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Interview

Designing affordances of future heritage: a conversation with Ronald and Erik Rietveld of RAAAF

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In this interview article, we present a unique marriage of architecture heritage design and fundamental philosophy exemplified in the built works by Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances (RAAAF), a studio that works at the intersection of visual art, experimental architecture, and philosophy based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The conversation with Prix de Rome laureate Ronald Rietveld and Socrates Professor in Philosophy Erik Rietveld took place during the field visit to three RAAAF's projects — *Bunker 599* (2013), *Deltawerk II* (2018), and *Still Life* (2019) — where we examine the potential of affordance-based approach for rethinking and creating built heritage as (re)activation of past, present, and future.

Introduction

How do we design spaces of future heritage? This question highlights a way of thinking about built heritage practices as something more than an act of preserving and conserving the structures from the past. Instead, future heritage is conceived as a material medium — either already constructed or yet to be produced — that enables the continuity of existing and/or creation of new values and meanings, on which future societies will be built.¹ If we assume that, as a humanity, we strive towards creating more inclusive, empathic, and tolerant societies, then future heritage is a common ground that fosters coexistence of multiple layers of meaning. This does not imply creation of a universal, 'one size fits all' heritage architecture; on the contrary, it calls for designing a platform for dialogue, imagination, and reflection between people of different cultural, political, and social backgrounds.

Such intention of imagining how we could live and do things differently lies at the heart of RAAAF's radical interventions in the field of built heritage.² RAAAF [Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances] is a multidisciplinary studio operating at the intersection of experimental architecture, visual art, and philosophy.³ RAAAF makes location- and context-specific artworks, which derive from the respective backgrounds of the founding partners: Prix de Rome laureate Ronald Rietveld and Socrates Professor in Philosophy Erik Rietveld. In this interview article, we present a unique marriage of architecture heritage design and fundamental philosophy exemplified in RAAAF's built works. Based on the field visit of three projects around the Netherlands — *Bunker 599* (2013), *Delta-*

werk // (2018), and *Still Life* (2019) — in October 2019,⁴ this conversation explores RAAAF's affordance-based approach to the built heritage as a way to 'interpret the history toward the future'.⁵ The actual transcript of the interview is supplemented with additional comments, references, and explanations, enabled by the format of an interview-article with expanded discussions.⁶

An imagination-based approach to creating future heritage

Aleksandar Staničić: Our intention for this special issue on 'Embodiment and Meaning-making: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Heritage Architecture' is to explore the interplay of embodiment, affect, spatial affordances, and socio-political factors in the way we experience and design spaces of heritage.⁷ The aim is to entangle the three currently detached research areas: (i) *affective and more-than-representational heritage studies*, which emphasise the role of affect, spatial atmosphere, visceral responses, and materiality in mediating visitors' experience of memorials, museums, and heritage sites and production of meaning;⁸ (ii) *embodied cognition and the built environment*, which helps recast the built environment as a rich landscape of affordances⁹ and highlights the significant influence of design in shaping our embodied experiences, habits, and patterns of behaving, thinking, and feeling;¹⁰ (iii) *politics and agency of meaning-making*, which draws attention to the political dimension of designing places of heritage due to their propensity to succumb to various political readings and misinterpretations, potentially deepening social divides in (re)creation of history.¹¹ Bringing these three areas of scholarship together enables us to investigate the processes behind the embodied creation of meaning and memory, and in particular, to unfold the role (and limitations) of architects and designers in dealing with future heritage.

We have been inspired by your experimental studio RAAAF that brings forward radically new perspectives on what is possible and meaningful in human life by merging architectural design skills, visual arts, craftsmanship, and philosophy of embodied cognition, among others. Your approach to design is inherently interdisciplinary and seamlessly bridges theory and practice. RAAAF's projects are trailblazers in materialising the idea of future heritage, which perfectly embody the questions posed by this special issue. We would like to use these questions as a way to open the conversation: How can we rethink and create built heritage as (re)activation of past, present, and future? And how do you see your role, as designers as well as researchers, in the creation of heritage?

