

# READING STREET SPACE: NOTES ON VIA TRIBUNALI AND ST JOHN STREET

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**Abstract:** *Via Tribunali and St John Street — two streets from distant cities but with unexpectedly common features — synthesize the physical, social, and cultural transformations of the urban fragments they belong to, which are only apparently very different: the ancient centre of Napoli and the Clerkenwell area in London. The urban analysis starts from the description<sup>1</sup> — a practice necessary to understand the singular elements of the system — which, through an empirical and experiential approach<sup>2</sup>, illustrates the consistencies of the spaces. This proposed methodology of reading<sup>3</sup> is structured in seven themes to investigate different levels of architectural intensity: from objective and easily comparable data describing historical evolution, typological modifications, geometries, and proportions, to more interpretive aspects, regarding the inhabitants, uses and atmospheric conditions. The analysis, supported by drawings and photographs, becomes a useful interpretive tool to capture the coexistence of material and immaterial qualities<sup>4</sup>, inherent to the urban environment<sup>5</sup>.*

**Keywords:** *Space of the Street; Permanence and Variations; Urban Reading; Re-drawing.*

**Resumo:** *A Via Tribunali e a Rua St John — duas ruas de cidades distantes, mas com características comuns inesperadas — sintetizam as transformações físicas, sociais e culturais dos fragmentos urbanos a que pertencem, que são aparentemente muito diferentes: o antigo centro de Nápoles e a área de Clerkenwell em Londres. A análise urbana começa com a descrição<sup>6</sup> — uma prática necessária para compreender os elementos singulares do sistema — que, por meio de uma abordagem empírica e experiencial<sup>7</sup>, ilustra as consistências dos espaços. A metodologia proposta de leitura<sup>8</sup> está estruturada em sete temas para investigar diferentes níveis de intensidade arquitetônica: desde dados objetivos e facilmente comparáveis que descrevem a evolução histórica, modificações tipológicas, geometrias e proporções, até aspectos mais interpretativos, relacionados aos habitantes, usos e condições atmosféricas. A análise, apoiada por desenhos e fotografias, torna-se uma ferramenta interpretativa útil para captar a coexistência de qualidades materiais e imateriais<sup>9</sup>, inerentes ao ambiente urbano<sup>10</sup>.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Espaço urbano; Permanência e Variações; Leitura urbana; Redesenho.*

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<sup>1</sup> HAVIK, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> BAILLY, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> JACOBS, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> ÇELIK, FAVRO, INGERSOLL, ed., 1994.

<sup>5</sup> SENNETT, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> HAVIK, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> BAILLY, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> JACOBS, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> ÇELIK, FAVRO, INGERSOLL, ed., 1994.

<sup>10</sup> SENNETT, 2018.

## INTRODUCTION

A considerable part of the urban footprint (from 1/3 to half) is street space<sup>11</sup>. It is the primary infrastructure for movement, access, and connectivity of people and trade. The street shapes our daily experience more than the other urban elements. It is a principal element of the urban structure; it also represents the most widespread type of public space which supports cultural, economic, political, and social activity. Through a structured reading of urban space focused on two different streets in Napoli and London, the paper intends to investigate the physical and the immaterial components of the space of the streets and compare how they interact and relate to each other.

In the last decade, the theoretical discussion about the space of the street and its role in urban design focused on connectivity and movement. In some suburbs and new parts of contemporary cities, the new public spaces become inappropriate places for collective and public life. New models for thinking street spaces are required to meet the demands of our evolving cities. These models should comprehend «diversity as a biological necessity and otherness as the unique condition imparted by the urban process»<sup>12</sup>.

