

REFLECTION

The graduation studio *Explore Lab* is trying to teach you how to develop your own assignment by starting from an interest or fascination you have about a certain subject. Its research method is different for each project, but as the name already says it is a place to explore and at the same time a laboratory. Exploring is easy for me, but doing scientific research is requiring something that does not come naturally to me. The challenge in *Explore Lab* is finding a balance between exploring and doing research. The exercise within this studio is to translate your fascination into an architectural research paper and at the same time to generate a design assignment. First step is to narrow down your subject.

The subject that I wanted to 'explore' in the first place, and which got me into this studio was about the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But, while I was trying to define the word *Gesamtkunstwerk* I got stuck because of the discrepancy in its meaning. The thing I ran into the most was the fact that everything in and around the building would be very fixed and thus not flexible. Meaning there would barely be room for the user and its needs or different ways of interpreting the use of objects and spaces. I began to question my ideas on what the role of the architect and thus my role should be. Because, who am I to tell people how to use their space? I do not want to limit people in their own preferred, interpretative, and creative ways of using spaces and in addition I also think it is very important to be open towards an unforeseeable future. So, the more I dived into this topic the more it became clear to me that this fascination I started with was no longer attractive to investigate for my graduation project. So, already at the very start of the studio my chosen topic made me question my role as a future architect and so my research started to shift.

Around that time I went on a trip to Finland and one day we did a field trip to a former steel industrial area which nowadays is being used by all sorts of creative industries and (a lot of) skateboarders. The skateboarders told us they struggled for decades to get a location and how ultimately happy they were when they finally got access to an empty factory. They showed us that the only architecture they needed was just a simple space. A large hall with a good floor to skate on and walls and a roof to keep away certain weatherconditions like cold air and rainfall. All of the objects they built together themselves with around 70 volunteers [img. i]. After all, they were the experts on what kind of objects they needed to use in this space.

This place in Finland immediately reminded me of Delft and its skateboarding community. The time they squatted an empty factory hall [img. ii] to use for skateboarding, since there was still - after years of requesting a suitable skatespot at the municipality - no indoor space to skate in Delft. It was the same story where they just needed an indoor space (consisting of a floor, walls and a roof) mainly because of the Dutch weather.



i. Finland skatehall, photo by Kenneli DIY



ii. Delft piratenpark 2015

The skateboarders brought their own objects to skate on and materials to build more objects with and it attracted lots of skateboarders in- and outside of Delft. The sad part was that they were obliged to leave as soon as the municipality took notice. Through interviews that I have conducted with some of these skateboarders I was told that there was not really room for conversation with Gemeente Delft or the owner of the empty hall. I'm not a skateboarder myself, but it frustrated me a lot that the municipality is, to say the least not very open minded. How can they not see the benefits of providing space for these kinds of informal sports? And how can they not understand that providing for such a space would contribute to social behavioural development. Through practice urban sporters learn already from a young age how to deal with others, to respect each other, to negotiate space and attention, to communicate verbally and non verbally, to give and receive appreciation, etc.

It became clear to me that I personally believe that having spaces where you can meet people alike and where you would be able to perform the things that make you happy should be a fundamental right. In addition the skateboarder ways of doing reminded me of the great added value of collaboration by building something together. It all made me realise that I didn't want to become a dictatorial architect who would tell people how to interpret and use a fixed space.

Due to these and former personal experiences with skateboarding communities my research subject changed. Because skateboarders make use of architecture in very intensive, innovative and open minded ways I started to look at this relationship between skateboarding and architecture. It made me think of the foundations of architecture and the role of architects in society. To what extent should we as architects design? Where does my task as a designer start and where does it end? Where does the input or influence of the users start and end? What can designers learn from the users? I would not be able to design a skatepark without the expertise of a skateboarder. Or, in other words, I couldn't design a building without taking in account the expertise and preferences of its users.

The first approach, as mentioned in the graduation plan, didn't work very smoothly because I kind of mixed the research question and design assignment together. This made things difficult because I had to research a lot of different parts. So at first the research question said "How could the architecture of a 'skatepark' contribute to an added value or more interesting public environment along the 'Schieoever' in Delft? (1+1=3)", while it should've been a more generic research question. My research mentor really helped me to understand the *how* and *why* and to be able to narrow this down to a feasible assignment. Eventually the research question became "What can architecture learn from the attitude and use of skateboarders in public space in order to subsequently design a more inclusive and more liveable public space that can bring people closer together?".

In this case the research is done from a user perspective and their social-spatial practices. More specifically it is about what architects could learn from skaters with their view and use of space, objects, materials, etc. The idea in the graduation plan was to distill a practical framework from the research to base the design assignment on. The method was on the one hand by deriving information from literature, magazines, imagery and video footage. On the other hand, by conducting interviews with potential future users and stakeholders. The framework is developed by analysing the architectural or spatial elements of skate spots.