Erik Rietveld: In our *Hardcore Heritage* approach, we emphasised the importance of paying attention to the imagination of the visitor and taken-for-granted practices of heritage preservation.¹² Rather than just preserving heritage, we propose that it is important to think of heritage as setting developments in motion; essentially, questioning an existing practice of heritage conservation and showing how that could be done differently. For instance, the radical intervention of slicing the *Bunker 599* (Fig. 1), which we created together with Atelier de Lyon, speaks to the imagination of the visitor more than it would



have if it were just the preserved concrete bunker, left untouched. One of the ambitions of the Hardcore Heritage approach is to activate the imagination of the visitor, but also to activate the imagination of the people dealing with cultural heritage — in this case, the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency and UNESCO — so that they can start thinking of preserving heritage differently.

Ronald Rietveld: We often call it a *real-life thinking model*. It is a thinking model based on the possibilities of a certain aspect of the environment. Public heritage and monuments have been transformed into such a thinking model through the Hardcore Heritage approach. It is not just about certain acts of demolition, like in the case of *Bunker 599*, but also about changing the context, whether by adding something new to an existing world or by unearthing and revealing a new world.

ER: A local intervention tells something about the entire country: by cutting open this one particular bunker, you also start to understand how the other bunkers are from the inside and how they are positioned in the UNESCO nominated New Dutch Waterline.

RR: Once you have seen it cut through, you can never un-see it. After seeing this bunker, the seven hundred others somewhere in the country will also evoke this image immediately in your mind. This is exactly what we try to do; we are trying to open up new ways of thinking. The conditions at the time, including wide national and international attention, allowed the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency to go past the resistance that arose because the bunker was a municipal monument and to recognise the potential of the cut bunker as a powerful and valuable way of dealing with heritage, going far beyond their limits. Now you often see *Bunker 599* being used by the people who in the beginning were against it; they show it as a positive example of dealing with heritage. This is what is really important about it, that it is showing, in the most radical way, another direction that can influence to a large extent the way we look at cultural heritage, especially public heritage in the Netherlands and beyond.

Future heritage and agency of the visitor

Andrea Jelić: According to more-than-representational and affective heritage studies, and the growing literature on atmospheres in architecture, the recent tendencies in the way we think about and design spaces of heritage is characterised by placing visitors and their embodied experiences at the centre of the meaning-making process. Through this approach, we see how visitors, rather than being passive observers and recipients of pre-conceived messages, acquire a major role as active participants in creating meaning and enacting collective memory by engaging with the artwork or architectural setting.¹³ This shift is very evident in the design of museums and memorials, such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York, where powerful emotions, visceral experiences, and atmospheric spatial qualities are used as a tool for representing historical events.¹⁴ What this approach to designing heritage architecture brings to the forefront is a future-oriented and open-ended perspective. Instead of (re)creating a single story, a single experience, spatial design supports and provides a number of material affordances and meanings that both enable and constrain manifold of ways in which they can be experienced and appropriated by individuals with different life circumstances and at different times. In this way, through affective and embodied experiences, built heritage connects the variety of individual ways of remembering with the collectively shared past.¹⁵ This manner of thinking about future heritage seems to be in close alignment with the underlying idea behind your Hardcore Heritage approach, as it aims at 'providing affordances for spatial experiences that trigger one's imagination'.¹⁶ How do you see the agency of the visitor in your projects?

ER: One of the ways we approach our projects is by looking into processes that an intervention sets in motion not only in the society but also in individual people visiting it. When you pass by the bunker, you can be immediately struck by it, although you do not know yet what it is. Simultaneously, both the anticipation

Figure 1.

Bunker 599, Culemborg, The Netherlands, 2013, by RAAAF in collaboration with Atelier de Lyon. Material: cut reinforced concrete, 5 × 5 × 6 metres. In a radical way, this intervention sheds new light on the Dutch and UNESCO policies on cultural heritage. At the same time, it makes people look at their surroundings in a new way. A seemingly indestructible bunker with monumental status is sliced open, revealing the minuscule interior of one of the New Dutch Waterline's 700 bunkers, normally completely cut off from view. Paradoxically, after the intervention, *Bunker 599* became a Dutch national monument. Many of RAAAF's interventions are about articulating the void by taking things away. Photographed by Allard Bovenberg, 2013, courtesy of RAAAF.

and shift in perspective are happening. For example, you might be just walking your dog on the dike and you see the bunker, which gets you out of what you were doing. You get curious, then you go down the path towards the bunker and start exploring what that could be. The particular experience will be very different for each visitor. In fact, each person who visits the bunker always brings their own history. Some individuals will start associating the bunker with war stories because they are fascinated by war history. A Chinese art historian who visited *Bunker 599* said: 'You have been cutting the war, so you have made the monument for peace'. Yet another person started talking about trauma because the bunker has been cut open thus 'traumatised', and now it has recovered and became more beautiful than it was before. On the one hand, what they experience is largely supported by what is there: by the materiality of the structure, the revealed soldiers' space inside, and the gap where the wall used to be (Fig. 2). The experiences are partly created by the history of the object, but also by the history of each person.

