

CHOREOGRAPHING A LANDSCAPE OF CONTINGENCY

Mobilizing the boundaries separating the Norm, the Alternative
and the Not-yet-known through bodily movement

Chair of Methods & Analysis/ Thesis reflection

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INTRODUCTION

As architects we are always caught in the tension between our intentions (no matter how noble they might seem to us) and the unpredictability of life. Operating in an environment that is in praise of informal, user-friendly, participatory, bottom-up design, I sometimes find it hard to position myself as an architect who intervenes in unfamiliar contexts. To not risk being seen as an imposing, hegemonic figure in shaping the built environment, what is required of us seems to be the most minimal intervention without a fixed and predetermined purpose in the concrete reality.

The Positions in Practice studio is a great opportunity to reflect on the processes of building with other (human and non-human) actors who have power in shaping the built environment. These thoughts have led me to choose disobedience as the personal starting point of my research conducted in collaboration with my colleague Rebecca, who is interested in dance choreography and bodily movement.

TEUSAQUILLO

My first visit to the site of our architectural intervention was slightly frustrating. The impenetrable street façade in Teusaquillo made up of highly reflective glass, fenced windows and high fences lined by spiral barbed wire on top draws an unnegotiable line between the collective realm and one's private domestic realm. This rigid limit constitutes the "self" and cuts off one's relations and affections with other entities in the world. During the time spent on site I have felt that our understanding of Teusaquillo stops at the periphery, unable to go any deeper.

The intention of our graduation project is to set up the material conditions that make it possible for dwellers in Teusaquillo to collectively experience the public realms anew through the movement of their bodies. The intervention should give room for them to choose whether to fully engage with life beyond their own selves or to withdraw from it if they wish.

BEING-OTHER THROUGH MOVEMENT

When carrying out the early conceptual investigation on bodily movement, Rebecca and I drew knowledge from modern dance choreography, specifically the Judson Dance Theater in 1960s. Since then, we have defined dance as being attentive to subtle changes in the environment, and having the agility to improvise with unexpected factors that arise from the banal everyday. I have then struggled for a long time to translate these conceptual findings into their concrete architectural manifestations, since what the definition I set for myself would demand minimal intervention from my side.

To get out of this gridlock, I have decided to broaden our understanding of dance to also consider one of its more primal and collective forms - the Festive Dance, the rhythmic and joyful movement of the body in synchronization with the music and with other moving bodies in the crowd. The community experiences the city anew during festivities, by moving and appearing in the presence of others.

Dance is understood as the corporeal processes of being-other, experiencing other ways of living by the self, the community and the city.

Drawing knowledge from Mikhail Bakhtin on the carnivalesque, I have defined the Festive Dance as the performance of alternative but pre-existing way of living. When performed repeatedly in the presence of others in a community, the “alternative” has the potential to be assimilated into the norm.

