

Graduation Reflection

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As an architect we experiment. Architectural experimentation is the process of generating design ideas and making design decisions. The traditional tools, drawing and modelling, have proven to be fruitful. Also in design education the drawing and modelling tools are dominant. Generally they are explicitly taught as representation tools. For example, a student learns about composition, shadowing, perspective drawing, different materials and cutting techniques. However, the student does not only need to learn explicitly about using these tools for representation, but also for experimentation. However, when zooming in on the essence of experimentation, one may wonder if drawing and modelling are the only possible tools to support the process of exploring and deciding. By detaching drawing and modelling from the act of experimenting; the paper tries to broaden the traditional laboratory and explore the meaning of experimentation within design education.

This fascination originates from my long-term interest in education and experimentation. I started learning about these topics in Van Gezel tot Meester and my theory thesis questioned the dominance of the architectural 2D drawings as representators of an experienced environment. Explore Lab fitted well with my intentions, because it is very much a studio which explores new limits and chances. Also, in doing so, it does not rely solely on the traditional techniques. The studio gives space, and often challenges you, to explore beyond the traditional or the known. In the end this is not only the topic of my research and design, but it is also how I performed the research and design.

However, when starting the research, I was planning to use a combination of literature (traditional) and case studies (more non-traditional). After showing the first results of the case studies, my research mentor suggested to only use case studies as a method. At first I was hesitant. However, when I extensively evaluated the case studies, it became clear that you actually learn a lot while doing. Furthermore, current literature about individual tools is often not directly related to architecture experimentation (in education). Therefore, I used my explorative research to further open up this topic. Moreover, doing the case studies would not only equip me with research findings: it also allowed me to develop skills which could be applied in my design project.

The latter has shown to be more valuable than I imagined. Because designing with the tools was not easy. The newness resulted in a lot of discomfort. It was difficult to start, because there was not yet a method of how to use the tool. However, when I started using the non-traditional tools in the design project it became less difficult. I was able to more carefully select a tool for an experiment and vice versa. This strengthens the research's suspicion that the tools may become easier to use when practiced or learned.

The use of non-traditional tools was also less difficult, because I allowed myself to combine traditional and non-traditional tools. I learned that, in the design project, the use of non-traditional tools was more implicit than in the research case studies. Most likely due to my long-term experience with traditional tools and the extra gained experience with the non-traditional tools. Furthermore, in contrast to the research, I was not bound to one tool only. A fluent transition from one tool to the other occurred multiple times. For example, after photographing I liked to externalise some of the generated ideas by sketch. Or, after modelling, I interpreted and further explored the model by making videos. This strengthens the research indication that tools are fluid and that the combination of tools makes the externalisation of ideas easier.

The tools' fluidity sometimes really blurred the lines between (non-)traditional tools. In the beginning of the design project I was sometimes hesitant in doing so. My design and research mentor, however, supported me to sometimes really dive into an experiment. But, moreover, keep on designing with the traditional tools. I learned that this is very much true. Because, for this research and design relation to succeed, there is no need to try and use almost only non-traditional tools. The research investigates the tools' boundaries by temporarily detaching drawing and modelling from the experimentation process. While the design project is a much more integrated and applied approach.

The time distribution of acting with the non-traditional tools lays mostly in the concept phase of the design project. Which strengthens the research' suspicion that these tools will be most useful in the concept phase of an design project. However, the impact of the non-traditional experiments goes far beyond the concept phase. Most likely due to its occurrence in the concept phase, because this is the phase in which the guiding theme and design principles are starting to form.

The non-traditional tools were the driving force for generating a guiding theme, design principles and the generation of ideas. This was only possible due to recurring reflection upon these generated ideas. Sometimes the value of the experiment becomes apparent in a much later phase of the project. Experimentation is not a linear process: you are coming back to earlier experiments. This recurring reflection is why, in the end, I am happy with the time balance between non-traditional and traditional tools. Because it did allow me to gain more knowledge about non-traditional experimentation and to use the outcome in the design (process).

The chosen design location (Bossche Stadsdelta) fitted well with my research, due to its multitude of layers. I used the tools to really get to know all these layers and filter the (explored and experienced) information. Furthermore, the design project is very much about experience and sensitive design which fits well with the tools. For further research it would be interesting to see if it works with all kind of projects, or only with rather similar projects. I suspect that future implementation of non-traditional tools is not so much dependent upon the project, but upon the willingness to explore. The willingness to experience a challenge and a change.

The latter, experiences of changes (coincidentally or not) is also seen in the theme of my design. We experience by changes in movement, for example by stopping. The designed folly route is a network of stops, which is created by the use of sightlines, exploiting existing qualities and the use of a shared language. All of these key principles have been touched upon by or originate from non-traditional experimentation. At the beginning of the project I was not sure if the non-traditional experiments could have a significant impact throughout the design. Reflection appears to be key, because only now I see that it is actually very much interwoven.

I suspect that, throughout the design project, it involved more and more into a way of acting. I felt like I was more open for generating ideas outside of my normal laboratory. I started to use video and photography much more often. I moved more often through the site. I performed more social actions: from random encounters to the voluntary work in the bridge keepers house. The latter I very much cherish and I am planning on keep contributing to the local developments. For the remaining time in my graduation I would like to explore an appropriate way of not only showing the design results, but also give insight into the process.

All in all, I think that this research and design gives suggestions of what is possible beyond traditional experimentation. It gives new opportunities to explicitly learn about experimentation in architectural education. But it may reach beyond architectural education into practice. Because, in the end, it provides you with a larger arsenal to battle future design projects.