This commonality is coming from the way we look at affordances, namely, not as something that is individually relevant, but something that is community-relevant and community-relative.¹⁷ When you start seeing an artwork as a very rich nest of affordances — it offers many possibilities that enable and constrain what people can do.¹⁸ How and which of these affordances they pick up depends on the person visiting. Then it is this multiplicity of affordances that the artwork offers, which creates the depth of the person's experience of it. It can generate the *total experience* that we are eager to realise, the experience of an entire situation in all its complexity. As we put it elsewhere:

[A]n artwork offers several affordances. This multiplicity contributes to the depth of a person's overall experience of the artwork, which may even be a 'total experience' of its many layers. We use the term 'total experience' to refer to the person's rich experience of this entire situation. Crucially, a person engages with an artwork by being open to the relevant affordances it offers, like possibilities for imagining, touching, conversing, feeling, and for reflecting on what is taken for granted.¹⁹

By cutting the bunker, we extended the landscape of affordances because now something is there that was not there before. That offers people various learning experiences, but it is not only about learning; it is also about experiencing what it is, with all your senses. It is about creating surprise, wonder, and trying to incite people to reflect on the practice of cultural heritage conservation. In this way, the artwork creates new possibilities for many things, including learning, but also for reflection, for imagination, for sharing with friends, for visiting during a lockdown, etc.

AS: You mention the notion of total experience, which can be partly understood as the way of thinking about your agency of the maker. Could you elaborate on this? How does this total experience interplay with the way you design for open-endedness?

ER: The ambition is always to create what we call a total experience, like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. What helps us in our process of making is to have a very



Figure 2.
Bunker 599, Culemborg, The Netherlands, 2013, by RAAAF in collaboration with Atelier de Lyon, cutting through a seemingly indestructible monument to uncover the materiality of the structure that plays a part in creating the 'total experience' of an artwork, photographed by Allard Bovenberg, 2013, courtesy of RAAAF.

clear image or model of what we would like to make. An image that looks as if the object is already there, and then in the process of making we can show that to all the different people involved to make clear what we would like to realise. We do not want to compromise on how it will look and feel and be experienced once it is there.

RR: Let me make clear what we mean with a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. We strive to make what we call *total interventions*. Total interventions are large site-specific artworks, inside or outside. A total intervention addresses a site or situation in its full complexity of multi-layered meanings. While offering an intense experience of its own materiality and the site, the artworks also trigger people to

reflect on issues in our contemporary living environment. Physically, a total intervention can, for example, be a built structure like *Bunker 599* that might exist for a hundred years or a spatial installation that is on display for three months at an exhibition. Many of our works are articulations of a void, and create space for reflection by taking things away. In a world filled with stuff, such a 'poetry of absence' is crucial.

ER: The individual's experience of what the bunker — as this nest of affordances — has to offer is something we cannot control. There is a big openness in terms how people experience the work we make. All we can do by making total interventions is just to create preconditions for total experiences to happen.

RR: What we try to do in our work is to offer a lot of freedom to interpret it or use it in any way imaginable. People are creative enough to do that themselves. But the main structure, the solid fundament, we believe it should stand firmly as a house.

ER: Often when we talk about our work, we talk about the context, both in the sense of the environment but also culture; for example, the fact that *Bunker 599* was a municipal monument when we cut it and later became a national monument. Yet, when you are on site in an artwork, it is not just the context that matters, but also the materiality of the artwork itself. If you want to understand the total experience that people might have, you should try to understand that the meaning of an artwork comes both from its context, from what we call the *outer horizon*, but also from the *inner horizon* of the object, which is to a large extent determined by its materiality. In our book *The Landscape of Affordances*, we explore the materiality of *Bunker 599*, *Still Life*, and *Luftschloss* in order to get a better feeling for the relation between meaning and the inner horizon.

