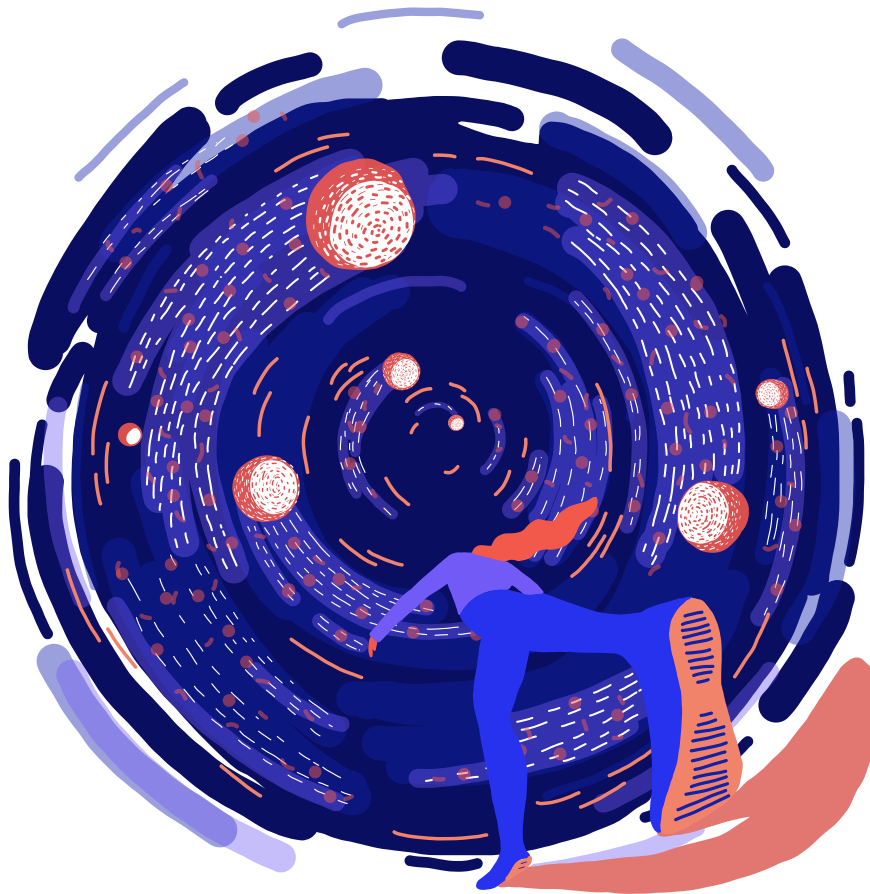WHAT IF?
THINKING
THROUGH/CONFRONTING
OUR RELATION
WITH FOOD

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EXPLORE LAB

GRADUATION PROJECT

TU DELFT

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Explorelab, to me, is a great combination of words. The act of exploration, going outside on an adventure, searching for something that is yet unknown. The place of a lab is that of trial and error, repeating steps with discipline and only occasionally some very deliberate and subtle variety. Exploration comes to me naturally, scientific research is a taste I had to acquire. Yet, in doing so, I found both very complementary too each other in my research as well as my design process. Too much exploration and at some point you don't know what you're finding. Too much time in the lab and you will only find what you already knew.

I have tried to stay true to this idea of Explorelab. With speculative design, I have found a way to channel my taste for exploration. It was a means to find new possible futures, not to falsify a belief or find further evidence for a scientific theory. I am thus not sure as to what the scientific relevance of this work could be.

Phenomenology has intrigued me, because of its respect for the subjective side of truth. Regarding facts, they have to be verifiable, or falsifiable, by anyone in a similar arrangements. For the scientific method, that is very necessary. However, in life's particularity, truth is not only about facts anymore. Some experiences are too subjective to be verifiable, or just too particular. And it is this particularity that comes into focus when something has a different meaning for me than it has for you. Or it might be the case that it has two quite different meanings for you, at the same time. Designing only from what everyone can verify, in my opinion, leads to dullness.

The subjective side of truth has to be taken into account, for two reasons. First, for architects to draw from their own memories, sources of inspiration and inexplicable gut feelings. Second, for getting to know a place. Then again, phenomenology often shifts from the subjective as something individual to the objective as something absolute or intersubjective. As if the subject is always an I, never a we, and the object is always itself, never hiding. It reminds me of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the human as an organism in the world mirroring a heart that is in the organism.

Whether we act as individuals, as a family or as a horde of people depends on how we identify with our surroundings. The subjective side of truth is not solitary at all, as opposed to what I think most people assume. Subjectivity is what you can identify with, and we people are made to identify with so much more than just ourselves. In fact, identifying with yourself is far more rare. Too me this is very important, because in retrospect during this project I was searching for a justification to use my gut feeling as an architect.

I design very intuitively, as opposed to a more analytical approach. Moreover, in the first instance my intuition expresses itself in spatial images that have a specific ambiance. Form follows vision. By far I consider my intuitive imagination more as a gift than a curse. However, bringing that first image home into a realistic design that is rooted in its context often becomes a real struggle. Sometimes in later stages of the design process I've had to say goodbye to my intuition in order to comply with the requirements of the course.

This is why I wanted to try out the method of speculative design. Set in an alternative world, speculative design gives me the opportunity to design in a context that is not already there. It gave me the freedom of setting my own requirements. I knew that freedom would be a challenge as well, but I wanted to know what would happen if I created my own context. Would the task of creating a context be too stellar to ever take form in a design? Or could I stay true to my imagination?

The matrix with 9 perspectives on food, set by an axis of subjectivity and an axis of objectivity, was a welcome kickstart that channeled the freedom into a focus. The first scenario, however, was ridden with rules. I am talking about Religious Fasting. As a result, the architectural design was very supportive of those rules. In other words, without all the regulation, the design would be hard to relate to. Effectively, I felt the design needed a straitjacket in order to be functional.

