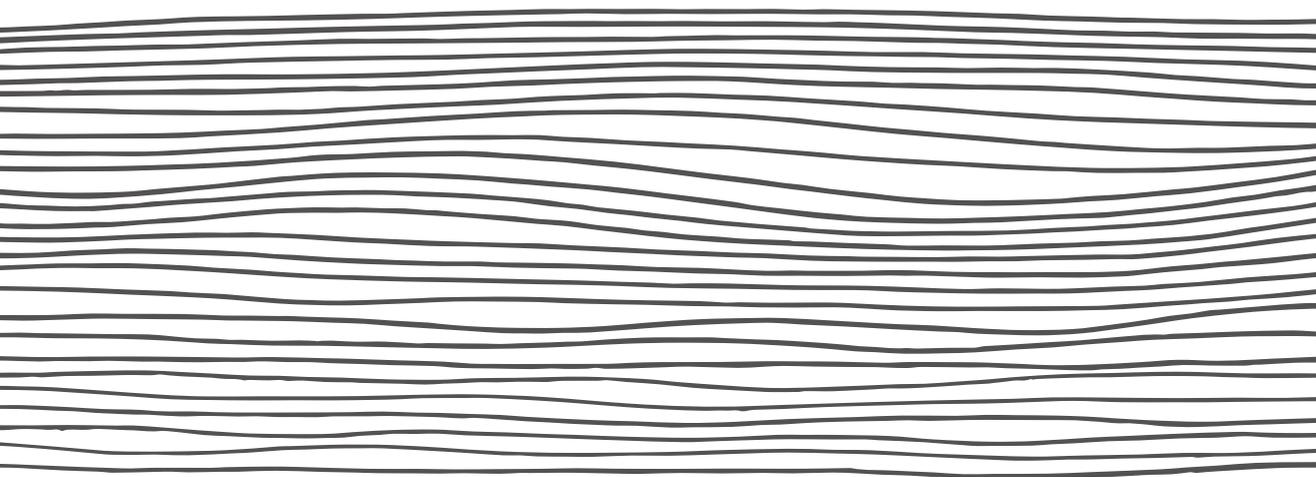


Reflection

Marah Wagner



The coastal environment as a laboratory

Design mentor: Engbert van der Zaag & Leontine de Wit

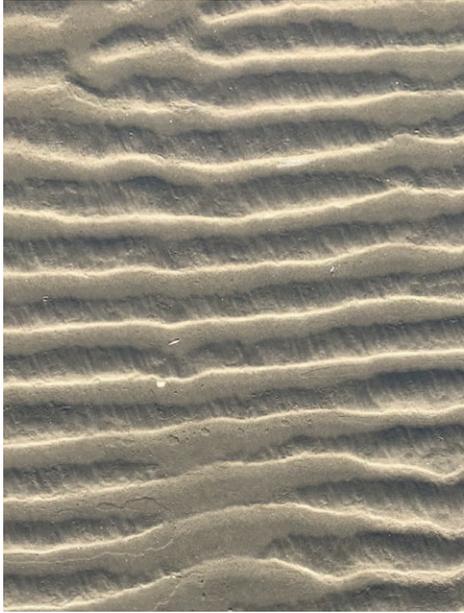
Building Technology mentor: Freek Speksnijder

Research mentor: Klaske Havik

The coastal environment as a laboratory

Architecture and embodied experiences

A research into how architecture can preserve and enhance the positive embodied experiences of the coastal environment around the harbour of Scheveningen.