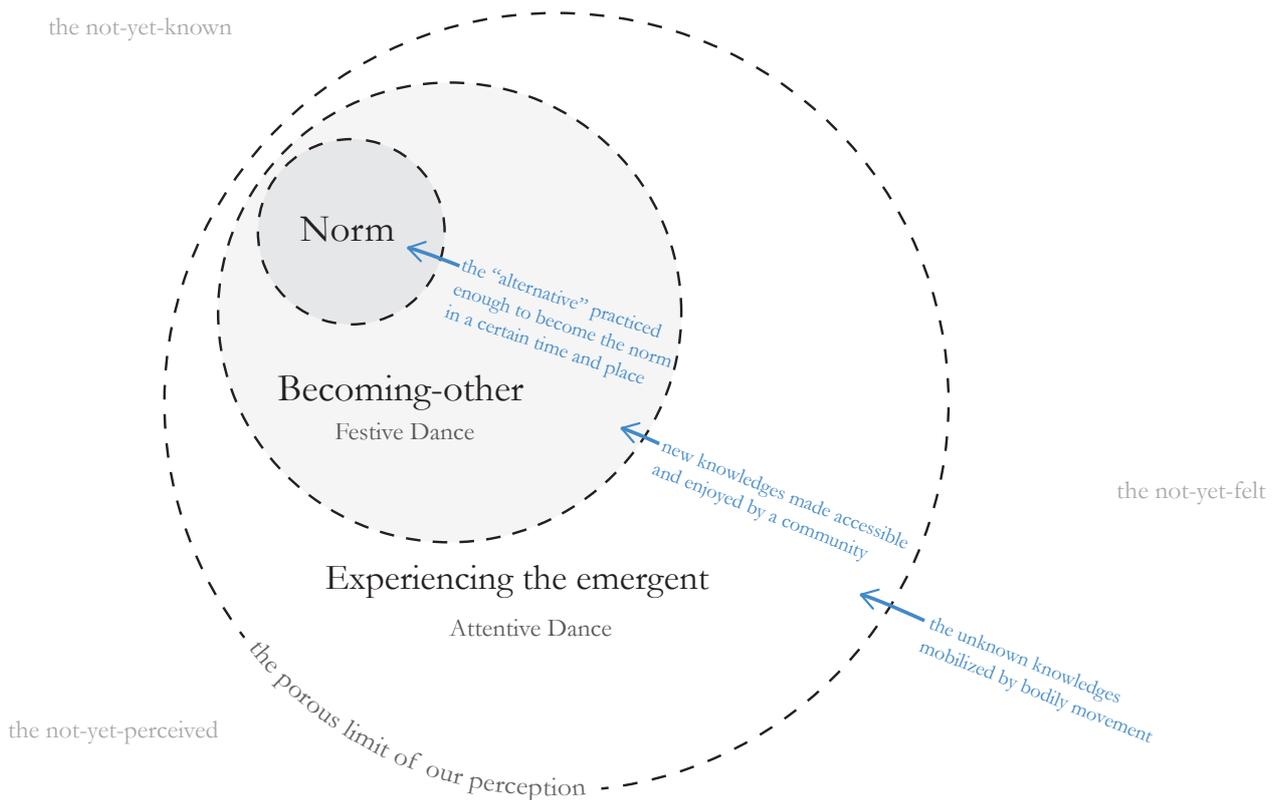
The Festive Dance is a collective dream in which one can experience the life that is desired but not yet practiced and accepted by society. Dance, performed at a heightened level of attentiveness, has the potential to mobilize the unknown knowledge that are at present below the threshold of one’s perception and to make them emerge from the built environment through the movement of one’s body, therefore coming into contact with the unknown.

These “new” knowledges that emerge in movement, if shared among multiple individuals, has the potential to become accessible to a wider community, and to become the commons.

This diagram shows the relationship between the norm, alternative ways of being, and the unknown knowledges yet to be discovered through bodily movement. The boundaries that contain them are porous and constantly being negotiated.

Nothing stands in opposition to the norm. Knowledge around the established code of conduct and societal order are not abnormal, but either not performed persistently or not yet perceived by the thinking-body.

As architects, by constructing the conditions for people to collectively perform alternative ways of living and gathering, maybe we can agitate the impermanent boundary around what is normal and accepted.



How can our intervention set up the conditions to host festivals along Parkway? How can the same constructions offer dwellers more ways to appear in the presence of others and engage with the environment in their daily lives?

Can the transformative spirit of the festive influence the everyday use of space beyond the duration of festive events?

PROJECT STRUCTURE

I have selected several design instruments and methods, when combined, can compose a course of action. This set of intended actions would give us instruction to transform the city in order to achieve the goal of enabling the individual, the community or the city to experience the alternative through movement and potentially to tap into the presently imperceptible and thus unknown knowledges latent in the built environment.

The carnival is an ecstatic order of rituals, games and various excesses that constitutes an alternative social space of freedom, equality and abundance. It is an embodied experience of the individual body liberated from social norms and its immersion into the collective body in synchronized movement.

In Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque features of the streets and town squares, we have identified key architectural elements that supports the "becoming-other" of the individual and the society as a whole. Based on my understanding of Teusaquillo, I have selected four design instruments best suited to the context from these elements.

The three instruments are:

- i) Paved paths
- ii) Prolonged Thresholds
- ii) Anchors and Supports for temporary structures

"People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind."

RELATION BETWEEN PARTS

The instruments relate to each other across scales and support each other to take full effect, since on their own they can intervene in the context to a very limited extent. This network of four instruments then lead me to examine locations that suit their requirements. I have discovered certain segments of Parkway in Teusaquillo where this intervention can be launched in full force.

Parkway is a gently curving linear park between two roads running through the fabric of Teusaquillo. It is approximate 1km in length and has an average width of 30 meters. It is built in the 1950s based on general principles taken from the urban plan of Karl Brunner, which is influenced by the Garden City model.

The i) paved ground invites the community to gather and experience the city in an alternative way. Temporary structures, such as stages, tents, and market stalls, need to be placed at reasonable intervals to support festivities at different intensities. These structures need iii) anchors and supports on the ground. Festivities should not be enjoyed only on the ground level. Some of the iii) column plinths support temporary spectator stands that reach the height of the second floor. This bridge enables residents to engage with the i) festive ground at different heights and turns the street inwards and draws people from the interior to collectively experience the neighbourhood. ii) Prolonged thresholds are placed at the end or on the sides of i) paved paths to distract people from the main routes. These micro-environments allow for transgression of the present self to become 'other'.

“...all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age..”

“Here Rabelais became acquainted with another important aspect of these gatherings, the marketplace spectacles. He learned about life on the theater scaffoldings (*les échajauds*) which he describes in his novel. These scaffoldings were put up on the square, and the people crowded around them.”

DESIGN TOOLS & METHODS

i) Paved paths

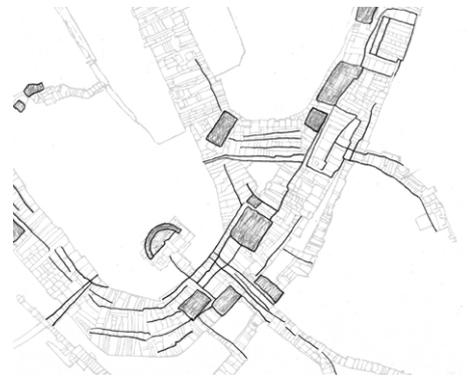
1. To **synchronize** the movement of water and humans
曲水流觴, which is translated to ‘meandering stream, flowing wine cup’ is a Chinese ritual celebrated by scholars who chanted poems while drinking wine from floating cups along a meandering water channel. It is a frivolous enjoyment in a world that is constantly flowing. In my proposal, the abundant rainwater of Bogota is mobilized by an above-ground drainage system which is at the same time a gently sloping landscape that moves human bodies. The alignments and textures of the paving are also designed to mobilize bodies, and at certain moments, to delay their movement.



Qian Gu, *Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion*, 1560.

2. To **align** brick paving to suggest paths of movement

I interpret Pikionis’s landscape around the Acropolis as a network of alignments and pauses. From this interpretation, I develop a method of scoring movement to lay down loose intentions of guiding the crowd in discontinuous segments along Parkway. These alignments are in the form of concrete edge courses, along which bricks are laid. With this method, I suggest the duration and direction of movement without determining what the ground looks like.



Dimitris Pikionis, *Lanscaping around the Acropolis*

These paths end at places of pause where benches are placed and where another path begins.

DESIGN TOOLS & METHODS

ii) Prolonged Thresholds

Instead of occupying the ground with a huge landmark to sharply mark the beginning of the festive promenade, I want to invite people to walk through a garden of mist and tall grasses. It is a threshold that takes time to cross. Some wanderers get distracted by mist and plants along the way to their destinations. The earth dug up to make room for ponds and lakes will be displaced locally to make small hills and to lift the ground where temporary structures would be placed.

