

Zeitschrift: gta papers

Herausgeber: gta Verlag

Band: 5 (2021)

Vorwort: Introduction : the width of a desk

Autor: Jasper, Adam

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 03.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Introduction: The Width of a Desk

Adam Jasper

Adam Jasper is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich.

It's a set-up cartoonists know well: a doctor sitting at an enormous desk (as much an attribute of the profession as coat and stethoscope), on the verge of delivering unwelcome news. The doctor's desk is drawn to appear imposing and wide. In cartoons, the width of a desk figures as a metaphor for the power of the medical profession, the social distance between omniscient doctor and the fragile patient. The joke only resonates because doctors' desks actually often are unusually wide. The wide desk helps prevent inadvertent contact between doctor and patient, thereby offering both of them a measure of protection against contagion. The doctor's desk grants social distance in a double sense: as a symbolic distance as well as a quite literal physical distance.

The historian's desk is wide but perhaps not so imposing. *gta papers* is dedicated to questions of architectural history and historiography, but this issue is a response to "the current situation"—the novel coronavirus pandemic—in recognition of the irreducibly historical disjunct that it represents. When we began gathering material for it in early 2020, one of the concerns that we had was that the crisis might be over, and half-forgotten, by the time the ink was dry. Sadly, this appears not to be the case.

What we sought, in putting together this volume, was a variety of approaches to pandemics, an alternative to enforced passivity in the face of phenomena that seemed to lurch at us out of a distant collective past. We knew that orienting ourselves via the micro-organisms would not help us much. In his 1967 essay on eighteenth-century nosology, Jean-Pierre Peter wrote of the difficulty in even naming diseases.¹ Not only do names vary from place to place and time to time but the categorization of diseases shifts depending on the ascendant medical approach. Diseases have been classified on the basis of symptoms, anatomical theories, etiology, climate, microbiology and more lately, genetic sequencing. A term as frequent in the literature as tuberculosis might cover a host of illnesses that we would now think of as wholly unrelated. To make matters more confusing, the diseases themselves change, both biologically, and, in the physical responses that they evoke. Even within a single society, the impact of a disease, its virulence and gravity and the response that it evokes, varies between social classes, races, and age groups. The study of nosology alone therefore reveals that disease and health cannot be captured solely in biological terms but must be approached through their cultural and political dimensions as well. So it has been with coronavirus, COVID-19, or SARS-CoV-2—terms that we read as synonyms but whose connotations vary.

¹ Jeanne-Pierre Peter, "Disease and the Sick at the End of the Eighteenth Century," in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, eds., *Biology of Man in History: Selections from the Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 81–124, here 95–96.

This issue of *gta papers* therefore should not, and cannot, be read as a diagnosis of a calamity that is far from over. Rather, we gather disparate approaches that may help us to orient ourselves and our research methods. From the Plague Column of Vienna, better understood as a kind of votive offering than as a public sculpture, we leap centuries to the invention of the rapid sand filter, a technology for water filtration without which the explosive growth in urban populations would not have been possible prior to the invention of antibiotics. We study cordon systems from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the city walls of seventeenth century London. We move from the early modern villa to the murals of Mexico City, from contemporary hospitals to nineteenth-century bedrooms. Our scales shift from isolation on household balconies to the attempted isolation of nation states, from mammalian placenta to plastic bubbles. Finally, this issue closes with a visit to the recent past, with reflections upon the first, vicious visitation upon New York City of what we, at the time of writing, still call “the current situation.”

It is important to add, in this short introduction, a note of thanks to the community that made this oversized issue of *gta papers* possible. Even under normal circumstances, scholars exist as a kind of diaspora, scattered in institutions of research and education around the world. In the last year, however, that isolation has often been total. The great generosity with which our call for papers was met is proof of the deep intrinsic motivation of all of our contributors. International meetings were held between kitchen tables and guest bedrooms hastily converted into offices. The authors, designers, and editors exchanged files without ever meeting. In the face of locked offices, closed archives, and in some cases, personal tragedy, they continued to work, and—at the time of writing—continue to work via improvised means. Seen in this context, the care required in preparing such an issue takes on a new meaning—not as escapism, but as an expression of respect for the endurance of medical professionals and volunteers.