

REFLECTION on graduation

PLAYHOUSE OF THE PUBLIC OF ROTTERDAM

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Theme and methods graduation studio

In the Explore Lab graduation studio, I started with a fascination for involving people in the processes of architecture. The more the involvement in different phases (design, build, use, maintenance and adaptation), the better the spaces will be used as well as maintained, was my assumption. As I have lived in Rotterdam for 24 years, I concluded this fascination could well be triggered by the conditions that are present in the modern center of this city. It specifically struck me that it is public spaces in this modern center that show little signs of long time use. This unsettling feeling about the 'new' city center is in line with surveys done in 1968 and 2015, demonstrating the design of the center after WWII is only partially successful, with current directions of improvements directed at aspects of social public life (lively public spaces, meeting, and inclusion).

Another fascination at the root of this graduation process is the act of playing. From personal experience I knew that the act of playing causes a special state of presence and action, which makes the player to focus on some aspects of its surrounding in a specific action, temporarily unaware of the 'normal' routine and judgement. If the process of play were to be directed towards strangers in public spaces, a connection could easily be established. If this play also takes into consideration some aspects of the space, also a spatial connection is established. These elementary ignitions of play could be the 'bridge' to establish a longer time involvement between the people and spaces in public life.

These two fascinations caused me to examine in my research the conditions of public life in the modern city of Rotterdam in detail (how it is experienced and what caused obstructions and advantages for this) as well as the potential play can have for solving some of the problems this setting could impose for experiencing public life in all its forms. The design tested some of the resulting design methodologies and could serve as an example of the implementation of these into reality.

Results research

I defined public experience as 'experiencing the otherness present in the surrounding'. This encompasses both people that you might share some traits or thoughts with and total strangers. Also it includes the spaces, elements and other creatures in the surrounding. This condition of public life in cities mostly generates a two folded effect on the perceiver (found in literature):

- **Indifference** to others or **fear** of the **uncertainties unknown** others produce
- This effects negatively the **use** (and maintenance by people themselves) of public places (**no guarantees** for future can be given)
- + Excitement of **encounter** of others or personal (**private**) **experiences** in public space among strangers

+ Spaces where people are present closely and in different actions cause a **distraction** that can generate **contact** between individuals. In these interactions with strangers **self-awareness** raises.

In Rotterdam the physical conditions of the public space were evaluated in analysis:

- Functional segregation in the modern city creates distinct areas where it is more likely to encounter the other. Only a few areas have **mixed functionality**
- Much of these encompass big roads. Borders between mixed functionality and **pedestrian accessible** areas are considered as places with a higher potential to be public. These areas **connected** to each other raise public value even more
- Setup of the public spaces are often roads, big open spaces or enclosed (and thus more private). **Inside public spaces** are few. Small ones are surrounded by non/semipublic functions.
- Elements for public use are often **scattered**. There are few public squares with facilities to use (benches, trees). Considering the surrounding area there is a very sparse use of **green to enjoy**

In interviews the actual types of public experiences of places within this area were sought. To connect these experiences to the places, the interview answers were noted on a giant sheet. Resemblances and values of specific areas within the center were expected to appear.

- **No real mono- experiential place** appeared. This makes it harder to choose a specific space that would benefit an adaptation of the public functioning. To solve this, places that **were not mentioned** in the interviews are considered to have less public value. Some places that are in areas of high public potential (according to analysis) and are of low public interest (according to interviews) then become eligible candidates for improvement of their public life.
- + Types of experiences in public spaces were governed by seeing, doing, feeling and thinking. While some of these were more personal experiences, all reflected on the way participants engage with the public (strange) surrounding. In 'seeing' more **public** and **active** experiences related to the **scale** in which something can be perceived (ambiances and tracing of stories). Also timely aspects seemed to be worth remembering (often ephemeral instances were narrated). 'Doing' subscribed the presence of private experiences in public passageways as well as many encounters with others (like in theory review). Synchronic public spaces and places where people are present in a lesser **density** seem to be equally valuable in the city. 'Thinking' taught me the presence of different types of **imagination among all participants**. Combined and collected, these different references to a non-existing reality can constitute the database for the **public design imagination** of the city.