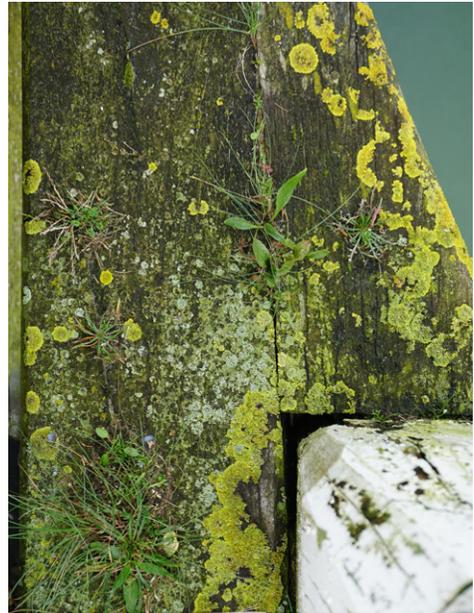
The coastal environment as a laboratory - as the name suggests, this project started by taking the coastal environment as the starting point. To be specific the coastal environment of my home town: Scheveningen. The choice for this starting point was my fascination for "uitwaaien" and the calming effect it has on me. "Why did I take the most non-architectural experience as an inspiration for an architectural design?", was a question I received at the start of my search for the most suitable mentor-team. A question I had no immediate answer to at the beginning of the project. Luckily, Explore Lab, the studio track that this project is part of, provided me the space to, on the one hand, investigate the underlying reasons of this question and, on the other hand, to be free to shape my own methodology to explore the topic.

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This research started with surveying people that I encountered at different sites of my research area. I asked them a set of closed questions on sensory cues in their/this environment. However, these prewritten questions didn't bring me much further and it turned out that starting an open conversation offered me much more. Simultaneously with this onsite research, I started a theoretical research into experiences and bumped into the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His theories, and also other scholars who connected his theories to the architectural field, such as Mallgrave, Gibson, Kuma, as well as my research mentor Klaske Havik, introduced me to the embodiment of experiences. Stressing the subjective side of an experience gave me a new perspective on how to position myself as an architectural researcher in this project. At first, I wanted

to approach this research “scientifically” by using surveys: collecting quantitative data of people their opinions. However, in the topic of experience, it is not all about numbers, logic and measurability. Through observation, and eventually adding conversations with people, I got the opportunity to, as an architectural researcher, collect information in a sensitive and intuitive way.

With this method, I was able to formulate seven themes which can help designers design new places, whilst enhancing or preserving the positive embodied experiences of the existing site. The themes were presented in text and image. In addition, I formulated them in such a way that there is still space for interpretation and imagination by the designer (in this case me, but also for any other designer who happens to read it). The space for interpretation showed to be useful, as the seven themes of this phase of the project went through multiple transformations to end up in the narrative of my final design. Also, the space for imagination proved to be important, as it was a recurring theme in this project. Imagination is possible, as the project showed me, through trusting your bodily feeling; and the embodiment of experience does help to understand how this works.



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The research in the first part of the graduation year has resulted into two main outcomes: A booklet, which concludes with the seven before mentioned themes, and a program brief for a design to further develop during the rest of my graduation. The qualitative, multi-tactical methodology of this research led to a design brief for a seaweed center. This center provides a continuation and a nurture of the



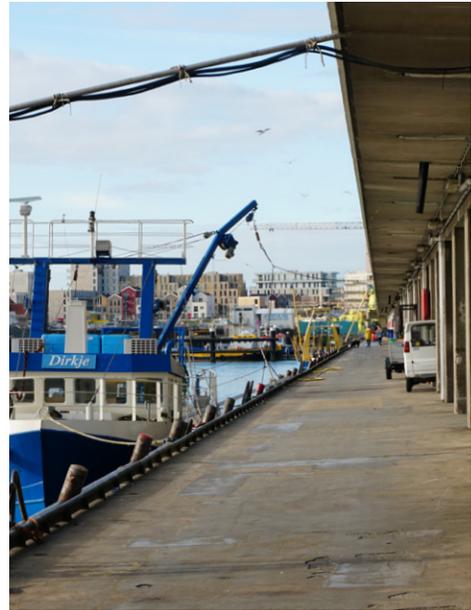
bodily knowledge and labor of Scheveningen's, past as well as a chance to shed light on the richness of the North Sea for a better future. The center houses places for the public to learn about seaweed, places for researchers and designers to experiment with seaweed and places for different people within the sector to exchange knowledge. As the chosen site is owned and used by Rijkswaterstaat (the state's department for water works), the new program will consolidate the existing.

