

A few years ago, I got involved with activism and feminism through activities both here at the faculty and outside of it. Within the faculty, this was—among other things—through writing my Architectural History Thesis on the Women’s Studies Department that was founded at our faculty in the 1970s, through contributing to an open letter written to the Dean pleading for gender balance and equity in the faculty¹, and through some simple acts, such as activating a bookshelf in the EspressoBar as a site where books and other publications could be exchanged.



Figure 1: BK Bookshelf, 2016

Outside of the faculty, I got involved through joining the Women’s March in Amsterdam, through joining/organising a performance in Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam² about feminisms in architecture, but also simply through not being able to avoid the (mostly hopeless) developments in American politics, in which especially in recent years it becomes painfully obvious on a daily basis that racism, sexism and many other forms of discrimination are still highly prevalent in our current society.



Figure 2: Performance Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2017



Figure 3: Women's March Amsterdam, 2017

All of this led me to start wondering about the relation between feminism and my own academic discipline. What could the architecture discipline contribute to the discussion and pursuit of inclusivity and empowerment? How could I—as a future architect—adopt a critical approach to some of the normative assumptions within the architectural discipline, to make sure that I’ll become more attentive to the surroundings that I’ll be intervening in in the future? How could I take action in/with/through architecture?

¹ The complete letter is published on the ArchiNed website, and can be found here: <https://www.archined.nl/2017/03/dear-peter-russell>

² Program of that evening: <https://thursdaynight.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/activiteiten/feminismen-de-architectuur>

This ambition—to take a critical look at everything that I have learned about architecture and about designing as a student here in Delft—automatically led me to the ExploreLab Studio, in which exploring new paths and developing critical positions is highly encouraged. When starting my graduation year, I wasn't quite sure at all about what the end of my project would be like, as I first wanted to develop my own position in the matter and then act accordingly. ExploreLab made it possible to be able to choose my own mentors, and my own method of researching and designing, which contributed a lot to the process and quality of the project.

I specifically wanted to do a project which would be critical of current (design) approaches in architecture. I wanted to go further than simply making an “inclusive project”, I wanted to figure out how come some people weren't included in the first place. This meant I had to think about the fundamentals of design practice, and about how we can think about the bodies that we're designing for.

My research, therefore, has been about developing a critical position through studying literature, writing and doing experiments.

Architecture is used as a tool through which behaviour can be regulated, and often architecture is also related to events of oppression (a clear example of this are buildings such as prisons, but also the inaccessibility of certain spaces for wheelchair users is a form of oppression through architecture).

I like to think about architecture as having the potential to mediate between bodies and their surroundings. However, this ambition raises its own questions, namely: what are bodies exactly, and how can architecture mediate?

I realized that architectural approaches often attempt to define bodies (sometimes in great detail), and then make architectural designs based on these definitions. These days, as students and practitioners, we don't even have to bother developing our own definitions and answers of what bodies are how architecture can mediate, as there are many thorough publications dedicated to this. Publications such as Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor*, Neufert's *Architect's Data*, or the Dutch book *De Menselijke Maat*, provide us with all the standardised measurements needed to design for the average person.

I also realized that designing for the average human being, with use of these measurements, may seem like a neutral position to take, but the definitions are not neutral. As we all know, the average 'standard' person doesn't exist, which means that average designs will therefore be unfit for all bodies (to a smaller or larger extent).

However, the solution does not lie in enlarging the definitions of bodies. Another result of designs based on definition of what bodies are, is that these designs create normative behaviours in spaces. Not only may some people be unable to perform this behaviour (i.e. walking up the stairs), the desired normative behaviour also limits the potential of bodies to change, to grow, to learn and to become something different.

The architects Arakawa and Gins have shown through their work that it can be a very productive approach to reject all knowledge about what bodies are, and instead start thinking about what bodies can do in/with their surroundings, to create architectures that function as mediators between bodies and their surroundings.

To adopt an approach like this, I learned about the importance of letting go of the ‘subject-object’ division, as is often used in architectural practice. Bodies are thought of as the subject, moving through space (the object). Problematic about this is that this division disregards the interdependency of bodies and their surroundings. In the same way that “the average body” doesn’t exist, “un-situated bodies” do not exist either. Bodies are *always* in a surrounding, and the body-surroundings relations are continuously in flux. In a way, our bodies are extended in our surroundings, and we can’t ever really determine where our bodies end and our surroundings begin.

