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Circle of Embrace: A community repairing through green development

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To repair some of the social inequalities in the neighborhood of Bijlmermeer, at the Southeast side of Amsterdam, Kring Brasa—a non-profit community organization—has been working on the project the Gardens of Brasa. The Gardens are meant to give local residents access to a shared green area which they can develop according to their cultural and social needs. Our recent master level studio course, “Designing with Others,” collaborated with the community towards this future. The students designed and partially built a lightweight structure to serve as a community center. The course was designed in close collaboration with the community, over multiple meetings, in which hopes, aspirations, and concerns were exchanged. Recent community-design scholarship (like the notions of collective bricolage and transversal participation) offered an overall theoretical framework in guiding the students through the process of participatory design. In this paper we present a short history of the area’s troubled past (an unfortunate case of non-participatory design) and explain the conditions that brought Kring Brasa together. We then explain the process behind the design of the studio course, its main challenges and shortcomings. We conclude discussing how a studio course based on participatory design can educate socially responsible designers.

INTRODUCTION

Kring Brasa—the “Circle of Embrace” in Surinamese—is a non-profit community organization, formed by residents of Amsterdam’s Bijlmermeer neighborhood, in the Southeast side of the city. Bijlmermeer, which emerged almost *ex nihilo* in the early 1970s, is a striking example of the serious shortcomings of C.I.A.M.’s urban principles (Fig. 1). Since its very beginning Bijlmermeer became witness to a troubled history of urban and architectural design failures, decay, racism and crime.¹ Kring Brasa works to repair some of the social injustices caused in the area due to the failed urban planning. Their project, the Gardens of Brasa (*Tuinen van Brasa*), brings together members of the neighborhood with diverse backgrounds, through workshops and activities related to tending plants, herbs and flowers.² Their dream is to construct a community center, a lightweight building structure next to the Gardens, that can host their activities indoors and allow them to expand their programs.

Our recent master level studio, “Designing with Others,” collaborated with the community towards this future. The course was conceived and designed with the involvement of Kring Brasa from the beginning. It offered students the possibility to experience first-hand what community-design can be like, in a time that “community participation has become a buzzword, but with little thought given to what the words actually”³ mean. “Designing with Others” was founded on the simple idea, brought forward by many advocates of participatory design, that “if people are to feel a sense of belonging to the world in which they live, an involvement in the spaces they inhabit is a good starting point.”⁴ Based on this premise we employed theory on participation, specifically the notions of collective bricolage and transversal participation, and guided the students through a process of design that can be both unpredictable and highly meaningful.

We will start with a discussion of Bijlmermeer’s urban history (interconnected with its sociopolitical, cultural and international aspects), before we focus on Kring Brasa and its Gardens. We will then present the development and unfolding of the studio course—with its successes and shortcomings—towards the design and building of the community center. We will conclude by discussing the capacity of architectural education to prepare socially responsible designers, capable of developing and implementing tactics of *care* and *repair* in their engagement with others.

BIJLMERMEER: A DOUBLE CASE OF NON-PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In 1965—the year that the construction of Bijlmermeer was announced—planner and activist Paul Davidoff advocated for the need to shift the paradigm of planning *for* to planning *with*, arguing that the public should be presented with plural plans rather than a single agency one.⁵ In the late 1960s architects like Giancarlo de Carlo, Lucien Kroll, Ralph Erskine introduced in architectural field a discourse on participatory design—also called community design—attempting to create spaces with social and cultural content.⁶ For example, in the construction of Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti (1969-1974)—now considered a seminal project of participatory design—the community was consciously involved. As Ana Rafailovska et al. explain in their analysis of the process behind this involvement, the aim was to “critically explore, discuss and formulate the socio-spatial framework of the



Figure 1. Aerial view of Bijlmermeer. Image source: <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/bijlmer-city-future-part-1/>

future neighborhood and the functional layout of the preferred lifestyle.”⁷ Bijlmermeer was a complete opposite example.