While doing the interviews, with skateboarders from Delft and a person of the municipality who was responsible for the sports part, I noticed having an allergic reaction because of the injustice caused by the local government. I sincerely wanted to help the skateboarders to get a more suitable space or updated park. So I got (maybe a bit too) involved in their action group, attended a city council meeting and joined a conversation between the skateboarders and the municipality. In the meantime skateboarders were using spots outside the inadequate skatepark and soon were chased away by hostile adaptations such as skatestoppers and temporary fences.

These interactions proved all the more that the municipality did not seem to be aware of the necessity and many social benefits of permitting skateboarders in the public realm. Which made this research and design assignment to be even more current and relevant.

After concluding the research, but before being able to make elaborated design decisions, a location analysis of *Schieoovers Delft* on multiple contextual scales and the history of the *Kabelfabriek* was made together with the analysis of some reference projects. When starting the design part during the research it was hard for me to keep understanding the exact distinction between the main research topic and these side inquiries. Unfortunately I could get lost in irrelevant details causing me to lose precious time. Luckily for me I could be completely honest toward my mentors about this and my disability of being easily distracted. Which resulted in constructive criticism and the personal guidance that I needed.

The design assignment is basically about how you can activate a still to be developed place in the city. In this case the area to be developed is *Schieoovers Noord* where the municipality of Delft has the ambition to create about 7000 homes and 5000 workplaces by 2040. Since it is such a huge project involving multiple parties it will still take some years before they will start building. In the meantime it is beneficial to start putting this place on the map by creating an attractive public space for everyone.

When wanting to create a 'new' public space that is also more inclusive the research results show it is a good option to activate the space by starting of with skateboarders as a user group. Skateboarding, with its unconventional and creative ways of use, challenges many norms, customs and practices in society. It forms diverse communities and tackles challenging social issues. It not only consumes urban life, but also produces it. In the city it provides liveliness, social and economic benefits, entertainment in the form of performance and culture. It can even make certain places safer by increasing natural surveillance.

Supposedly, skateboarding helps open up urban spaces to everyone. Ensuring very diverse layers of the population to come together and meet. When we as designers are aware of the special lens these users have with regard to the built environment and therefore use skateboarding as a method to rethink the diverse possibilities of architecture, we can learn a very clear lesson from that: form could be any function. In other words, let's create multifunctional spaces that allow users to improvise and reinterpret.

Practically speaking, skate spots are much more inclusive when not clearly defined and consist of varied, hybrid spaces where skateboarding is just one of many functions. Instead of - as skate parks often are - a sharply fenced-in place that is just for skateboarding and is based on display and performance.

The relevance of this project in the larger social, professional and scientific framework has not only to do with designing an architectural structure for a disadvantaged but socially engaged group by asking them what their preferences are. But it is also dealing with a new kind of architectural typology: a multifunctional, temporary building and public space that contains not only skateable areas but also facilitates in stimulating encounters with all other types of city users. A public space being a cultural ensemble, designed by applying a user centered approach, which would stimulate encounters between its users and gives them a place where they can (literally) build upon together. The graduation work is based upon research on the needs of the user, the location on multiple contextual scales and its history, and upon analysed reference projects to eventually be able to make elaborated design decisions.

Theoretically, the research could be applied worldwide as skateboarding is known worldwide and cities are somewhat comparable in their conditions due to globalization. However, this work is mainly based on sources from Western countries like America, Sweden, England and the Netherlands. The design assignment is in this case focussed on one particular city in The Netherlands. But the concept could easily be adapted to any city that considers to create more inclusive public spaces. When considering materials it depends on the local resources and necessities. For instance this project made use of the already existing modular building system of so-called *schottenketen*. But it is presumable that other types of modular building systems are more common in other places. Within the low-cost and sustainable re-use concept it is more than logical to make use of these kind of local resources. In a wider perspective, we can say that cities are getting more densely populated resulting in higher pressure on public places. With this in mind, the concepts of multifunction, integration and reinterpretation become even more increasingly interesting.

One of the ethical issues is who will benefit the most? The developer? The user? The local government? It should be clear that it is absolutely not intended to take advantage of the user groups that have been implemented for the benefit of the already rich and powerful. Creatives are in all kinds of projects put in for activating and pimping neighbourhoods but eventually get dumped or pushed away when the place is populair for the average person.

The purpose is to activate the area by temporarily creating an accessible location for urban sports and creative culture. This accessibility is what makes it a fun and inspiring place where everything is still possible. It could be a risk that when the location becomes popular and it gets taken over by wealthy parties its not that inspiring and fun anymore for these groups. Is this somehow preventable? Perhaps it is good to anticipate this by making it a temporary project beforehand. Because at the same time these type of open minded users that activated the space would probably love to go on adventure and explore other areas in the city after a while. Which creates a win-win situation, but also makes the circle round.