

P4 Reflection

Communis

A multi-functional spatial experiment where young professionals and students could live and work together consisting a new shared, common, collective living environment.

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Prologue – Starting points

Since the beginning of this academic year, the chair of Architectural engineering has been encouraging us to find our main fascinations that we would like to explore further within the academic year. This in combination with the open design brief that the studio offers allowed us to be fully responsible on the direction that our project will follow. Personally, I chose to approach this open brief as an opportunity to open an architectural discussion on the current state of architecture in relation to the user and aim to identify what my position is within this field.

While technology within the built environment allow us to build bigger, faster and more efficient, within its evolvement architectural creation gradually became unreasonable to human scale and human behaviour. The current architectural environment, as described by Rem Koolhaas reminds of ‘a creation of extravagant spaces that tend to overwhelm the subject’ or even ‘spaces searching for function like hermit crabs looking for a vacant shell.’¹ In this architectural environment the importance of the subject and how it interacts with the space seems to be abandoned while physical and social isolation started becoming very visible. The built and natural environment seemed to be more and more detached from human and body experience and architectural creation seems to be incapable of serving and strengthen the social relationships within the city environment.

To conclude, this problematic approach to contemporary architecture became the initial point of my research paper. Within my research, the participation of the user in the production of space was investigated as a potential solution to the above problems of detachment from the built environment, social isolation as well as community decay. Finally, the fundamental question that shaped my ‘line’ of research and design is: *‘How could a building entity reconnect human to natural and build environment as well as regenerate the social relationships that are fading within the contemporary environment?’*

I. The relationship between research and design.

With this problematic approach to contemporary architecture as a starting point, the research paper was basically structured in three parts. First, within this rather complicated architectural discussion around the current state of architecture, I had to refer to architectural literature in order first to investigate and most importantly to present that the above problems of social and physical detachment are legitimate. This investigation led to the second part of the research paper which was about the necessity of participation in the build environment. Within this part of the research, an extensive vision through the theory of participation and the study of the pioneers of participatory architecture enabled me to formulate a strong theoretical foundation on which my further research and my overall master thesis would be based upon. The third and final part of the research was the understanding of how the same theory has been applied in practice through the study of diverse notable cases studies of participatory architecture that were actualised within the 20th century. Within this analysis the level of participation of the user in the production of space, as well as other architectural aspects such as flexibility, adaptability, social impact, collectivity were systematically evaluated in order to introduce an alternative model of participation which would be formulated upon the strengths of these participatory cases, capable to reformate the contemporary living environment and ideally propose a shift towards a more human orientated socially driven architecture.

For me this was the turning point in which the research part of this project started to be translating into a design concept. In the conclusion of my research paper I propose an alternative model of participatory architecture that I refer to as ‘a compromised participation’, an ordering structure provided by the architect that will enable participation to evolve within. Since the P2 evaluation, there always has been a constant investigation within the diversity of the levels of participation within the proposing project while the implementation of this compromised participation has been the main leading aspect of the design process. Hopefully, in a such comprised model of participatory architecture people would be directly involved and responsible on every process that is necessary for the creation of the built environment; processes that can only take place under social interaction,

¹ Rem Koolhaas and Hal Foster, *Junkspace*, (Widworthy Barton, Devon: Notting Hill Editions, 2013), p. 53.

collective decision-making and acts of self-organisation revealing the possibility for an architectural creation with the capacity to regenerate social relationships within a contemporary urban environment.

II. The relationship between your graduation (project) topic and the studio topic.

The chair of aE and the direction of Intecture are mostly orientated towards innovation, technical fascination and integrating technology into architecture. The studio contains two different directions that students will be able to follow, 'make' which is dealing with all the fields around manufacturing and low or high tech craftsmanship and 'flow' which is more about circularity. However, the open design brief and the way that the studio is structured give the opportunity to students to be more flexible within the choice of direction and technical theme. In my case, even though my project has been evolved upon the more 'abstract' idea of participation, the actual involvement of people in the production of space and the experimenting character of the project provoked me to place it under the theme of 'make' and more specific to an investigation on how this participation process will be translated into and materialized by low-tech craftsmanship and simple technical solutions.

Similarly, if we look more into the Marineterrein agenda, among others the Municipality of Amsterdam aims the site to be perceived as a public production environment or even a place in which researchers and international entrepreneurs can collaborate. Liesbeth Jansen, project leader at Bureau Marineterrein, raises the question 'how can we keep our city living environment and society liveable in a contemporary urban environment that is constantly changing?'. My response to those was the main argumentation about the choice of the programme for this project. 'Communis' was conceived as a multi-functional spatial experiment in Marineterrein where young professionals and students could live and work together consisting a new shared, common, collective living environment. A co-living/ co-working environment in which users actively participate able to accommodate the current living and working habits but also to be able to adapt to future scenarios.