The paper investigates how it is relevant to consider both the material features of form and the complex immaterial relationships between the physical space and the observer. An interesting interpretation of the physical component of the street is the urban canyon proposed by Rudolf Arnheim, where streets are «an extended channel, formed by buildings and ground. [...] The street canyon hole carries out something that I will define as the primary quality of the inner spaces, and so it operates as an exciting extension of the man in the surrounding space»<sup>13</sup>. In *Great Streets*, Allan Jacobs argues that «streets moderate the form and structure and comfort of urban communities»<sup>14</sup>. One of the aims of his study was to describe the composition of streets and capture their physical quality. The author recognizes two ways to define streets: the vertical and the horizontal limit: «Vertically, which has to do with the height of buildings or walls or trees along a street; and horizontally, which has most to do with the length of and spacing between whatever is doing the defining»<sup>15</sup>. The relationship between the street planes consists of the physical and material components. The physical features of the vertical plane include quantifiable objective data: buildings typology, elevation height, window and entrance type, sidewalk dimension and cross-section of the street, lighting, trees, street furniture, and porches. These elements define the atmosphere of the street and express the essence of the space in which people live.

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<sup>11</sup> MEHTA, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> ÇELİK, FAVRO, INGERSOLL, *ed.*, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> ARNHEIM, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> JACOBS, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> JACOBS, 1995.

The horizontal plane as «human action field»<sup>16</sup> is the second component necessary to define the form of the street. The ground material and its surface features directly influence the city's form. It also encourages relationships, creating a sense of proximity and a space for movement and interaction. The formal characteristic of a street has a significant influence on the quality and the urbanity of the city as a whole.

The street space holds together human activity and «represents a social artifact of specific impulse, energy, and commitment. That is its meaning, and this meaning resides in its physical form»<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the buildings, despite their modifications, represent the structure of the urban space that serves human movement, and contribute significantly to quality of the street.

## 1. AN URBAN READING METHODOLOGY

The observation of cities is the first exercise to understanding urban space<sup>18</sup>. Based on Allan Jacobs' analysis of a number of streets, the methodology proposes an urban reading of the places to identify the characteristics that make a great street. Jacobs argues that «streets moderate the form and structure and comfort of urban communities»<sup>19</sup>. He suggests exploring some urban streets in different cultural and geographical contexts to understand their physical consistencies and transformations. His aim is to provide comparable information on the physical qualities of the streets.

Drawing serves as a valuable instrument for comprehending and exploring reality. The re-drawing of specific urban areas and the meticulous examination of each street, achieved through a series of architectural plans and cross-sections, prove to be invaluable aids in apprehending the physical attributes that delineate a great street. Jacobs undertakes a meticulous analyzes of select streets chosen for their urban and spatial quality. Through a series of drawings, he compares the physical dimensions, elucidating the recurring elements, and the unchanging characteristics that confer unique identities upon each city, denoted as invariants. Jacobs further a comprehensive taxonomy based on the physical and dimensional attributes, categorizing streets as boulevards, historic streets, tree-lined streets, streets with central walkways. For each category, he identifies a sequence of parameters, including the size and the origin of present streets, the height and length of buildings, the scale and quantity of commercial buildings, the frequency of entrances, and pedestrian foot traffic. These

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<sup>16</sup> ARNHEIM, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> KOSTOF, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> In *Urban Literacy. Reading and Writing Architecture*, Klaske Havik (HAVIK, 2014) proposes a literary approach based on the experience, use, and imagination of place. In her research, the analysis of urban space starts from the description of the place as a necessary practice for understanding the elements that constitute architecture. These concepts influence the way we look at architecture and the city. Since the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architects and academic researchers have used a descriptive method to knowledge the city; this approach has become a necessary practice for the study, analysis, and design of new parts of the city.

<sup>19</sup> JACOBS, 1995.

insights, complemented by drawings, provide a comprehensive understanding of urban streets<sup>20</sup>.

The paper presents a methodology for the examination and the analysis of urban space by integrating both the physical attributes of street space and the social dimension. This approach is delineated through seven distinct components: roots, measurements, textures, surfaces, objects, interactions, and sensations. Each of these components delves into various aspects of street space, encompassing historical context, as well as tangible and intangible elements. These thematic categories explore varying degrees of depth, spanning from empirical and comparable data that describe the historical evolution and formal and typological modifications, geometric dimensions, and material composition to more subjective interpretive facets, which are shaped by the inhabitants, uses, and the atmospheric conditions of these places.

