The AAA (Asignifying Affordance of Assemblage) studio of the Delft School of Design is focused on linking philosophical ideas to notions of architecture. Philosophical insights into New Materialism through texts and discussions brought about questions on the way architecture is currently practiced and formed a starting point for our architectural project. This is also where my research started, by putting oppositional architectural notions together, questioning the way architecture seems to always choose for one extreme. As Aldo van Eyck puts it: “There is a kind of spatial appreciation which makes us envy birds in flight; there is also a kind which makes us recall the sheltered enclosure of our origin. Architecture will fail if it neglects either the one or the other.”

When we follow a New Materialist way of thinking we are able to circumvent these extremes, focusing not on the already constituted, but focusing instead on the relations. According to Brian Massumi “A positioned being, central, middling or marginal, is a term of relation.” It doesn’t matter that much what something is, it is what it does that matters. It is the becoming, the
change, the difference, that matters. What follows is not an abolition of these oppositional stands, but a shifting in perspective, acknowledging that one extreme needs the other extreme to exist; they are two polarities of the same thing.

A new materialist worldview enhances the idea of matter as something that can be unstable, and thus to see change as having an ontological status of its own. My ‘method’ for the project, as a result, developed from this notion, by acknowledging the unstable, the virtual and taking this ‘virtual’ consciously into account when analysing and reading places and projects. Trying to separate means and effect and linking them back again. The way we look at the world around us influences so much the way we work with it, the way we intervene in it. New ways of thinking open up new possibilities. This theoretical stage of the project focused on opening up the mind, reading and analysing as the most important ways of working.

Slowly the focus shifted from reading to making, forming spatial concepts to work from in the design. The brief of the project entailed a new Faculty of Architecture, building further on the theoretical questions about how architecture is practiced and taught. It encouraged us on actively thinking about how this education evolved over the years and how this could again change in the future. It immediately also fed back into the own design process. How do I design? What influence does my background have on my way of working and the tools that I use? Moving from the research towards an architectural design led to answers and insights. The most important one that ideas not linked to space, whether these are social, political or philosophical, cannot be translated directly into architecture. I needed to start with space to end up with space. I thus realized that although I really liked the focus in the studio on theory and philosophy, I had to keep doing spatial exercises next to it to keep theory and practice intertwined, again two oppositions that are hard to unite. After a semester of theory this opposition was next to be tackled.

In my project I tried to work from oppositions to get rid of them eventually. My project focuses on this zone where two things meet, it takes place at the edge. The school that I designed works with the relations that exist at these ‘edge places’ and takes advantage of the activity that takes place at the edge. This is the place where there is interaction, where new
life starts to exist. This is thus also a very important place for creativity. When we expose ourselves we find new ways of working, we start to interact with what is available and the materials around us. The ‘new’ is never formed from nothing, form is a process, architecture is a process.

Architecture is for me about transformation. Using both actual and virtual materials at hand to create. The sculpture of the Bull’s Head by Picasso explains this way of working. The sculpture is built out of a saddle and a handlebar, directly taken from the environment. The material feeds into the perceiver, in this case Picasso, and then back into the real again, getting into a dialog with the environment around us. But it cannot be without a new perceiver that something new is created. Only by using our imagination we can see something new appearing, a bull’s head. Picasso transforms and recombines two known things together to create a new relationship and in that way to create something new.

Throughout the years I spend in this school I became more and more aware of the methods I was using and the methods we are learnt to use. In the bachelor we learnt to work from a ‘concept’, a strong principle that all decisions to be made could be tested with. From myself I learned that experience is at the base of each project, I always tend to work from spaces that I know, and elements from these experiences can be taken over, transformed and tested. I know now that this method of ‘collaging’ can work both effective and ineffectively, sometimes creating so many new problems instead of solving them, but in this process, what I valued most was when, at certain moments, things came together and created accidental arrangements, suddenly solving many problems at once. In this graduation year I learned to see architecture as more than an object and to find ways of incorporating the virtual in this process of collaging and transforming. The drawing (be it a photograph, model, sketch or…) became a very important tool to achieve this, where in the drawing I could combine pragmatic, rational considerations (in terms of for instance light, acoustics and measurement requirements) together with the incidental and intuition. Through illusion and the accidental the material transforms into something new.

This project is a small step in my search for a certain method that fits me and my beliefs, and makes me aware of what I am trying to achieve, of
what architecture can do. What I believe now is that although the world might get more and more complex, and we tend to incorporate that all in our architecture, architects should, maybe more than ever, focus on what they can do, which is for me working from and using spatial means to create relations and effects.
Notes

1 KOMRIJ, Gerrit – in Aben, Rob and de Wit, Saskia, De omsloten tuin (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2000) p.16


I put method into quotes to underline that I don’t believe that a design process is a following of one method, but a constantly shifting between different methods, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, trying out new things, getting surprised, etc.

Images:
Handdrawing, ink on paper, showing an interpretation in plan of the project
PICASSO, Pablo - Bull’s head (1943)