



Delft University of Technology

## Reflection. Research, design, making something

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# RESEARCH, DESIGN, MAKING SOMETHING

## REFLECTION

Urban design in the context of delta landscapes is quite a challenge. By nature, deltas are highly dynamic environments. Despite all the risks they pose to people, over many centuries they have provided favorable conditions for intensive agriculture and human habitation. Always heavily used, in our time deltas throughout the world are coming under huge pressure from urbanization - while also facing all the threats and consequences of impending climate change.

More than ever before, the creative disciplines will have to consider the factors time and uncertainty in their approach to deltas, to learn to think in terms of strategies rather than simply of spatial solutions. This is the type of mindset we wish to foster among our students at the Delta Interventions Studio, where we help them to develop the skills necessary to think along these lines.

In this context, design is increasingly being viewed as a form of research. That is, as a tool to be used when conceiving 'potential futures', in the investigation of intervention-effect relationships and in the development of more widely applicable instruments and tools.

However, designers should look beyond their own research as well. They need to explore possibilities and develop practical tools. They face the challenge of translating spatial interventions into physical forms and structures, in a manner appropriate to a specific time and place, and of creating a consistent composition which retains some degree of familiarity and comprehensibility while offering enough novelty and originality to attract attention and involvement. Rarely does their task end with the developing of tools - the real test lies in the practical application of those tools to actually *produce something* with such strong inherent value that we forget its back story: the issue it was intended to address, the process of its design, the tools and techniques used in its construction.

### Space as a medium

The tasks assigned to spatial planners and urban designers are usually formulated in terms of policy goals, key figures, densities and cash sums. The solutions they come up with are used and manifest themselves in *space*. This has huge implications. Space is not a neutral medium. It has its own realm, its own idiom, its own agency, and evokes its own appreciation. One has to learn to 'read' it: to recognize, to depict, to describe, to conceptualize and to use its intrinsic qualities, its dimensions, forms, structures, patterns and proportions.

Space can also be *celebrated*. Spatial quality and appeal are powerful means to realize broader objectives such as urban regeneration, but ultimately space also represents a *value in itself*. A designer should embrace this, like a craftsman with 'the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett, 2008).

### A designerly way of thinking

Of course, space does not exist in isolation. In deltaic landscapes, in particular, spatial forms result from countless interwoven natural and human processes, and they are in a constant state of flux. At certain moments, however, these processes will solidify into more or less fixed forms or artifacts, which tend to lead a life of their own. Many of these outlast human lifetimes, and directly or indirectly influence other concurrent or future processes. The traces they leave in the landscape form a narrative in space that we need to learn to understand as thoroughly as possible before adding new chapters of spatial interventions.

The designer has to constantly move between the languages of words and images. He or she is continually switching from one medium to the next. And those switches are nothing like the one-way traffic - from words to images, from figures to maps, from problem statements to spatial solutions - that dominates the discourse-driven, formula-dominated scientific world of the technical university. Rather, they represent a never-ending movement in *both* directions. In recent decades, reflection upon this 'designerly' way of thinking has emerged as an academic discipline in its own right. Essentially, the design process asks for a 'co-evolution of solution and problem spaces' (Cross, 2001). Cross and others state that, analysis and synthesis occur simultaneously in design processes. For designers, the evaluation of potential solutions is often more important than the analysis of the problem itself. From the very beginning of the process, their focus is on *reframing the problem* in the context of potential solutions (Schon, 1984).

Figure 170.  
Research by design  
Durgerdam #02  
- cross-section  
combined with  
a longitudinal  
perspective.



Figure 171.  
Research-by-design:  
Durgerdam #01 -  
spatial section of the  
boundaries between  
land and water:

### Drawing

To be able to move back and forth effortlessly between abstract problem and spatial solution, drawing qualities are vitally important. As a means of grasping the intrinsic qualities of space, drawing should not be regarded merely as a technique used to express solidified ideas but rather as a way of investigating and conceptualizing spatial phenomena. In this respect, too, delta landscapes present designers with unique challenges. What makes these environments so fascinating is not just their ability to change over time, but also the fact that they combine extreme spatial elements all in one place.

Delta landscapes are characterized by the entanglement of land with water. They are interfaces where the solid meets the fluid, the tactile the endless, the defined the undefined. The delta landscape attracts the eye, but also eludes it. The great expanse and openness of the IJsselmeer region make it hard to discern an overall spatial form, never mind capturing it on paper, and yet much value can be attributed to those very features. Interventions like coastal reinforcement, dyke raising, new shorelines and construction of wind turbines are always controversial, unleashing fierce debate. The art of drawing and visualizing these landscape features can help clarify the situation, contextualize it, and help make a better informed discussion.

### Space and place

Rather than an open sea, a vast expanse of water, the IJsselmeer is a 'tamed' inland sea hemmed in by stretches of coastline, headlands and landmarks that constantly loom into view, then disappear again. The value of its open character comes not from total nothingness, not from an 'absence of everything', but from the relative experience of space it provides: the aesthetic of 'almost nothing'.

The way in which we humans experience space is ambiguous. We are torn between two extremes. On the one hand we perceive it in terms of its confines, just as we 'perceive' a room by virtue of its walls: bounded, enclosed, well-defined, manageable and more or less safe. This is the experience of space as 'room' or 'place' (or the German *Raum*). But at the other end of the scale we find unbounded space: endless, abstract and, in its indefinability, potentially threatening. Here, space is synonymous with 'infinity' (or the French *espace*).

The relative safety of the manageable 'place' evokes images of the mundane and the picturesque, while we associate the experience of 'infinite' space with the exceptional and the sublime. It is from the combination of the two, the picturesque plus the sublime, that the IJsselmeer region - like many other delta landscapes - derives its aesthetic appeal.

The concepts described here are deeply rooted in the design-driven disciplines architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture, and are constantly being reinvented. Their professional history offers a wealth of examples of how practitioners have approached the relationship between intimacy and vastness.

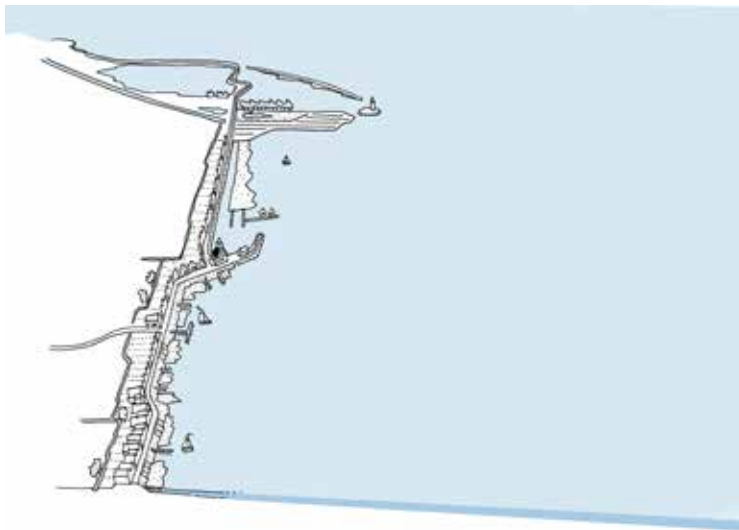


Figure 172.  
(below left)  
Research-by-design  
Durgerdam #03 -  
bird's eye view.

Figure 173.  
(below right)  
Research-by-design  
Durgerdam #04 -  
cartographic overview.