All of the methods above (literature, analysis and interviews), have a limited scale in common. The literature study was based on a few personally selected sources. Analysis of the modern center was done based on the production of maps of the whole area. The interviews were conducted with 17 diverse individuals based almost solely on what they remembered on top of their minds. If done on an area of a smaller scale with methods that would fit this scale, a more detailed description of possible solutions (carried by local problems) could have appeared. The observations that were also done now

on a specific location in the area only as a verification of an assumption could then have been more extensive and serve multiple purposes that all these methods also perform. In the whole planning of the graduation this could have saved tremendously on time.

Play is a state of awareness which is inclusive of its environment and non-judgmental. This is a perfect condition for public connections to occur, as it tackles the distracted state and the prejudgment of others. Also, in the focus and enjoyable tension of flow, nothing but the play matters - all daily (social) concerns evaporate. Therefore this state overrules issues of trust or prospects of an uncertain future, for it is not the result that matters. Play is the discovery process of an unknown defined as a balance between defined rules combining a challenge and personal skills. When these rules are directed not only towards each other but also dependent on each other, play can form the catalyst of social public behavior that makes possible future bonds as well. When at the same time evolving around raising an awareness of the environment and unlocked potentials that are hidden within public environment, play can also be an important part of creating a proactive public that dares to use the public space to all the potentials it has.

Applying play in public processes brings about a challenge considering the diversity of the participants (how to make it inclusive and attractive to all). **Balance of skill and challenge** needs to be obtained for all the diverse participants. This suggested me that processes that are open and use the participants' imagination could allow for such conditions. Different phases within the design process then become excellent places to use the **public imagination**. Reviewing existing methodologies to involve people in design processes, suggests in 'co-design' processes (collective creation acts in design processes) during the **idea generation phase** involvement of future users is especially valuable as 'expert on their experiences' and as creative beings. Later involvement might limit effectiveness of the process, however this might be valuable for creating a power dynamics (that is inclusive or governed by participants itself). The ability to create, just like play, is noted to be dependent on the level of expertise, interest/passion and creativity of the participants. Four **levels of creativity** (doing, adapting, making, creating) are distinguished. To ask for creative input by non-designers asks for the designer to: 1) lead those at 'doing' level 2) guide those at 'adapting' level 3) provide scaffolds for those at 'making' level and 4) offer a clean slate for those at 'creating' level. To get people in a creating mode the theories of combining **elements of tradition** (known) and **transcendence** (unknown) can be used. While the physical setting often provides for the element of tradition, it is the odd context/impossible reality/an abstraction that serves as an element to transcend from the normal reality order into the realm of imagination and possibilities.

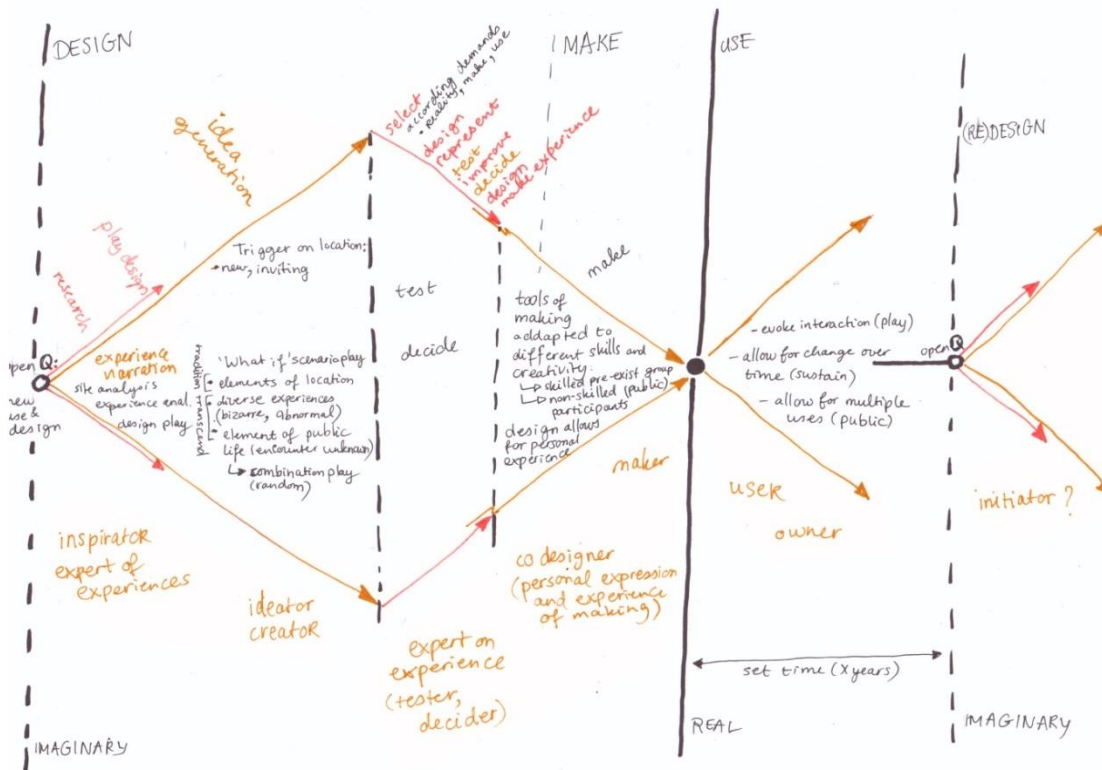
Reviewing some cases that aim to revitalize public spaces, demonstrated various uses of play and levels of engagement of the public. The ludic interventions – taking shape as new/radical (temporary) installations or events- brought people together in (a shared) curiosity, and provided a stage of communication (shared discovery process and surprise). By providing for an experience or intervention that is totally new to all, a common ground can be created where all are equal experts. In creating processes then, it is suggested this could be a good rule for providing a **common, neutral ground between strangers**. This could be the case by involving **chance** in for instance making processes, or by using semi-structured play with **set play elements** that are to be used by all. The reach and possibly long-term ownership effect of such ludic interventions seems to expand when involving different

