

# Meahcci - A Sámi home for practice in the city

*A study on using values to design for the unfamiliar*

*Reflection*

*Research: "How to make space for the Other?"*

*Design: "Meahcci - A Sámi home for practice in the city"*



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2024/2025 Graduation Architecture  
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This project focuses on designing for the values of the Sámi people in North Norway, particularly in Tromsø. The research stems from noting the problematic exotification and oversimplification in the historical and contemporary approach of non-Sámi architects when designing Sámi spaces. The question of how to make space that is in tune with the Sámi values, as a person unfamiliar with this, leads my curiosity. The eagerness to discover how to make spaces based on these values, shifting away from singular, Western modernist and Eurocentric approaches, drives this project. The findings in the research and the takeaways after their first application in the design are relevant for any future design process and are not limited to the case of the Sámi space in Tromsø.

The paper's research question reads as follows: "*How to make space for the Other?*". It investigates what it means to intervene, write, and design for these alternative voices and perspectives with values possibly other than those of architecture's discursive tendencies or the architect. How can a relationship be established between these two seemingly different worlds? A relationship from which an architectural space emerges where common ground is found and differences are embraced. The research is centred around an interdisciplinary literature review aimed at addressing various sub-questions. These questions revolve around three key concepts: The Other, the Practitioner, and the Practice. Each concept is defined and elaborated upon within the theoretical framework, drawing from diverse disciplines. The methodological positioning and the literature analysis explain the selection of relevant domains and their corresponding works within the framework of Design for Values. Connections are being made between the works of literature that resulted in several tools for designing. Four toolboxes could be identified, providing a set of tools that form a method to make space for the Other. The results also highlight the importance of positionality and reflexivity.. These toolboxes are a work in progress and propose a way of practising, dynamic and adaptable by other Practitioners in different contexts.

The design project aims to test out the tools and focuses on a specific case study, creating space for Sámi practices within the Arctic city of Tromsø. Historically, Tromsø underwent an assimilation process, during which Sámi identity was suppressed, and at some point, almost everyone publicly identified as Norwegian. However, over the past 30 years, there has been a growing movement to reclaim and celebrate Sámi heritage and identity in this region of Norway. Today, there is a call for more physical spaces within the urban fabric where Sámi people can gather, speak their language, and engage in Sámi practices. A need for space to connect through doing things and finding community through activities that show the pride for Sami identity was expressed when I was in Tromsø.

In response to this need, the project introduces five small buildings distributed across a part of the city. Every building can be seen as a small working shed, housing tools and workspaces needed for the specific practice during a certain season. These structures extend the practices beyond their walls into the surrounding urban landscape, integrating them into the contemporary Arctic city. The placement of each building is guided by the unique requirements of its practice, the existing urban context, and the natural light conditions. In their architectural language, they are one family with individual characteristic traits.

When reflecting on the findings from the sub-questions in the research, the findings from the first sub-research question, *How can a person's values be positioned?* matter a lot, as they are foundational for decentering conventional one-sided narratives and bringing to light marginalised perspectives. Practitioners are never neutral, neither politically nor culturally. A Practitioner's positionality, acknowledging their values and background, and how this shapes their interactions, is essential in

creating Other spaces. Reflecting on this, more understanding should be given to conflict, an element integral to Practice. Recognising that each perspective brings a unique worldview can lead to friction, given differing values, whether between stakeholders or between the practitioner and others involved. Within this field of friction is where the Practitioner can be of added value. Practitioners must navigate this field of friction, identifying points of common ground or necessary confrontation. There are many different ways to approach this, and taking position is necessary to find your way of doing it. In this project, an example of this friction is translating Sámi values into the contemporary city. Most of these practices are usually done in rural locations, and there were few examples of how this could be done in the urban context, even though there was a strong interest to have these practices accessible by public transportation. Finding ways of attuning to the city landscape and understanding this as also a Sámi task-scape was my approach to navigating this friction. In this Master's, there is a focus on positionality, but through my project, I realised that even more focus and attention needs to go to this, especially in the reflexive aspect. The complexity of positioning asks for continuity and cannot be checked by a one-time statement. Your project also influences your position over time and changes your biases. I see this transformative potential as a very positive thing when the complexity is embraced. This is one of the most important insights for me personally in this project.

