Spaces of Impact

Architecture as a Medium for Social Activation



Imke Mulders

Abstract

The research investigates how architecture can be used as a communicative medium to activate societal engagement and inspire individual action, particularly in response to global challenges such as the climate crisis. While data and facts often overwhelm rather than mobilsze people, architecture offers the potential to bridge the gap between information and emotional resonance.

Drawing from narrative psychology, experience design, and narrative architecture, the study identifies five recurring design qualities that enable impactful communication through space: movement, curiosity, interaction, materiality, and light. As can be seen in this booklet, these qualities were implemented in an analysis of 24 reference projects, architectural as well as non-architectural, selected for their clarity of message, emotional impact, and diversity in medium and audience engagement.

The research results in a practical design toolbox, which outlines concrete tools such as spatial sequencing, co-creation, framing with daylight, and the use of projections and sensors. These tools are prioritised based on their frequency in the projects analysed and their grounding in theory. The five most effective design strategies identified are:

1. Facilitating spatial movement and offering multiple viewpoints
2. Creating space for interpretation and dialogue
3. Encouraging visitor agency and co-creation
4. Guiding perception through light and framing
5. Using sensory techniques like projection and interactivity to generate emotional impact

Combined, these findings form a reusable methodology that shifts the architectural narrative: *from a story to explain the design, to a design to explain the story.*

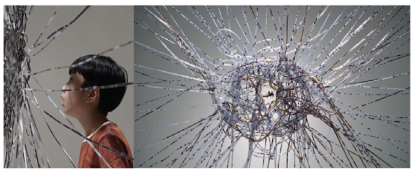
List of architectural projects

Message

1. 

Materialism (Beetle)
Studio Drift
2018

We are not in dialogue with our environment and we have come to lose touch with raw materials.

2. 

Pollutive Ends
Thijs Biersteker
2019

Showcasing the impact of a single cigarette butt on our environment and waters.

3. 

Memory Palace
Es Devlin
2019

The power of memory and the potential for humans to shift their perspective and achieve collective change.

4. 

Waterlicht
Studio Roosegaarde
2018

Reminding us of the importance of water innovation and the impact of climate change on the rising sea levels.

5. 

Water Wise
Studio Mast
2024

Creating awareness around personal water consumption and learning how to save water.

6. 

Cathédrale d'Images
Carrières des Lumières
1976 - present

Creating a 'total visual experience', a journey through a cathedral of images.

7. 

Brickworks Museum
Duncan McCauley
2009

Tthe story of brick making in Zehdenick from a technical and cultural perspective. Focusing on the impact of the Kiln for the local village.

8. 

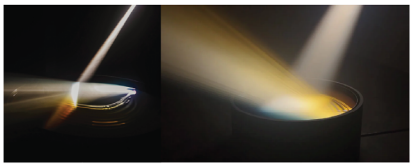
Doloris Anoma Maze
Karmanoia
2019

Let curiosity be your guide, stimulating all the senses.

9. 

Ice Watch
Olafur Eliasson
2014

Raising awareness of climate change.

10. 

Sunbeam, Captured
Boris Acket
2024

The ephemeral beauty of everyday life. Striving to freeze time.

11. 

LFS2
Mariska de Groot &
Dieter Vandoren
2018

How old and new technologies merge into a dynamic sensory landscape. Light, sound and space blur the boundaries between matter and media.

12. 

Mind Bridges
Jeroen Alexander Meijer
2024

The value of undivided attention between human beings.

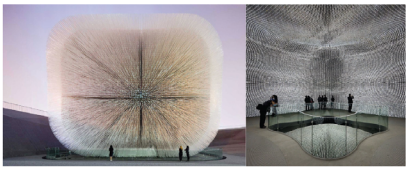
List of additional projects

Message

1. 

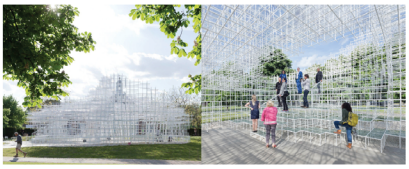
Blur Building
Diller + Scofido
2002

Architecture as a special effects machine that delights and disturbs the senses. Challenging the assumptions about conventions of space, showcasing our visual dependence.

2. 

Seed Cathedral Pavilion
Heatherwick Studio
2010

The interconnectedness of nature and urban life, and the importance of preserving biodiversity.

3. 

Serpentine Gallery Pavilion
Sou Fujimoto
2013

Weaving architecture with the greenery of the surrounding plant life.

4. 

Serpentine Gallery Pavilion
Bjarke Ingels
2016

Embodying multiple aspects that are often perceived as opposites.

5. 

Serpentine Gallery Pavilion
Peter Zumthor
2011

Placing nature on a pedestool, framing the garden and the sky, the human can only be an observer.

6. 

Kolumba Museum
Peter Zumthor
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Respect the sights history and preserve its essence. Believing in the inner values of art, its ability to make us think and feel.

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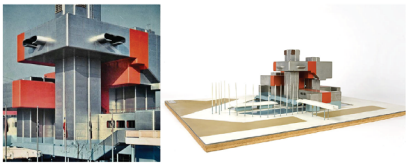
Bruder Klaus Kapelle
Peter Zumthor
2007

A building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being.

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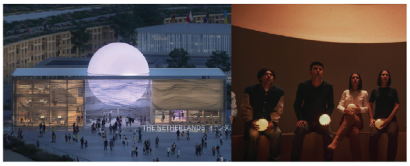
Water Temple
Tadao Ando
1991

A spiritual transition, symbolically passing through water to reach the sacred space, symbolism in Buddhism.

9. 

Dutch Water Pavilion
Weeber & Bakema
1970

Showcasing how the Netherlands lives with the water, lying below sea level.

10. 

A New Dawn Pavilion
RAU architects & Tellart
2025

"Common Ground," emphasizing international collaboration and shared solutions to global challenges.

11. 

The Jewish Museum
Daniel Libeskind
1999

To engage openly and actively with Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life in Germany.

12. 

Tatlin's Tower
Vladimir Tatlin
1920

Inspire all people towards a contemplative, meaningful and thoroughly modern future.

Architectural projects





Blur Building

Diller Scofido + Renfro

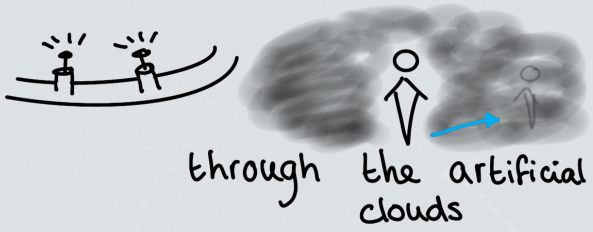
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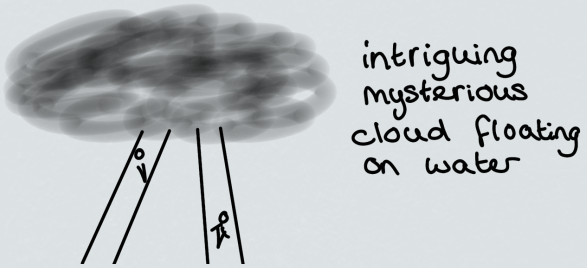


