Space Modders: Binckhorst

Learning emancipatory practices of space modification through videogames and introducing them to the built environment.

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Final Reflection

When I first started exploring the relationships between videogames and architecture on my first year of my MSc, I never expected that I would end up creating a framework for a design during my graduation studio at Explore Lab. I have to say that it has been a challenge to speak about those relationships without indulging in deeper theoretical study of what are the individual and societal processes that occur within environments of digital play by initially avoiding to explicitly talk about architecture. Yet this exclusion seems to have been necessary in order to build a foundation around my conclusions that concern the practice of architecture and the built environment. The main conclusions of the research would be that:

a) The exploration of self though play results in experiences which question a player's identity as an individual and their role inside and outside of a game (voluntary and involuntary submission to rules). Such experiences allow the emergence of non-normative performances and practices which affect not just an individual but whole groups within the game environments. The advent of independent videogame productions and the distribution of digital tools and information has led to the emergence of the game commune; a collective which is affecting the way games are being made, played, modified, experienced and communicated. The resulting diversity of spatial virtualities from these technological processes begs questions about the democratization of other disciplines, such as architecture.

b) As our built environment becomes increasingly codified and defined by public and private ownership under capitalism, play in terms of spatial intervention and experimentation is also becoming codified and subsequently commodified. Spontaneous innovation and modification of space are considered dangerous and even illegal; a treehouse is no longer an unsupervised space, an empty lot is fenced off, snow castles cannot be built due to climate change, spikes prevent the homeless from setting up a shelter for the night and squatting spaces are being seen as hives of subversive activities against state and corporate power. The only practice that seems to undermine this paradigm without drawing attention so far is the operation of maker/hacker spaces where their communities share tools and knowledge to create permanent and temporal industrial objects.

By combining the commoning practices of the game commune and maker spaces together, the design of spaces where emancipatory spatial practices can be pedagogically exercised is a necessity in areas where crafting and manufacturing is being deterritorialized along with its workers and communities. Furthermore, the alienation of people from tools, materials and processes (technical and social) perpetuates a cycle of consumption that is detached from broader social and environmental consequences.

Such is the situation today at the industrial area of Binckhorst close to the city center of the Hague. Factories, manufacturing, workshops, repair shops, and creative industries play an important role not just in terms of employment but in terms of retaining means of production and crafting close to the city instead of operating in isolated industrial parks. Moreover, the fact that the area is still designated as an industrial zone has made it possible to avoid nuances that would otherwise would be undesired in a typical Dutch housing area such as the appropriation of common space for wall art, performances, events apart from the facilitation of businesses (parking space, waste disposal, transport of cargo etc). Yet due to the increased demand for housing in the Netherlands, the Binckhorst has been in the crosshairs of speculation for high density dwelling schemes of 10.000 new housing units. Although the municipality and province are positive in retaining the operation of industrial activities, local businesses are concerned about how the coexistence of high-rise condos and coarse industrial activity could co-exist, thus forming local initiatives such as I'm Binck have been created to address these concerns and strengthen the say of productive and creative networks. Some businesses have already moved away from the area due to plans currently in development therefore the concern is not unjustified. Hereby we see the conflict of introducing new types of spatial coding of urban space in an area which is defined by means and individuals who have the potential of creating more sustainable bonds with the need for housing socially, environmentally and economically.

The next challenge for me was to translate the majority of those research conclusions into a spatial design that can contribute positively in this situation, not much as an explicit act of disruption/resistance but more as a system which while being acceptable by the public and private dichotomy, contains subversive practices which promote circular economy models. The Binck Twins building on Binckhorstlaan built in 2001, currently a densified industrial and logistics complex, seemed like a good case study to apply theory with design. Through this process of translation, I came to the conclusion that not only I had to treat this space as an architect-developer but also imagining my role in the project as an architect-participant. I have been going back and forth between these modes to define the architectural gestures that would result in desired effects. It was not a process about speculation but rather about setting up the systems, the rules of the game, that would allow the practicing of spatial emancipation by visitors, craftspeople and the fusion of both. The result of this thought process has led to the conclusion of proposing a large unified maker space with accommodation capabilities for those who operate the workshops and areas where visitors are allowed to witness and explore their potentials as space modifiers, thus forming together a game commune.

It is worth to mention that I tried to assist my design process by importing 3D models of the site in the game engine Unity in an attempt to simulate player/visitor movement, scale and relatability with fictional characters based on actual persons in the area but this process proved to be time-consuming and not resulting in definitive design suggestions. Nevertheless, with the appropriate, this method might prove to be a valuable tool for future projects where architectural projections are more than just spatial simulations but they incorporate narrative, action, speed and decay. It is my ambition that perhaps one day I will be able to develop games that communicate the practice of architecture in an educative and

Jose Sanchez's Plethora Project, UN Habitat's BlockbyBlock, You+Pea and the modding community of Cities:Skylines are just a few examples where the fields of architecture, urbanism and videogames unite with positive outcomes for local communities while at the same time the work of Lina Bo Bardi and assemble studio are very concrete reminders of how the public can appropriate space and the means it provides. It is my hope that by critically studying individual and social interactions within spatial virtualities, whether we speak about videogames or architecture, that we as practitioners of an increasingly interdisciplinary field incorporate issues of commoning in terms of access to tools, knowledge and spaces to practice it. Learning emancipatory practices of space modification through videogames and introducing them to the built environment is a field in its infancy which has the potential of inviting millions, especially younger generations, to participatory design processes.

As a last word I wish to thank my tutors for their guidance during the research and design process so far. They have been able to provide me on multiple occasions reminders on how should my design decisions be consistent with my research findings and views and that has undoubtedly helped my project towards a direction that would result to a tangible architectural study. My intent after the P4 presentation is to apply the feedback that I will receive from my tutors and then work on presentation products that would attempt to simulate many of the principles I am addressing in the research and the design. Such products involve (cross-sectional) models and digital simulations where observers can interact with.