

# P5 Reflections

Ephemeral city: from event space to an open city<sup>i</sup>

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Graduation studio Complex Projects

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## **Introduction:**

In short, the thesis research revolves around a central theme: ephemerality that is the quality or the state of lasting a very short time<sup>ii</sup>. The theme was inspired from an exhibition on the research of ephemeral urbanism<sup>iii</sup> by Rahul Mehrotra during the 2016 Venice biennale. The exhibition presented various flexible architectural and urbanistic configurations that appear and disappear at a very short period of time across the globe. The research places a particular focus on the dimension of time, which resonates with the bigger theme in my studio chair, Complex Project, which is about the city of Amsterdam in the timeline of 2050. While the dimension of time (vision from 2017 to 2050) plays an important role in the theme of Complex project, it is found that the general research approach mainly focuses on the spatial dimension of urban form at different scales, such as mapping of the city solid/void in figure-ground representation, analysis of an urban block or drawing details of street element, yet the research on the different dimensions of time seems to be lacking. In this regard, the emphasis on time within the research theme of ephemerality intrigues me to move towards this direction.

“How can the future city (Amsterdam metropolitan area) proactively plan and facilitate the ephemeral use of space” become the central research question after a series of preliminary research and thinking. Pre-given by the studio chair, the site for the thesis project will be located in Amsterdam new west, Sloterdijk. The research question will lead to a thesis design project as a response to the site situation (potentials and current problems). Despite the limitation on the scope of site implementation, the field of research will be expanded to the entire region of AMA (Amsterdam metropolitan area) so that the project will have a more comprehensive insight on the ephemeral use of space across the city and it will eventually inform the bigger urbanistic vision embedded in the design project in Sloterdijk at later stage.

While ephemerality becomes the theme of the research, it encompasses a very board range of different topics. To bring the research towards a more focused and sharp investigation, the major research will be revolving around the event space where people turn part of the city space into temporary special use. From the research on various events happen in the city, a statement is formulated problematizing the design and the nature of event space in the city. It is put into question that the event space existing in the city is poorly designed that its rigidity and gated nature lead to an underutilization and unsustainable use of precious city space. The phenomenon can mainly be found in space for holding big and mega event such as convention centre for business trade show and world mega event such as Olympics and world expo. The problem statement eventually lead to the research question on how can the event space in the city be better designed in the future to promote ephemeral and flexible use of city space. The design ambition involves turning the problematics of city big event space into an opportunity to help promote temporary informal use of space by the marginalized city space user such as independent artiest, nomadic free-lance workers, young entrepreneur, start-ups and many more creative communities.

### **Aspect 1: the relationship between research and design**

The research can be generally divided into three parts, the quantitative research, the qualitative research and the spatial research.

The quantitative research involves the collection of hard data of the urban and programmatic settings. Hard data of urban settings includes, for example, the percentage and area of urban void space, quantity and locations of amenities, data on urban infrastructure, the A10 and so on. Specifically for this thesis research topic, quantitative data of various event space of different scales within the city are collected. On top of that, the research puts focus on three convention centres across the globe including RAI in Amsterdam, Messe Basel in Switzerland and Hong Kong Convention and exhibition center in Hong Kong. Those quantitative data such as the total gross floor area, total event spaces, the area ratio of foyer to indoor event space, number of meeting rooms and so forth are the core basis on setting up the design parameters of the programmatic requirement. Those numbers are also important to serve as basis to formulate a critical review of the existing typology of event space, quantizing the inefficient use of city event space and projecting the potentials of informal usage and future optimization of space in the design.

The qualitative research involves investigating the social economical implication of big and mega event as well as the other side of ephemeral use of city space which is the informal and temporal exploitation of city space by marginalized creative communities. The economical and commercial value of big city events as well as the social value of informal bottom-up use of city space eventually become the major player in the design process. Those values are complimenting and conflicting each other during many design decision making such as how to open up the event space and how the space can be designed and used in such ways that both parties can coexist in relative harmony within one single indoor climatized space. The research on future trend of working, living style, implication of technologies into the build environment and the rise of virtual space and smart cities provide significant inspiration in designing and imagining the how the event space and its subsequent opening-up for informal use can be executed, managed and organized.

The spatial research involves investigation of the spatial quality and programmatic arrangement of event space. The research leads to the conclusion and problem statement that programs are arranged and the space is managed in such a way that contribute to the gated urban area. The space is only designed to serve big business event in such a way that it is lacking certain spatial quality to open up for other alternative temporal use. Those findings in the research contribute a lot in defining what kind of spatial quality and atmosphere the future space of event should be and that directly define the premises of the design project.