The 5 qualities

Movement

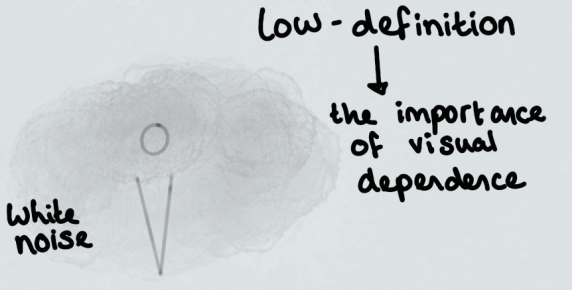


Curiosity

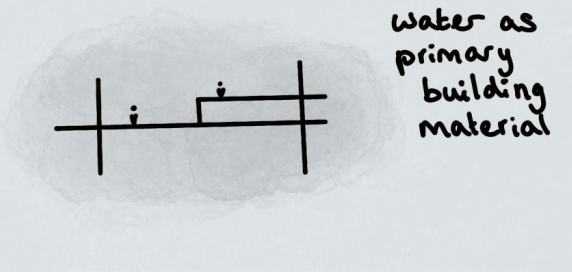


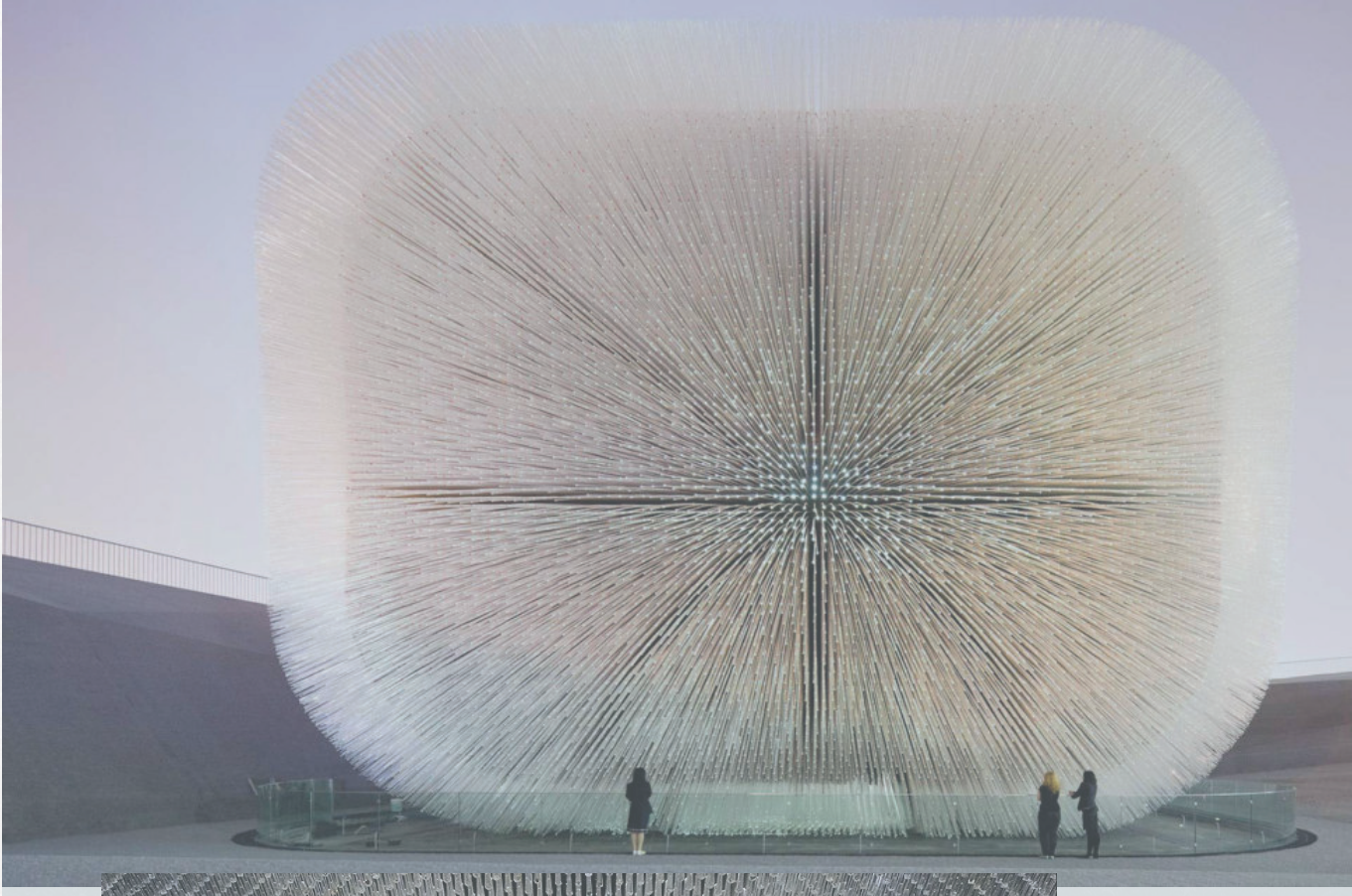
Interactive

Light



Materiality







Seed Cathedral Pavilion

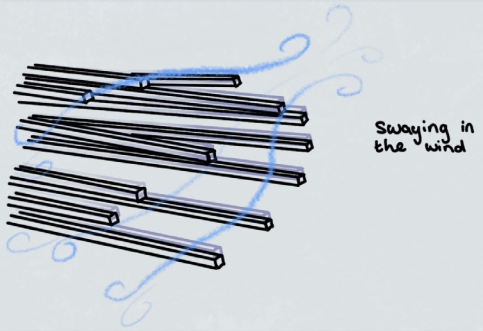
Heatherwick Studio

2010

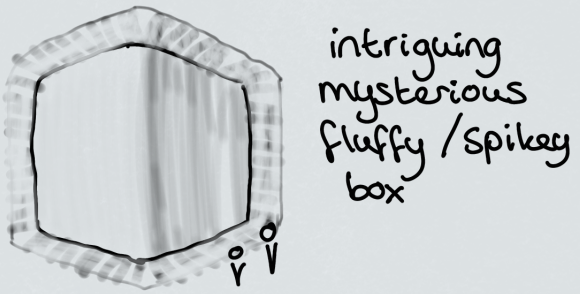
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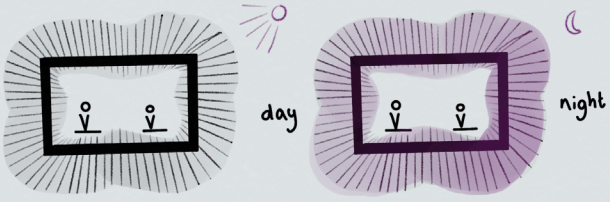


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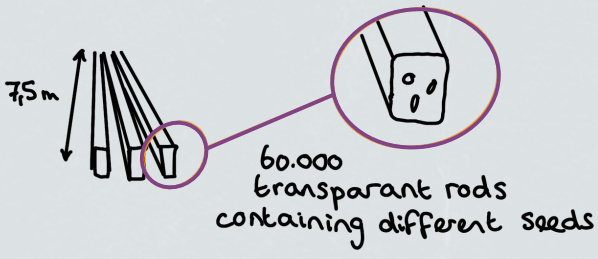


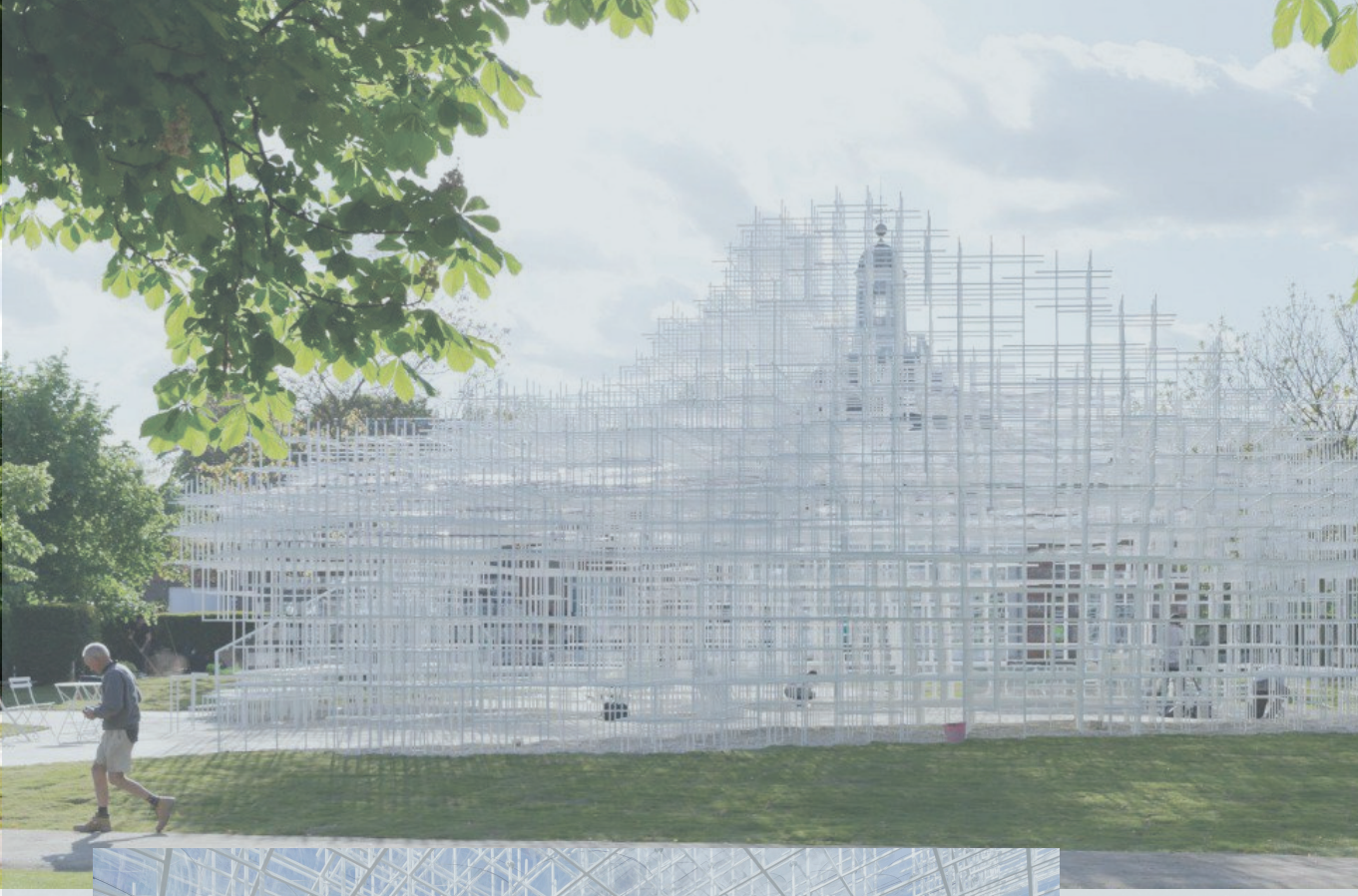
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Serpentine Gallery Pavilion

Sou Fujimoto

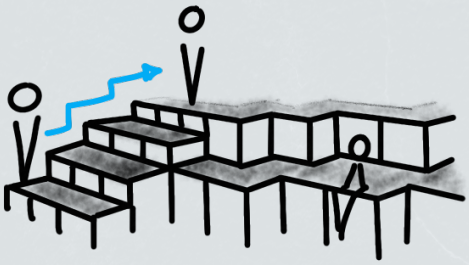
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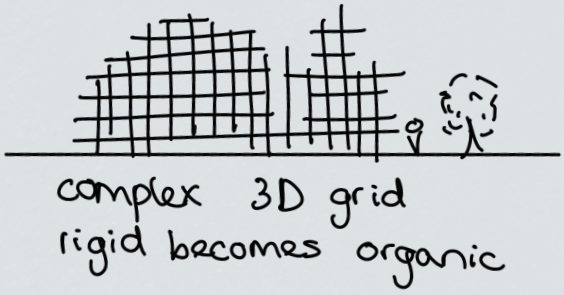


