

City between the Local and the Global

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The graduation studio 'A City of Comings and Goings' investigates the ever increasing mobility of individuals and the migration patterns this results in. By exploring the theme of migration from an urban designers point of view, I examine in this graduation project the possible influence this could have on the built environment. The project focuses on work migration in particular, with the case study of the wind farm Borssele.

With a new scale of operating and constructing large off shore wind farms, harbours and adjacent cities are facing a transition. This transition will include an increase of work migration and temporary citizens within the area. The construction of the wind farm will result in a comings and goings of all kind of high- and low-skilled migrant workers and expats. This raises questions about the role of the city, the buffer landscape in between and the port. The city of Vlissingen and the port of Vlissingen-Oost that will be involved as construction base for this wind farm, is unaware of the effects and opportunities of this transition.

The graduation project touches upon two controversial challenges in the Dutch society, off shore wind energy and migrant workers. Therefore, the approach to connect the local and global is chosen to welcome, integrate and celebrate both the migrant workers as the wind energy into the society. The project will not only address the spatial requirements or housing for this comings and goings, but also the social and political position of the migrants.

Research and design

Starting the graduation studio with an idea out of an only an observation, the first stage of the research was focussed on providing a context. Interviews, reports and news articles gave me the right information to form a context, but finding real data and numbers about the necessary infrastructure and the workers was difficult. As an urban designer, I try to combine multiple goals and stakeholders into this project. Therefore, obtaining knowledge about each specific topic is impossible. The excursion to Berlin showed me how to deal with this situation and look for inspiration, not necessarily the exact truth. It is more important to get a grip on the topic and being able to draw quick conclusions based on the information you have. Not drawing this conclusions in an early stage made it difficult for me to define goals for the design. Looking at historical predecessors in urban planning, in my case the company town, helped me to limit the scope of the project.

The second research stage addressed the local conditions. In order to realize the potentials for the project, it is necessary to understand the current city. Research into the specific conditions of the area, and a fieldtrip was executed in order to understand the local particularities and lead to locations to intervene. After the two research stages, it was important to write a design brief for myself. I asked myself the question what can we do about this? The retake of P2 showed me I had difficulty with drawing conclusions for the design and writing a design brief. Documenting my work and writing a quick reflection on it, would have helped me to draw clear conclusions earlier. I would do that differently in the future.

The design is an attempt to make the global factors of energy and migrant workers comprehensible and visible, while using this as a catalyst to local urban change. The comings and goings of a new population is seen as window of opportunity for transformation of the Scheldeterrain and the port area and the development of new activities. Research on flexible planning strategies and research into the site helped to set a vision for future development of the area. However, a more specific look into transformation of old industrial sites or cities would have helped to proceed with the design easier.

'A City of Comings and Goings'

The graduation project contributes to the topic of Design as Politics studio 'A city of Comings and Goings - designing for migration and mobility'. The projects explores a specific type of comings and goings of the energy industry by addressing the first large scale wind farm that will be build in the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands is familiar with migrant workers, due to the time span of the construction of a wind farm, it makes an interesting case study to look at.

The question posed by the studio, how can we design a landscape that make the best of our restless lives and profit from the constant exchange of people, can be interpreted as addressing a global trend (the restless lives) and a local condition (how to profit from the constant exchange). In the design brief of the graduation project, this tension between the local and global is addressed in each site and program. This results not only in a project about housing, but also about the social living conditions and integration with the local. It explores not necessarily a definite solution, but rather shows a new perspective on the opportunities temporary citizens could offer.

Methods

By questioning the social, political and spatial implications of the next mode of energy, and how design practice can partake in shaping a more just urbanization, the graduation project fits with the method of Design as Politics. By not only addressing a practical solution for the workers of the wind farm but also a more symbolic one, the project tries to explore another role of the designer to make processes visible and comprehensible. This reflects upon the resistance of the public against renewable energy. The task of urban designer is to also give people an insight into these planning processes by making it visible and even 'celebrate' this in public space.

Design as Politics discusses the role of design in policy- or decision making and politics as an integral part of design. In line with this approach, the graduation project tries to address the tension between a the national decision making process of a wind farm and the local implications for the city. By visualizing a common future and showing the opportunities, the project tries to close a gap between politics and society.

The organised workshops, lectures and excursions by the Chair of Design as Politics helps to step outside your own topic for a day and get familiar with the Chair's approach. The workshop in Feijenoord showed me a new outcome that could derive from design practice, while the OMA / AMO lecture learned me how to visualize and make global systems like energy visible and comprehensible.

Social context

By addressing two topics, wind energy and migrant workers, that both have a sensitive political position within the Dutch society, the graduation project fits within the framework of Design as Politics. The societal challenges in the project are related to the acceptance of large scale off shore wind energy and the integration of migrant workers into the society. Offering new activities for as well temporary and permanent citizens, the project tries to close the gap between the local and the global.

The graduation project fits also into the social context around the energy transition. Controversial opinions about wind energy influenced by visual pollution and lack of decisions on political level keep the development of offshore wind parks as an open question. Borssele, as first large scale wind park in the North Sea makes an interesting test case, that could be of value for other future locations. Visions showed in the project are relevant to other upcoming sites in the Netherlands, but also Northern Europe.

Is it a different city?

The City of Comings and Goings differs not so much in program as cities nowadays. In the end, I came to the conclusion that the temporary citizen or migrant does not differ so much from the necessities of the permanent inhabitant. Research into the company town made me realise a large scale new neighbourhood would not fit the scale nowadays and small changes could already improve the life of the migrant worker.

But a city of comings and goings does differ in the flexibility of the program and the governance or stakeholders involved. By making a project interesting for as much stakeholders as possible, there is room for investment instead of falling back into 'quick temporary' solutions. Also the municipality should be more aware of this, in order to benefit from temporary citizens. Offering temporary solutions, but making it accessible for the permanent inhabitants as well, will create more support and interaction. I see it as my task as an urban designer, to identify and invite all those involved to serve multiple purposes with one project. Only then sustainable and long lasting solution, can be found.