At the time it was conceived, Bijlmermeer was regarded—at least by the urban planners, architects and politicians involved in the process—as an innovation in the field of urban planning, a clear implementation of C.I.A.M.’s planning principles.⁸ It was meant to provide housing for 100,000 people creating a brand new residential area in the Southeast side of Amsterdam; an area of “future value” as the mayor at the time announced to the press in 1965.⁹ Nine-stories high concrete buildings were situated over spacious green areas and parks. Large three-bedroom apartments were stacked on top of each other. An elevated metro line between the apartment buildings connected the residents to the heart of the Dutch capital.¹⁰ Amsterdam’s new neighborhood came to life in the early 1970s but despite the visionary intentions behind its planning, Bijlmermeer never attracted the middle-class residents it was intended for. The high cost of the apartments and the lack of public facilities led instead, and very soon, to big vacancies.

This does not come as a surprise if we consider that the project contrasted sharply with the housing preferences of the intended inhabitants.¹¹ The high-rise development was a *par excellence* example of non-participatory design. Maarten Mentzel in his article “The Birth of Bijlmermeer (1965): The Origin and Explanation of High-Rise Decision Making,” illustrates that while designers and politicians were claiming the high-rise constructions to be the urban habitat of the future, “there were a number

of factors which did not support the claim.”¹² Research into housing preferences from 1960 showed that most people preferred to live in low-rise housing and “this preference was particularly marked among households with children, the target group that Bijlmermeer was addressed to.”¹³ Moreover, there were many advocates that opposed the extreme uniformity and separation of functions characteristic of high-rise developments, but none of these voices was taken into account either.¹⁴ According to Mentzel, “the project was not discussed publicly, but was nonetheless accepted by local and provincial governments.”¹⁵ To add to this, the original plan was altered due to budget restrictions and many of its refinements were abandoned or compromised. For example, larger but fewer lifts were installed, long access galleries or walkways were added, and the covered street part of the design was raised one floor with the ground floor becoming a storage facility.¹⁶ Soon after it was built the neighborhood started becoming a victim of crime and decay, making the residents who had trusted the new way of life move slowly away. By 1975, the buildings were almost vacant. This vacancy coincided with the 1975 influx of incoming Surinamese immigrants—due to the political changes in the Dutch colony—which the municipality of Amsterdam decided to house in Bijlmermeer, ultimately creating a ghetto. The neighborhood was stigmatized as a place of immigrants, an isolated and underprivileged area.¹⁷

It was only until 1992 and due to a tragic plane crash that the conversation about the renewal of Bijlmermeer began.¹⁸ But once again the residents were not part of the decision making and design processes. Karen Leeming and Tasleem Shakur, in



Figure 3. Presenting the desing proposals in front of the community. Image credit: Angeliki Sioli.

that, “architecture often serves as not just the stage for such breakdowns but as the very means through which social ideals and their challenges are constructed and disseminated.”²⁹ It was thus an exercise in “broken world pedagogies” where we hoped to confirm that “architecture is [...] deeply entangled in both the brokenness of the world and the potential for its reframing.”³⁰

DESIGNING WITH OTHERS: THE COURSE

The course, a ten week intense desing studio for a maximum number of twelve students, was designed with the involvement of the community from the beginning. We discussed collectively the overall goals of our collaboration; the expectations for the delivered material on behalf of the students; the general timeframes; the resources the community could provide (from local builders to reused material). Based on their financial capacities and available time, the community envisioned this process in two stages. In the first stage they wanted to construct only 50m² (550sf) of the community center, a small part of the overall structure, to host a workshop area and a kitchen. This structure should be designed and built in such a way that would become an integral part of the whole community center when the second stage of the development would be completed. At the end the community imagined a single building of 225m² (2500sf) with a program constituting of a greenhouse for tropical plans, meeting rooms, exhibition spaces, additional workshop places

and work areas to be rented for revenue. Given this goal we agreed that the students would provide architectural drawings for the community center as a whole and then develop in detail and build the first part (50m² part) of the structure. Some of the community members asked to join the weekly studio meetings (Fig 2), to which we readily agreed, while we also decided on a few key dates in which the whole community could see the development of the design and waver in their opinions.

Collective Bricolage and Transversal Participation

When we first presented the course to the students, we shared all the above. We also introduced the notions of “collective bricolage” and “transversal participation,” as discussed in the seminal article “Losing Control, Keeping Desire” by Doina Petrescu, which became a foundation of our approach. Understanding participatory design as a “collective bricolage” means that “individuals (clients, users, designers) are able to interrogate the heterogeneity of a situation, to acknowledge their own position and then go beyond it,”³¹ opening this situation to new meanings and new possibilities. In such an approach “the process is somehow more important than the result, the assemblage more important than the object.”³² Adding to this process the possibility for “transversal participation” meant that the students would have to listen closely to all our collaborators, without prioritizing one over



Figure 4. Building a 1:2 part of the kitchen wall in the local building with the help of the community. Image credit: Mara Boghean.

another. “Transversal participation transverses different social strata, which is neither hierarchical (vertical) nor symptomatic (horizontal), and generates unexpected and continually evolving actions,”³³ as Petrescu explains. For architectural students, used to think and design individually, or at best in small groups, with the goal of a polished, refined, final result, this was already a destabilizing idea.