The 5 qualities

Movement

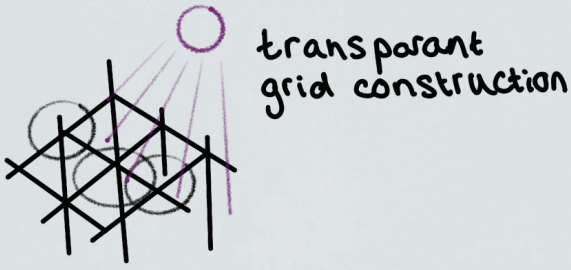


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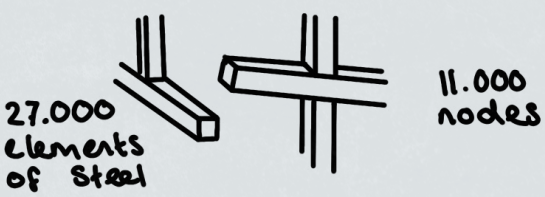


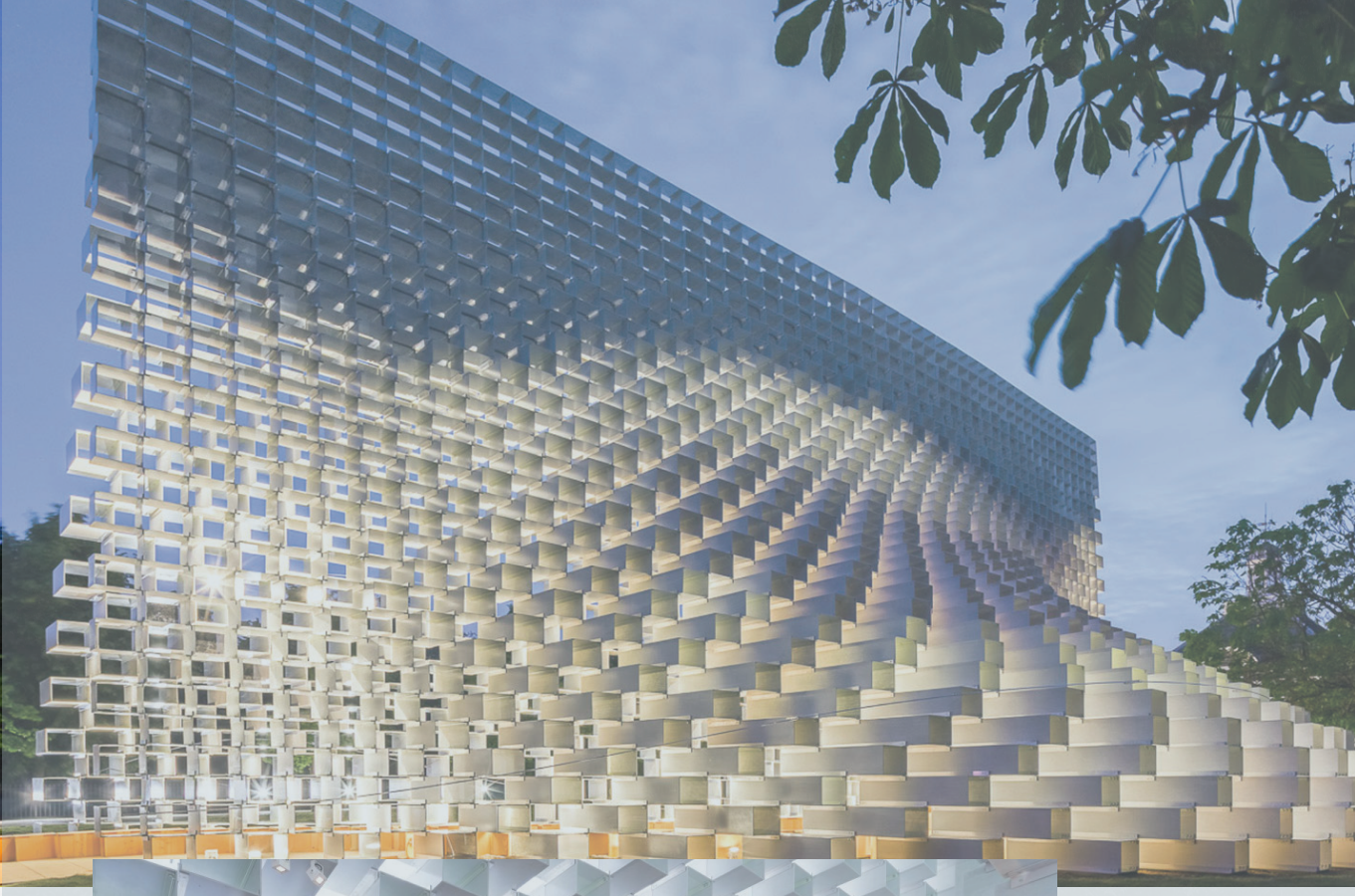
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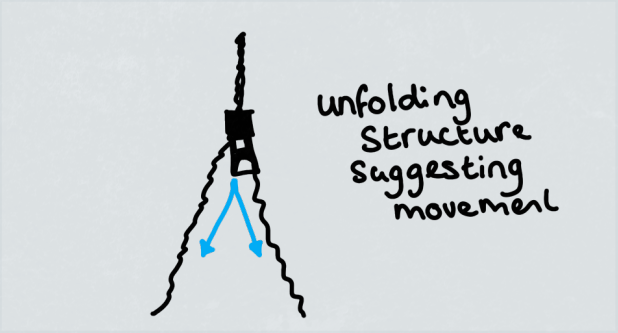
Bjarke Ingels
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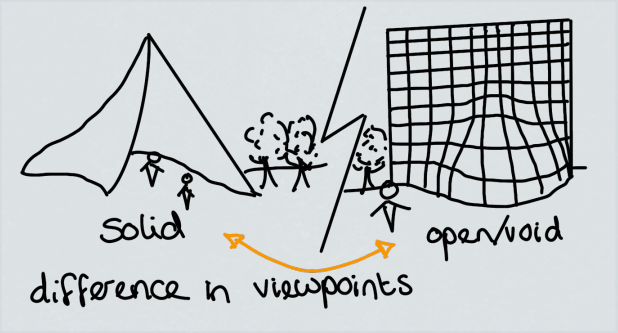


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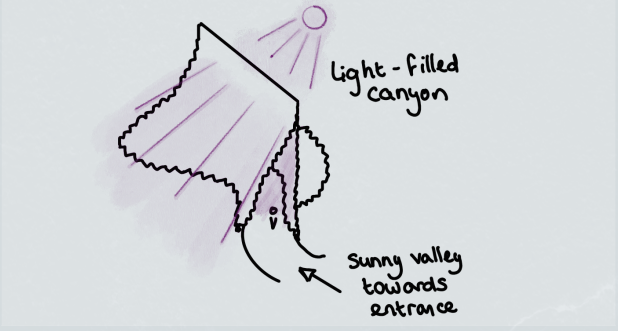


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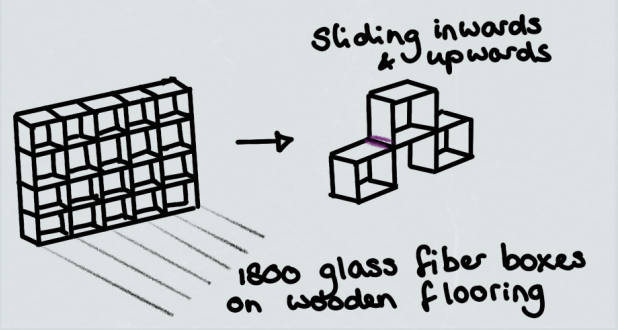


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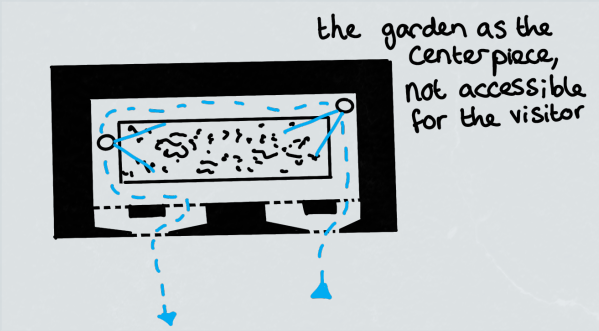
Peter Zumthor

2011

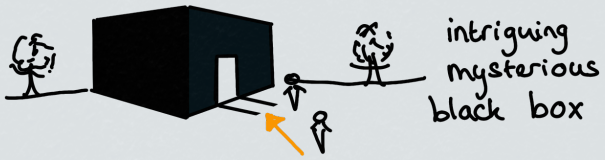
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The 5 qualities

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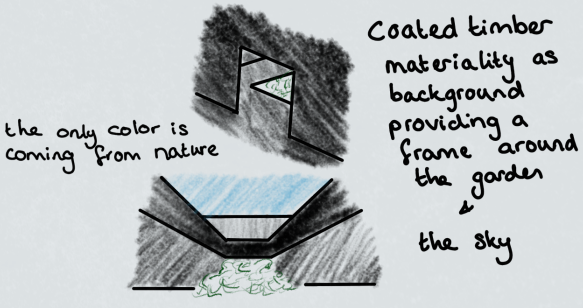


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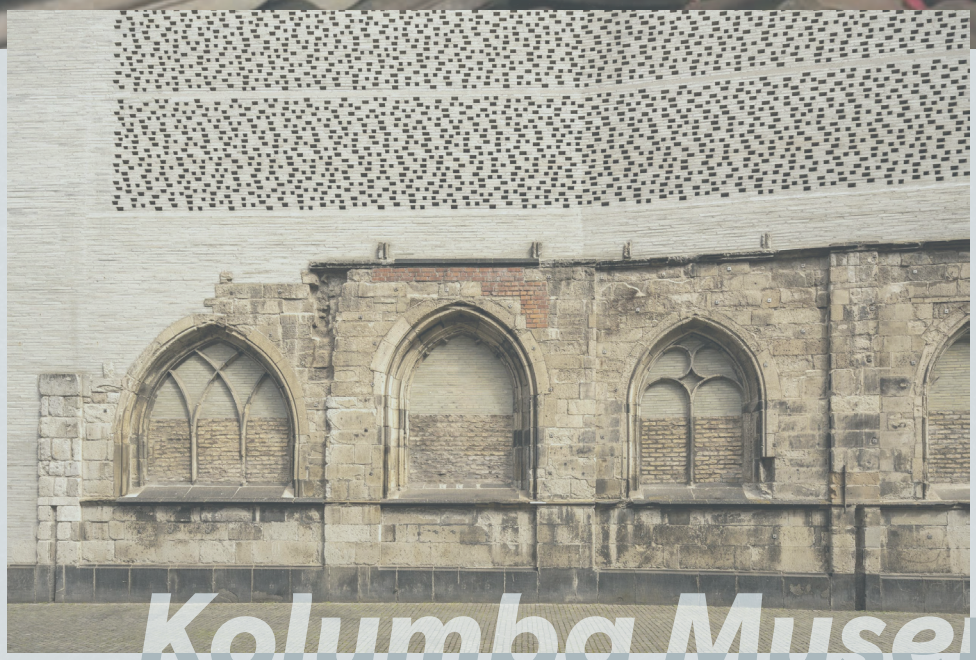
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Kolumba Museum