### **Aspect 2: The relationship between the theme of Complex Projects and the subject.**

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research theme of ephemerality intrigues me to move towards this direction. The design project looks into the programs and activities of temporal use of space in terms of days of business trade show, various use of the space within day/ night, weeks, months and eventually the long term projection of the building from in construction in phases to its potential evolution spatially and programmatically. The organization and the proposed management of the space is also highly influenced by the research on future trends and technologies. Therefore the design project resonates with the bigger theme of the design studio in terms of its focus on different time scale and implication of the future.

### **Aspect 3: The relationship between the methodological line of approach of the graduation lab and method chosen by the student.**

Inspired by the theory and research by Rahul, it can be concluded that the research adopt a theory-led approach<sup>iv</sup>, using theory as the point of departure. Context as well as methodology come as the second building block to build up the thesis. Different methodologies are used with respect to each specific question. The typological study offer an etic and quantitative approach to generate knowledge on an overview of ephemeral use of space in Amsterdam. To compliment the detachment from real life in the first approach, on-site study of public life offers a qualitative and emic perspective. It is also found that an etic but qualitative research is necessary to generate more understanding in the meaning behind the phenomenon that a first-person experience and typological study cannot offer.

The adopted research methodologies resonate with few epistemes that frame the view to understand the phenomenon and, in turn, to generate new understanding. Typology is an obvious frame of thought throughout the research. With respect to the aforementioned references, it is expected that with the same episteme, the research can generate new knowledge on the typology of event venue as a tool for the city to proactively plan for the ephemeral use of space. This epistemes and methodology resonates the most with the outline research of “hard data” set up by the graduation lab. On the other hand, praxeology is another frame of thought embedded in the study of public life, viewing the built environment as the stage for everyday practices. Within this thought frame, the research focuses on finding meaning not exactly about the phenomenon in daily life but special moment that happen every once in a while in public life. There are not just value attached to the special moment (temporal factor) but also the space and material at that moment (spatial factor). The enquiry on the meaning of this aspect resonate to the thought frame within material culture studies. Arjun Appadurai, Ian Hodder, Victor Buchli and Joseph Rykwert are some prominent researchers in this aspect<sup>v</sup>. Same lens can be applied when looking at the biography of a vacant space and how it is commoditized when used temporarily<sup>vi</sup>. Such method of looking into the socio-economical impact and meaning of the subject relates to the “ soft data “ research series proposed and outlined by the graduation lab.

### **Aspect 4: The relationship bwtween the project and the wider social context.**

The project is related to a bigger urbanistic discourse of participatory design ( see spontaneous city, Pop-up city, open source urban planning) and the idea of “open city” ( see open city by Richard Sennett). The concept of a flexible built environment that response and adapt to the constant flux of people resonate with the essay written by Rahul Mehrotra under the theme of ephemeral urbanism.

The employment and involvement of temporary use of space into urban development and planning create an open and kinetic city, where Openness prevails over rigidity and flexibility is valued over rigor, challenging the formal notions and expectations for reading a city as a grand and stagnant entity<sup>vii</sup>. The synthesis of top-down and bottom up; formal and informal resonates a lot with the view of Richard Sennett on the idea of "open city": "Open means incomplete, errant, conflictual, non-linear... The closed city can be designed and operated top-down; it is a city which belongs to the masters. The open city is a bottom up place; it belongs to the people. These contrasts of course are not absolutes of black-and-white; real life is painted in greys..."<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, planners and designers have to constantly challenge assumptions which favor closure and embrace the stimulations of differences that produce openness.

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<sup>i</sup> Sennett, Richard, “Open City”, accessed October 5, 2017,  
<https://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/UploadedResources/The%20Open%20City.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Definition found in Merriam Webster

<sup>iii</sup> The same exhibition is held again recently at Architekturmuseum der TU München till March 2018, see  
<http://www.architekturmuseum.de/ausstellungen/vorschau/2017/ephemeral-urbanism/>

<sup>iv</sup> Ray Lucas. *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King, 2016), 12-13

<sup>v</sup> Ray Lucas. *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King, 2016), 103-111

<sup>vi</sup> .Borrowing Appadurai’s biographical approach to objects and temporality concept of commodity which refers to the idea that one thing may at one time be considered a commodity but later not

<sup>vii</sup> Rahul Mehrotra and Vera Felipe and Mayoral Jose, *Ephemeral urbanism: cities in constant -flux* (Chile: ARQ ediciones, 2016), 17-18.

<sup>viii</sup> Sennett, Richard, “Open City”, accessed October 5, 2017,  
<https://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/UploadedResources/The%20Open%20City.pdf>