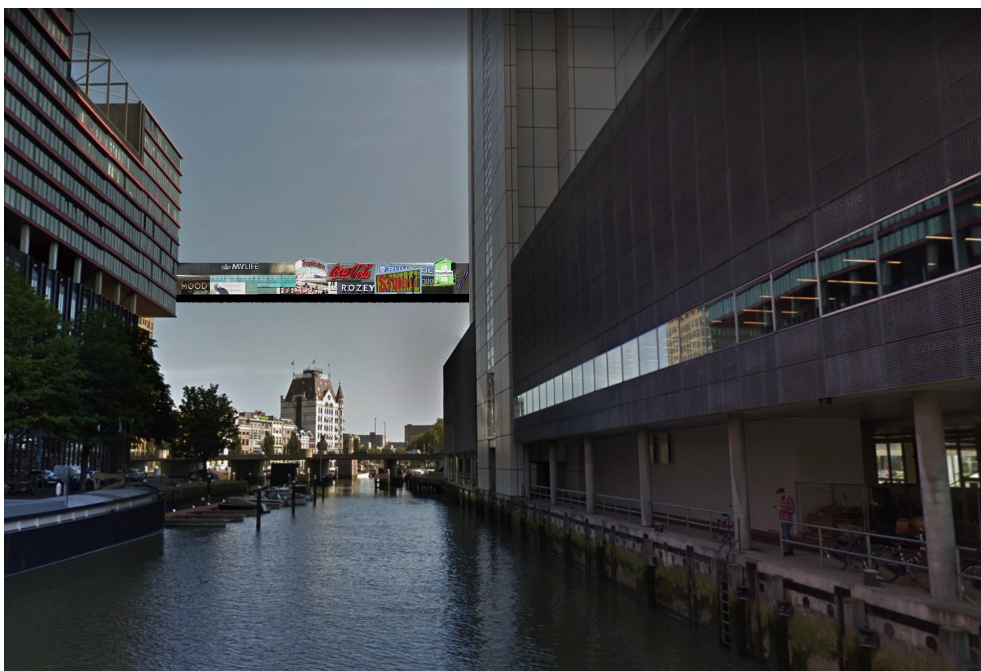Reflection graduation project - Elodie Fabre

The empowerment monument

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Since the beginning of my master's, I am interested in the question of the role of the architect in society. It seems that the practising architect doesn't have the responsibility that we get taught in university. For my master's thesis, I chose to tackle the topic of the architect confronting neoliberal processes, from 1980 to nowadays. I discovered that many more actors are responsible for our built environment, and I wanted to understand the underlying systems of power keeping things in place. I decided to continue working on this topic for my graduation project.

I started my research with an inquiry into the neo-liberalization of building processes and the commodification of architecture, as well as the manipulation of the population subjectivities under "societies of control". Nevertheless, the topic I was studying evolved in the first months of the research, toward a productive answer and stand-point as an architect. As I was looking into architecture as a disturbance against overarching systems, I interested myself in bottom-up practices, counter-movements and overall, alternative forms of power. I came across the notion of empowerment and wondered how architecture could be an actor in the empowerment of the population and its emancipation from profit-oriented narratives in the construction of the city.

A multiscalar research method, the heuristic design database

I realized that empowerment is a complex process, encompassing many disciplines, including but definitely not limited to architecture. It then seemed fitting to choose a research method considering this multiscalar factor and the involvement of many actors. Therefore, I applied mixed-method research by curating a set of projects according to several parameters, constituting a heuristic design database of empowerment. The projects range from small urban interventions to scale-less digital infrastructures, which are then analysed according to several characteristics: Instigator, Plannificator, Perpetuator, Time, Opinions, Politics, Institution, Maintenance system, Urban, Local, Surface, Architectural, Ecosystem, Non-humans, and Subterranean. The result of this is a design matrix comparing the different projects. I then deduced from each project a specific situation in which it is anchored, and a corresponding empowering strategy to be replicated in similar situations, but different contexts.

 The goal of this Atlas is the creation of a strategic structure to centre the design around empowerment. I saw it as a guide to employ multi-scalar empowering strategies in design processes. Bringing social and political concerns into the project, it was necessary that the research method reached beyond the architectural discipline. This research acted as a discovery process as I discovered many topics and approaches to empowerment-oriented design. The curation of over 25 projects, at many different scales, necessitated of me a work of abstraction of concepts in order to synthesize them in terms of strategies. If I reflect on this method, I could have maybe selected more specific projects, making my results easier to translate into the project. Also, I could have chosen a different way of analysing the projects, in a less rigid way.

