

Lisbet Harboe

Social Concerns in Contemporary Architecture

Three European Practices and Their Works

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ISSN 1502-217x

ISBN 978-82-547-0241-3

CON-TEXT

PhD thesis 53

Akademisk doktorgrads-
avhandling avgitt ved
Arkitektur- og
designhøgskolen i Oslo

PUBLISHER:

The Oslo School of Architecture and Design

PRINTED BY:

Unipub AS

DESIGN AV BASISMAL:

BMR

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Acknowledgements

This thesis, as the reader will soon discover, relies on generous contributions from a number of people. I am deeply thankful to all contributors.

I have been given the opportunity and privilege to look into the works of three architectural practices. Studies on site and through interviews have been a great pleasure. Sincere thanks to Nicolas Henninger from Exyzt, Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød from Fantastic Norway, and Anne Lacaton from Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, for their time, patience and generosity. During interviews, they have explained the content of their works, sharing with me their ideas and reflections. Furthermore, I have been welcomed and guided on site by Exyzt – in Madrid and London. Thanks to all the Exyzt members and their associates, particularly Nicolas Henninger and Thomas Lindner who explained the organisation of their work and introduced me to an interesting new world of architecture and people. Haffner and Aasarød have put aside several hours of their time to answer my questions and reflect on their practice – always ready to contribute. Anne Lacaton generously shared her reflections through talks and crits at the AHO. Lastly, I am thankful to all for their willingness to share visual material.

A set of exhibitions and conferences formed the starting point for this research. I owe great thanks to Emiliano Gandolfi who at the Rotterdam Biennale in 2007 and the Venice Biennale in 2008 contributed to a display of practices and invited for debates. His readiness to include everyone into informal discussions and to share his reflections has been especially important for my

studies. Visits to the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, on several conferences and occasions have provided me with a wealth of practices and thoughtful discussions. I would like to thank the teachers and researchers, particularly Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider, who have demonstrated a critical position in architectural practice and research, challenging me to reflect.

The workshop “Action as Fiction” organised by Markus Bader in Raumlabor Berlin became eye-openers for me, as I experienced a very different way of practicing architecture and urbanism. The event opened many other things besides: I met Nicolas Henninger from Exyzt, as well as Jakub Szczesny of Centrala in Warsaw and Mister of Basurama in Madrid, all of them demonstrating a variety of approaches.

I also want to thank Liza Fior from Muf Architecture|Art and Vincent Lacovara and Daisy Froud from AOC (Agents of Change) for interviews and conversations. Conversations and debates with Mathias Heyden and members of An Architektur have also been instructive.

My research theme grounds on a long lasting interest first evoked when I, as a master student at NTNU in Trondheim during the early 1990s, met the teachers and architects Elin and Carmen Corneil. Their distinctive architectural approach and their clear social concerns, in the legacy of Aldo van Eyck, showed me other ways of performing and thinking about the discipline. They were my mentors, leaving me with several unsolved questions concerning all that cannot be said but must be understood. My sincere thanks to Elin and Carmen.

After ten years as a professional practitioner in architecture, I wanted to combine my interests, questions and my professional experience into further studies. When I discovered what looked like a renewed social engagement in contemporary architectural practice, I saw an opportunity of bringing it all together in a doctoral research.

To guide me in this contemporary and evolving architectural field, Tatjana Schneider at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, has been important, accepting the assignment as my second supervisor. I have been lucky to benefit from her knowledge on spatial praxis, as well as her social and political engagement, for which I am grateful. With generosity and dedication she shared her knowledge and challenged me to develop clearness and coherence in terms and in theoretical reflections.

The one I am indebted to, more than anyone else, is Mari Hvattum, who has been my main supervisor. With invariable attendance, she has followed me and this research project from the very start until its completion. I could not have asked for a better guide and critic. She holds a broad knowledge and deep understanding of architectural history and theory, which I, as her student, have both benefitted from and relied on. I have been impressed by her ability to combine academic knowledge and intuited possibilities through research, sharing with me a confidence to do so. Thus, Mari Hvattum has encouraged an open

process where the research material guides a continuous development of questions and framework. I am extremely thankful for her genuine support in the progression of my thesis and my research education.

I have also been kindly supported by the AHO as well as by my generous and experienced colleagues; academics, teachers and librarians and administrative staff. A special thank to the Institute of Form, Theory and History and its leader Mari Lending. Last but not least, the interdisciplinary society of PhD-students at AHO has been a giving and rewarding environment of discussions, incentives and advice.

Finally, I owe my gratitude to Odd, Ole and Jon for bestowing upon me the extra time and concentration it has taken to complete this work. Thank you for your enduring encouragement.

