

### **a reflection by me ...**

Through this piece of text, I reflect on the product, process and planning of my architectural graduation project, as well as the reflexive questions posed in the graduation manual. Next to the questions provided by the faculty, which consider the project's positioning within the master's AUBS and the Architecture track, as well as the assessment of various important values of the project, I have integrated two other points of reflection that are important for my project's topic specifically. These aspects consider what it means to internalise an approach of disorientation within an architectural graduation project, and where I have found the limitations of architecture between research and design. Ultimately, all thoughts have been distilled into this reflection that critically dissects three roles I have enacted in this project, through which various values can be assessed.

### ***... as the project manager***

The project stems from a queer fascination: it critically researches ways in which we can design the built environment differently than has been, have done or have been taught to previously. Therefore, it is actually perfect for it to be situated within this faculty. As we are taught to explore architecture as a critical, creative and interdisciplinary practice and design as a means to deal with socio-spatial and technical challenges in the built environment, the faculty serves as one of the many orientations that this project aims to disorient. In framing the project's scope, it already became clear what frictions arise from various constraints, albeit academic credibility, timelines or research and design outputs. Even in the moments of preparation and planning, I found the internalised expectations of myself as manager. It became important to recognise the constraints that directed my project. For example, I thought I completely embraced the freedom that was available within the Explore Lab graduation framework, but in hindsight I still had to work around (what I thought) the general academic framework of the faculty expected of the project. For example, instead of wanting to create a 'design project' - a full-fledged, integrated solution to a wicked problem of the built environment - it helped me to reconsider the project's goal as finding an 'approach', or rather the Dutch term *benadering* solidified it for me: to come as close as possible to an expression of a specific value. This led the project to open up into multiple expressions of what it could turn into, and therefore would allow the project to take multiple directions and expand, both physically and mentally. I ultimately recognised such moments of re-orientation as a metaphysical manifestation of my research project. It led me to several points of departure, analysing how it will (not) work and therefore urging me to go into alternative directions that I perhaps do not know the outcome of, with the benefit of creating a larger allowance for myself as a student and as a person. These various paths and new directions were, however, not always clearly documented which means that some backtracking was needed to ensure a reproducible account of my graduation project.

Therefore, this reflexive approach did not always get enough attention throughout the project, which meant that sometimes I knew that my project was restricted by various factors, such as the internalised desire for an academic structure, but I did not vocalise this as an important facet of the project's challenges. It would have been great if the reflection on the positioning of the project within the faculty or academic framework at large had constituted a more significant part of the project's timeline, and additionally, a more thorough analysis of the methodology employed throughout the design phase.

### ***... as an architecture student***

This critical stance on existing modes of knowledge production and design is as important, if not more, from the perspective of an architecture student. As the project zooms in on the faults of design as a reproductive force of inequalities, I needed to take an active attitude towards questioning the methods I utilised within my project. This was expressed through a very explorative way of working, trying a lot of different paths, tools and media. However, throughout the project, the reflection upon these ways

of working mainly stayed within the realm of tutoring and feedback, instead of seeing this as an opportunity to learn why some methods work better than others. However, throughout the project, I noticed that it became quite hard to balance this mode of questioning with a mode of production. In one of my journal entries, I wrote "The more I design, the more I lose 'the goal'" and in another, "The more specific it becomes, the less I understand what I want to achieve with it." In such a theoretically motivated project, the translation between research and design can already be difficult. In this case, the exploration of other modes of knowledge production and design made it hard to stay within the timeline of the graduation project while still delivering a project at the various presentation moments. At times, I even wished to 'just be allowed to work mindlessly on some floor plans', which could, for example, allow me to meditate on the key aspects of my project, without questioning and critiquing every small step of the way.

Being an architecture student - learning to become an architect - made me wonder again how this all relates to Judith Butler's interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir's 'becoming of a woman' as "to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project." Often during this project, I wondered if I was becoming more or less of an architect because of the work I was producing. If seeing it from a general academic perspective, I am definitely learning to become an architect, since I am highlighting and trying to tackle the challenges that relate to our contemporary built environment. However, throughout this project, I paradoxically also felt the need to step away from this idea of 'becoming an architect', as if breaking away from the idea of what 'an architect' would do, essentially opening up what can be done. This meant that actions and even certain (verbal) expressions had to first be 'unlearned' before I could delve into other directions, which in turn made it harder to assess my project outputs as they were not 'in line' with what I saw as adequate results of a student learning to become an architect.