Tangible and intangible heritage

AJ: What attracts architects and designers to the notion of affordances, in our view, is that it enables them to consider the experiential and the material as two sides of the same coin; every form and every design decision correlates to a set of possible experiences, dependent on the conditions of human embodiment. Through form making, designers can shape an experience — not in the sense of *what* will be experienced, but the capacity of an embodied subject to resonate with or be attuned to their spatial surroundings. Recent works on affordances in visual art and architecture, including your projects such as *The End of Sitting*,²⁰ have emphasised the links between embodied practices (like the skilled action of sitting and supported standing) and the form of the built environment.²¹ Architect and philosopher Sarah Robinson captures this link clearly in her book, *Architecture is a Verb*, by advocating for an understanding of architectural design as a practice of articulating situations of life; it is a call for focusing on

embodied actions and asking what the building *does* rather than how it *looks*.²² In a similar fashion, scholarship on cultural and body memory has indicated the importance of bodily skills and habits as the carriers of cultural traditions and collective practices.²³ Following this line of thinking, we could suggest that, in the case of heritage architecture, what we are preserving is not only the material, physical structures, but also the invisible, tacit conditions guiding our patterns of movement and behaviour, including social practices in these spaces of heritage. So, the built heritage, whether it is being preserved (understood in a broad way) or being (re)designed for the future, needs to account for and include both the tangible and intangible aspects. How do you approach this idea of architectural heritage as a combination of the tangible and the intangible — in other words, of built heritage as a socio-material phenomenon?

ER: I think the distinction between the tangible and intangible heritage is artificial. The meaning of tangible heritage has intangible aspects. When you are visiting *Bunker 599*, for example, it is not tangible that it is a bunker from the Second World War, but it requires knowledge or skill, it requires that you are able to read that it says 1940. Due to skills like these, there is already more than just the materiality that matters. Moreover, I think that, like the Chinese historian who said ‘you cut the war, so you created the monument for peace’, it requires an understanding of the difference between war and peace. There is a lot of the meaning that comes with something you make, and it is not something that is tangible; it is something that comes from socio-cultural practices. Also, if you start looking for intangible heritage, you will find it embedded in the materiality of things and the socio-materiality of practices; the separation starts to feel artificial.

RR: There is a cultural aspect that is interesting here. Concerning cultural heritage interventions, the starting point may not be something that is physically present, but there will always be a cultural aspect we can start from. For us, a total intervention is not only about the visible things, but also about the invisible. The starting point can be about built heritage you can see, or about climate change, as for example in *Deltawerk II* (Fig. 3). The stories behind as well as the things we have been taking for granted in our society are all equally important in our work. We aim to make them tangible and to reveal layers that are hidden in a society through a certain kind of expression.

ER: We think that total experience is not just about the five senses, but it also involves the possibility to reflect, for instance, on certain aspects of the work and its history. There is no artificial separation between reflection and perception happening in our work. For me, embodied cognition is explicitly not just about dancing or grasping cups of coffee, it is about everything we do skilfully.²⁴ This includes making and experiencing architecture, but also imagining, talking, and reflecting.

Figure 3.
Deltawerk II, Land Art Flevoland collection, Waterloopbos, The Netherlands, 2018, by RAAAF in collaboration with Atelier de Lyon. Material: cut reinforced concrete and water. In the context of a giant wave basin served as a test site for the Dutch Deltaworks, *Deltawerk II* questions the ambition to build an indestructible Holland in times of climate change. Related to this, the artwork is also an experiment in making new ruins through the approach and practice of Hardcore Heritage. Photographed by Tae Kyoung, 2021, courtesy of RAAAF.



Common ground: example of *Deltawerk II*

AS: As mentioned earlier, the role of future heritage is to provide a platform, a common ground for mutual cohabitation of people coming from different cultural, political, and educational backgrounds. Its role is to help us imagine a more inclusive and sustainable future, where the challenges of social and environmental change are met. For example, finding communality in relation to our awareness of climate change is perhaps best illustrated in your *Delta-werk II* project, which we also visited.²⁵ In an ideal setting, future heritage should acknowledge the diversity of views and try to negotiate between them, until a common, shared meaning emerges. How do you deal with this

diversity of possible readings and the hierarchy between them in your projects? How do you identify a possible common ground? As often happens in practice, the design of places of heritage (like museums, monuments, memorials) is usually commissioned by the government and heritage institutions that have certain narrative to fulfil. In this scenario, the task of an architect is to create some kind of meaning that is predetermined. What then comes to the fore is this limitation of a designer to produce the desired outcome; this pre-determinacy, it could be said, is what limits the inclusive agency of heritage sites.

