

# **THE SUBVERSION OF EXPECTATIONS**

RESEARCH PROJECT Explore Lab

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## NOTE

The research report I handed in, as part of my graduation at the TU Delft, was in the form of a website. Thus you can find the complete report on: [subversion.space](https://subversion.space).

In this document you can find the written text that you can also find on the website.

## ‘EXPECTATIONS’ - a mini Manifesto

*‘... for what we call everydayness is not obvious but opaque: a kind of blindness or anaesthesia.’ (Perec, 1974)*

Society is stuck in daily routines; everyday we take the same train, we sit in the same spot at work, we are surrounded by the same people with the same opinions (Hagenaars, 2004). Unconsciously, we are lived by our expectations, led by social norms and conventions. Often we are unaware of this.

Life can be much richer if we would subvert or escape from these routines every once in a while. These routines prevent us from seeing everything that there is. Our expectations need to be subverted.

In our public space many daily routines play alongside each other. It is a place where people adapt themselves the most to social norms and conventions. For example: in the face of society we refrain from skipping, no matter how much it could improve your mood (van Luyn, 2016). However, it is also in public space where the promise of freedom is to be found, where there is room for creativity, adventure and potential beauty (Karskens, 2003). This richness can be revealed by subverting your expectations.

The subversion of your expectations can make you more aware of the public space around you. It can motivate you to use that space, it can initiate encounters, raise questions and start discussions. It can increase the feeling of collectivity.

Usually, it is reserved for artists to make people look at the world differently (Hagenaars, 2004). But precisely because architecture is much more common, much more everyday, than art, it is architecture that has the possibility to, unexpectedly, subvert our expectations and wake us up.

The architect should play a role in the subversion of our expectations. They should learn how subversion works and how it can be achieved.

# ARCHITECTURE AND THE SUBVERSION OF EXPECTATIONS

## methods and parameters

As part of my graduation project at the TU Delft, I did research on the subversion of your expectations in architecture. To find out how to design an unexpected moment I created a collection of exemplary projects. The more than hundred examples of this collection show how one can design a subversion of one's expectations. It is a growing collection, from which we can learn continuously.

The projects in the collection are analysed on:

1. the effect on the spectator or participant (method)
2. the experienced senses and used elements (senses & elements)
3. the type: architecture/art (type)

Furthermore the examples are tagged, and can be sorted by; size [object, installation, building, structure], placement [inside or outside] , timeframe [temporary or permanent], kinetic energy [static or dynamic], relation [spectator or participant] and color.

This collection can be used as a productive tool to develop new forms of the subversion of expectations.

My analysis of the collection shows eight methods in which the expectations of spectators or participants can be subverted:

1. Provocation
2. Confusion
3. Play
4. Humour
5. Evoking wonder
6. Disruption
7. Sparking one's imagination
8. Raising curiosity

*These eight methods are not the only ways of subverting one's expectations. There might be many more, depending on who does the research, the context, and other factors. These eight are the result of my research in the context of my graduation project. By having analysed the methods and corresponding projects, and making it possible to sort and compare them in the online collection, I hope that this research can be a good starting point, showing how it could be possible to use architecture for subverting daily routines and fixed expectations.*

At '**Methods**' you will find further explanation about these methods. Below you will find the the collection of examples.

## REFERENCES

Hagenaars, H. (2004). Wie een stad bouwt heeft kunst nodig. *Lectoraat Art & Public Space, Gerrit Rietveld Academie*. Retrieved from <https://laps-rietveld.nl/?p=550>

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## Provocation

~ Action or speech that makes someone angry, especially deliberately.

/ To use provocation as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to deliberately act out to make somebody angry.

The project examples are often intervention art: art works that interact with an existing structure or situation. Provocative works make us aware of a space or situation and, after making us angry, make us question and look at the situation differently. An example of a provocative project is the Wheat Field project of Agnes Denes, where she took a land fill in lower Manhattan - a very expensive piece of land meant for luxury building blocks - and cultivated it fully with wheat. In this way calling attention to the misplaced priorities at that time.

Provocative projects touch upon the boundaries of society, it pushes these boundaries to evoke a reaction. John Körmeling's work shows us the possibilities of architecture if it would be liberated from tradition and its social responsibilities, it is not strange to see that most of his work makes use of this method. For example the 'Kunstfabriek', a 'art-factory' made with seven laser beams, a building that you can switch on and off. To realise this, floors, roof and walls of the existing academy had been drilled through.