A counter-project of the space-as-commodity

Going into the project, I had to bridge these strategies toward an architectural project. I chose several strategies and translated them into programmatic and spatial actions. I decided to work with the notion of hybridising spatial programs. The project would be a critique of the dissociation of functions in the city, and a machine to create new imaginaries. I was interested in not only empowering people but creating an architecture that at its core, creates new situations, potentials and visions for the future. Indeed, from the beginning of the project, I was interested in the question of the manipulation of our subjectivities in control societies toward the acceptance of a common, profit-oriented narrative. My approach evolved into the creation of an alternative narrative, in which design could replace the space-as-commodity with empowering counter-forms and counter-structures.

Working along the notion of empowerment, my design proposal could run the risk to become a loophole. Nevertheless, as an architect, I have my own disposition on architectural quality and at this point, it was clear that my personal subjectivity had to be put into the project.

For the site of my proposed project, I saw the potential in Rotterdam, inquiring into the marketing narratives around the centre and the city council policies oriented toward gentrification. I decided to analyse this major narrative, constructed around high-end housing towers and their counterpart, the minor narratives of Rotterdam. Within this framework, my site analysis focused on the under-valued, left-over urban spaces as catalysts for critical transformation, since these are the ones sacrificed in the first place to create new, more « valuable » architecture. As there are numerous different sites and situations, as part of my sampling strategy, I mapped them in a transect across the city, a line assemblage. The idea behind this line was also the randomness of it, as I am not looking for THE spaces of value, but the common ones.

Writing has eventually become one of my methods to carry these places' narratives and also to conceive the project, it was a form of expression for my personal vision. By focusing on the atmospheric qualities I found interesting and the playfulness that I experienced in these spaces that were sometimes not designed for humans, I created a narrative in the form of a users' manual for the emancipation of the inhabitants in the city, taking place in the different left-over urban sites.

There are six steps to this user guide: **extraction, disturbance, collision, re-assembling, revendicating, and caring**. These six steps are also used in the conception of my project. I *extracted* a taxonomy of the elements of the site, categorizing them according to the qualities I found in them, then, I used collages as a method to bring elements together on site, that are not usually *colliding*, breaking the limit between usual functions of the city and creating a *disturbance* to the usual order. The program of the project then focuses on three main topics: body, mind and politics, and how to *re-assemble* them in the architectural project.

Unpredictability as a programmatic and spatial method

Following this line, I conceived the project as a mega-minor structure across Rotterdam, creating alternative narratives in the city. The structure would be discontinuous and anchor itself in multiple key positions in the urban space to appropriate them, in different time frames, permanent, semi-permanent, and temporary dimensions. Spatially, the structure can be grounded, floating, or even underground. The programmatic and spatial instability and its unpredictability would be the factor opposing its commodification.

Time is a quintessential dimension of the project: linear, cyclical, seasonal, short and long durations. The programs transform over day and night, but also during the year, with the objective of confronting usually dissociated functions in architecture. For this reason, the building period is integral to the architectural project. In order to incorporate these various dimensions, I mapped the programmatic activation of the project as periods of intensities of different activities over time, some permanent, semi-permanent and others temporary.

One anchor of the structure is a floating pavilion that I detailed, made of modular functions that can be assembled and disassembled. The structural system is a modular, scaffolding-like structure, assembled on-site, adapting to the different functions, with a modular textile-membrane system that can open and close. Within this structure, the different floating programs, like a theatre, a bar, a cinema, a workshop space and also climatized pods, enclosures and modules come together and transform their relations with one another in a space that is covered but not insulated. My references are amongst others, the fun palace by Cedric Price and OMA's programmatic approaches.

I consider my role as an architect as a storyteller, a narrator of a socio-political fiction through an architectural intervention. The different functions and stories of potential users are to be re-created for an alternative future as a critique of the existing spatial systems of power. I focused

on the « first piece » of the edifice that I offer and make it architecturally viable while showing the extent of the potential vision. Inspired by John Hejduk's writings and architectural projects, I wrote a play including the elements of the projects as actors, having a role in the spatial and time arrangement. I also consider that the project can take multiple forms depending on how the elements are arranged and interact, and like that, the narration changes.

The biggest challenge for me was to materialize this vision, out of narratives and visuals and into an actual construction. Indeed, I did not want to lose the qualities of fiction in architecture. If I can reflect on this, I would say that I took too long to reclaim my own stance and perspective on the question, and that to conceive architecture that empowers, I suppose that I had to first empower myself.