We also tried to prepare them for the fact that “people’s desires change along the way, and one should learn how to deal with tensions, contradictions, oppositions and failures.”³⁴ Watching Alejandro Aravena’s popular TED lecture titled “My architectural philosophy? Bring the community into the process,” added a humorous component in our opening discussion. The students laughed, and relaxed, listening at the Chilean architect openly admitting that “participatory design is not a hippy, romantic, let’s-dream-all-together about the city kind of thing” but a tense and rewarding process which models and shapes life itself.³⁵

Meeting the Community

With this framework in place, we met the community in the afternoon of our first studio session. The members of Kring Brasa welcomed the students ready for conversation. They shared the history of their community—comprised primarily by people living around A9. They also explained how they are currently using the Gardens and presented struggles along the way. They proudly presented visuals—produced with Artificial Intelligence software—of how they envision their community center to look like. They tried to communicate a general aesthetic image, but they also insisted that they expect (and hope) to be surprised by what they students will imagine, suggest and design.

Right after this introductory meeting we moved to the Gardens of Brasa, and site of the community center. We met with other members of the neighborhood that were there tending plants and herbs on the spot. They were proud to communicate how important the Gardens are in their daily lives and what workshops they are organizing. The students spent time exploring the site, recording sounds, smells, textures, registering impressions and sketching the context, while also talking with the people of the neighborhood. They returned to the Gardens repeatedly during the first few weeks—as was part of the course’s requirement—to study it closely. Their analysis focused on aspects varying from flora and water to politics and art (e.g. the multiple graffiti of the immediate surrounding area). Kring Brasa members would join us in every studio session, happily sharing their knowledge about the area. They were openly appreciative of the fact that the students were working to understand the neighborhood in depth, before moving on to design.

Disagreements and Inconsistencies

With the beginning of the design phase though, the first differences in opinions between the community itself became

evident. With the students presenting some of the first design possibilities the issue of aesthetic—how should the community center look like—arose strongly, and the students witnessed some of the community’s own inconsistencies. While some of its members were supporting and encouraging a minimalist, white aesthetic look, others insisted that such an image looks more like a place for the area’s businessmen. To this argument some members reacted saying that they too deserve nice things. There was no consensus reached and while the students asked questions, attempting to elicit clarifications, the studio session ended with no clear direction. Our attempt to remind the students that, as much research on participatory design suggests, “participation is also ‘creating space’ by creating space for discussion and liberating speech,”³⁶ did not seem to appease their concerns.

Few similar moments arose during the studio but probably the most intense one took place a few days before the final submission and the beginning of the construction phase. While we thought we had agreed on what functions the small 50m² structure would include, the members of the community started questioning this decision. In that meeting more members from Kring Brasa joined, among them some of the leading female characters. Their fascination about the available possibilities led them to ask the students rethink the functions and try to incorporate more of them in the design. One of the students recorded in her log book that we should have assigned a student to take official minutes during the studio sessions, have the members of the community read them and agree upon.³⁷ We wanted to remind them that “in a participative approach, the possibility of expression and evolution of participants’ ‘desire’ is the precondition of their empowerment,”³⁸ but we refrained from doing so given their tense disposition at the moment.

Process, Results and Shortcomings

Despite these tensions, the students navigated through various demands with diligence and care. The need for a two stages structure led many of them to think in a modular structural way. They all developed individually 1:100 architectural designs with clear and concise ideas about the overall community center. *In lieu* of mid-terms the students presented their work at a local gallery in the heart of Bijlmermeer (Fig 3). The event had been advertised thoroughly in an attempt to get as many of the locals involved to cast their vote for the winning design. The participation though was not as strong as Kring Brasa had hoped. In a group of almost 50 participants the students presented the main idea behind each of their individual designs. The audience could “walk through” the different designs with the use of VR goggles. At the end they all voted for their first three choices leaving comments that could help further develop the design. The results were not unanimous neither easy to interpret. Almost all of twelve presented designs had elements that attracted people’s attention and preference.

