

ENCOUNTER OF UNKNOWN

Indeterminate Public Space

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When defined or described in certainty, the object loses its underlying openness for multiplicity. Indeterminacy, as emergence, heterogeneity, decentred, ephemeral occurrence in understanding of social life, triggered my fascination of public space. To design a public condenser that facilitates the encounter of unknown, a communal place for sharing and creativity, my research is situated in the epistemic framework of praxeology and absorbing theoretical knowledge from sociology and psychology.

Unlike the proliferation of science which relies on its precise legibility and distinguishing between functions, the practice of everyday life is open to contingency and unknown¹. In the 1960s-70s, Dutch artist Constant asserted a revolutionary society *New Babylon*, where people are free to move, play, and create. It offers only minimal conditions to facilitate adventurous circumstances that stimulate life-activity². In 2020, the world witnessed tremendous impact from nationwide to every individual due to the unexpected global outbreak of Covid-19. Quarantine has greatly changed people's way of working, entertainment as well as social interaction, which stimulated my reflection on the notion of public space. As the technology is rapidly developing, public realm is not necessarily a static physical space predetermined by designer, but anytime and anywhere with wider range of autonomous social activities happening. The increasing instability and indeterminacy in social life call for new public building.

By means of observation, mapping and typological analysis, I approached the design via architectural possibility in flexibility, mobility and playfulness. The key is position within the determinacy and indeterminacy and how to translate the indeterminacy of social life into spatial quality. At the beginning, I investigated in the movement and properties of various activities, from which I found great potential for the spatial arrangement of public condenser. My graduation project tried to question the dominance of functionalist technocracy in architecture and urban planning. However, as I was considering the programmes, the functionalist mindset inevitably trapped my design development. After several failed trials, I turned to think about the multiplicity of spatial conditions instead of programmes. As Koolhaas claimed, "flexibility is not the exhaustive anticipation of all possible changes. Most changes are unpredictable... Flexibility is the creation of a margin - excess capacity that enables different and even opposite interpretations and uses"³. I looked up for references

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1984).

² Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Lecture at the ICA (1963)*, Constant. *New Babylon* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2015), 194-201.

³ OMA, KOOLHAAS, R. and MAU, B. S,M,L,XL. (New York: Monacelli, 1995), 29-240.

that elaborate the “in-between” condition in terms of climate, penetrability, privacy and etc. It is the undefined space that provides the ambiguity redefining the boundary of different activities, between indoor and outdoor. Three types of nature – indoor, intermediate, outdoor, are further articulated in the level of spatial organization, materiality, structure as well as climate strategy and construction detailing. In the end, all the ingredients constitute a coherent system.

During the process, what made me struggle the most is the relation between architectural specificity and generality. The specific form serves for certain purpose but at the same time set the limit, while the neutral structure with less implication leave space for open function and allow more flexibility for future change. Unlike the post-modern formalism practised by the de-constructivists, in my opinion, it’s crucial to remind of the initial idea of “social condenser” by constructivists - the dependency between form and social, political and economic content⁴. Architect should not be a swaggering dominator of social praxis with the users submissive to the predetermined rules. The power of architecture lies in the reflection on the social stratification of space, between the eternal and the ephemeral, the existing and the unknown, the mundane and utopian.

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⁴ Michał Murawski, “Revolution and the Social Condenser: How Soviet Architects Sought a Radical New Society”, *Strelka Mag*, September 26, 2017. <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/architecture-revolution-social-condenser>