1. To **obscure** with mist

In the carnival, the self is transgressed through practices such as masking. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, and the violation of boundaries. I interpret the carnivalesque technique of masking with the medium of water vapour. The rainwater collected at the retention ponds are reused by fog systems placed along the borders of the ponds. The white blindness of fog obscures physical borders, and thus invites the body to become attentive to the things it immediately smells, touches, hears... Mist is an important element used in Tarkovsky's films when the protagonist traverses the ambiguous territories of dream, reality and memory. It is my intention to create zones of obscurity and intimacy to allow the transgression of the self with minimal obstruction on the ground of Parkway.

2. To **blur** borders with vegetation

The technique of masking can also be interpreted with the medium of perennial wetland plants. When shrouded in mist, the fuzzy outline of these grasses create a soft topography above the sturdy ground. It is an ephemeral topography that responds to the changing daylight and air humidity. Not only is the mask a visual device here, when rustling in the wind, grasses create white noise that blur out sharp noises from vehicle traffic. The acute awareness of self is suspended in an array of mist, fuzzy grasses and white noise.



Andrei Tarkovsky, scene from *Nostalgia* (1983)



Piet Oudolf's perennial garden

“A mask is not primarily what it represents but what it transforms Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms.”

DESIGN TOOLS & METHODS

iii) Anchors and Supports

My intention is to equip the ground with the possibilities for action. A network of anchors and supports invite the neighbourhood to transform itself daily and during festive events. The paved ground when equipped with anchors and supports becomes a landscape of offering that affords various constructions and uses.

1. To **afford** different kinds of attachment and support

The affordances of the flat ground in the market square of Delft. The potential of these almost unnoticeable cues embedded within the landscape are actualized by use in multiple ways. Hammock hooks and postholes of various shapes are placed at regular intervals which coincide with the dimensions of market stands that are set up in the town centre twice a week. Vendors anchor their lightweight canvas tents on the ground to secure them against Dutch winds. Even when these hooks and holes are not in use during calmer weathers, their placement on the ground regulate the placement of temporary structures above ground.

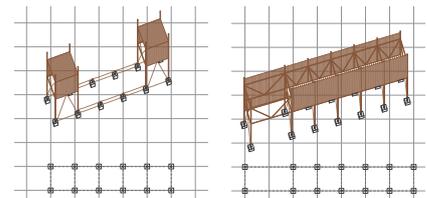
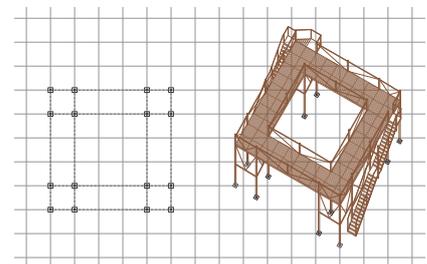


Hammock hooks and postholes in the city centre of Delft

2. To **suggest** magnitude and location of events with different configurations and placement of anchors of supports

Square configurations that suggest the erection of pavillions and stages. An alternation of small (6mx6m) and big (18mx18m) configurations are placed approximately 55 metres from each other along Parkway.

Narrow configurations that are 3m wide on the short side suggest the erection of transitional spaces, such as galleries, gates, bridges and passages. They are placed along borders separating the frontyard from the sidewalk, the sidewalk from the road and the road from the park