**1. Roots:** The roots component delves into the origin of urban structure that is providing essential insights for comprehending the evolution of various city elements. The stratifications, whether in the form of alterations or enduring elements, within the physical structure of the street are discernible in the context of physical, social, and cultural transformations that shape the space. The history of a place represents the physical context transformation and urban life evolution. These aspects exert a profound influence on the city's distinctive character, constructed from the amalgamation of intricate details, significant events, and time-honored rituals, collectively constituting the memory of each place.

**2. Measurements:** Geometry serves as a means of imposing structure on the intricate fabric of physical matter. The dimensions of the elements play a key role in determining the spatial relationships that connect the various components to each other and to their immediate surroundings. In particular, the composition of the horizontal and vertical planes that make up the street is crucial to understanding the spatial foundation. Factors such as the height of facades, the width of roadway, the dimensions of sidewalks and the length of passages are essential information for understanding the spatial and relational nature of the street. Measurement, in terms of how elements relate to each other, significantly influences the perception of space and how people engage with it.

**3. Consistencies:** The street is an assemblage of multiple components that coexist, introducing diversity and shaping the physical texture of the space. The juxtaposition of different buildings determines both the material composition and the typological uniformity of the street, with emerging features taking on different roles. These features contribute to the street's individuality, serving as focal points for diversity, attraction, meeting and gathering, sacredness, quite or leisure. These

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<sup>20</sup> JACOBS, 1995: 134.

textures relate to the built elements and the space they create. The interplay between solid and void elements defines the character of the street and represents what can be considered «the most inclusive property of any place»<sup>21</sup>.

**4. Surfaces:** The observation of the street space focuses on its surfaces, which are made up of layers of different entities that manifest their material qualities. Matter serves as the fundamental building block of these surfaces, encompassing natural and artificial elements, porous and compact textures, dense and transparent qualities, as well as reflective, cold, warm and colourful attributes. Materiality fundamentally defines the appearance of a place and contributes to its distinctiveness. The variety of materials used in different aspects of the street, such as street level, pavements and facades, connects to the human experience, involving tactile sensations and the dynamics of movement.

**5. Objects:** The street is inhabited by a series of elements such as trees, lighting, vehicles such as cars, bicycles, mopeds, benches, curbs, and walls. Many of these elements are often introduced spontaneously, occupying, and contributing to the space, enriching it and giving it a human touch. The geometric realm of the street transcends its inherent geometry and transforms into a space of everyday life. In doing so, it changes both the perception and the physical configuration of the space itself, introducing a more humanised and dynamic environment.

**6. Interactions:** «Arteriality, a property identified by the cartographer Alastair Morrison whereby “the pattern of arterial roads is the only one which forms a complete network.” [...] It is a pervasive propriety — but an almost invisible one, intuitively built into road systems without conscious prescription»<sup>22</sup>. Through this interpretation, Marshall explores the intricate relationships between major and minor streets, encompassing the capacity for branching, absorption, and exchange. Different levels of interactions, such as mobility, proximity of the built spaces, and the intersection of open and closed spaces, coexist within the street space. These interactions materialize between the physical aspects of the environment and its inhabitants, as well as between buildings and open space. Each of these interactions plays a key role in shaping the balance and connections between the public and the private spheres, culminating in a space characterized by «a high degree of intensity, of communications, exchanges»<sup>23</sup>.

**7. Emotions:** The final aspect is closely linked to the experiential aspect of a place. The essence of a city’s quality is deeply connected to the combination of tangible and intangible interactions. These interactions evoke emotions that are intertwined with sounds, noises, smells and emotions, ultimately leading to a sense of unfamiliarity,

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<sup>21</sup> NORBERG-SCHULZ, 1980: 6.

<sup>22</sup> MARSHALL, 2005: 61.

<sup>23</sup> WOLF, 1978: 205.

engagement, belonging or exclusion. The perception of street space is inextricably related to the degree of human engagement with the urban environment.