Peter Zumthor
2007

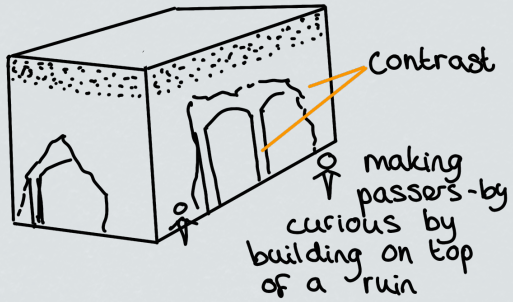
Respect the sights history and
preserve its essence.
Believing in the inner values
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The 5 qualities

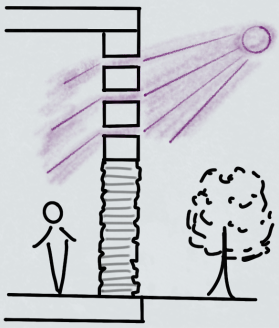
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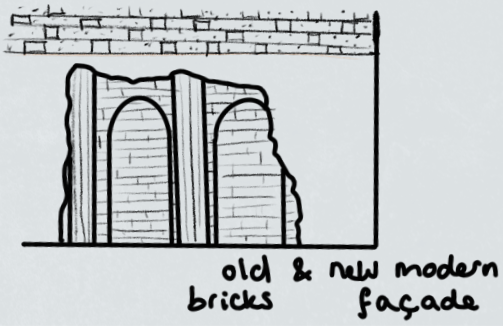


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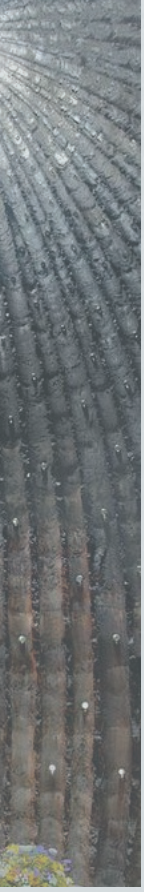


Bruder Klaus Kapelle

Peter Zumthor

2007

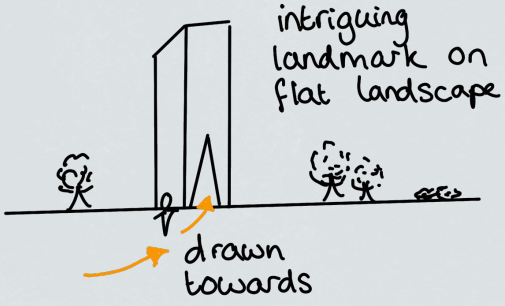
A building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being.



The 5 qualities

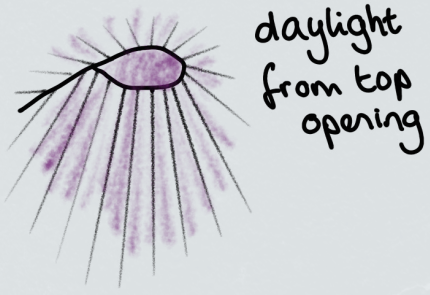
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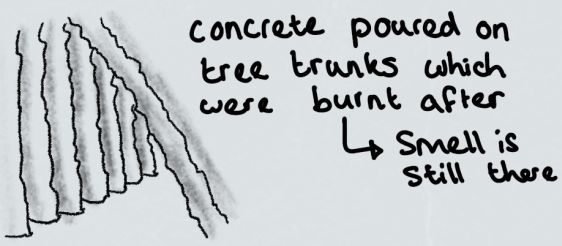


Interactive

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Water Temple

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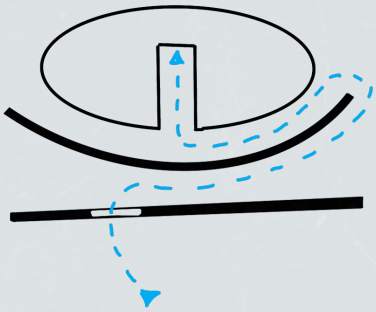
1991

A spiritual transition, symbolically passing through water to reach the sacred space, symbolism in Buddhism.

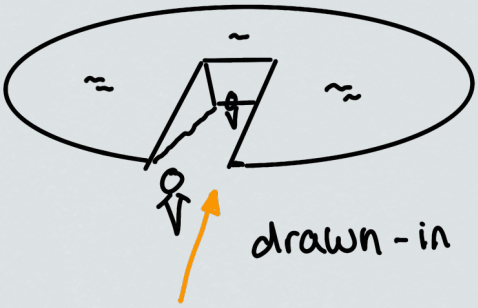


The 5 qualities

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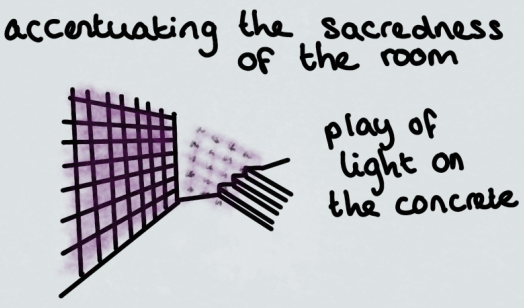


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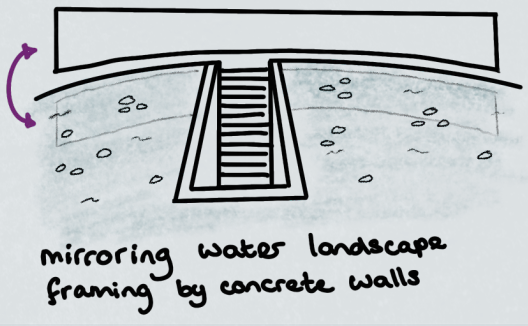


Interactive

Light



Materiality







Dutch Water Pavilion

Weeber & Bakema

1970

Showcasing how the Netherlands lives with the water, lying below sea level.

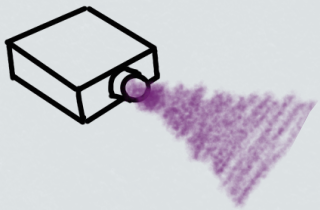
Movement

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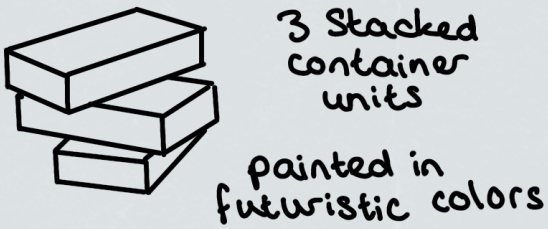


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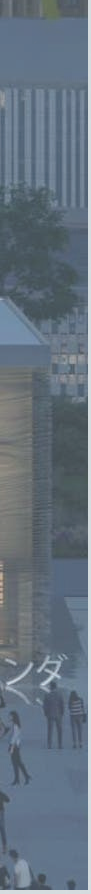


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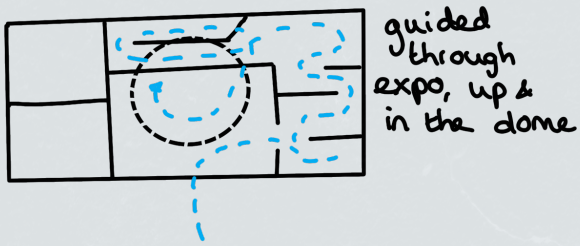
2025

"Common Ground," emphasizing international collaboration and shared solutions to global challenges.

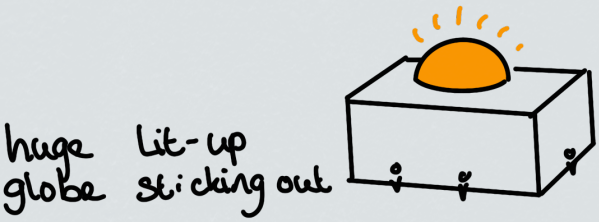


The 5 qualities

Movement



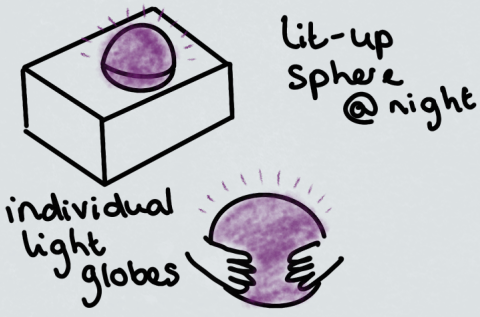
Curiosity



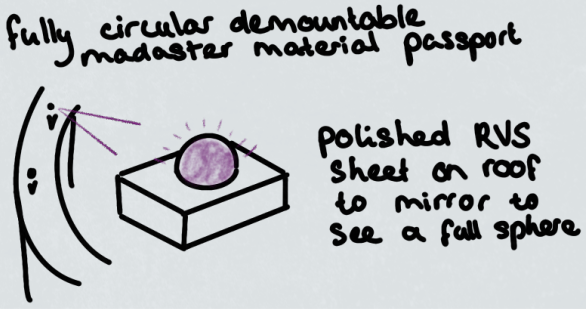
Interactive



Light



Materiality









The Jewish Museum

Studio Libeskind

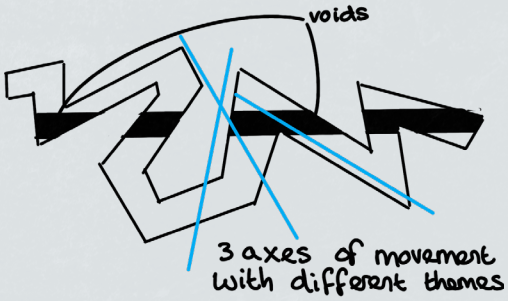
1999

To engage openly and
actively with Jewish history
and contemporary Jewish life
in Germany.

