

Reflection

Catherine Koekoek, May 2019 (p4), Explore Lab

Mentors: Alberto Altés Arlandis, Armina Pilav, Hubert van der Meel

External examiner: Lei Qu

Relations between graduation project and the wider social, professional and academic context; values and ethics

Building together as political, performative action

Politics seems to work less and less like most democratic theorists and politicians thought. Politicians whose words are clearly incoherent, still gain power through elections. The political spectrum is increasingly polarised and fragmented: the two largest parties in the recent provincial elections in The Netherlands were Groenlinks ('green left') and FvD ('forum for democracy', a far-right party). All of these phenomena show that politics can also work in different ways than the democratic ideal of rational argumentation. To better deal with this, we – citizens, thinkers, architects – need to find other ways of doing politics. And I believe architecture can help doing that.

Building together can be another way of doing politics: it is not just cognitive and representational, but an embodied, collaborative, performative practice. Abstractions or stereotypes are easily projected over situations far away: but when you are negotiating, carrying a beam with another all too real person on the other side, moving together to put it in place, these abstractions seem far away. Building together means creating another reality, together, situated in the mud of a location, materials, bodies, thoughts and values. Even if this 'other way of doing things' happens only on a small scale, it can have a wider influence by facilitating to learn skills and knowledge, and because people take these experiences and skills with them wherever they go.

Building together is not the only way of doing politics differently. Other practices that work with (not just for) inhabitants, including gardening, making theatre or music, dancing, drawing, walking and more can have similar effects. It is possible (and I think likely) that the 5 fields of tension that I developed in my research are also applicable in many of these fields. An advantage of building together (or other spatial practices) is that it creates a situation, a place, that can function as an anchor point for shared memories and values. It 'leaves a trace': architecture's material presence can help to sustain the collaborative values of the building process *after* the building process is finished (if it is managed well). It is a material memory of something that happened before, and one that everyone who participated can access, see and experience. Building together is a performative action, but it can leave a trace that can be *representative* of the things that happened before. In this way building together plays with the tension between representation and performativity – this is one of the 5 fields of tension that I developed as a theoretical framework in my research (I elaborate more on this below).

Het Rotterdams Wijktheater

My graduation project is directly engaged with the wider social and political context in which we – as architects, inhabitants, citizens – operate. It engages with it through the content of the research and the design, as I described above, but also because it operates both within and outside the context of TU Delft. I started with an inquiry into the nature of 'participation' in architecture and because I thought it did not make sense to look into that without actually 'participating' myself, I quickly became involved with the Rotterdams Wijktheater (Rotterdam neighbourhood theatre, RWT), a participatory community theatre organisation based in IJsselmonde, on the south side of Rotterdam. Working with people takes time: you need to build relations and trust, and the rhythms are often not in sync with the institutional rhythm of a TU Delft graduation project. I thought that a theatre organisation, hosting many different processes with various groups of people and different timespans, could be a place where I could 'participate' while those experiences could also inform a one-year graduation project. Most importantly I personally love theatre and the work RWT does.

The RWT makes theatre around urgent societal issues, proposing that although they know how to make theatre, they don't know the stories that need to be told. They invite inhabitants to the theatre – by going out to community centres, schools, and other places - and facilitate a space of learning, of playing roles, of

improvisation during weekly repetitions. In the end this leads to a (series of) performances in the theatre, on site or in schools, performed by a diverse crowd of actors, with or without previous theatre experience, from various places in Rotterdam, with different backgrounds and from all walks of life. But perhaps more importantly it also leads to building lasting connections between people and organisations who didn't know each other before, and most of whom stay in touch with RWT through their next projects.