One of the aspects that has challenged me the most during this graduation project is this feeling of 'dissonance'. I learned about this term during my visit to Nanterre and Paris, thanks to Paris-Malaquais-based researcher Stéphanie Dadour. She explained to me that our contemporary society, especially the student population, is troubled by this feeling of dissonance. As we become more aware of the values we should pursue from a young age, we are increasingly troubled by all our actions and the extent to which they align with our values. Becoming aware of all the implications of our actions and how they are linked to the bigger picture is incredibly stress-evoking and simultaneously questions the change we as architects, but also as individuals in general, could realistically make. But it is also exactly in this dissonance that I recognise my own commitment to ensuring societal progress and a critical reflection on the consequences of my actions.

This dissonance was also heavily felt in the translation between theory and practice, in which a lot of the key aspects of disorientation got lost, in my opinion. To internalise disorientation as a quasi-holistic, phenomenological concept, also meant that any design iteration fell short of capturing its essence. To be able to represent these complex qualities and characteristics therefore meant that it became as important to both abstractify and dissect in detail what it means or what it could look like. This meant that, next to stepping away from a singular architectural building, I had to figure out many other ways of representing what the project is, or rather, recognising all the moments in which the project is not able to capture the essence, even through references. Even though expected, it came as a harsh reality that an architectural graduation project cannot serve to figure out all the questions I started this project out with. In this regard, it becomes especially clear that 'me as the project manager' was more important than I gave him credit for as the architecture student, and could have provided more guidance and support if I had taken the time for him to operate in an earlier stage already.

### ***... as a person***

To internalise an approach of disorientation, also meant to disorient the self. In finding a 'project', I also often wandered through my thoughts, experiences and my daily life with the ideas and theories of disorientation in the back of my mind. The further along in the project I came, the more I started exploring in designerly ways, and the more I had to let go of what I expected my graduation project to be or become. In turn, this made me urge to both challenge myself to step outside of my comfort zone, for example, having to actively neglect the feedback of what tutors expect from me or would like to see in favour of following my intuition and therefore potentially 'disappointing them', and to find the courage to do such things. This often meant that I tried to find academic justifications for various methods, while other times I had to 'just do'. However, such things do not solely happen in the dimensions of 'me as project manager' or 'me as architecture student'. They also relate to me as a person, as an individual who has accumulated a frame of reference, but has also experienced many socio-spatial situations myself that not only relate to the spaces that I choose to design, but also influence my methods, approaches and daily practices because of, e.g. mental and emotional implications. 'Just doing' an experiment in a park of walking circles while tied to a tree, then not only becomes an architectural research inquiry, but also becomes a challenge to push myself over several thresholds, which relate but are not limited to my insecurities as a designer, my anxious thoughts urging me to conform and the queer desire to radically stand out. 'Just making' architectural models not only relates to finding potential material manifestations of my research and allowing myself to physically sketch, but also challenges internalised beliefs about my own practical skills of handling machines and tools or the kind of spatial designer that I am (not).

If the project is about 'space for disorientation', then it is also about how much I allow myself to let go of a finish line or the path towards it. In a way, the entire project circled back to the metaphor that has always been embedded within the Surface-Sea dichotomy that I started this project out with: how much can you let go of the comfort of what you know (the Surface) before you want to come ashore again? What does it mean to come back to 'the Surface' in my project? And what is the desire that makes me come back in line? Or is it a fear of never wanting to come ashore again ergo being scared to lose myself within the project? All these questions continuously triggered and influenced me and therefore determined whether I felt 'comfortable enough' or 'had the courage' to 'just do/make'. These challenges should not be seen as separate from the project as they have influenced the scope, approach and methods that I have had to continuously reconsider; they are a part of my positionality.

### ***... as joey***

Looking back across these roles, I firstly see how taking extra time for my graduation project allowed me to regain my footing, clarify its main challenges and discover the potential within them. Secondly, rather than finding all the answers, I learned to value questioning itself as a form of learning and to see how this contrasts with the product-oriented habits of architectural design. Thirdly, by internalising these "re-orientations," I experienced both the excitement and the discomfort of navigating undeveloped research directions and felt firsthand what it means to inhabit disorientation. This process sharpened my understanding of resilience, effort and limits and therefore how one can work toward a more equitable built environment while recognising the right to fail with good intentions. Disorientation could therefore serve as an approach to spatial design which centres on becoming rather than projecting, in more ways than one. It is as much about daring as it is about challenging and, ultimately, it is as much about allowing yourself to let go of expectations as it is about caring about our built environment and each and every actor that we dwell together with.