ER: First of all, it is important that the way we typically work at RAAAF is closer to visual artists than to architects because we start from our own fascination with a particular site and not from commissions. To generate an artistic freedom for our works, we develop an idea for a site, make that visual so that people can understand what our site-specific artwork would look like, and only then try to get support from the relevant governments and heritage institutions. Second, it is important to emphasise here that the history is already a shared history. In the case of the *Bunker 599*, for instance, the Second World War is a shared history for many people in the Netherlands. So, there is already a common ground in our society that, when you deal with a bunker from the Second World War, you deal with a certain aspect of its meaning. And similarly, with *Deltawerk II*, the Netherlands is constantly trying to protect itself from flooding. It is an important cultural aspect that people share. If you go into the history of the site, you will find a lot of commonalities and common interest of the society that are also relevant for the future. Especially in times of climate change, we will have to rethink how to keep the Netherlands from flooding.

Another aspect is how to deal with the commonality that cultural heritage can have. I think it is about creating something that is meaningful for a society or a community; that comes partly from history, but it also comes in part from what we try to set in motion. Often, we try to set certain development in motion, like in the case of *Vacant NL*.²⁶ We try to make people see that this vast sea of building vacancy holds enormous potential for temporary re-use. Setting that in motion is offering the Dutch people something, namely, the resources provided by all these vacant buildings. They can be used temporarily for all sorts of things that people find interesting (Fig. 4).

RR: The work often starts with just the site, and if there is a question, it can be only an open question. We are not going to do simply what somebody asks because we want to deal with the sense of place and the site-specific qualities, and we try to reveal layers that one usually does not see. Almost every site has an interesting story, and if there is a story inside, we try to reveal it and carry it to the future. Now, if the meaning of the site were predetermined, as in your example, we would not be interested in the commission.

In our case, by working with total interventions, it means that it is not just about the object itself, but about its entire complexity. Sometimes it means

Figure 4.
Deltawerk II, Land Art Flevoland
 collection, Waterloopbos, The
 Netherlands, 2018, by RAAAF in
 collaboration with Atelier de Lyon,
 illustrating the affordance-based
 approach to the built heritage as a
 way to interpret history towards the
 future by allowing open-ended
 actions and new meanings to
 emerge, photographed by Juliana
 Gomez, 2021, courtesy of RAAAF.



dealing with the landscape as well. For example, the Bunker 599 was in the middle of the forest. We removed that and made water in front. We do not mention that because it is not interesting for the artwork. But for us it was very important that the bunker stands on the field of water next to the dyke. In *Deltawerk II* the entire environment contributes to the artwork. Here we wanted to focus on the Dutch struggle against water by just cutting it into pieces, and that opened a question towards the future: how are we going to

do deal with climate change? But the experience on site is all about being in nature and everybody's reaction is 'oh, the reflection looks so good'. Of course, we have been thinking about that, how it will work. If you think about that image, it is about creating a total environment; in that sense, it is very close to Pallasmaa and Zumthor's approach to architectural atmospheres.²⁷ We are creating atmospheres (Fig. 5). Yet, we do not focus on this topic because for us, it is not an essential thing in the story we want to tell.

We try to make environments with our total interventions that are really about the environment of an artwork. Whether it is interior or exterior, we can make it very precise, and although sometimes it is a small intervention, it opens up a new way of thinking about bigger issues. We stay close to this basic principle. It is not, of course, possible for everybody to deal with this our way because we have to generate our own work. That is not easy. For *Deltawerk II*, we generated the work ourselves completely. We had to do it ourselves, and that made it complicated, but the good thing is that we do not have to compromise and can then point to the things we find important and want to reveal, to tell something that is culturally relevant.

Negotiation, differently skilled participants

AJ: Recent studies in co-creation reveal its potential to serve as a tool for cross-disciplinary, multicultural, and multigenerational knowledge exchange.²⁸ Here, group dynamics is the key — that is, creating a work environment of differently skilled people who, through a constructive dialogue, are constantly learning from each other and negotiating the design outcome. Architectural practice, however, teaches us that the work atmosphere in a design studio setting is somewhat easier to manage since shared interests and understanding of the profession is one of the key factors when choosing collaborators. Maintaining a constructive dialogue is much harder outside of the design studio, between non-skilled people who come from different cultural backgrounds, have different understandings of heritage, but also different goals, agendas, interests, etc. Can you tell us more about your own design process, how do you negotiate the differences between differently skilled participants, within and outside the studio? How not to inadvertently impose our own narratives, ideas, and solutions about heritage, but to allow this co-creation of meaning to happen?