groups: not only passing strangers, but also by inviting different preexisting groups or individuals with **specific skills**.

Both the theory and cases only gave suggestions to the effect play can have for a **longer period**. Although play, especially with the constant changing participants in public space, is a temporary activity, the beneficial effects of this for public processes can be used in different **phases of the lifecycle** of space (design, build, maintain, re-design). Ways of doing this were suggested (see above). As the space reaches the end of its functional lifecycle, the play methodology can have the same public role in the new lifecycle. This re-occurring public role of play for a space can be made stronger by organizing it as a re-occurring event on set times. As such **re-iterative public play processes** can be of most value in creating and sustaining a relation between the changing public and the space. A real life application of this methodology is however the only way to test its effectivity in creating (longtime) bonds between people and spaces.

Research and design

In the research I have developed proof on why play can be a good method for tackling some current issues of the public space and a rough framework for application in public design processes. The roles of an architect and of the public were redefined, so as to create a maximum of public involvement and engagement in these processes. The roles for both are marked in red (designer) and orange (public) in the next image.

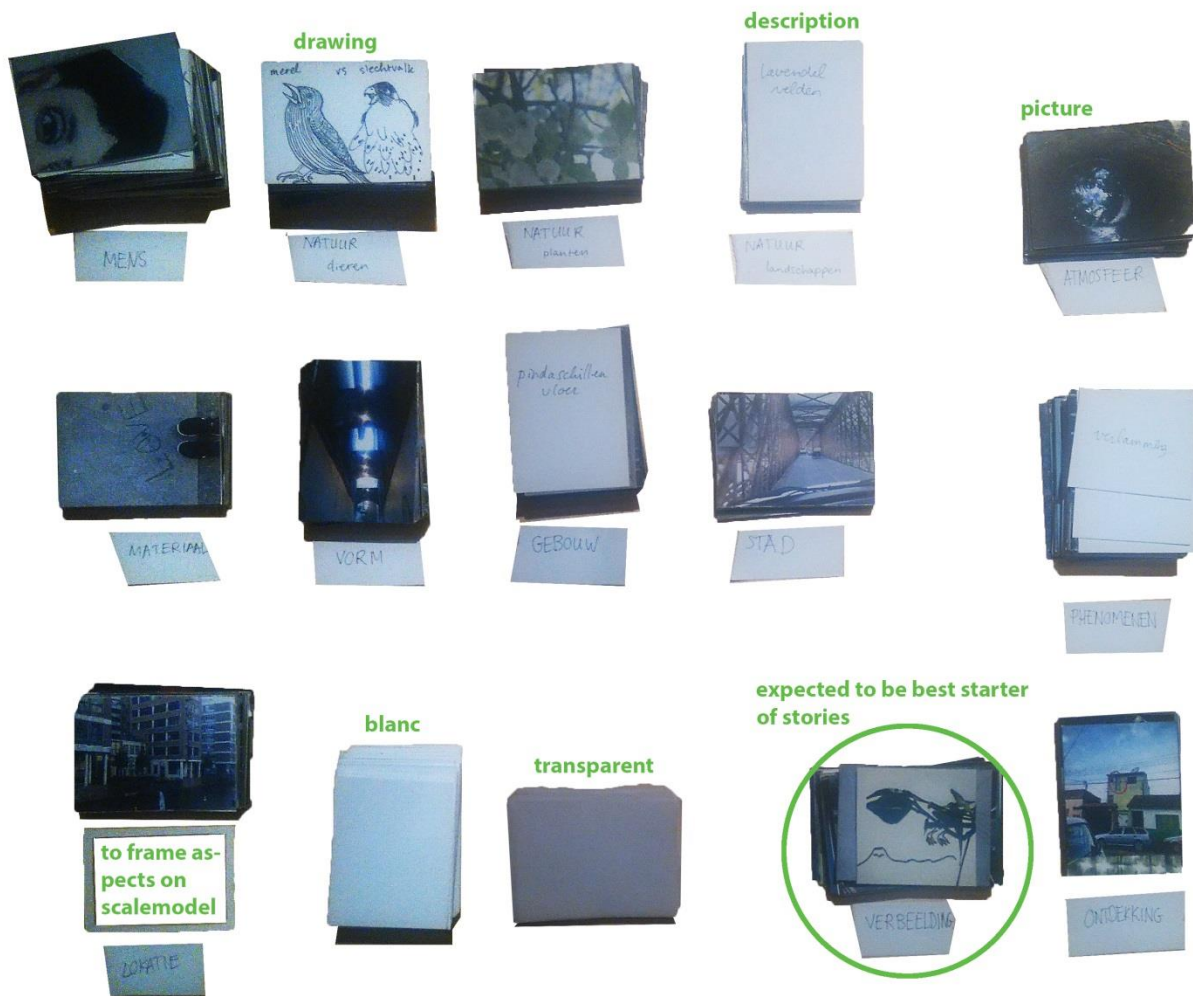


The strengths and weaknesses of the proposed methodology were suggested in the research. (=X?)

Embarking upon the design, I tested the proposed methodology for the initial idea generation phase of the design process – the ‘What if scenarios play’-, in multiple variants on 4 participants:

The main idea was to create imaginative stories using elements of tradition and transcendence. The element of tradition a location on the site could be chosen, represented in a 1:50 model. This could be a connecting part in the stories created. The elements of transcendence encompassed the categories of diverse experiences narrated by the people interviewed (intriguing, bizarre and abnormal ones, supplemented by other similar experiences) and element of public life (the encounter of the unknown). Different experiences were categorized on their relation These three elements were represented in different mediums and fashions: site in a 1:50 scale model and photographs; experiences and elements of public life in photographs, drawings, short texts and scaled objects. To encompass the experiences of the specific players in this play as well, blanc cards were provided. Transparent overlays were present in case the presented image/text was partially interpreted or altered by the participant.

