THE THEATRE EXPERIMENT

Reflection

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This graduation project is an experiment within the typology of theatre. It aims to create a new spectacular place for performances and storytelling to attract a broader audience, since the number of theatre visitors has been going down for years. At the same time, it functions as a cultural catalyst for the Marineterrein, an area in the centre of Amsterdam, which has been closed off for the public. This graduation project stands at the beginning of a transition process of this area, with the objective to attract people, so the island can come alive again. These two objectives have led to the following design question:

“How can an innovative theatre function as a cultural catalyst in the temporary experimental character of the Marineterrein in Amsterdam, in order to develop the isolated area into a vibrant innovation island?”

The research focused on innovation in theatre, resulting from a personal passion for visiting and performing in theatres myself. Many theatres and theatre companies are in trouble in the Netherlands, because of decreasing number of visitors and less subsidies of the government. However, there are also some success stories, where theatre makers are thinking outside the rigid box of the traditional theatre. The question is: how did they do it? The research question thus was:

“How do you create an innovative place of performance with added value to the cultural environment, that reaches a broader audience?”

The method I used for my research was a series of case studies on innovative (theatre) performances and theatre buildings, combined in a database. The 3 main ways of innovation - the three categories of deviating from the traditional theatre(performance) - as found in the research (fig. 1), are: 1. Establishing a (visual or physical) connection with the environment. 2. Using water (indoors or outdoors) 3. Using transformation of the building to create different spatial settings for different shows and/or genres.

![Connection](image1)
![Water](image2)
![Transformation](image3)

**fig. 1. Added Value**
During this research, I also studied the area. I synchronised the starting points (fig. 2) for the Marineterrein with these three themes. The first goal is to connect the area to the city again, to remove it from its current isolation. The second intention is to use the urban quality of the surrounding water: you have an amazing and wide view on the city from the Marineterrein. The third aspect is the uncertain future of the area: the next 10 years will be testing the potential of this promising piece of the city. That means that flexibility is important for the architecture, so it can withstand changes in use of the Marineterrein in the future.

The answer to the overall design question is as follows: a floating and modular open-air theatre, which can be assembled by the theatre maker in any way he or she likes, on the water that is surrounding the Marineterrein. In this design, all three elements as found in the research are implemented and connected to the starting points: the open-air theatre has a visual connection with the Marineterrein, the harbour and the busy city. It is also accessible by boat, connecting the area more with the city using the water. The water is also used for the flexibility of the modules, giving artistic freedom to the theatre maker. Besides these facilitating functions, the water adds to the experience and the view, creating a unique theatre experience.

The research contributed to the design from the start. I did a lot of sketching during the research phase and was already influenced by the innovative projects I have been studying. I was unaware of it at first, when the concept came together, but I later realised I had already implemented these innovative elements (connection, water transformation), or added values as I called them in my research. These elements also contributed to the formulation of the starting points for the location, as I was looking for a way to integrate the research into the design. This process was not a linear process but an iterative process: I was going back and forth between the case studies - categorising them in different ways and trying to find the right way to label them and analyse them – and studying the Marineterrein. The interaction between these two aspects eventually paid off in the preliminary design of “theatre-modules”, a system of floating elements that can be connected according to the wishes of the theatre maker.

The result of my research, the toolkit of innovating in theatre typology, can be applied on future projects. I used a selection of tools that fitted the objective for the site the most, but another combination of tools can create a whole new innovative theatre.
Architectural Engineering is about the integration of architecture and (building) technology. The subject of my research was not a technical one, but the design process on the other hand had many technical challenges, where this integration of technical aspects with architecture is very important. This project combines known building techniques to create innovation in the typology of theatre. This means that it is very much about integrating technology and architecture, which is what the studio of Architectural Engineering represents.

I like that the aE studio and the tutors give you that freedom and I believe that I couldn’t have made this design if my research would have been done on a more technical subject. It made me think outside of the box and create an innovative project.

My project became more of an aE project in the second semester than it was during the research. The preliminary design at the end of this first semester was more like a building system of theatre elements than an architectonical composition, which is very characteristic for an aE graduation project.
The simple concept I designed at the end of the first semester is technically a bit more complicated. Since the research is a collection of case studies on innovative theatres and performances ("how did they do it?"), the technical aspects had to be researched after the research phase of the project. The good thing was that my research led to a clear concept, which gave me a good direction on what technical aspects I had to study. The design process was therefore filled with research on floating structures and stability, on acoustics, on how the modules can be linked and on materials that can withstand the constant presence of water. I studied these subjects through sketching, literature and model making.

Sketching, which is something that I really like to do, was my main method of research by design (fig. 3). I explored aspects such as routing, materialisation, acoustics, the floating structure, proportions and detailing through my sketches.
The most important thing that I learned in this graduation process is the strength of storytelling (fig. 5). It is vital for almost all the design decisions you have to make as an architect: if the story of the project is clear and logical, the design is too. Everything in the project must make sense from the start to the end, whether you do a very technical project or a more architectonical project, because every project needs both the architecture and the technology to be integrated with each other. When I realised this, I could make the postponed decisions and all the elements of the project came together.
Connection to the social context

This design is one solution to two problem statements. The first is within the social context of theatre. It is a new kind of theatre with the aim to attract a broad audience to a unique theatre experience. Previous examples, such as the Dutch musical “Soldaat van Oranje” with its rotating auditorium, prove that these kinds of spectacular shows attract many people. Not only the usual theatre visitors, but even more people get in touch with the world of theatre. This is financially good for theatres in the Netherlands in general. The toolkit, as developed during the research phase, can be applied to many more theatres in the future, to give them something extra that adds value to the cultural experience.

This new experiment in the theatre typology not only gives a new experience to the visitor, of an open-air theatre in the old harbours of Amsterdam, but also a new method of making theatre for directors and theatre companies. It provides the artistic freedom to help the art of theatre develop and make the creators explore all the possibilities of telling a story.

Not only is it valuable for the world of theatre, it also is a cultural catalyst for the urban regeneration of the Marineterrein. People who will visit the theatre and come to the Marineterrein maybe for the first time. At the same time, it is a perfect showcase for the intended innovation island. It shows that the Marineterrein is a place for experimenting and exploring innovative ideas.

My project is a design for the Marineterrein and the city of Amsterdam, adding a new typology to the many theatres in the city with new means to create innovative theatre shows. The result is a win-win situation: it aims to attract a broader audience to theatre shows and at the same time it will get people to the Marineterrein and make it more known to the residents and visitors of Amsterdam, so people can see the beauty of this place. The floating theatre will take the area out of its isolation.

The result is an innovative concept for a theatre, floating and flexible: a true experiment in theatre typology.