ER: Teams of specialised craftsmen are actively involved in the process of making our artworks. Specialists include firefighters, brass founders, master carpenters, church bell makers, concrete cutters, and crane operators. Finding excellent craftsmen is necessary for realising the artworks and crucial for the quality of materialisation that we strive for. One of the good things in the process of making at RAAAF with craftsmen, visual artists, philosophers, graphic designers, and architects in the studio is that there are always differ-

Figure 5.
Deltawerk II, Land Art Flevoland collection, Waterloopbos, The Netherlands, 2018, by RAAAF in collaboration with Atelier de Lyon, where the entire environment contributes to the artwork and creation of architectural atmosphere as a means of telling the story of how the Dutch will deal with climate change in the future, photographed by Jan Kempenaers, 2018, courtesy of RAAAF.



ences of opinion; then we can always try out different options, different scenarios (Fig. 6). When there is a whole range of possibilities, it makes it much easier to find a way out. We can create all sorts of alternatives because, if you do not like option A, and others do not like option B, then perhaps there are still options C, D, or E that you could use.

RR: Our tools are drawing, sketching, making models, and trying out mock-ups to experience how the human body relates to the space. The only way to come to the essence of the work is by continuously producing ideas and drawing them. We draw ideas, try to visualise and reflect on them. The work has to become visual and preferably, spatial, to arrive to the essence of a place. There is also a lot of theoretical research going on, but if you do not make it physical, it is never going to work. That is also why we work simultaneously in several media next to each other. Another important thing is to keep following your intuition, so that you can do the work collaboratively. Especially if one has a lot of experience, it is even more important to both stick to your intuition and to leave room for others' intuitions.

But then, the problem of all of our work in public space (outside the studio) is that every person involved behaves like a professional. Everybody has an opinion. If it is something outside, in public space, everybody feels attached to the neighbourhood. It can be counterproductive if amateurs start behaving like experts while you have a clear vision how to make something. We have to deal with amateurism on a daily basis. It is always difficult to make something

Figure 6.

Deltawerk II, Land Art Flevoland collection, Waterloopbos, The Netherlands, 2018, by RAAAF in collaboration with Atelier de Lyon, sawing large blocks out of a colossal monument of the Dutch struggle against the water, photographed by Jeroen Bosch, 2018, courtesy of RAAAF.



visionary while collaborating with many people. Those two do not always match in a good way. People can collaborate on a project, but it depends on the state and stage of a project. It is difficult to integrate all these things in a good way, so that they are still clear.

AS: The question then is how you actually negotiate and push for your project against people who do not share the same vision, or have no understanding at all what is the meaning that you are trying to achieve? This is of course a common thing in architectural practice that happens all the time — our work depends on politicians, urbanists, and investors. How do you engage with people who do not have the same set of skills or the same vision of architecture that you do?

RR: It depends on the situation. For example, somebody who lives in the neighbourhood can often offer very good information when you want to make a site-specific art installation. For example, when we made a work on Taksim Square for the Istanbul Art Biennale, the curatorial team had selected key people for us to meet and connected us to specialists of all kinds: cultural history, ecology, current day politics, etc, but also citizens who told us about what that site meant for them.²⁹ The curatorial team helped us through the entire process of making the artwork. It was extremely constructive and it contributed a lot to the intervention we made for that contested site. In that case of working in a different country, it is logical to collaborate with locals because we need to understand the layers of meaning of the site. With *Deltawerk II* as well as with the *Bunker 599*, I would not appreciate many people collaborating there because they were such sharp ideas. It was too radical to negotiate or compromise. But even then, we had to convince commissions, officials, etc. It was more about convincing than collaborating. It always depends on the kind of place, where is it, and who is involved. Sometimes, if we have images that bring so much good information, we will find a way to include them in a project in one way or another. The opposite also happens.

Then if you start thinking about timescales and ambitions for the next ten, twenty, or fifty years, people are usually not aware of that because everyone is looking at their environment right at this moment, but not on the longer timeframe. If you ask people what spatial interventions should happen within ten or fifteen years, they often do not really know. I am really glad that, for example, *Deltawerk II* was not a large collaborative project; it was even without a client in the classical sense. The example of the Istanbul Biennale shows however that sometimes many people are really contributing in a meaningful way. It depends on the situation and the commission, but then again, we often create commissions ourselves.

