Reflection

MSC3 BORDERS & TERRITORIES
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Introduction

From a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, including musicalological, historical, architectural, sociological, political, philosophical, psychological and computational, improvisation is being discussed, although lacking a single widely accepted definition of improvisation. Despite this diversity, there are some common features that run through these perspectives on improvisation. These include issues like spontaneity, indeterminacy, freedom and other related concepts. It represents a feeling that is different from composition and design. Improvisation is like a collage. Typical qualities of design and composition such as precise, rigorous, and aesthetic always turn out to be less critical for improvisation. Its charm lies in adaptability and unexpectedness.

When people do the practice, they mainly based on their own current needs and what material they have instead of considering the building or city as a whole. These practices are spontaneous, unplanned makeshift and ad hoc. They can be seen as improvisational practice. Seen architecture as paintings, in these cases, their improvisational activities are more like a collage rather than fully considered composition.

The Massilia that came into existence around 2000 years ago as a port city and has turned into a city unlike others in Europe. Its millenia long history as a melting pot of cultures and nationalities has led to a complex city. The notion of the disconnected or fractured city echoes through all aspects of the city. This has led to a patchwork of tight-knit communities that connect the Marseillais through mutual respect.

This patchwork is described as a planet by the Marseillais themselves, La Planète Mars, a separate entity that supersedes France in their eyes. Marseille is indeed a city of anomalies. Where every patch within the tapestry has their distinct elements that do not repeat themselves in the others. Where life is played out between the deviations that allow people to say, I am first from here, then Marseille and lastly France.

 The first noticeable characteristic of the city, its relative otherness, albeit not only with regards to other parts of France, but more importantly its structural propensity to undergo 'othering' of its elements. Marseille is composed of various distinguishable spaces — or patches — with properties, in relation to each other and the rest of the city, are somewhat, 'weirdly' emphasized. As one of the biggest port cities of Europe, it represents a heightened transitional character. As people, ideas, beliefs or technologies travel through, they improvised, in one way or another, on the urban fabric.

People shape the city spontaneously. They used their own methods to occupy or reuse buildings and public spaces. There are many examples in Marseille: vendors, graffiti, protest... By practice, people change the environment to meet their current needs better. And as their situation changes, the practice is constantly happening and changing.

These statement leads to my graduation project: Using international shipping lines, which perfectly show Marseille's international port feature as clue to develop a space for exhibitions of different narratives and improvisational practice that make Marseille unique. International and local, different cultures, design and improvisation, new and old, port and city. The project is reacting to all these opposite elements and let stories happen in the project.

Improvisation is a more ad hoc, spontaneous and bottom-up response, which is more precise than typical architectural and urban design to respond to the dynamic changes of the environment and problems. It has no long-term plan, and the results are temporary, but the advantage is that it can quickly respond to the current situation. This is a critical quality, and I hope my project is a combination of design and improvisation: after my design process, preserving the possibilities for people to continuous DIY on the project. So the project is not a one time work, nor am I the only designer.

Research and Design

The method I use for the research and design is "Zoom in" and "Zoom out" and the relationship between design and research in my project is like a loop. Base on my research, I use for catagories to describe the process of improvisational practice in Marseille which are: 1. Fill in the vacancy: city contains many forgotten pieces of the urban fabric, like the dead-end alley, the vacant corner lot, infrastructure's leftovers. Utilizing eftover space or squeezeing in normal space for improvisation is cheaper and easier for people; 2, Makeshift: Improvisational practice is makeshift. It's focus on solving current problems by doing some efficiently and quickly makeshift changes based on current useful structure; 3, Using accessible material: Improvisational practice mainly focusing on meeting people's current needs, which are often unpredictable or urgent. So most of the times the improvisational practice is under the situation that normal construction materials are not easy to get or not enough. People have to use whatever material they can find for the improvisational practice; 4. Adhocism: Improcisational practice is ad hoc. People bring together various, immediately-to-hand components and create something that is uncommon in the typical design works, like a collage rather than a fully composed work. In the design process I following the same logic.