Another good example is the intervention artwork in Utrecht 'Sic Transit Gloria Mundi'. Verhoeven occupied a public square for what people believed was to be the building site of a giant sculpture. After two weeks of occupying the square people found out that the art piece was the occupation itself. It annoyed people that space was taken from them, made them question what public space is, and how we use it. To use provocation architecturally, you have to look closely at the location and situation you are reacting to. Often these projects are temporary performances or conceptual artworks. They are there to make people aware and annoy them, but leave after a period of time.

## Confusion

~ Uncertainty about what is happening, intended, or required.

/ To use confusion as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to raise a feeling of uncertainty about what is happening, intended or required.

There are various ways to raise confusion.

The project examples show us that a way to raise this feeling is to use contrast with its environment. This contrast can be achieved with deviating shapes, colour and/or material.

Material can play a big part in the creation of confusion, for example: the use of reflecting materials to create a disorienting feeling. One's expectations can also be subverted by using a material that is normally used for luxurious functions, in a very ordinary programme. For example, a public toilet executed in marble.

Yoro Park is a good example that uses confusion as a way to subvert one's expectations. In the experience park, you find carefully considered constructions of undulating planes, shifting colours and disorienting spaces. These spaces are very different from what you are used to, making you uncertain how to act and move yourself around them, thus making you confused.

Large repetition of shapes at human scale can also raise a uncertain feeling. An example of this is the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. The memorial consists of 2711 abstract concrete slabs that represent a ordered system that has lost touch with human reason. Visitors have described the monument as isolating, in between the slabs they are separated from the street noise and sights of Berlin and get lost.

Confusion is often found together with curiosity, probably because confusion makes us curious. When you see something you do not understand, you usually have a desire to know more about it.

## Play

~ Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.

/ To use play as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to create activity for enjoyment and recreation, rather than for a serious or practical purpose.

The project examples that use play are usually 'active' projects. They make use of the sense of body movement, and motivate you to move around. Often an element of imagination is added to the project, which creates 'other worlds', where you can relax, play and follow different rules and conventions. While these projects usually have no serious purpose - they are there for enjoyment and recreation - it could lead to reflection on daily routines.

One way to provoke this activity is to use odd shapes and colour contrasts. This leads to installation art, which is art that has to be walked through to fully experience it. Or to relational art, which is art that engages in interpersonal relationships, where the artist and its artwork are viewed as the catalyst of relationships. A good example here is Carsten Höller's 'Test Site', an installation that tests the influence of slides in daily life. Carsten calls it 'a device for experiencing an emotional state that is a unique condition, somewhere between delight and madness'. Carsten provides the possibility to slide, if you do or not, does not matter, as only the presence of the slide already changes how people interact with each other in the this formal situation.



## Humour

~ The quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech.

/ To use humour as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to add an amusing or comic quality.

The project examples show us that this method is often used in conceptual art or intervention art.

Humour can be used to question daily activities by turning our expectations around, leading to humorous installations. For example the intervention 'Welcome to Public Space' where Marc Bijl makes us question what freedom we have in spaces that we perceive as public, and how do we use your freedom in the actual public spaces? He wrote down all the 'rules' you have in public space; '*... Feed the pigeons if you like. Look at the clouds...*' and showed them to passers by in the public space.

Or the 'Drive in Wheel' made by John Körmeling; for a city wide event he made a giant ferris wheel that you could simply drive into, relieving you from the hassle to find a parking spot. Solving the parking problem in this way is counterproductive, as it makes it attractive to visit the city by car. And in an era where we are trying to get rid of the car in the cities, this is quite funny.

## Evoking wonder

~ A feeling of amazement and admiration, caused by something beautiful, remarkable, or unfamiliar.

/ To use wonder as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to evoke a feeling of amazement and admiration, caused by something beautiful, remarkable, or unfamiliar.

The project examples that use wonder are often set in a natural environment. Most examples fall under the type Land Art; this is art that is made directly in the landscape, sculpting the land itself into earthworks or making structures in the landscape using natural materials such as rocks or twigs.

While the projects offer you a view on something that seems ordinary, they make you aware of the passing of time and show the beauty within. "The best of land art makes it impossible to forget where you are and sets in to relief your surroundings with a clarity that jolts you out of the one thing after another of everyday life"

A good example is the 'Sun tunnels' project of Nancy Holt, where she placed four sewer tubes on an open desolate terrain. The installation interacts with the sun and the stars, giving you a different experience and view every time you visit. Or the projects make use of natural elements, as water, air, wind or light.

Projects that evoke wonder also often use a dynamic element; certain parts move or can be moved, in a mesmerising or hypnotising way. For example 'Poppy' by Zoro Feigl, a giant red canvas that rotates in the air, opening up and closing while projecting a strange un-identifiable sound. This sight is so remarkable that you stand still in amazement.