The next task was to create a suitable design by merging the themes with the program on the site. Although this sounds easy, in fact I experienced this phase as a very difficult one. Half way through the design phase and reflecting on my P3 presentation, I had to conclude that designing with seven themes in mind was too difficult. Overwhelmed by the seven themes and all the wishes of the people I had interviewed, I forgot to focus on what it was all about: maintaining or intensifying the positive embodied experiences in their original way and to intensify and further improve the quality of these. Or, in other words, starting to design with the main objective of creating the desired embodied experience. Since experiences and how people experience are very subjective, this results in the fact that it is never possible to design according to everyone's wishes. Taking the feedback of my tutors into account, the right step forward seemed to be to make it smaller, staying closer to my own intuition and trust those gut-feelings of the architectural researcher and designer that I am. The seven themes ranged from the more direct architectural themes (rhythms; imperfection as perfection; the long line and the detail; the interaction of materials), to more experience related themes (unconscious to conscious; multiplicity of tranquility). The

architectural themes are about materiality and spatial qualities, and weren't helpful in this phase. They seemed to specific. I needed a theme which had a deeper layer. The less direct architectural themes, turned out to give me better handholds to make a coherent design and to make sure the new design would tell the desired narrative of the place.

To continue the transformation of the themes, I used the chosen themes to formulate two architectural families: one about enclosure, and one about exposure to the environmental characteristics of the place. Incorporating the most important lesson I took away from taking the coastal environment as a laboratory: The coastal environment has the capacity to calm through a multiplicity of environmental stimuli. Creating contrasts to the exposure and the withdrawal of these sensory stimuli, can lead to a moment of awareness. Awareness of the physical presence at that specific place. By positioning these two architectural themes into one building, the goal is to create these contrasts. "Enclosure" being the place where the sensory stimuli are faded and " Exposure" being the place where there is an engagement with the sensory stimuli of the context.

The other important lesson I took away from my research was the human scale and the engagement of the human body in the design. This is achieved through craft but also to display the activities of the program. Within the places of "Enclosure" the architecture makes the tools and machines visible from a distance. Within the places of "Exposure" the activities of creating and making are becoming part of the architectural design.



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Much of what I've learned by focussing on specificity of the coastal environment of Scheveningen, I will take with me to future projects in my professional career. In the current money-driven building industry, developers are building at fast pace and with low budgets. Designs therefore are becoming more standardized and generalized. Examples of these new developments are even seen at my research sites. These buildings feel distanced and lack any empathy to social and spatial context.

This projects has shown that a sensitive approach as a designer can nourish empathy to the design. When using sensitive approach, I'm referring to the methods I used to collect the qualitative and less measurable information, and using how we experience a place as the starting point when designing. As a designer, it is important to immerse yourself in the site socially and spatially; get to know the people, the history and the local characteristics. I would like to emphasise the use of photography as a research method. Taking a camera to the site helped me to observe and take in the context, from the smallest detail of a texture, to social practises, to spatial rhythms. It offered me to pay full attention to the things I observed and to remember and collect those findings. During the design phase, the photographs helped me to return to the site for a moment, because of our collaborating sensory system and our archive for sensory cues. Often when reviewing a photograph, new details emerged, provoking new ideas. Photographs were also fruitful as a starting point for a discussion with fellow students, my mentors and people I spoke to on site.

Photography, or any other method to socially and spatially understand the site, provides

handholds to generate and formulate the desired embodied experience of imaginary places. When taking experience as the medium to define the new design, it is important to reflect on the subjectiveness of embodied experiences. It is important to acknowledge how the design will be perceived by future users, whilst not forgetting to stay close to the designer's intuition. I learned to dare to change perspective, hovering between the technical background Delft University of Technology has provided me with, the perspectives of the users, my interviewees, and my gut-feeling. Designing is about being curious, about trying, exploring and making mistakes. Although this takes time, it is important for a step towards more sensitive design. The "Aha" moment will eventually come, things will fall into place and my design will come together.