The case of burdened and contested heritage: *Still Life*

AS: In the Dutch cultural context, as the example of *Still Life* (Fig. 7) shows, there is a lot of burdened cultural heritage — heritage that has difficult and

troubled history. In those situations, this kind of thought-provoking interventions can challenge our understanding of burdened heritage and maybe propose some other readings of it. What helps, in any case, is starting from the premise that there is a common, shared understanding of history, no matter how troubled it is. Yet, as we unfortunately know, there is a lot of world heritage whose meaning is actually contested, so that there are not only many different readings of it, but the understanding of history around which that heritage is built is also contested.³⁰ In the most extreme cases, such as the former Yugoslavia, where we came from, destruction of heritage of others was an integral part of ethnic cleansing and territorial homogenisation.³¹ Culture wars persist to this day, as they have become a means to deepen social divides and break social cohesion in a traditionally multicultural environment. In such layered and complex history, where heritage is deeply embedded in social and national identity, deciding which moment in history to preserve and memorialise is already an act of political determination. What, in your view, can be done in that case to find a possible common ground even if heritage is contested? What role can architecture, art, or even experimental philosophy, play in creating more empathic society, taking care of the vulnerable and oppressed?

Figure 7.

Still Life, 2019, by RAAAF, in Museum Het HEM, Amsterdam. Material: casted brass, steel beams, crane trolleys. During the Cold War, millions of bullets were made for NATO soldiers worldwide in the former bullet factory Het Hem. At the time, the factory was full of trays with brass bullet casings. The artwork *Still Life* questions the abandoned war factory and creates a link between the present, past, and future of this historically burdened heritage. The source material of the bullet production has been melted and casted into four heavy brass plates. Their movement forces the visitor to relate to the work over and over again. The brass plates move slowly away, but inevitably return. Photographed by Jan Kempenaers, 2019, courtesy of RAAAF.



ER: First of all, you need to be aware that a site is contested, of course, which is quite important. And then, you can try to zoom out to a larger level where people's interests do point in the same direction, where they can find a broader common ground. Only then can one try to make an intervention that sets development in motion towards the direction where there is a broader common interest. Imagine, for example, Dutch climate change deniers and the non-deniers all share a common interest, namely, keeping the Netherlands safe from flooding. So, one can try to find a perspective that is on a longer time-scale or at a larger scale level, where it does not matter anymore that things are currently being contested. Then you can make an intervention that sets development in motion toward that shared, preferable direction. Our installation *Vacant NL* was partly trying to do that because, at the time when we were starting to do the Venice Biennale, there was a squat ban in the Netherlands. The right-wing parties, of course, liked the squat ban and the left parties did not. Then we said, OK, leave it as it is. What all parties wanted was to see the Netherlands as a place for scientists and artists, for knowledge workers, basically. We then decided to reuse this temporary vacancy — ten thousand vacant public and government buildings — for something that all the parties from left to right would approve, namely, knowledge development. This is an example of getting to a larger scale level. Another thing that one could do, and that is partly related and partly unrelated, is just to make something that is more abstract and appreciated just by its sheer beauty. It just gets people to think: OK, this is not the form or statue I would make, but it is something beautiful, and I am happy it is there (Fig. 8).

RR: The same happened with the bunker. In the beginning, institutions wanted to preserve it. But then we showed our first idea to people at the cultural heritage agency, and everybody was convinced it should be realised. In every project, there are things going on that have two sides. An important aspect of our artworks is indeed the openness that makes them accessible in many different ways of reading.

ER: Another example is *Luftschloss*, an intervention for this huge Nazi fortress in the centre of Vienna.³² One could say it is a contested heritage given that it is a former Nazi bunker, but it is only contested for a small minority, fortunately. Despite that, even now it is still a very vulnerable and burdened issue, where there are all these sensitivities. By blowing away the concrete and leaving the steel structure uncovered, we made people realise that it could be something very different, that it could be a great sculpture there in the centre of Vienna. So, you just capture people with the beauty of the whole thing.

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Figure 8.
Still Life, 2019, by RAAAF, in
Museum Het HEM, Amsterdam,
where brass, the source material of
the bullet production, is being
melted down, photographed by
and courtesy of RAAAF, 2019.

Notes and references

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