## 2. NAPOLI AND LONDON: READING AND RE-DRAWING THE STREETSPACE

The cities of Napoli and London have significant differences, both in terms of spatial and material aspects affecting the construction of open spaces and buildings, and in their social composition. While in the ancient centre of Napoli, despite the increasing process of touristification, it is still possible to find the combination of locals and students, London is taking shape as a complex city where coexistence is manifested through a fusion of cultures, often resulting in social enclaves that are reflected in the construction of space, particularly in public spaces. The comparison between two physically and socially different places allows for the experimentation and verification of the urban reading mode proposed and articulated through different categories.

The seven different categories outlined above have served as the framework for the urban reading of the two case study streets: Via Tribunali in Napoli and St John Street in London (Fig. 1). The examination of Via Tribunali and St John Street starts with a comprehensive urban assessment, elucidating their historical development and



Fig. 1. The plan of Naples and London. Source: Drawings by the author

transformations they have undergone. This evaluation is further supplemented by a series of drawings that explicitly depict the categories detailed above. Napoli and London, despite their distinct identities, share a complex layering of historical time. Within these cities, one can discern the evolution that has left an indelible mark on the physical and perceptual fabric of urban landscape.

The ancient city of Napoli has a regular and orthogonal urban layout, consisting of main streets, known as *decumani*, and the smaller orthogonally intersecting streets, known as *cardini*. However, a closer examination of the physical city reveals a complex interplay of spatial rooms that together create a unique atmosphere within the ancient city. Typically, the transition from the street to the entrance, leading to the court of the main historical *palazzi*, gives rise to different urban rooms. The spatial configuration is a constant state of flux, creating extraordinary urban compositions in the ancient city. The three main *decumani*, Via Tribunali, Via San Biagio dei Librai and Via dell'Anticaglia, are made up of a sequence of spaces that include small squares, external staircases, and arcades. The walls of the monasteries, the porticos and the entrance of the small shops define the boundaries of the streets. This varied arrangement contributes to the image of the city and represents its identity. The ancient part of Napoli follows an invisible order that comes from the interaction between the elements, the buildings, and their effect on the inhabitants. Via Tribunali is the central street within the ancient urban structure. Its spatial diversity, changes and unique exceptions maintain its role as scenographic and theatrical space that remains inhabited. This street serves as a window on the essence of ancient city, where every aspect contributes to the composition of the city. It represents a holistic form of architecture that goes beyond mere churches and *palazzi* and embodies a strong sense of order, scale, proportion, and rhythm. Within this sequence of spaces, «each element that shapes this ancient urban area — in its tangible presence — to a collective moment and meaning, telling — as a formal fact — the remarkable history of its continuous reinterpretation and incessant transformation»<sup>24</sup>.

Describing London as a single city is a complex endeavor, given its vast size and the incredibly diverse facets it encompasses. London functions as an amalgamation of distinct cities that engage in a constant dialogue, each offering an array of changing forms and languages. Clerkenwell, situated in the northern part of the City, epitomizes this complexity. It adopted its present-day morphological structure at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a historical monastic influence. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Clerkenwell witnessed the emergence of its initial industrial activities, including breweries and distilleries. These echoes of the past continue to characterize streets like Cow Street and St John Street, albeit for different purposes.

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<sup>24</sup> SAVARESE, 1991: 13.

St John Street, which extends from Angel Station to Smithfield Market, is notably diverse in character. In its northern segment, it maintains a predominantly residential atmosphere, with new structures punctuating the Georgian and Victorian façades. In contrast, the southern part is characterized by historical industrial edifices that now house co-working spaces, offices, apartments, and smaller residential properties. The architectural diversity is a prominent feature of this area, with structures constructed in brick, buildings reminiscent of medieval styles, and industrial factories from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This diversity contributes to an exceptionally mixed urban landscape. Presently, the borough hosts an array of bars, breweries, art, design, and craft spaces, attracting numerous artists. It is in the interplay between the people and the place that this area derives its uniqueness.

Re-drawing proves to be an invaluable tool for understanding the various aspects of both material and immaterial relationship within the street space. In this research, a series of drawings is employed to investigate the structure of the form, covering the initial two categories, roots and dimensions. Additionally, it delves into the characteristics of the edges, delving into consistencies and interaction, as well as the essence of the visible layers, encompassing surfaces, objects, and sensations.