1 Dead or Alive: Addressing “the social” in architecture

In 1991, Margaret Crawford posed the question “Can architects be socially responsible?”¹ Her query focused on the architects’ lacking sense of social responsibility in their professional practice and in regard to the performance of their works. Her diagnosis was a gloomy one:

As individuals, most American architects sincerely assert that they are deeply concerned about issues of social and economic justice. Yet, over the past twenty years, as a profession they have steadily moved away from engagement with any social issues, even those that fall within their realm of professional competence, such as homelessness, the growing crisis in affordable and appropriate housing, the loss of environmental quality, and the challenge posed by traffic-choked, increasingly unmanageable urban areas.²

Crawford claimed that architects had “almost completely surrendered both the tools and the ideological aspirations that might allow them to address the economic, political, and the social concerns posed by modern life”.³ In the years that followed, the gap which Crawford had identified between “individual concern and professional indifference” seemed only to widen, and the professional codex of the architectural practitioner excluded most often any form of social commitment.⁴ While environmental issues did receive some attention in the architectural discipline after 1991, social ones got less consideration. Crawford herself did not completely write off the

¹ Margaret Crawford, “Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?”, in Diane Ghirardo (ed.), *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1991.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

possibility for a change towards a renewed social responsibility, but warned against repeating the faults of earlier forms of engagement and prompted architects to look in new directions: “a growing demand from individual practitioners and students to reconnect architecture to social and economic questions demands a thorough reformulation of both theory and practice in order to avoid repeating the well-intentioned but mistaken strategies used by modernist reformers and sixties radicals”.⁵ Crawford’s outline of the various ways social responsibility might be brought back into architectural practice, anticipates the recent surge of social interest emerging in contemporary architecture – both on the American continent and in Europe. She envisioned “new rooms” in architectural discourse and practice where social conditions can be addressed and where “ideology can ... serve as a positive fiction, telling a story about a larger vision of professional aspirations”.⁶ She encouraged architects to create “compelling stories of social needs”, to seek out “a new set of clients, not the generic masses of modernism, but specific groups whose needs are not served by the architectural marketplace. There is no shortage of possible subjects: the homeless; individuals and families excluded from the real estate market; communities threatened by decay or development; elderly, poor, and minority groups with inadequate housing”.⁷ Crawford regarded the identification of these ideal clients as an important first step toward creating a discourse adequate to the enormous tasks faced by the architectural profession if it accepts the challenge of reshaping society and the built environment. Margaret Crawford pointed towards singular initiatives as the starting points to opening up such new rooms, rooms that may eventually develop into a more socially responsible architectural profession.

A decade and a half later, many theorists and curators have observed a renewed social interest in architecture; noticing a growing number of works by young architects and urbanists that seek to bring about changes, not only in the built environment, but also with regards to influence from residents, users and citizens. It seems as if the young generation of architects is ready to leave the apolitical and non-committal artistic works characterising the 1980s and 90s, to take on a renewed social responsibility and societal focus. I had been waiting for this development for some time; scouting around for architectural practices whose works and actions reflected some kind of social concerns. Encountering the first, scattered practices voicing such concerns, I became fascinated by their refreshing solutions and innovative ways of working. Soon, conferences, exhibitions and publications started to present these works, not only as singular instances, but as part of a general tendency.

⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

⁷ Ibid.

Margaret Crawford's promotion of an experimental, singular approach, then, seems to have anticipated the development taking place some seventeen years later. However, while Crawford recommended to focus on specific groups in society, contemporary practice tend to use specific situations as their point of departure. As the curators for the American Pavilion at the 2008 Venice Biennale put it: "In a milieu characterized by territorial and institutional deadlock, architects, urban researchers, and community activists increasingly must intervene in situations by 'going beyond building'. This does not mean dispensing with the value of architecture per se, but rather acknowledge each situation's unique complexity."⁸ These curators pointed out that "local initiatives are becoming newly dynamic arenas for the exploration and generation of new forms of sociability and activism"⁹ The exhibition in the American Pavilion showed practices that were not only addressing a different set of clients but also focusing on specific social situations, often situations marked by social problems and injustice. In Europe too, we have seen instances of a radicalisation in the architectural field, where architects expand their perspectives to include social and socio-political issues. Particularly among younger architects, new kinds of political, environmental, democratic and social engagements have appeared in writing and in practice. This new commitment goes together with new ways of working. In the following study, I want to examine some of the motivations, works, and heterogeneous ways of working emerging in this new architectural landscape. Who are the socially engaged architects today? What are their concerns? How do they operate and what is the actual result? These were questions that prompted this study. I am not on a quest to define a contemporary political avant-garde, but more to explore new agendas and new ways of working that affect the architectural discipline today. Like Margaret Crawford, I am interested in the way social commitment changes the way architects work, "expanding" both architecture itself and the architectural profession.