Hammock hooks and postholes in the city centre of Delft

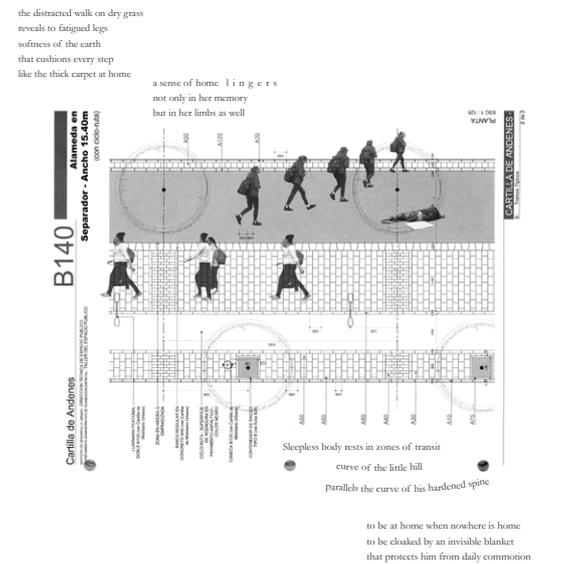
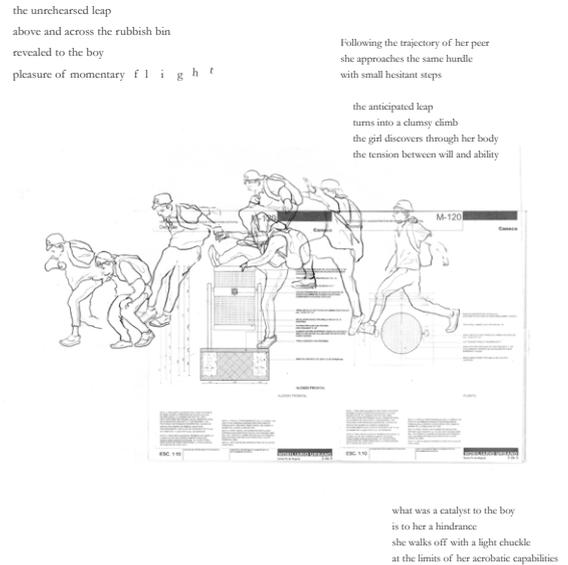
OPERATING IN DIFFERENT REALITIES

The attempts I have presented to our studio mentors prior to P3 has been either too immediate and tactical to specific situations or too abstract to find a concrete architectural expression that achieve the project goal. After numerous trials to test out what works best for the project, I structure my proposal so that it simultaneously operates on a general and applicable level and on a concrete and situated level.

The early form of this two-fold model is an exercise which explores the potential in the mismatch between the blueprint of the city (urban manual of Bogota) and its actual use. Short texts are written to imagine what the body would feel, discover, or remember along paths of movement.

The dialogue between the two levels results in a choreographic score for the ground of Parkway which contains rules and instructions to be interpreted by myself and potentially by contractors and users. Instead of predetermining the forms of each architectural element, the urban score choreographs the interrelations between parts.

To accompany the score which is instructive by nature, I materialize the intentions laid down in the score with concrete and detailed architectural drawings at different scales. The score and the enactments inform each other and enter into an operative loop that perpetually suggests future courses of action.