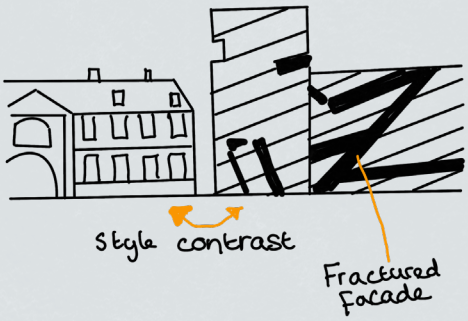


The 5 qualities

Movement

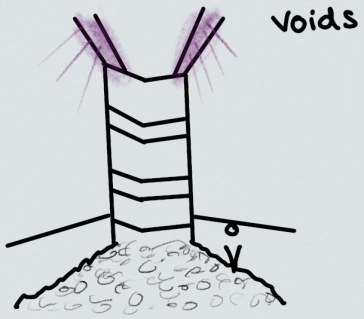


Curiosity



Interactive

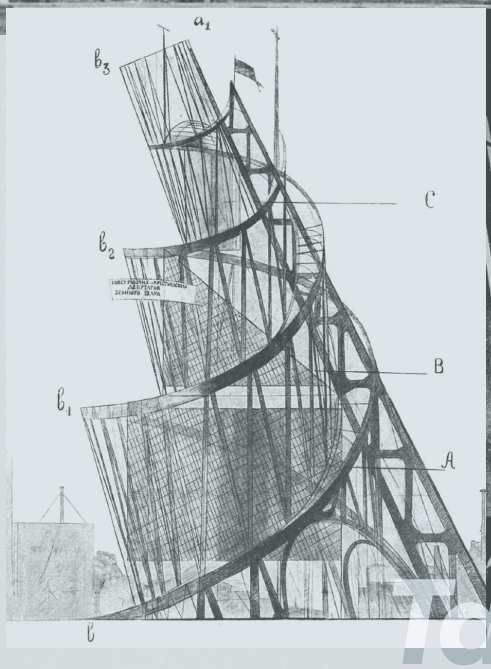
Light



Materiality









Tatlin's Tower

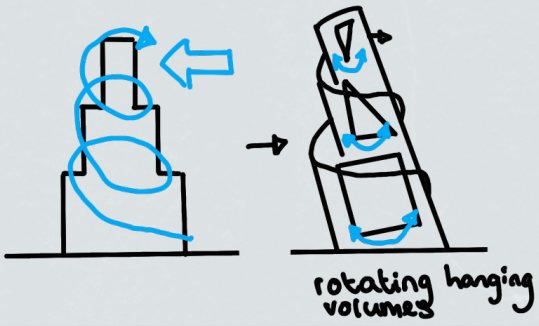
Vladimir Tatlin
1920

Inspire all people towards a contemplative, meaningful and thoroughly modern future.

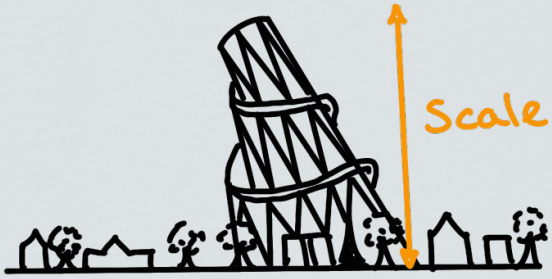


The 5 qualities

Movement

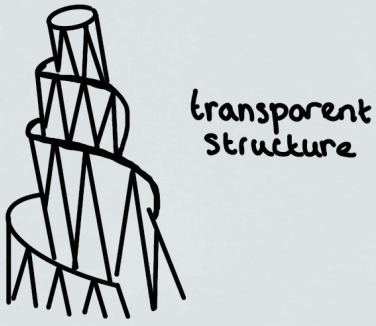


Curiosity



Interactive

Light

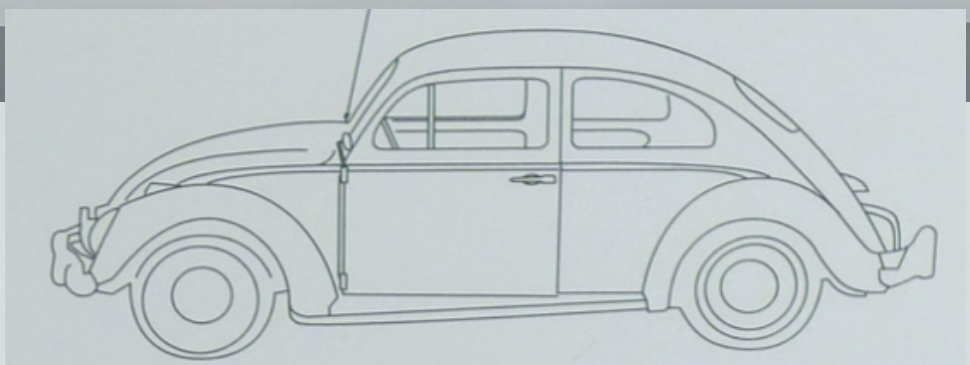


Materiality

optimistic steel construction & dimensions

Additional projects





STUDIO DRIFT
(2007)

Materialism, Volkswagen Kever, 2018

collectie Studio Drift, Amsterdam

van grote naar kleine hoeveelheid grondstoffen

katoen / polyurethaan / paardenhaar / staal / rubber / teer / aluminium / houtpoeder / Tectyl / glas / polyoxymethyleen (POM) / lakverf / polyvinylchloride (PVC) / zuur / aluminium magnesium legering /

Materialism, Volkswagen Beetle, 2018

collection Studio Drift, Amsterdam

from largest to smallest amount of raw materials

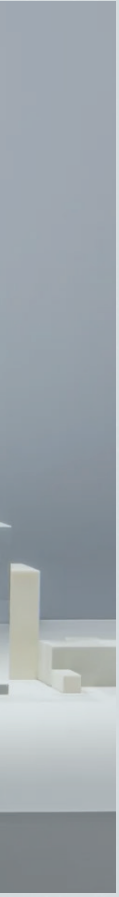
cotton / polyurethane / horse hair / steel / rubber / tar / aluminum / wood powder / Tectyl / glass / polyoxymethylene (POM) / lacquer paint / polyvinylchloride (PVC) / acid / aluminum magnesium alloy /

Materialism (Beetle)

Studio Drift

2018

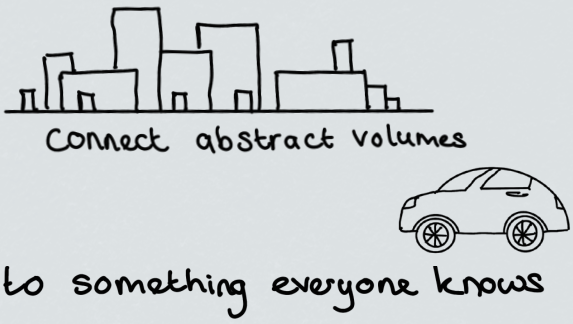
We are not in dialogue with our environment and we have come to lose touch with raw materials.



The 5 qualities

Movement

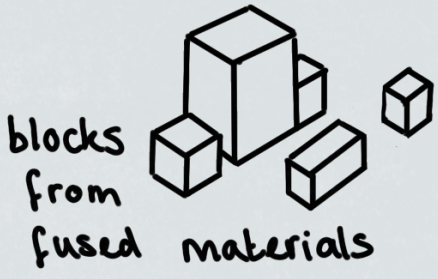
Curiosity



Interactive

Light

Materiality







Pollutive Ends

Thijs Biersteker

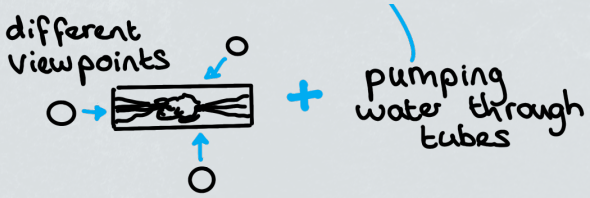
2019

Showcasing the impact of a single cigarette butt on our environment and waters.

