Reflection Graduation work
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In September 2011 I started my graduation project in the studio of Explore Lab. Explore Lab is a studio that allows students the freedom to explore their own fascination and integrate that into their architectural or urbanistic graduation work. Students get to decide on their own subject, make their own graduation team of mentors and are encouraged to collaborate on projects and learn from each others "explorations".

Because I had a long time fascination for peace and wanted to get to know more about how architecture could benefit peace and afford feelings of peacefulness, I applied for Explore Lab. I chose a city for my graduation project (Berlin; because it has a significant history with both peace and non-peace, and also because Berlin fascinates me); Explore Lab'ers often go abroad for their graduation project. Because I believe a future of peace is only possible if we take care more of both each other as well as our "spaceship earth", I decided that I wanted the project to be "sustainable".

My research tried to answer the question of how our environment can influence our behaviour and our emotions. This research has been a real exploration for me, in that sense that I ended up with a result that I could not have thought of at the beginning. My theory mentor Patrick Healy advised me to look into the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (an existential phenomenologist; phenomenology is often referred to in the Explore Lab) and the works of the Gestalt psychologists. It was in the work of Abraham Maslow that I found a very useful framework for the apprehension of how we interact with our environments and how they make us feel or behave in a certain way. For designers like me, who make their decisions based on feelings and intuition but feel insecure as long as they do not have a rational explanation for their decisions, this is a very valuable framework.

However, the research did not answer the question of how a building could afford feelings of peacefulness specifically, or contribute to peace. This was a problem I ran into when I started designing. I was a bit too fixed on a specific geometry that I thought could have this effect, and got stuck in the design process because of that. This slow start of the design phase eventually resulted in the project not being finished within the period prescribed. In the end I learned that a more abstract set of requirements for the spaces of the building works much better than trying to apply a specific geometry that one thinks can have a certain effect onto a design.

For the design I chose to build something on the most unpeaceful place that I could find In Berlin, Kottbusser Tor. The building most in need of a peaceful makeover was the underground station there. For some reason train stations are often designed in Explore Lab, and in my case the reason for choosing this program was very clear: by choosing to design a public building that many people visit, and that many people visit everyday, the design can really make a difference in people's lives. Because of that, I found that the design approach really matched the research. Coincidentally, the location turned out to be linked to the results of the research as well — for a large part the theory of the Gestalt psychology on which my conclusions were drawn was formed in Berlin.

As mentioned above, during the design phase I developed a more abstract set of requirements. Working with the abstract requirements (freedom, continuity of space and time and playfulness) turned out to be a really handy tool for designing. It allowed me to test certain decisions ("Does this space really afford freedom?") and it also helped to push things to a higher level ("Can we make this column just a little more playfull?"). However, I found it hard to combine with the sustainable development requirements that I set for my building from the start. Designing is of course always a integrative process, in which many seemingly contradicting requirements have to be combined into one satisfying form, and in that sense it should not be too hard to combine these abstract requirements with the sustainable development requirements. But I found that trying to integrate two new sorts of requirements into the design process at the same time confused me and made me stall at certain points because I did not know how I could make choices. In the future I will try to limit my attempts at integrating new skills to just one-at-a-time.

Approaching the end of this graduation period I can conclude that I have really made an Exploration. I have learned a completely new way of looking at the psychology of architecture and environments, got stuck somewhere in the design proces, and found a valuable decision-making tool for future design processes. Additionally, from August 2012 until November (partly the reason for the delayed graduation) I Explored the possibilities of applying design skills outside of the design-industry while I participated in the Nationale DenkTank, which was a very valuable experience. I am eager to Explore more, but first finish this project.

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