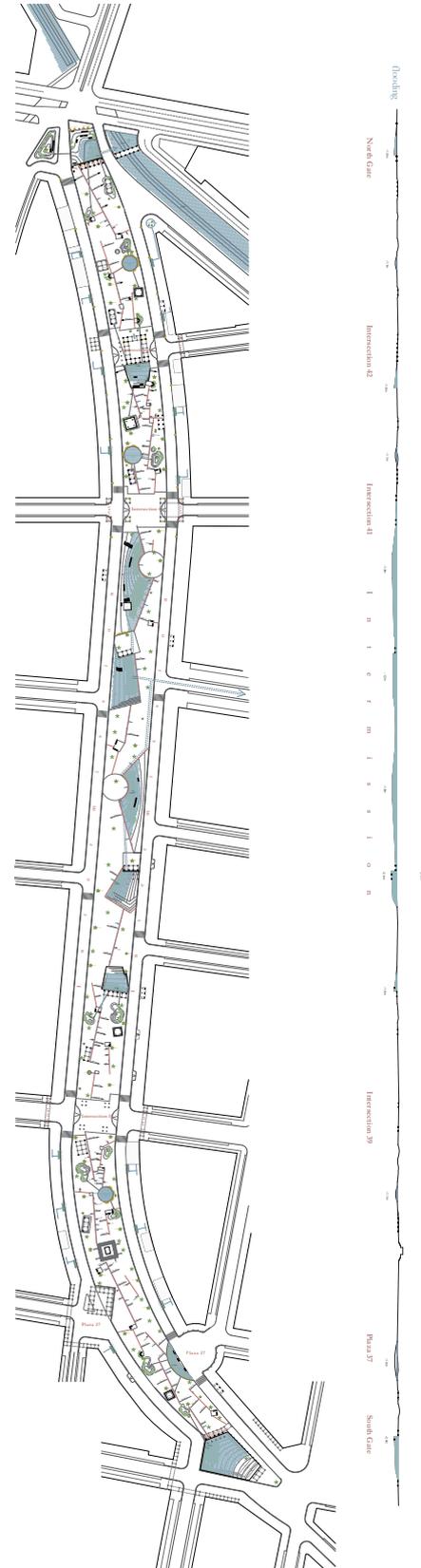


Documentation of movement on the urban manual of Bogota, (top) rubbish bin, (bottom) Seperador Verde

In the previous unsatisfactory attempts, I have been dwelling along the limits of my understanding of a context that I cannot possibly have total knowledge of. However, this acknowledgement does not mean a lazy compromise. On the contrary it has driven me to think about what knowledges we can possibly draw from the unknown. I have been immensely influenced by Erin Manning's writing on how previously unknown knowledges can be mobilized across the limit of our perception and emerge through bodily improvisations.

After numerous attempts, failures and reflections, I have come to realize that more than just proposing an immediate design solution that tries to solve "problems" in one specific location and social-cultural-political context, we are now developing a model that contains a set of instructions that could potentially be interpreted in other realities outside of Teusaquillo.

The themes and questions discussed in this project is highly relevant to the processes through which a built architectural project come into being. Any architectural project is a collaborative and open-ended effort in which the intention of the project is interpreted by different people in multiple ways. Instead of receding into the background, we architects can make productive the inevitable negotiation between the blueprint and its multiple enactments in reality, between the intended use of architecture and its actual appropriation.



Masterscore of El Parkway

OPERATING IN DIFFERENT REALITIES

What does it mean to develop a “socially-engaged” architectural project when there is 8,799 km and an ocean separating us from Bogota? When there are undeniable limits to our understanding of the site we are intervening in? Who are we actually designing for? The “locals” in Teusaquillo whom we do not personally know, whom we haven’t even met? Or ourselves? These are questions that have been occupying my mind since the beginning of the studio.

This uncomfortable distance between me and Teusaquillo left no room for false lucidity. I develop the twofold structure to bridge across time, places, and cultures.

This structure also gives me the flexibility to move back and forth across different scales of operation, to bridge the great length of El Parkway and the lived experience of walking and flowing (in the case of water) on the ground.

Hence, the score is not a product that cease to take effect once a design is complete, nor is it a tool which is subsequently materialized in technical drawings. At every scale of elaboration, I write down instructions that accompany the description of the phenomena I have observed in one place, so the abstract and concrete constantly inform each other.

I carry out research and precedent studies at every stage of the project to inform my design decisions. Each design proposal is a reflection on how other architects and practitioners across place and time have approached the same fundamental questions. Research and design is interwoven with each other throughout the development of the project.

My observations on the existing conditions in Teusaquillo sparked a train of theoretical discussions from which I develop tools and instructions to imagine an alternative reality in our site. These operative tools demands specific architectural expression to take effect and become concrete interventions on site. This constant oscillation suggests that this graduation project can possibly exceed the timeframe of the graduation year, to be carried along through life.

SHIFTING FROM DISOBEDIENCE

Of what use are architects if in reality we can never foresee whether our intentions and their effects in practice will be aligned, when users often disobey the convenient paths laid down for them? How do architects deal with things that are essentially out of their control?