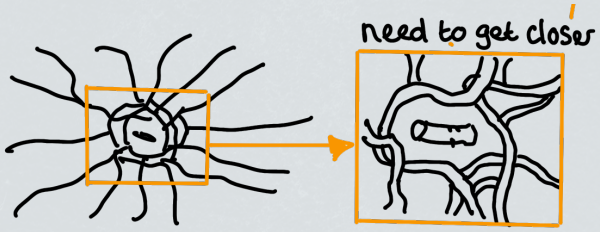


The 5 qualities

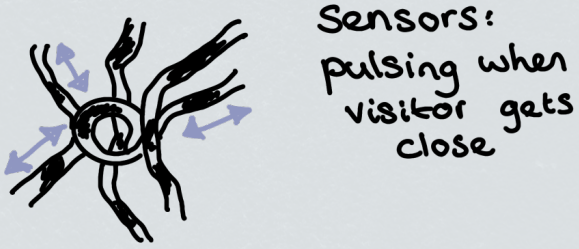
Movement



Curiosity



Interactive



Light

Materiality







Memory Palace

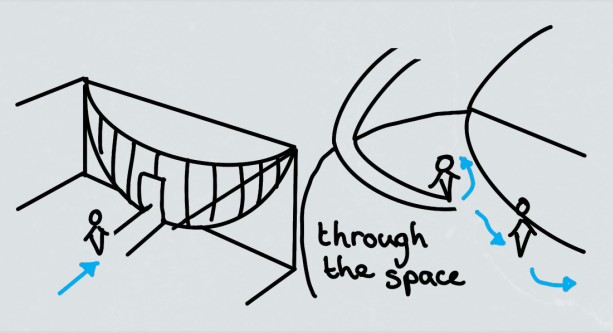
Es Devlin

2019

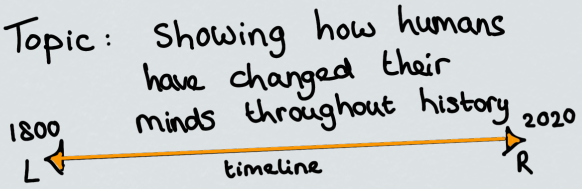
The power of memory and the potential for humans to shift their perspective and achieve collective change.

The 5 qualities

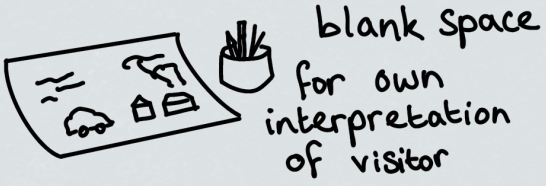
Movement



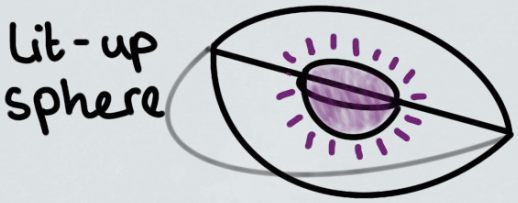
Curiosity



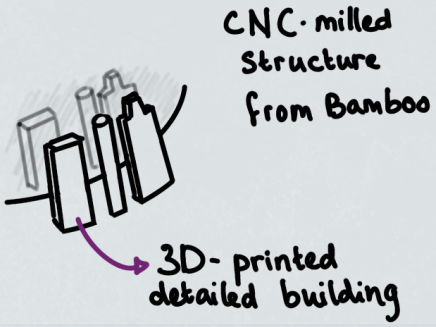
Interactive



Light



Materiality







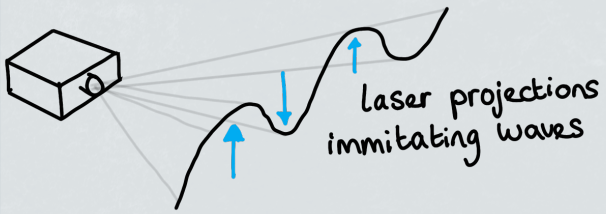
Waterlicht

Studio Roosegaarde

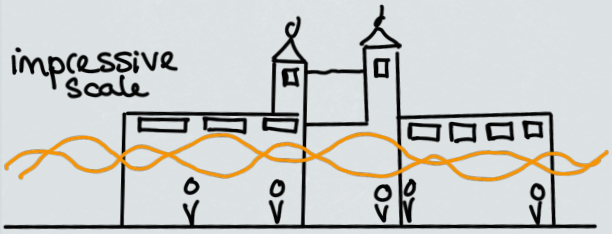
2018

Reminding us of the importance of water innovation and the impact of climate change on the rising sea levels.

Movement

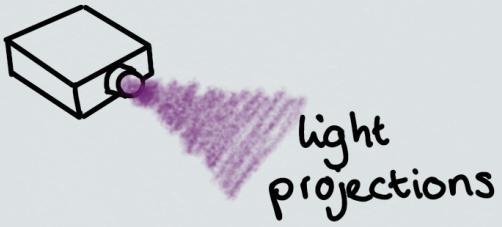


Curiosity



Interactive

Light



Materiality





Water Wise

Studio Mast

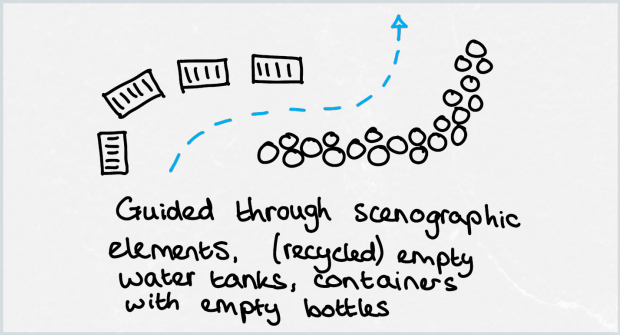
2024

Creating awareness around personal water consumption and learning how to save water.



The 5 qualities

Movement



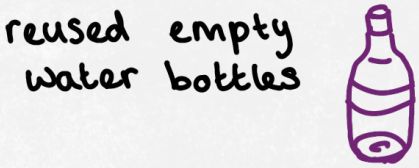
Curiosity

Interactive

- question → answer games
- personal qr coded motivation
- selfie in water-pipe

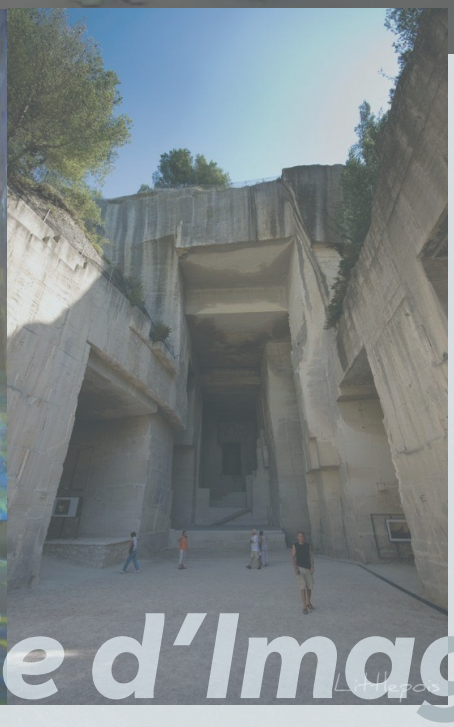
Light

Materiality







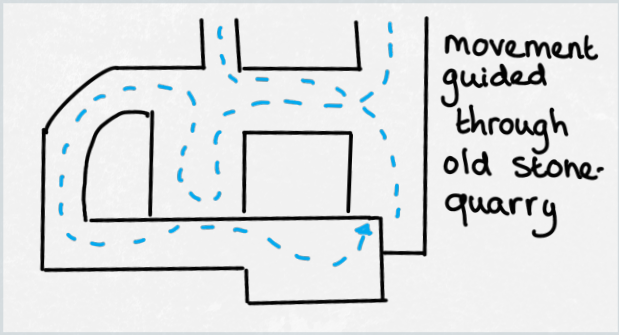


Cathédrale d'Images

Carrières des Lumières
1976 - present

Creating a 'total visual experience', a journey through a cathedral of images.