Other ways to evoke wonder is to show something that seems impossible. For example done in the 'Monolith' installation of Zoro Feigl; an upwards flowing waterfall. As water normally falls downwards, you are uncertain about what is happening. This is so unfamiliar you have to stop and look at it. Like in confusion, you don't fully grasp what is happening – but with wonder this doesn't lead to a feeling of frustration but to a feeling of awe.

Often the projects make use of a grand size or large repetition to impress people, as is done in the memorial for the Holocaust in Berlin or the monument for 9/11 in New York.

## Disruption

~ Disturbance or problems which interrupt an event, activity, or process.

/ To use disruption as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to create a disturbance or problem that interrupts an event, activity, or process.

The project examples that use disruption often affect the activity of one's body movements, slowing them down or speeding them up, stopping them or diverting them. This is done in the Hundertwasser 'Uneven Floor', where suddenly one has to walk differently as the floor goes up and down. This change in body movements gives you a completely different experience of the room. Routes can also suddenly be disrupted, as Richard Serra did with the 'Tilted Arc', where he placed a large tilted arc in the middle of a pedestrian square. Because of the intervention, the most efficient route over the square was disrupted. Or a staircase can have an off-rhythm, done at the staircase of the TU Library. You can not walk over it smoothly, as the landing is too long for the rise.

A disruption can also be made by a noise. Your attention can suddenly be caught by it, making you stop, looking for it. Benjamin Verdonck attached a giant birds nest up on the Weena tower and acted and screamed like a bird. In this way he was interrupting people that were down below, making them look upwards. Another disruption example is the UFO over Delft, people were so confused and curious about the strange flying object above the city. It disrupted their daily routine, they had to stand still look at it and discuss it.

A disruption can also be a small strategically placed object. For example the concrete Nike Swoosh that Marc Bijl placed in the middle of a basketball field; this interrupted the player's ability to play a normal game and making one question the role of brands in sports.

## Sparking one's imagination

~ The faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses; the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful.

/ To use imagination as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to spark one's ability of the mind to form new ideas, images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.

The project examples that use imagination are often installation art pieces; artworks that the spectator has to walk through in order to engage fully with the work, they are complete unified experiences. For example the 'Icebergs' installation, an enclosure of blue netting with giant shard-like forms that jut upward and downward and appear to mimic an icy underwater scene. Providing a structure that feels so different from daily life, it makes it easier to dream off and spark your imagination.

Often this method is used in playgrounds or playing activities.

To achieve sparking the imagination of participants, the use of contrast in shape can be used. This can be done by designing parasite-like structures; new, odd, structures that are attached to existing structures. Like the 'Oase No. 7' project.

Constant Nieuwenhuys was somebody that imagined a world without boundaries, where people do not need to work, where they are free to play and travel. You can clearly see this in his models, and in one of his life size prototypes, the 'Ludieke trap'. Inspired by Constants ideas, MVRDV designed a giant staircase going up the Groothandels Gebouw, and in this way providing a different view on the city. This intervention made it possible to dream about different uses of the city's public space and the possibility to add a second layer to the city.

## Curiosity

~ A strong desire to know or learn something.

/ To use curiosity as a method to subvert one's expectations means: to raise a strong desire in one to know or learn something.

The project examples that use curiosity show that to raise this desire you can use contrast with the environment to grab one's attention, and lure them to the project itself. This can be a use of contrast in colour, as done in the project 'Delirious Frites', a bright pink installation in between two brown buildings. Raising curiosity can also be done by the use of contrast in shape, for example the spherical houses in the middle of an ordinary neighbourhood. Or contrast in material, like in the 'Oase No. 7', where a plastic balloon suddenly pops out of a building. Passing by something that is out of the ordinary and contrasts with the environment raises curiosity.

It can also be achieved by the use of sound, for example the sound of the waterfall in the back of Paley Park. This natural sound is out of its place in the urban surroundings, a busy road, that you notice it and makes you eager to know more.

Curiosity can also be achieved by placing an object somewhere where it is alien. For example the Lego Table that was placed in the faculty of architecture. Adding an element that does not belong there, will be noticed by passersby, and ask questions why it is there or what it is. It also evokes questions about work ethic in the faculty of architecture, the importance we attach to models, who decides what's beautiful and exhibited, and other forms of regulatory power.

Confusion is often found together with curiosity, probably because confusion makes us curious. When you see something you do not understand, you usually have a desire to know more about it.