With the suggestions of the votes in mind, we took one “winning” project as a basis and guided students to develop it in full. In the meantime, the community was filling in for a temporary permit using drawings produced by our students, struggling to meet the time frames we had agreed upon. It was not certain whether we could have the permit in time to build on site, as originally planned. Despite this uncertainty the students worked with enthusiasm, dividing themselves in three teams: the architectural team, in charge of all final drawings in 1:100, the construction team, in charge of structural details in scale up to 1:5, and the furniture team, in charge of interior design in scale 1:2. The fact that the community center should be built and maintained by the community in the years to come introduced in our conversations the need for the practicality of the construction, but also maintenance of and repair. For example, the construction team created a catalogue of all interior plants that could be used in the construction of the green vertical walls, making sure to inquire about their maintenance and life cycles. In his article “Rethinking Repair,” Steven Jackson suggests that, when we place maintenance and repair at the center of our thinking about the technologies we use, we manage to develop stronger relations with the technological artifacts we construe and surround us, “positioning the world of things as an active component and partner in the ongoing project of building more humane, just, and sustainable collectives.”³⁹ This doctrine was seemingly also adopted by our students who, while designing maintenance facilities, and while imagining how people would actually take care of their building, developed a special bond with the project itself.

At the end, since the community couldn’t secure the permit on time, the students built a 1:2 section of a kitchen wall as well as 1:1 furniture elements, and displayed them in a local building (Fig 4 & 5). Initial disappointment for not being able to build the actual 50m² structure on the site (which was the promise at the beginning of the studio) was overcome when their design finally started to materialize. The act of building was performed in front of the whole community, who provided unlimited support to students both in manpower, words on encouragement, and (often unsolicited) advice. The gathering ended with a dinner cooked by the community, a simple offering to the students, reminding us tangibly that King Brasa is a “circle of embrace”

CARE AND REPAIR: A CONCLUSION

Our experience with “Designing with Others”—both as an educational course and as a design method—confirmed many of these preconceived theoretical postulates about participatory design and community repair, and at the same time, brought many new knowledge and insights. When it comes to participatory design, the theory tells us that the concept is predominantly understood as the experience of sharing values across different stakeholders. Both communities and professionals benefit from this exchange because in order to build a “future that needs to strengthen human relationships and practices of sharing, the ability (or disposition) of creating a shared value in spite of differences is

strategically fundamental.”⁴⁰ Embracing uncertainty and open-endedness allowed us to focus more on various voices coming from the community, and how to interpret them in respectful



Figure 5. Movable kitchen furniture. Image credit: Mara Boghean.

yet innovative ways. For everyone involved, and students especially, this was a formative process. They witnessed actively how “residents are initiated through dialogue and interventions into becoming an active part of their immediate surroundings,” and that by facilitating this process as architects, “we might manage to pass on tools that will allow them to re-shape their world.”⁴¹

Feeding on the fruitful exchange of common values, on the mutuality of shared goals, and on enthusiasm of everyone involved, also allowed the students to address the difficult history of Bijlmermeer full of power imbalances and exclusion, and to propose alternative models that both empower and “embrace power as inescapable, essential and productive”.⁴² While the biggest concern at the beginning of the course was the recognition that “it is challenging to design for mutually beneficial relationships in a multi-actor service system when these actors have diverse and conflicting interests and lack usable methods and tools that support the design process”,⁴³ during the course we were repeatedly reminded that “co-creation is built on trust, respect, and mutuality”.⁴⁴ This, however, required conscious and steady effort from everyone involved, as well as entanglement of multiple socio-spatial milieus, since “maintenance [and we would add, repair] at any particular site, or on any particular body or object, requires the maintenance of an entire ecology: attending to supply chains, instruments, protocols, social infrastructures, and environmental conditions.”⁴⁵ Surpassing obstacles, looking beyond the disagreements and suggesting design possibilities for shared futures, allowed students “to develop skills that will

prepare them to manage personal as well as social and occupational challenges in ever-changing, global and technology-based settings.”⁴⁶ In a world that increasingly focuses on maintenance and repair as new paradigms in architectural production, educating empathic engineers and architects is of paramount priority.

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