Movement

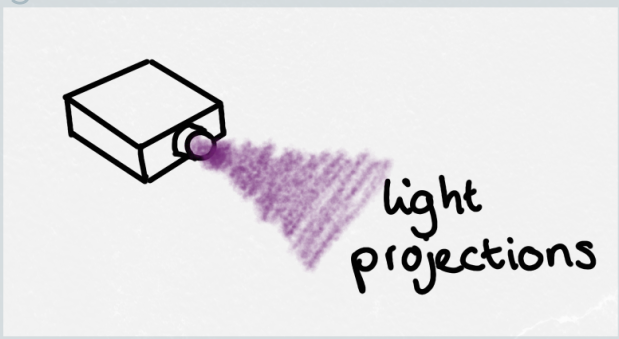


Curiosity



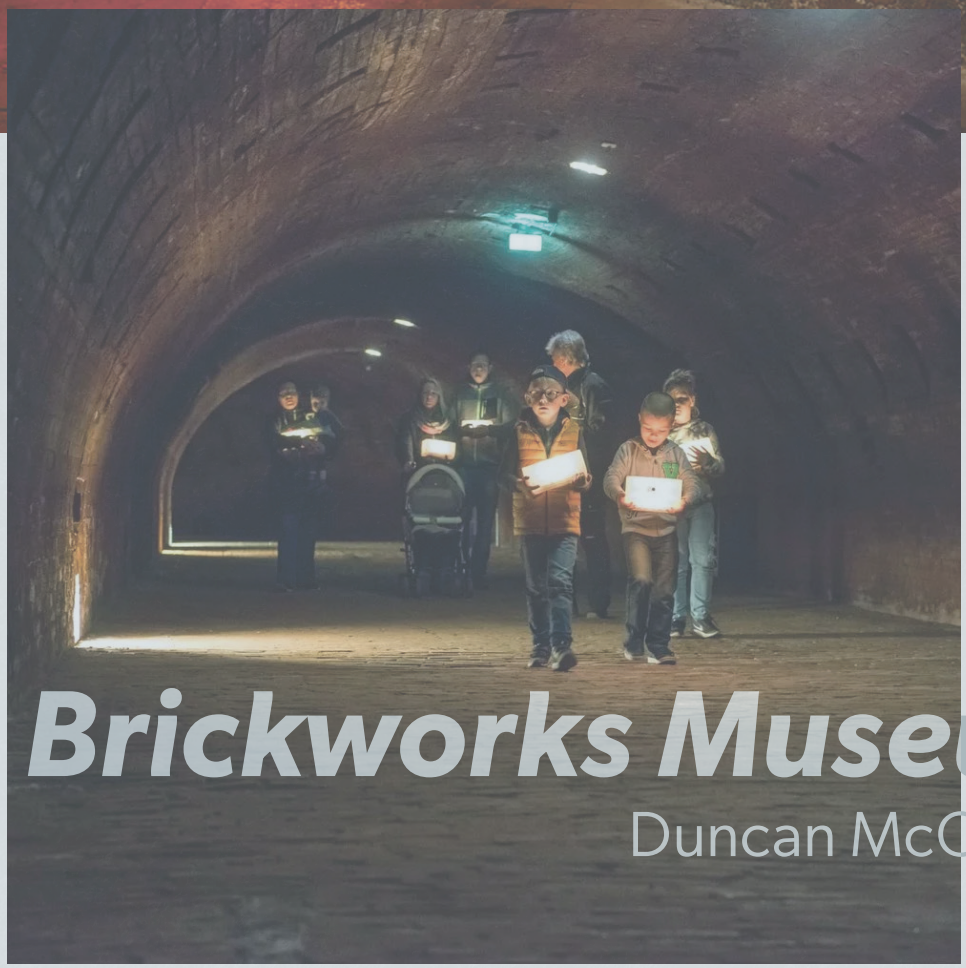
Interactive

Light



Materiality





Brickworks Museum

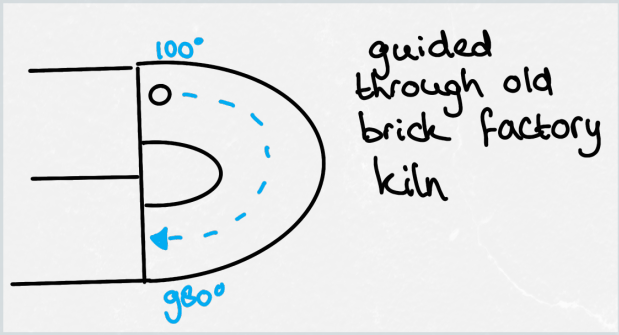
Duncan McCauley

2009

The story of brick making in Zehdenick from a technical and cultural perspective. Focusing on the impact of the Kiln for the local village.

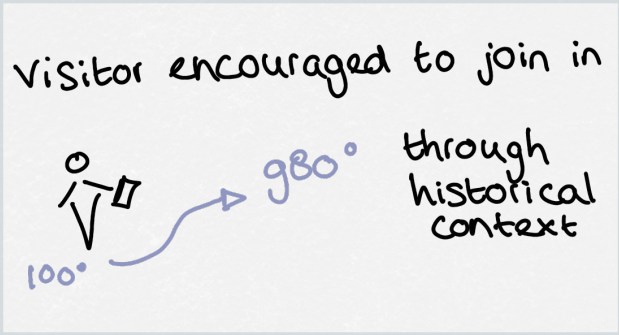
The 5 qualities

Movement

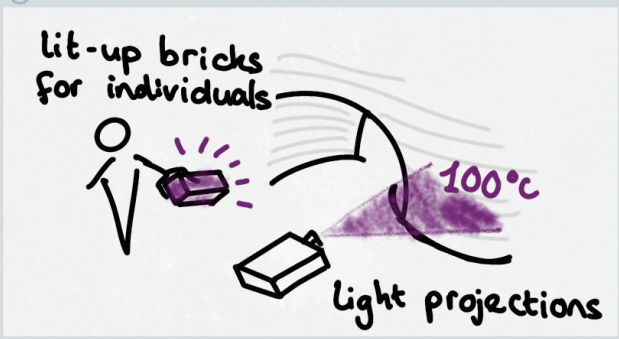


Curiosity

Interactive



Light



Materiality





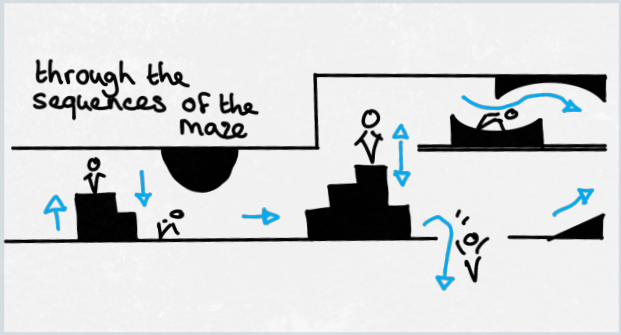
Doloris Anoma Maze

Karmanoia
2019

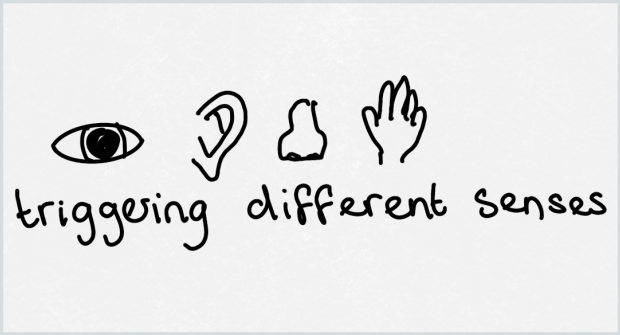
Let curiosity be your guide,
stimulating all the senses.

The 5 qualities

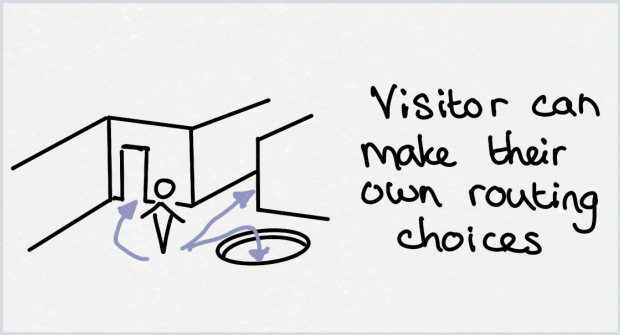
Movement



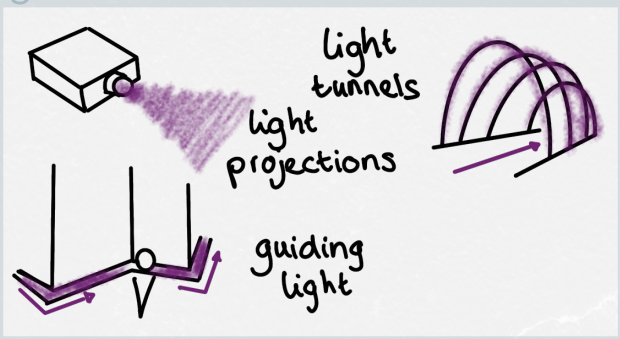
Curiosity



Interactive



Light



Materiality







Ice Watch

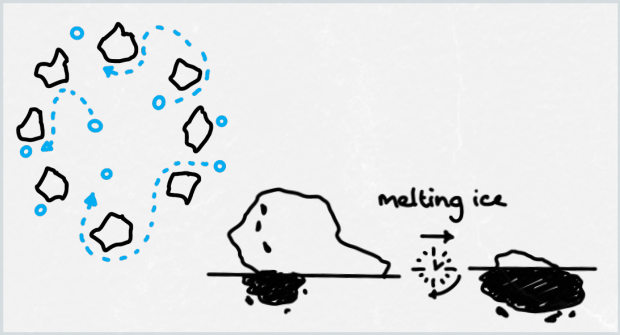
Olafur Eliasson

2014

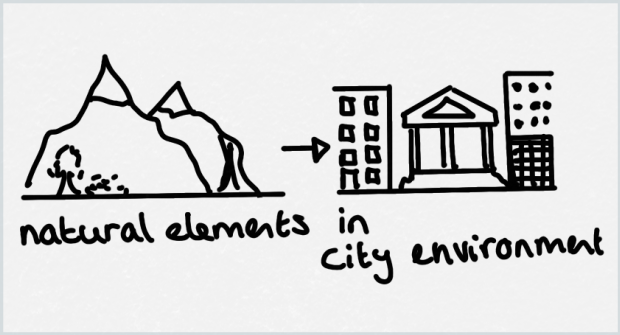
Raising awareness for climate change.

The 5 qualities

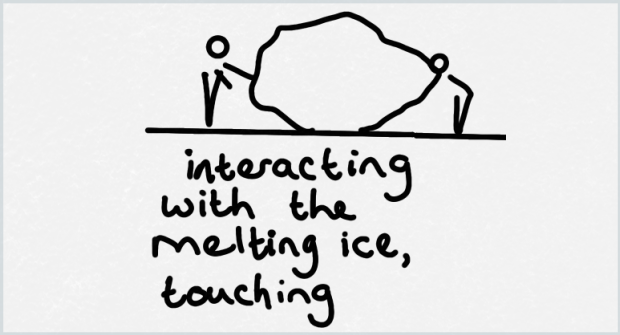
Movement



Curiosity

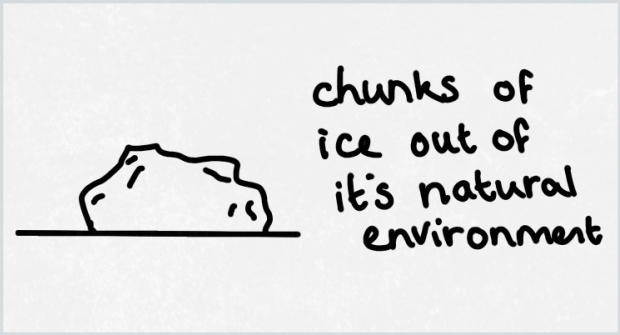


Interactive



Light

Materiality







Sunbeam, Captured

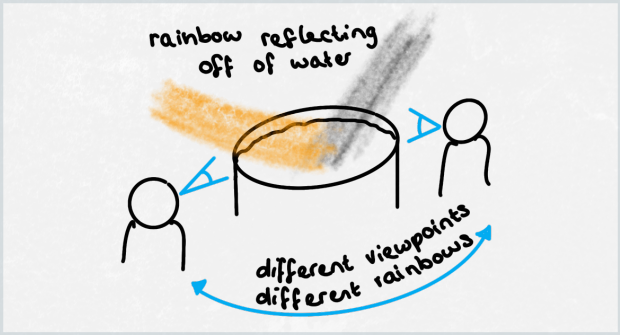
Boris Acket

2024

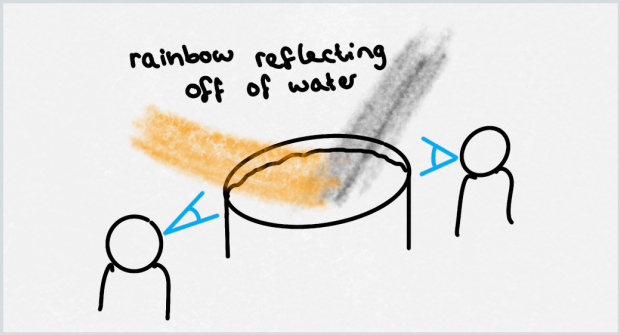
The ephemeral beauty of everyday life. Striving to freeze time.