After volunteering at a performance on moving and becoming inhabitants of Rotterdam called *Toen Wij Nu Zijn* in December I am now part of the organisation of a long-lasting project called *Zwart Zaad*. This project is the first to focus on the direct environment of RWT since they moved there in 2011: IJsselmonde. It engages with poverty, broadly construed: it focuses not just on people who suffer from financial issues but on society as a whole, that allows poverty to happen, and on the complex and often very strange ecologies of money and aid. At the moment of writing (12 May 2019) we just started the repetition process last Tuesday, with a very nice group of some 15 people with diverse backgrounds and experiences. The project will last 2 years, and will include a performance next Christmas, an event during the International Community Arts Festival in March, a site-specific performance in IJsselmonde in July 2020, and a series of performances at schools to provoke discussion and thought around a topic often covered in shame and stigma.

My graduation project most directly relates to the site-specific performance of 2020. It is likely that for this we will build a (temporary) theatre space on a location in IJsselmonde. I designed three theatre spaces that could be built together with inhabitants and performers, made of local materials. This could be a starting point for designing a 'real' theatre space for the performance in 2020. My project expands the brief: rather than 'just' designing a temporary theatre structure, I speculate that it could be a more lasting space that remains a space for the neighbourhood after the theatre is done. In this way a project like this could also directly mean something for a relatively poor neighbourhood: there are almost no public spaces at the moment, and poverty often makes it impossible for domestic spaces to fulfil public functions. I imagine that the spaces I designed can be used for community events that cannot always take place at home. Moreover they turn the park into a usable and more friendly space than it currently is, inviting people to work together rather than reproducing suspicion and fear.

Values and ethics

Working in a social and political context, and working with other people, especially on a vulnerable topic such as poverty, is by nature an ethical issue. One of the things that I found difficult to mediate during the process was being (or slowly becoming) part of a situation (by engaging and working with RWT), and at the same time using that situation in an academic context, which means taking distance. This has the risk of objectifying the situation, and it requires continuous consideration and care to make sure that in describing experiences and situations you do justice to the people who were there, and their (and your) experiences. It took some time to realise that working with RWT and my graduation project are not the same thing, but they can mutually inform each other.

Relationship between research and design; research method

Over the last 8 months, I have explored how building together can be a non-representative, performative political action. I traversed through different fields of knowledge: feminism, performance, participation, walking and more. Through case study analysis and literature analysis I developed a theoretical framework of 5 fields of tension (figure 1) that can be used as parameters to learn from and understand spatial practices. Political spatial practices are often highly local and site-specific, and I believe that the 5 tension fields that I developed can be of use to connect, compare, understand them in a wider context. These tensions can never be generally resolved: the specific methods and tools used always respond to a specific situation.

My design proposal can be understood as an exploration of these five fields of tension in a specific context and using specific architectural methods. By focusing on the specifics of the location, its history, building traditions and typologies, and the materials and resources that can be found or grown there, I propose a highly situated design vocabulary that can be used to build in various ways, and to facilitate or afford different uses, improvisations and places. The design explores how a building can use both ephemerality and durability, both conventional and marginalised building methods. It makes space for improvisation during the building process by placing a ‘support structure’ that make it easier to build a building that lasts. It offers a wide variety of affordances instead of scripting the ways in which these places can be used, but it also shows some ways in which they could be used as to make it easier to imagine other ones. It uses performative methods and I believe performs and embodies the values of its making; but it also has a representational function, so that people can recognise what’s going on from afar. It ‘domesticates’ a public space that was previously not cared for or used by the inhabitants living around it. It was a space that was very difficult to inhabit or use, and I hope that this proposal will make it easier.