CATEGORIES OF EXPERIENCES cards



As a medium of expression of the outcome, I proposed the transparent overlays or white cards to be used. They could be drawn or written upon by either the player or the moderator (me). The resulting

story elements are placed on a holder or clipped to a location to show its relation to a specific location in the site. Using clips and strings, story (elements) could be linked to multiple locations.



Different rules in order to make these linked to the location: min. 4 elements should be used to achieve public, imaginative and location bound stories. Second player can 1) expand story of other 2) create own story but connect to one event in a location of the story of the other. With the participants, I experimented with different orders and presentation techniques of the elements and the play:

The play was introduced to the participants in roughly the following setup:

- 1) What are absurd/abnormal experiences that you've had? In real life or for instance in dreams?
- 2) Goal of the play is to create imaginary stories. Choose any 4 cards, only one per deck, of these (all) decks of cards.

- 3) What do you see? What does it make you think of?
- 4) If you would place it in this site, where would this happen? (instructed/helped by me)

While the first question was sometimes hard for participants to answer (they could not remember such a thing upon request), it was a useful question to set them in a mood beyond logical thinking. To revive the memory of astonishment and mystery beyond their normal logical lives. Reflecting on the presented materials, as to be expected the cards of the Imagination, Discovery and Phenomena categories gave the best results in starting off the imaginative thinking of the participants. No matter what order the participants picked or reflected on the cards, once these imagination inducing categories were addressed often the participants were able to create a narrative incorporating the other (less provocative) cards. The play was also successful in a way that participants gave the feedback that it was “fun”, “interesting to learn to look at things in detail” and “discover how I think”.