The 5 qualities

Movement

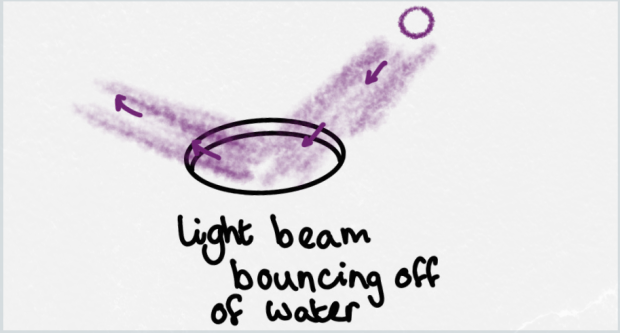


Curiosity

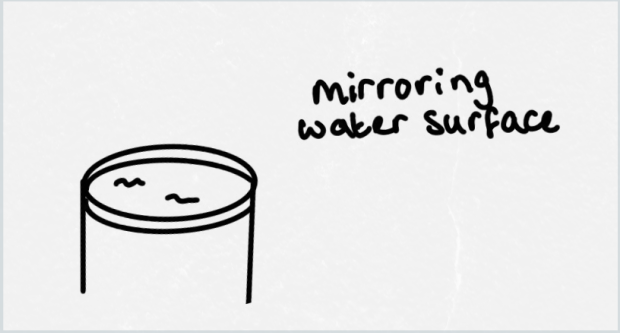


Interactive

Light



Materiality







LFS2

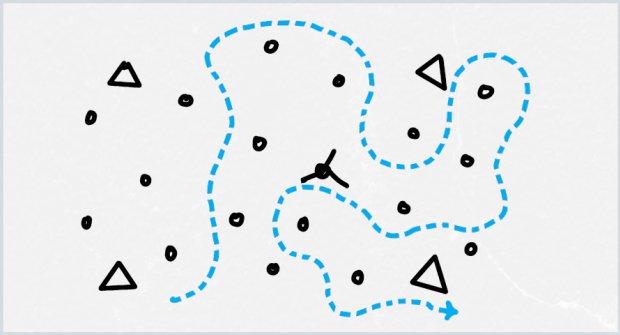
Mariska de Groot & Dieter Vandoren

2018

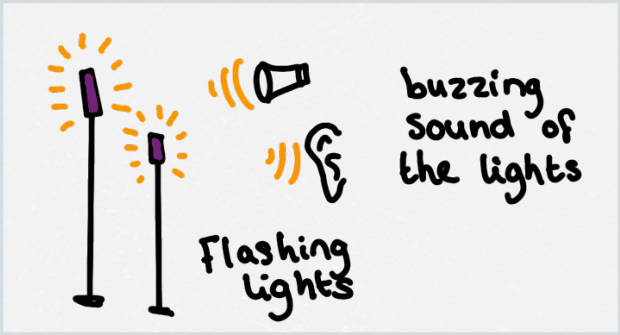
How old and new technologies merge into a dynamic sensory landscape. Light, sound and space blur the boundaries between matter and media.

The 5 qualities

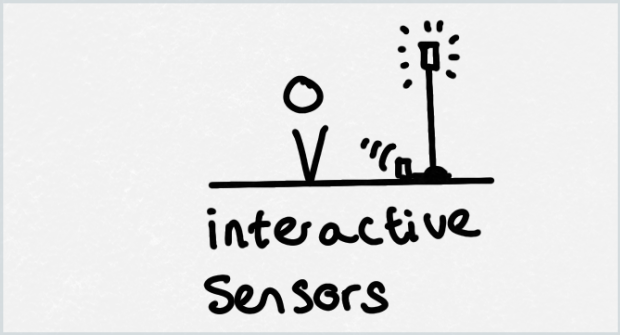
Movement



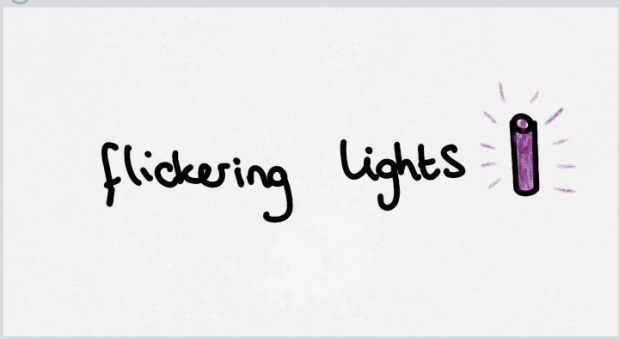
Curiosity



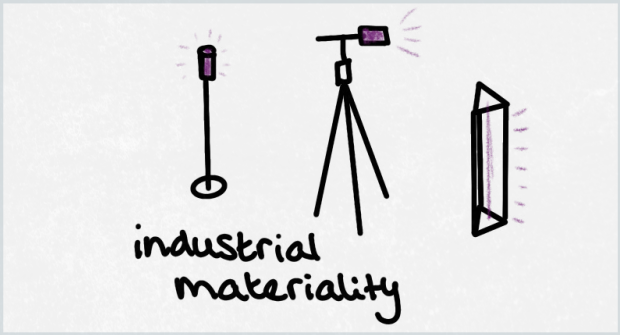
Interactive



Light



Materiality





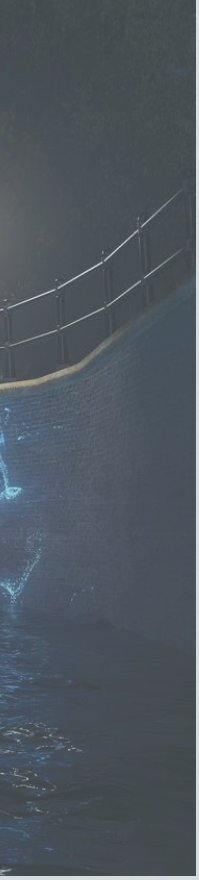


Mind Bridges

Jeroen Alexander Meijer

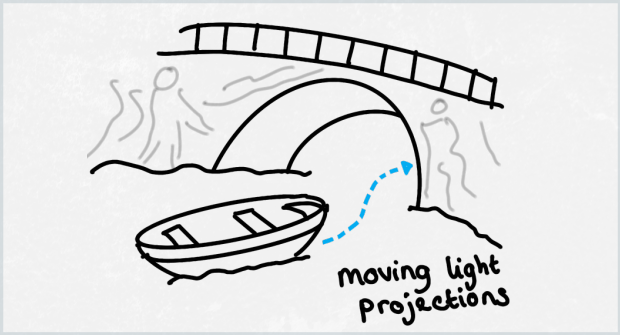
2024

The value of undivided attention between human beings.

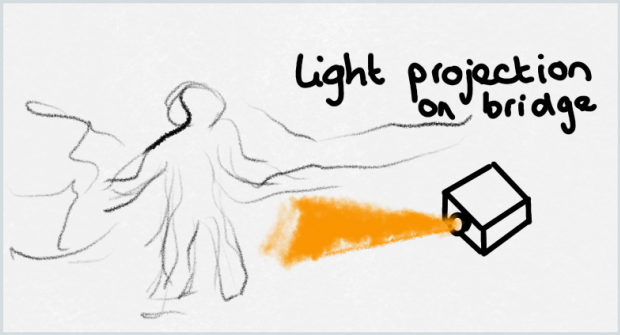


The 5 qualities

Movement



Curiosity



Interactive

Light



Materiality

Results.

The outcomes of the practical toolboxes are gathered per quality and summarised in this scheme. As made visible in the scheme with the dotted lines, quite some design tools are interlinked within the different qualities, which makes them more relevant to take into consideration as they occur more often. By taking this into account, these qualities can be bundled into three parts, which makes up a list of the most effective design tools identified through the project analysis:

- Different viewpoints
  - Space for dialogue
  - Moving around in the space
  - Reflection spaces
  - Room for own interpretation
- Visitors can make their own choices
  - Routing
  - Engaging in
  - Co-creation
- Use of projections
  - Sensors
  - Guiding the view
  - Framing with daylight
  - Mirroring
  - Optical illusions

Dark spaces to trigger the senses

Light for guidance

playing with daylight

Light

Reflecting natural light

light projections

transparancy

Contrasting different kinds of materials

linking the choice of materials to chosen message

Materiality

Using the materiality to frame the visitors sight

Using unexpected / out-of-place materials

Demountability

Use of mirrors (or reflecting waters)

Sound design

Triggering several different senses

Intriguing Façade

odd scale

contrasting

colors

Light projections

Surprise effect

Curiosity

Different Viewpoints

optical illusions

playing with interesting volumes

the topic

Entry / Entrance

long 'driveway'

over/though/under Water

discussions

experiments

lectures

games

Organised activities

room for own interpretation

Blank Space

Interactive

Follow their curiosity

Sequence of spaces

Visitors can make their own routing choices

Exhibition route

Inviting the visitor to move around in the space

Being able to determine your own path

'roadblocks'

obstacles in the space

Physical object for visitors

Movement

Reacting to visitor by Sensors

Clear axes

Moving Projections

Research
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