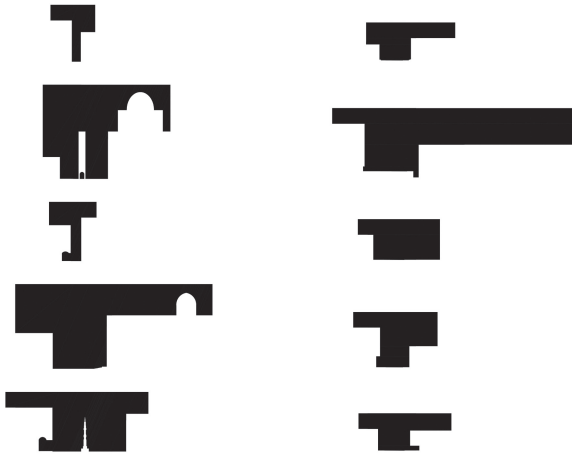
Structure of the Form: The composition of the block defines the structure of the street space, emphasizing the relationship between void and built space. The urban blocks, often characterized by a consistent, excavated mass, delineate the boundaries of Via Tribunali. The interplay between solidity and emptiness is readily observable in the cross-sectional sequences, which give rise to diverse urban rooms defined by variable boundaries that shape the urban void (Fig. 2). In the case of St John Street, the blocks display a spectrum of architectural style from Georgian buildings to more articulated blocks that often challenge the boundary of the street. Re-drawing of the void space in the sections highlights how the sequence of voids, in contrast to the solids, is articulated with greater thickness to the north, gradually transitioning into subtle branches to the south (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2  
The urban blocks in Via  
Tribunali and St John Street  
Source: Drawings by the author

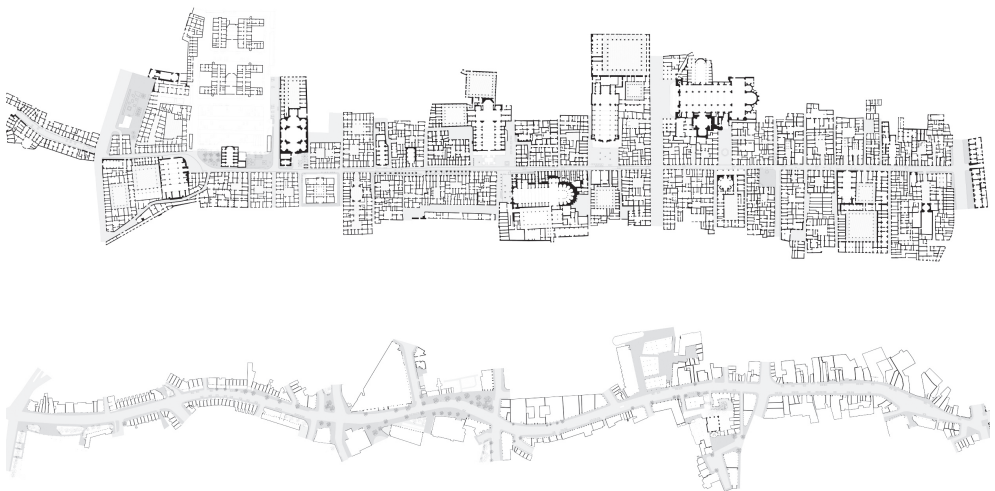






**Fig. 3**  
A sequence of cross-sections that explains the different urban rooms of Via Tribunali and St John Street. Source: Drawings by the author

The consistency of the Edges: The ground floors reveals the nuanced consistency of the street space, which houses a network of contradictions and variations. Via Tribunali unfolds along a roughly one-kilometer stretch, characterized by a complex sequence of spaces. The layout rarely adheres to a continuous straight line, and the facades frequently exhibit shifts backward and forward, resulting in diverse architectural expressions. Widened sections and squares serve to alter the street's configuration, accommodating churches, monuments, social gathering spots, and meeting places. In the case of St John Street, the plan highlights the presence of a great variety of buildings. This drawing explicitly delineates the various segments of the street, which spans approximately one and half kilometers. It contains buildings