Already noted in the research as something to take in account were the differences between the participants. Initially I designed the variants in a way to ensure as much space as possible for the participants to let their imagination come to life. While this caused very creative outcomes for some, other participants felt blocked by the “amount of possibilities” or were still obstructed by pragmatic or realistic thinking. This created an awareness for me that one all-inclusive public design methodology is maybe a vain aspiration. To be inclusive then could mean offering different setups for people with different levels of creativity and imagination. The more predesigned setup would benefit the more framed mindsets and the open methodology already used could still engage the imaginative thinker into a creative imagination play process. I reacted to this by theming scenes around physical experiences within the design in the same area (light, audio, etc.). Besides providing for more structure for less imaginative players, this also creates a better and enhanced understanding of the experiences and spaces in the design by its users. Also the less imaginative thinkers are still very useful as testers of a presented design – in this way they could elaborate on an already existent (presented) design. This could imply that in real-life, the imaginations of others which are envisioned could be the starting point for these people. How to determine at which entry-level the player is however, remains a challenge even here (the balance for each individual between imagination skills and challenge).

Another challenge in this imagination design setup, was that often when the participants became loose from pragmatic and realistic thinking (as desired), the outcome could not be translated directly towards something that can be designed or created (something possible in reality). Nor was I always directly able to fit these on a proper location. Imaginations staying imaginations do not have to be conceived as problems as such. Imaginative perception is in fact an important urban experience as appeared in the research. As such the task is maybe not to translate directly into reality, but to use the stories and incorporate them in a way that it could in one case tell the story, but at the same time the scene created could be part of many other imaginations as well. In other words, designs that intrigue and make the perceiver wonder about its meaning or functioning. It is however questionable that these stories are reduced/abstracted/transformed in a specific way. This being done by me as a designer, would imply that I have the authority to interpret their stories in a way that suits with the other design demands I think best. The translation of imaginative stories then becomes a task which is specific to the designers’ skills. As a designer (researcher and architect) I know the building site, its possibilities and limits much

better than the general public participants. Also the weighing and matching of contradictory design demands and alternatives could mean an adaptation of the original stories.

An alternative to the game used in real-life would be to do on site workshops, where probes (and other made or presented objects) could be the trigger for the imagination. In this case a real interaction could take place on a 1:1 scale in space. Additionally this form of enactment could be a more suitable medium of triggering and expressing imagination for some participants.

Design considerations

Beyond the wish to represent the imagination of people in the design, the design process had to encompass other rules to make sure the design would be and stay a public building also in its use and afterwards. The imaginative stories that my participants created were translated by me as a designer to different interventions within the existing old empty building ensemble. The physical interventions that I extracted from these stories had to comply with a set of demands relating to the themes: public, play and participation.

Firstly, the reflection and transformation of the stories towards the theme 'public' was executed. The main question here was:

How can this story become part of a physical experience that addresses a type of public use?

In accordance with my understanding from the research of the 'public space' as a 'place of presence among otherness', 'public' translated to experiences that took on different forms of relating to otherness. Some were aimed at providing for an experience that is not yet existent in the current public city places. Others were aimed to provide for an experience that is not possible within private spaces. An added public value also, was to create an awareness of otherness among the users of these interventions. In this sense 'otherness' translated to becoming aware of other users of the public city, or of other ways of perceiving the environment.

The second theme 'play', just like its role in the imagination play processes, gave clues on *how* to shape the experiences that were envisioned in the previous step. As established in the research, play has the potential of creating an active, voluntary, non-judgmental common platform between strangers. As such play can create the positive atmosphere in which to experience the 'otherness' mentioned before.

In what physical shapes within the public experiences can play transform to create an active, voluntary, non-judgmental common platform between strangers?

I established three ways in the design interventions in which play is functioning in the desired manner. The first two can be seen as subsequent stages of play in the interventions: the moment of *discovering* which delves on the way the intervention introduces itself to the potential user; the moment of *exploring* which is the mode of interaction of the user within the designed experience and space. Discovery in the introduction of the intervention happens on the level of an out of ordinary physical appearance (rule of contrast in the environment) and on a way specific to the intervention's theme (sensual experiences in accordance with the theme of the area, e.g. audio, visual, touch etc.). Both of these follow the play related principle of *hiding* or selective/gradual appearance. So much is also given in the word 'dis-covering'.

