 11 (www.icas.asia).

As part of the school, the researchers were asked to upload an image/recording or any material to the ‘HaB Accession Card’, a platform that makes digital storytelling through smaller pegs. By bringing to fore the voices of the people in the field, this is a unique repository of fieldwork and engagement. These exercises further helped to encourage self-reflection and to understand how such a tool can in fact become a tool of and for research. In addition, on every day of the school, the researchers experienced Leiden through food. Whether it was the abundance of bread in the Dutch diet, to herring, to eating Thai, Italian and Greek food in the Netherlands, food was one of the ways in which we commonly experienced Leiden. Through *Reading Leiden: An Experiential School* the researchers gained an understanding that research is a dialogue between different forms, experiences and sites of knowledge.⁸

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Notes

- www.humanitiesacrossborders.org
- www.lakenhal.nl
- www.craftsmanship.net/the-future-is-handmade
- I would like to thank Anneke Fennema and Herbert van Hoogdalen who guided us at the Museum Leids Wevers Huis and the trustee of the Sint Anna Aalmoeshuis.
- <https://brouwerijpronck.nl>
- Weaving in Leiden is bordering on decline and only around 25 women in and around Leiden are involved in the efforts to continue the practice.
- <https://www.erfgoedleiden.nl>
- I would like to thank everyone involved in organizing the school and those who have given their valuable time to reflect on this article at the draft stage.



Above: Fidelia and Mesha in action in Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. Photo: Arkupal Ra Acharya.