If we do acknowledge this situatedness and this interdependency, we could switch from thinking about bodies as entities, to thinking about them as “*fields of potential*”, which are never in a moment of stasis, but that are always in the process of becoming.

After having developed this position—as shortly introduced above—I continued to practice adopting this position, by setting out on a few experiments. These experiments helped me to learn through doing, and to think through the things that I was doing. I realized that in your direct surroundings it can be difficult to find the normative structures that I wanted to change, as everyday life tends to make even oppressive situations appear normal (Frichot, 2016, p.8). These experiments therefore helped to discover certain structures of my own everyday life.

During the experiments, I tried to gather tools that would help me to think about/with/in and take action in surroundings. As I did not want to focus on definitions but on relations and creating new potentials, it meant a different way at looking at sites. I dubbed these ways of thinking *Thinking Sites*. The Thinking Sites do not offer a definition, or any form of concrete solution to a problem, all they do is offer a way of thinking about potential relations in a site (i.e. *Discover Structural Element Potential, Make Non-Intrusive Connections, Enable Constraints*).

The Thinking Sites helped me to make some normative structures in the environment visible, and it helped to imagine potential configurations of body-surroundings. Some Thinking Sites proved to be very productive, in many different surroundings they helped me to think about potential interventions.

Such a Thinking Site is *Make Non-Intrusive Connections*. The ways we are able to affect our surroundings is often dictated by the tools and means that we have at our disposal. Most architecture projects often require the use of highly specialized power tools, that many people do not have. This necessity makes it difficult for people to contribute to the affecting of their surroundings through architecture. Discovering ways of how to make non-intrusive connections could help to create more potentials, and thereby



Figure 4: Building with Non-Intrusive Connections by stringing a façade of wooden blocks

creating more opportunities to counter the forming of normative behaviours in certain sites. Being able to make some non-intrusive connections in architectural surroundings could mean that ‘doing

architecture' can become a shared activity of taking care of the surroundings, which I think would be quite empowering to the people who interact with these surroundings.



Figure 5: Establishing relations with people from the Zelfregiehuis

The site chosen for this graduation project, was chosen for its close proximity to my own surroundings (Rotterdam West). This was an important factor, as it meant that I would be able to go out and physically extend my own body in these surroundings. It also meant that I was able to put the *Thinking Sites* that I had formulated in my research to use. Experimenting in the site allowed me to discover normative structures in the site and establish close relations with some of the other bodies who extend themselves in the surroundings.

The *Zelfregiehuis* in Rotterdam is an organisation which is focussed on helping people to get more empowered in their own surroundings, a goal very similar to my own. The *Zelfregiehuis* is a space where people from the neighbourhood can develop their social and entrepreneurial skills, making them more active participants to public life and enlarging their chances in the job market. The activities of the *Zelfregiehuis* take place in the building that they're using (a former school) and the park across the road (Park 1943).

The goal of the design is to show the possibilities of practicing otherwise, to question and contest some normative structures of the site, with architectural interventions. From the research, and the chosen site, I established three cores that the design would have to focus on.

First of all, I wanted to create more potentials in the surroundings used by the *Zelfregiehuis* to affect the surroundings without the need of highly specialized tools.

Secondly, it was important to take into consideration that when affecting our surroundings, the changes that we make will be subjected to the regulations that are present. The park across the road, for example, is 'owned' by the municipality, so any changes here would have to be approved by the municipality. This consideration meant that the design would have to navigate these (urban) regulations, and make sure to be able to exist 'despite' the existence of these regulations.

Thirdly, the design had to accommodate the activities of the *Zelfregiehuis*. Related to this is the focus on *collective making* instead of working towards a completely fixed end-product.

Considering all of this, the design will consist of a series of interventions and events. An area of the park will be re-designed (with supervision of the municipality), to facilitate use and inhabitation of this area. Through interventions, the park area will be turned into a *site of emergence*, from which new things/potentials/relations can emerge.

The façade of the ground floor of the Zelfregiehuis will also be redesigned, to turn this façade into another *site of emergence*. The façade (and outdated extension to the building from the 1980s) is currently already much more than simply a barrier between inside and outside. The new façade will also be a site from which new things/potentials/relations can emerge.

It will be attempted both here in the building and in the park to show how the new interventions make it possible to put some of the *Thinking Sites* to use.



Figure 6: Sketch of current use of the facade in main room of the Zelfregiehuis