By a contrast at first glance, our for instance a strange sound coming from a strange object, the curious unaware passerby starts the interaction with the intervention by approaching the intervention. In this process, more clues appear and he/she enters the exploring phase. The user, once approached, can explore either the potentials of the structure (the 'use') or engage in interaction with the others that make use of the structure. Since no obvious signs are given, all of these movements and interactions have to occur based on the own induced and inherent curiosity of the person. This ensures the voluntary nature of play. Beyond the suggested movements (indicated by shape, light or produced by other people) there are however some clues on what the structure can do: action clues (things that the person can relate to and knows something can be done with this: a handle, robe etc.).

The last way a crystalized play emerges, is whenever the person has approached close enough: the expression of the visible materials is the outcome of participation and "making" play events. This is both a form of play for the creators of this appearance (easy, flexible and expressive mediums), as well as for the observer of their results. In this way the observer interacts not only with directly present 'other' users, but also with 'others' from a different timeframe. Some of the makers might incorporate clues, stories or messages for or towards this unknown future other in the material. Even if he doesn't, whatever the expression is, serves as a source of wonder for the observer.

Together, the playful interaction with others in use (effect and variations possible dependent on the people present), and with the expressions of the materials by others (embedded with mystery: an ultimately unknown other) make sure the interventions are places that are interesting to go to another time. As such it tries to keep the induced curiosity alive.

The last theme that had influence on the design was participation. As established earlier, participation is valuable for creating a bond with a place (especially if this is not existant like on the location in Rotterdam), which could suggest not only a the role of a user, but also a designer, creator and maintainer. During the research on participation in the designprocess, I discovered some challenges with participation which learned me that there are some limits to this participation. In conclusion of this, I concluded that during different stages of the life of an intervention, different people could contribute and participate in accordance with their skills. Although some elements of the life of the intervention are possible to design in a way that almost anyone can participate, there are some aspects that are too specialized and too boring to let anyone participate. As such, the challenge of participation can be the following question:

In what stages of the life of the interventions and how can almost all (without too much specific skill or knowledge) participate?

Since the imagination design phase was already explored during the research, this participation theme talks about the influences on the design of the making, use and maintaining. For the making phase, I introduce making events of the outsides of the interventions. This is the most seen aspect of the intervention and therefore more fun to participate in. Participation here is possible in either: mediums that allow for many expressions (painting, sculpting, molding) or allow for the wonder of chemical-artistic accidents (pigments mixed while pouring concrete). Like this creative play is a way to participate in the making.

To enhance the amount of (different) people that can make use of the interventions, the designs allow for multiple uses: one exceptional case (a temporary event) and one daily functionality. The temporary

event allows also for the whole project to become more known among the residents and increasing the potential user database.

The daily functionality itself indicates different uses, but does not enforce them. The users have their own choice depending on different interests and desires from the public space how to use them. By not being able to close off totally the spaces, no territory or exclusivity can be claimed for solely private use. Like this even the more private public experiences are still in contact with the public environment.

To allow for users of the interventions with different skill levels, the private public spaces are materialized to be unseen by others. In this way even the shy can have their chance to explore their unexplored talents.

Also, the specific more private public experiences are subsequented by more open and flexible functions that can be used more commonly for many purposes.

Over time, the interventions can be build according to some growing rules and the rules indicated on these three themes. Other challenges that arose during the project:

How to create a public project condition (ground floor) which welcomes diverse public use, attracts people to enter and works against abuse? Mysterious city hints (remainders/preparations of activities), open groundfloor...

How to not spoil a surprise, but still be engaging enough for people to use the potential of the interventions? Suggestive shaping of the interventions. Including action clues. To enhance perception and understanding for the users of the building, the interventions are clustered towards the senses involved in the experiences – this creates a guide to routing/moving about in the building, an enhances experience and creates helpful limits within the imagination and designing process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one could say the design became an example project on how to create a public space that the diverse and dynamic public is connected to as much as possible. I think play is still a good method to use in different ways in all the phases of the lifetime of the interventions as a common glue between strangers. There exact methods of play that are suitable in all stages can be explored more detailed in a real project. In all these phases the consultancy of an event manager/expert could be of use to make sure successful public events are created. The application of play in the phases of maintenance – which can be change as well- is also an interesting theme that is less explored in this project.

Another remaining question is whether or not the interventions bring forth a long term commitment. Execution of the design and methodology would be the only way to prove the desire and resilience for such public programs.