In later designs, the rules followed the design. I created a building out of which the context was derived. In reality it would have been an inferred context, but in alternative worlds that distinction is redundant. It felt great. Then it was time for the transition into design. That is, design set in an already existing context.

Talking about the atmosphere of a space is how I talk about what it is like to be there. It is the subjective, personal and social experience. I understand the context as the building blocks of an atmosphere, and that is what makes trying to design an atmosphere so hard. With an already existing context, there already is an atmosphere. Changing that by rearranging the building blocks often makes some parts of the context look odd. Alternatively, I could rearrange less, but then the atmosphere doesn't really change or it becomes diffuse.

Moreover, I understand the atmosphere of a space as what it is like to be there for me. I don't know what it is like for other people to be there, but other people are just as

much part of the context as the built environment. They are building blocks I cannot use, but are very much part of the atmosphere. It is like having to create a new recipe for a x-course dinner, with the ingredients of a totally different, already existing, dinner. It is a hard thing to do.

I do, however, have come to appreciate the 'already existing' part of designing architecture. Getting a sense of how the built environment is rooted in a place and using that familiarity in design is, I think, very important. With the old, I tried to seduce and guide people into a new and meaningful encounter, effectively seeing the same differently.

If this encounter does not happen, I feel like just repeating something. I always try to steer clear from repeating myself, let alone someone else. In the iterative process of designing I sometimes become weary of confronting myself with the same decisions that once felt like a solution, but not anymore. As an intuitive designer this often has been very scary. Then again, I know I cannot do everything intuitively. I sometimes just have to stick with my decision and go. In retrospect, I have postponed some hard decisions that made the whole process more unclear later in time, adding to the anxiety. Don't get me wrong, anxiety can be a great motivator and is by definition part of designing. But the dosage was too high too often.

In conversations with teachers, I often hoped they could tell me what to keep and what to leave behind. Martijn struck a chord during the P3, saying that part of being an architect is setting your own rules. And, he continued, strictly following a set of rules is not what an architect does. In the phase of researching, clear distinctions are mandatory to avoid conflating terms. In designing, however, they have to be dealt with differently. You can't live in rules, the rules have to create the security and

freedom that is needed to live. During this project I have come to understand that I should not blindly follow rules, whether they are my own or of someone else. Moreover, I should not blindly wish for "the right" rules either. Another big mind change came a bit later in the process. During the P4 I got the advise to see the project more as a vision of the future than an detailed plan. Although I was confused during this presentation, it all became clear while finishing the project. So show less is to speculate more, without become too specific. The reveal of the greater plan is more important than the detail, which in my case will be developed by my whole neighborhood. To see the project as a recipe, there is still room to experiment, make it your own and sometimes change it for the better.

In the transition to design, I first came up with something that had, again, too much rules in it. The three concepts on the subjective axis of the matrix were reflected in the design. Three levels, survival, routine, festivity. The concepts were not separated by the levels as such, for that I took the triptych of the Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch. In that piece of art, the scenes are set on earth, in heaven and hell, but are not categorically different in these three worlds. In my design, I first had three worlds, each with their own way of life. A lot of several scenarios were represented in the levels. On one level I wanted to show what could become of the current way of life if this was not sustainable anymore. On the other levels, other ways of life were presented, that were ever more sustainable, but asked from each individual an ever more strict discipline. It expressed a future I would very much not want to live in, but that appeared to me as possible, if not probable. Regardless, the design was too rigid, had too many ideas and stayed diffuse.

In the meantime I came across a new idea. In 'De meeste mensen deugen' Rutger Bregman shows the example

of how citizens of London reacted to the bombing of the city. They did not pillage and plunder, falling into a war of all against all. They helped each other. The same was true for German cities. Morale was as high as ever, although the whole idea of bombing civilian structures was to break their will. I also think the fact that the bombs fell on everyone, anyone thus could be hurt, caused solidarity, preventing a lower morale. The problem I am addressing is such a problem: when the bomb falls, it does so on everyone. So why would the people in my street not join forces as well? The three levels I had myself designing, each with their own workings, were based on the idea that people would keep valuing individualism over solidarity.

This extra idea was an opportunity to simplify the design. Instead of designing for several irreconcilable ways of life, I design for one reaction of several people after a disruption: to survive together, find a new and sustainable routine, and thrive as a result. I am very glad this development in thought and design happened, although I intended a design that was to be dystopian. Maybe, it still is. I now have worked on a hopeful design, set in hard times. The outset is that of disruption, the street as we know it has to be demolished for the build-up. However, the build-up is there. In any case, I am not intending a dystopian design anymore. I hope it will be received in several ways, not just something you should not want. Moreover, I hope some will see the design as purely fictional, and others as something that might just happen. Consequently, I hope it causes a discussion on what we want to be fictional and we want to happen. Because, while this design is finished, I myself am not quite settled on the matter.

This last point, is resembled in the design. The functions on top are made of wood and can be broken down easily to make place for something new. It is a marriage of future and past, where the past is more fundamental as it does not change very much. The future is not one path, but several, and should be regarded as such. The same is what I will try to do with the images and atmospheres my intuition comes up with. I used to regard them as ideals, something that was set for me to strive towards. It's the best I can see. However, there is always more to it than what I can see from where I stand. Moreover, the moment I start striving, the images and atmospheres change and I become alienated from what once was set as an ideal. At first it feels real, it's a gut feeling. My imagination fills the gaps of what it does not know. It views the result as set in stone, what in fact is charcoal on paper. It's speculation. It is hard not be fooled by my imagination and at the same time stay inspired. Nevertheless, in the future, that is where I see my development as a designer go.