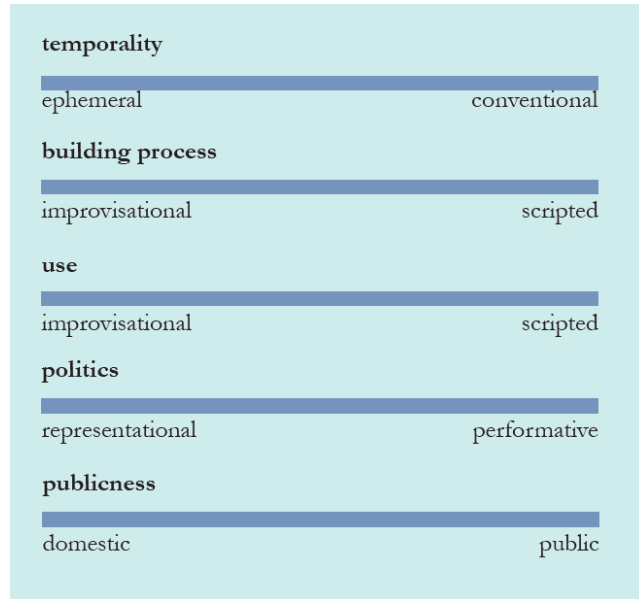


Figure 1: 5 fields of tension developed in my research. by the author.

My research and design are, I believe, thoroughly intertwined. Nevertheless, if I were to do this again (which hopefully I will not), I would have started exploring the specific site from much earlier on. That would have allowed me to walk on the site and potentially make spatial interventions, building my own case study. I did not do this because the location choice solidified when I became part of the *Zwart Zaad* project at RWT, which only happened in February. And I was very busy to try and find out what I was trying to do. But looking back, having a location from much earlier on would have made things easier, richer and would have been very interesting. This also means that I could have explored more embodied research methods. My research methods remained rather conventional, using mostly literature analysis and case study analysis, although I was exploring embodied knowledge, building together, moving together. Although I incorporated this where I could, it would be interesting to explore other ways of developing knowledge, including walking, testing, building 1:1, to test and develop the ideas I developed in my research.

One consideration that I think is important in relation to research method and academic standards is that, because I am involved in the site and the Wijktheater, I continued to do what is conventionally called “site analysis” up until the day before my p4. Normally, a design project starts with a site analysis, and then proceeds to the design. I believe that it is very important to develop long-lasting relations with the sites and situations where you are working. The site is not a static thing. What you learned in December might have changed in May. The site and its inhabitants are always growing, always becoming something else – much like you, continuously learning. This is something that I hope can be done more in graduation projects and architecture projects generally. We can learn from practices like Constructlab, or architects who stay or live in the places where they will build, before or during the building. I believe if we were to do this en masse, it would lead to architectures that are much more responsive to the actual contexts in which they operate: to the wishes and needs of inhabitants, to the material situation at hand, and their mutual relations. It would also give much more agency to inhabitants, and acknowledge the practices of ‘worlding’, of ‘homing’ – it is sometimes as difficult to become an inhabitant of a place, as it is to build it. Of course, living on a building site and engaging with situations long-term is not always possible mostly due to economic considerations – but nevertheless, I’m into a world that’s not yet there, in which this would be possible. And I hope that in my future practice, I will continue to build relationships with the people and places with which I work.

Relationship between graduation topic, studio, track, master programme

I applied for explore lab because I was interested in the relation between politics and architecture, and I felt I could not explore that in a free way anywhere else. Previously I also graduated in political philosophy, and this graduation process was also a way for me to connect and explore the relations between these two disciplines. Explore lab allows you to question everything: not just the question at stake, but also the method, the architectural profession at large. Explore lab is also a caring place, a refuge in the faculty full of plants. It is really enriching to be part of that context, and to contribute to it through the workshops, reading groups and building projects that happen simultaneously through graduating.

That said, graduating in architecture at the AUBS MSc at TU Delft is hard. This is not surprising, and also a good thing. But one of the things that kept me quite busy was to try and find out how my graduation project could fit within the graduation framework and assessment. Especially in explore lab, where everything is so open, the validity of your project as an architectural graduation project is continuously questioned, and you need to find ways to explain and fit your project within this structure. This is time and energy consuming, and although some constraints might be necessary, I do believe that without questioning this continuously, it could have led to a richer project.