III. Elaboration on research method and approach in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry.

The methodological line of enquiry of 'research by design' that Architectural Engineering studio follows had been presented to us as a triangle consisted of the three main aspects;

context, technique, programme. However, I choose to perceive this methodological line of enquiry more as two fundamentally interrelated stages; those of (1) research and (2) design. The research part is based on an extensive scientific research paper that would potentially equip the students with the theoretical background and the technical knowledge in order to move into the design of their graduation project. Thus, I see Architectural Engineering's methodology more like 'design by research' rather than 'research by design' or in other words that the design is derived by an extensive research on context, technique and programme. At this point it worth to mention that the character of this research, which in my case was mostly conducted as a scientific evaluation based on literature and case studies allowed me to explore a kind of research that was new to me and approach architecture from a more scientific point or view.

After all, this methodological line of enquiry is not very different from the one I choose to follow within my designing process. However, through my architectural career so far, these two parts, those of research and design, have always been two more interweaved processes that take place alongside rather than two methods that the one is taking place prior to the other. But even in this case, it cannot be argued that the connection between them two is still very prominent and both complement each other directly. Finally, I believe that this kind of light separation between research and design has been proven to be very valuable for a more in depth investigation on our potential architectural interventions. Within the period that was dedicated to research I had a significant amount of time to explore, comprehend and reflect upon my personal architectural intentions within the graduation project but also to evaluate my position and perspective within the overall field of architecture. More on my methodological research are also presented in part I.

IV. Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework.

It is important to understand the necessity for socialization within the society of a contemporary environment. In the beginning of my reflection I am referring to the starting points of my project, those of the detachment of human to architecture; an architecture which seems to be incapable of serving and strengthen the social relationships within the city environment. To put this in our context, 37% of the constantly growing population of Amsterdam is consisted of people that are 20-40 years old. Therefore, almost half of the entire population of Amsterdam is consisted of young people while at the same time the highest levels of social loneliness in the same context is coming from this exact age group.

Social loneliness is by definition the inability of people to socialize within the city environment.

My graduation project as a live/work experiment established upon the theory of participation reveals the possibilities for new ways of behaving within the built environment; an environment which in this context is 'received, designed, built and often occupied together with others.'² It investigates an architecture that is no more concerned with the building as final product but with the social and collective processes that the production of space is based upon. Furthermore, within this framework of participation in which people will be responsible upon the decision making on the formation of space as well as to involve in the actual production of space, the socialisation of people would be inevitable. The production of space becomes a shared enterprise that involves 'dialogue and always seeks the other' with ultimate goal the conception and the creation of the proper human habitat'³ and the establishment of a public produced environment and the notion of community in Marineterrein.

To conclude, I see the consideration and concern around the wider social framework as an integral part of our profession. As Jan Gehl describes, architecture is 'an interplay between form and life and only if life and form interact in a good way then architecture is good.'⁴ From the beginning, this project had been approached as a tool that will help to reformate the contemporary living environment and ideally propose a shift towards a more human orientated socially driven architecture. I would like to see it as a manifestation of my personal position within the field of architecture and I hope the final product to be an honest translation of my personal architectural stance.

V. Ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in the research, elaborating the design and potential applications of the results in practice.

Within my research, the relationship between the more theoretical framework of participation in the build environment and the materialisation of this theory into design have always been a relatively delicate part of my research. Sometimes, I found myself drifting towards a more theoretical discussion and even though it was a very interesting and enjoyable

process, the more I was getting into it the more difficult was to translate these theoretical findings into practice. On the other hand, I see these moments of uncertainty as highly valuable that have also paid some role in the evolvement of the project and in an academic project like this you have opportunity to explore your fascinations to the maximum extend through ways you are not familiar with.

Along those lines, the level of participation within this project have always been a prominent question within of my project. There has always been the concern on the extend of people's participation, questions such as what is provided by the architect and what is self- build or even other questions that have always been prominent in the architectural discussion such as, what would be the role of the architect in a project like this. In the model of participation that this project proposes, the production of space is regarded as the empowerment of the user while at the same time the role of the architect should not neglected. On the contrary, I see the architect's agency as necessary for the practice of participation and he/she is considered as a distributor of participation within the built environment. As a result, a framework will be designed and provided by the architect while the infill will be shaped under participatory acts. In such a context, architect and users co-exist and both are informed and influenced by each other's acts and decisions.

Finally, even though it is an academic project which explains its relatively high level of ambition, self- build techniques and discussion around the empowerment of the user within the build environment have always been present in the practice of architecture. This project enabled me to see the production of space not as a fixed process with a beginning and an end but as a process that has the ability to constantly be evolving based on user's decisions and I would like to believe that this architectural approach would be carried into my professional stance.

² A Monstrous Alliance: Open Architecture and Common Space', *Commoning as Differentiated Publicness, Footprint Delft Architectural Theory Journal*, (9)2015, 69-90, (p.72-73.)

³ Constantinos A. Doxiadis, *Architecture in Transition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 174

⁴ *Jan Gehl Interview: How to Build a Good City.*