The graduation project is part of the Architecture Master track at TU Delft. This track traditionally reflected a technocratic and Eurocentric framework that marginalises alternative perspectives and histories. My project challenges this by engaging with other voices and making space for alternative ways of doing and perceiving the world. It counteracts the reductive narratives that often emerge from Western architecture. This aligns with the recent shifts in education at TU Delft that aim to introduce a bigger plurality of architectural knowledge into the teaching at the Master track. Traditionally marginalised knowledge has begun to reshape the curriculum.

An important aspect of TU Delft and its research and education is ethics. This involves the upcoming theme design for values. Values are a very slippery concept and, therefore, difficult to assess. The tools in the results of my research are proposed to find practical ways to make values tangible and applicable in the design. However, this is not a reciprocal way of designing, a step-by-step guide that should be followed to end with a successful result. Every project and situation asks for a different set of tools from these toolboxes. This makes it much harder to assess the academic value. It asks for a certain agency as architect to make efforts in finding the fitting approach per project. Setting up these toolboxes and collecting different tools for them was my foundation to later on work with more intuition. Trusting in the knowledge that I started to embody during the writing of my research paper allowed me to still work instinctively and not too rigidly. As long as there are moments of reflection, I think this is the way to go forward. A moment of reflection during my project was at my first P4. The products and, therefore, the way of working were not aligned with the project and its core essentials. I had to revisit my way of making things, going back to work with my hands and the materials instead of trying to translate everything into CAD drawings. Trying to make every product truly align with the Sámi way of doing, I was able to communicate the ideas way better. Even though this project is evolving around a very specific case, the project results are transferrable to other cases. I am grateful that I will be able to use this knowledge as a foundation when approaching future projects.

Throughout this graduation year, I also talked with fellow students about the approaches within their respective graduation studios. These conversations gave me insight into the differences between my tools and the path laid out by their studios. Therefore, I would like to include this topic in a reflective question: What is a takeaway from the process that could be applied in other graduation studios as well? In many studios, there is a tendency to work from a very zoomed-out scale and work step by

step towards a zoomed-in situation. I would like to advocate for more focus on the detail and even take this as a starting point. The traditional way of doing Practice starts with a big scale rather than the minutiae. The Practitioner reduces the territory to a site plan scaled to conveniently oversee from a desk instead of examining the detail. Micro-strategies involve a shift in scale from the universal to the specific. To start from the detail as a way of thinking through the 'micro' and uncovering new ways of doing architecture. A focus on interventions embedded in everyday processes leads to the recognition of differences while proposing points of connection rather than an exclusionary move. To retell the story from the perspective of the detail is inevitably to tell another story. Micro-strategies are not only a shift in scale but more a tool to shift thinking about Practice and how to embed values into the process.

I am very grateful for my design team: Rachel, Roel, Rufus and Elise. They guided me with enthusiasm in this alternative exploration and trusted me with the tools. Their feedback was often related to taking it a step further and really trying to see how far I could go with certain decisions. This involved taking designing from values and with friction very serious. Sometimes, they checked if I still took form as an initial design inspiration instead of value. At those moments, they would function as my conscience. Other comments were about giving priority to certain things and leaving other aspects as background information while still avoiding simplification. Keeping it complex while being selective in which elements were core was a challenge for me. The feedback from my tutors pushed me to keep reflecting on this.

Another reflective question I'd like to explore is how my values evolved throughout this project after being introduced to Sámi values. I found myself placing much greater importance on the process of making. Engaging firsthand with materials, people, and spaces became a fundamental part of my working method, allowing me to learn more quickly, connect with others, and create new environments. A creative collection of practical places and relations emerged. These places were not fixed but shaped by the times and context in which I and other people engaged with them. This interconnectedness between practice, space, time and knowledge is so vital in Sámi values and started to give more meaning to me. Making models allowed me to talk about my project with others in the studio and create a space for discussion. Working with materials and transforming them into compositions gave me love and care for my designs. It gave me skills and understanding of things I would not get from just reading or drawing on my computer. An example of this is the workshop I organised with Max Bernaerts about Yakisugi, a Japanese technique for charring wood. Using YouTube as our taskmaster, we decided to share the knowledge with our fellow students in a practical workshop. Providing the materials and space, we created an afternoon where we collectively learned and experimented with the material and techniques. It is one thing to see the process on YouTube and another to set wood on fire next to a lake in Delft. The experience enriched us with knowledge about the process, connection to the people participating, the joy of practice and appreciation for the material. Moving forward, I will continue to cherish and prioritize the process of making.