After several unsatisfactory attempts in formulating a project proposal, I realized this inner conflict that initiated my thesis project is built on the precarious assumption that the work of an architect is done the moment the built form of the project resembles his/her idea represented in technical drawings.

I reflected again on this remark by Tim Ingold. The walkers whom I have previously labelled ‘disobedient to the authority’ have as much authority in shaping the landscape as the architects commissioned to design the paved path of Parkway. I remember something one of my tutors said in the beginning of the studio when we shared our initial fascinations. We can see the paths laid down for us as life’s offering, instead of something that stand in opposition to our free will.

Previously, when proposing architectural responses to our conceptual and theoretical findings, I have stubbornly sought comfort within the interior of the apartment buildings in Teusaquillo, instead of intervening in the open ground that is highly charged with potential.

“The stream does not flow between pre-cut banks, but cuts its banks even as it flows. Likewise, as we have seen, people shape the landscape even as they dwell. And human activities, as well as the action of rivers and the sea, contribute significantly to the process of erosion.”

After exhausting all the other possibilities, I eventually return to Parkway with firm assurance. There, I have space to experiment with ways in which architects can give in to contingency and to be in peace with the irredeemable fact that human nature is as unstable and changeable as the dust. Indeterminacy is not the despised opposite of order and reason. Uncertainty is anticipation of what is to come, an oscillation between hope and fear along our paths.

The undetermined choices people make along their paths of movement are not erratic and without purpose. We are always unconsciously affected by other bodies in the environment and in resonance with the various cyclical changes happening within this ever-changing landscape.

I hope to demonstrate it is possible to construct a landscape that is part of a complex and interlocking network in which things, be it water, vegetation, identities etc., are all along never-ending paths of movement, cutting their banks as they flow.

WHAT MOVES PEOPLE?

If I were to pinpoint the beginning of my graduation project, it would be the moment when I followed a lady texting on her phone while walking along an elephant path on Parkway, disregarding the main route designed particularly for pedestrian use. After that encounter I have been observing how people would interact with the landscape embedded with intentions that suggest a course of action.

In the beginning of my graduation year, I went through countless literary and theoretical sources about movement and choreography, in hope of finding within this dense forest of words and symbols an unhindered path that leads to my thesis project.

After briefly studying Baroque architecture, the project became for a while a tyranny of the rectilinear form, exploiting the visual dynamism of undulating curves and organic shapes that I assumed would evoke movement. The deployment of curved geometry eventually delivered superficial results.

I overlooked for a long time the immediacy of architecture. After the P2 presentation I have come to realize architecture is not understood by its representation and cannot be fully understood by only the eyes.



We understand the world around us by being moved by it, as I have during my walks around Teusaquillo and Delft. My perception of the world is shaped and crafted within bodily movement.

After this crucial realization, it has then become all the more obvious to me that I should be intervening in the ground of Parkway. “There is no movement without opposition.” is a comment I received from my studio tutor. The matter of the ground which we are in constant contact with affords movement by opposing and delaying the pull of gravity. The intention laid down within the landscape is not only recognized by the eye but felt by the body through its immediate contact with the ground.

The suppression of visual expressiveness and exaggeration has become one important constraint that I hold onto when designing the landscape of Parkway, which leads me to situate my intervention in the ground and underground. I elaborate the project across various scales - from choreographing relations among parts at the urban scale to designing pavement details with care.

I have also gone beyond this principle to create with mist and vegetation, micro-environments that partially and temporally obscure vision. With this momentary blindness i make one attentive to the things the body immediately hear and touch.

The design decisions I have made in the final design are not so much laboured products of my artistic “creativity” and “originality”, but rather silent observations gathered from my daily walks around Delft in the last three months of my graduation year. The drawings I have spent hours to make concrete are documentations of moving matters I observed during those months of early spring, when the interchangeability of life and death was overwhelming to my senses.

My contribution here is no more than a modest and simple observation of life forms in perpetual transformation.

“Because it is a living process, artistic creation demands a capacity for direct observation of the ever-changing material world, which is constantly in movement.”