**Fig. 4.** The re-drawing of the ground floor of Via Tribunali and St John Street. Source: Drawings by the author

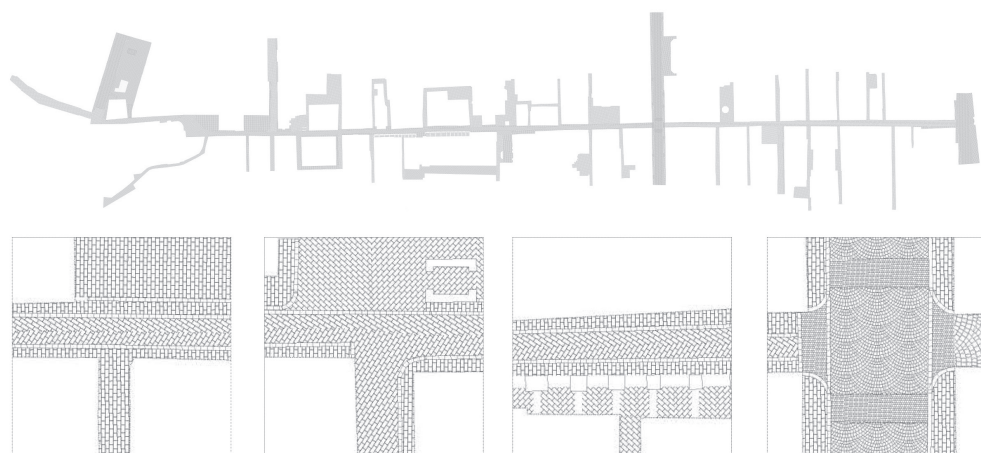


Fig. 5. The horizontal plane of Via Tribunali. Source: Drawings by the author



Fig. 6. The vertical plane of St John Street. Source: Drawings by the author

of fragmented consistency, some of which follow the street façade, while others, such as a terraced urban block, are set back from the street by a gap and connected to the house entrance by a staircase (Fig. 4).

The essence of Visible Layers. The pattern of both horizontal and vertical surfaces specifies the character and perception of the street space. In the case of Via Tribunali, the drawing of the paving accentuates the horizontal consistency of the street, comprising multiple layers. The lava stone pavement, with its distinct shapes and positions, underlines the spatial variation. The diverse arrangement of the stones serves as a visual marker, signaling the presence of the roadway, a widening, or a passage (Fig. 5). In St John Street, the representation of the vertical surfaces underlines the multitude of materials that contribute to its identity. Brick is displayed in various forms and colors, contingent on the age and architectural style of the buildings.

It represents a porous, warm material that frequently contrasts with the gray asphalt, light marble stones, and white moldings (Fig. 6). These material variations collectively shape the street's visual and tactile character.

### 3. THE DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE STREETS SPACE

The reading and re-drawing of Via Tribunali and St John Street underline how the street space exemplifies a nuanced order that is characteristic of collective cities. This order becomes evident in the morphology of the urban elements and in the intricate interactions that weave together formal, social, and cultural aspects. The street acts as a synthesis of various relationships that combine each layer, both material and immaterial, within the urban space. The physical composition of the street engenders relationships that can take on different forms: continuous, discontinuous, interrupted, and overlapped. These variations arise from the multifaced urbanity within the city space, generating mutable conditions visible in the volume of the street space; the connection with the vertical plane; the conformation of the ground floor (e.g., porches, entrance halls, passages, arcades); the sequence of urban rooms.

The figural structure of the street defines the framework of the city, holding together its components and activating interactions between them, including, the street planes, the edges that delineate the horizontal plane, the interplay of void and solid, and the integration of interior and exterior spaces.

The street's image encapsulates the relationships between the physical and immaterial elements of the space. These relationships are changeable and closely tied to the sensory world. They emerge from the interaction of people, the presence of different buildings, the transitory and ephemeral elements, and unexpected events. The street's image encompasses all of these relationships, capturing the hidden world within the visible one and encompassing the myriad aspects that each individual can perceive in their unique way.

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