Fill in the Vacancy: When I search for the site I zoomed in to the port of Marseille, finally I found the abandoned J1 building located in the Marseille Fos port. The J1 building was used as part of the old industrial port of Marseille years ago and been abandoned since the new port in the northern part come in to use. The site fits my topic of improvisation-a vacant building which is easy for me to reuse. And it also fits the topic of my studio – borders and territories, my project is about how international improvise the local Marseille, and the site is located at the border of Marseille. It's a typical place representing the border of international and local; port and city, new and old, the project will renew the J1 building and let it works better the balance these elements.

Makeshift: First of all, what make Marseille different from all the other typical French cities is the unique location in the Mediterranean as an international port city. I "Zoom out" to the Mediterranean scale to research for the international shipping lines that introduce international people and staffs to Marseille. And then "Zoom in" to the site to see how the shipping lines and interweave and improvised to become part of Marseille. Then I translate the in to different type of tubes based on the duration and other narratives of each line then develop the interior space.

Using accessible materials: based on the research of Marseille Fos Port and the shipping lines, I found that there are a lot of container ships that come to Marseille every day, and every year there are a lot of containers that can be reused. So I decide to use accessible materials – containers as one of the main materials in my project. On one hand it matches my concept of improvisation in my project, on the other hands it helps on reuse and circularity process. At the same time using containers can help people strengthen the feeling of shipping lines when they experience the tubes.

And Adhocism. I think urban and architectural improvisation allows not only urban planners and architects but everyone to use whatever they have in their hands for seemingly ad hoc decisions to be made in response to needs and emerging priorities. Architects are not the only doers of architecture. So in the project, besides fixed design space in the containers for exhibit the narratives of each shipping line(tube), I focusing on the "leftover" space in J1 building that create by the container tubes. The space represents local Marseille. And it is space for people to improvise, showing their feeling and life as unique "Marseiller". Long after the project have been made, the non-architects continuously shape it.

"An architect does not create a city, only an accumulation of objects. It is the inhabitant who 'invents' the city; an uninhabited city, even if new, is only a 'ruin.'" architects and urban planners' works are only part of the city. We seem to occupy a dominant position in shaping the urban form. Still, it's not the most up-to-date and not necessarily the most satisfying part that meets inhabitants' needs. Inhabitants' efforts in shaping the city cannot be ignored.

And as Jencks explains in Adhocism - The Case for Improvisation: improvisational practice involves using an available system in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently. Doing so offers a way for everyone to shape and discuss the city they live in. I hope that through research on this topic, people's needs can be more widely recognized, and the problems they face can be solved more effectively. And for the public, there should be nothing preventing them, in an agonistic and participatory manner, from devising and debating forms of their shelter and space for daily life. The improvisational practice has itself taken inspiration: Another world is possible.

Next Step

Till now, I For next step, I find it important to zoom in again to the interior space to develop the potential of improvisational space in my project. Now the tubes that generated based on the research of international ships in Marseille are already transformed in to space on the site J1 building which represent the local land of Marseille. The tubes all have these narratives that will be translate as exhibitions in each tube and the leftover space on the J1 building is space for improvisational practice and space for the unique narratives to spread. But how it really works as impressive architectural space, what kind of improvisational exhibition and practice can the project afford to people, how can my design encourage people to improvise, to show their own unique stories as "marseiller" in the exhibitions?

I think I need to keep using the methodology of "zoom in" and "zoom out" to develop the designed space and improvised space: "Zoom in" to the interior space and floor that people can have improvisational practice in the project, see what specific practice people can have and how the exact space react to the practice. And "Zoom out" to deep research on the narratives of each tube to better support the fixed designed space part.

And I also need pay more attention to the relationship between new structure and old structure. I will also research and design the structure and detail in "zoom in" and "zoom out" way: "Zoom out" to see the materials and structures. How I can reuse the containers? Deconstruct them and then move to the site for reconstruct? Where are the containers and steels really come from? How to make the reuse session really sustainable? And then "zoom in" to the detail. New structure needs to cross the old column, how is it works, what material I use for it? How can I cut it? I think I need to develop it in both physical model way and digital model way.