1.1 The field

This research project looks at contemporary architectural practices in Europe whose work display a distinct social commitment and whose ways of working are marked by new and inventive approaches. The term work, here, is understood as the products of architects' efforts, including, but not limited

⁸ William Menking, Aaron Levy, and Andrew Sturm, "Into the Open: Positioning Practice", *United States Pavilion, 11th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2008*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

to, physical structures. When I speak about ways of working, I refer to approaches, strategies, tactics, and tools, pertaining both to how these practices locate and define their tasks, and how they go about fulfilling them. Although the selected architectural practices are concerned with a variety of social, economical and political issues such as inequality, consumerism, democratic opportunities, and multicultural urban life, there are few references to overarching ideologies or theories. Does that mean that ideology and theory are dead? Or should we rather ask what *kind* of critical thinking and societal reflections inform architectural works and discussions when overarching political or theoretical ideology seem to have evaporated? As a way to discern the issues at stake and to discover how social concerns, as called for by Margaret Crawford, impact on architectural practice, I follow an approach similar to the architects that I study. I do not proceed from concepts and theories on to practice, but move from concerns in the field, and in-depth explorations of practice, onto reflections and discussions. Margaret Crawford listed economic, political, and social concerns. Referring only to social concerns is thus a simplification. As I use it, it covers economic and political aspects concerning equality and democratic opportunities.

The specific background for my research is found in three key conferences and exhibitions taking place in 2007 and 2008, namely *A Better World – Another Power* at the NAI as part of the 3rd *International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam* (IABR) in 2007, the *Alternate Currents* symposium organised by researchers at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield in 2007, and the exhibition *Experimental Architecture* set in the Italian pavilion of Giardini at *La Biennale di Venezia* in 2008. All three events focused on a new or renewed social commitment in contemporary architecture, yet as we will see, their aims, terms, and concerns did vary. Based on a wide array of works and practices presented during these events, I have selected three European practices for in-depth studies; the French office Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, the Norwegian duo Fantastic Norway, and the multidisciplinary French-based Exyzt. What kind of situations, problems and assignments do these architects choose to deal with? How do they relate to the context, people and conditions in the situations where they operate? What are their approaches, their ways of working, and their tools? How do users, residents and citizens take part in the works and working processes? What constitute their works? What are the concerns of these practices, and how do these concerns inform their work? How do these architects position themselves theoretically and historically? Seeking answers to these questions, I am researching what takes place in practice when social concerns become an integrated part of architectural and spatial processes.

None of these selected practices approach their work from an explicitly ideological point of view, but take rather specific situations as their point of

departure. In this study, too, theoretical discourse is introduced gradually rather than beforehand, attempting to let the empirical material guide theoretical reflection. That is why the introductory chapter does not begin by presenting theoretical concepts and discourses in contemporary architecture, such as for instance the recent interest in agency or criticality. Neither do I start from a conception of centre versus margin, or conventional versus alternative. I am mindful of Manfredo Tafuri's critique of the architectural avant-garde as unable to do anything but superficially soothe the consequences of capitalism while inventing new formal solutions.¹⁰

Architecture, Tafuri hints, cannot be critical. What I have encountered in meeting with contemporary experimental practices, however, is a social commitment appearing not primarily as critique, resistance or opposition, but as concerns. What these concerns are, and how they express themselves in through architectural practices, will be investigated in this study.

1.2 The Social?

Although this research takes practice rather than concepts as its point of departure, there is one term that begs some initial definition, namely "the social". The word social in architecture is generally understood through its use in ordinary language. At the smallest scale, it denotes two or more people who meet and interact. At a wider scale, "social" refers to what is communal and collective, pointing as well to companionships, living in communities, and to public life. At the largest scale, the term denotes society and its organisation, and one may talk about social development or the "all-encompassing" conception of social structure.¹¹ However, at a societal level

¹⁰ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976. Manfredo Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology", in K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture theory since 1968*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1969/2000.

¹¹ The adjective "social" explained in *Oxford Dictionary of English* and in *Oxford Thesaurus of English*: "Oxford Dictionary of English", <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>>, accessed 10/02/2010.

social

→ adjective

1. [attrib.] relating to society or its organization: *alcoholism is recognized as a major social problem | the social structure of Europe had become more fluid.*

• relating to rank and status in society: *a recent analysis of social class in Britain | her mother is a lady of the highest social standing.* **2.** needing companionship and therefore best suited to living in communities: *we are social beings as well as individuals.*

• relating to or designed for activities in which people meet each other for pleasure: *Guy led a full social life | staff facilities included a social club and leisure complex.* **3.** (*Zoology*) (of a bird) gregarious; breeding or nesting in colonies.

• (of an insect) living together in organized communities, typically with different castes, as ants, bees, wasps, and termites do. • (of a mammal) living together in groups, typically in a hierarchical system with complex communication.

→ noun

1. an informal social gathering, especially one organized by the members of a particular club or group: *a*

the term also expands in quite another direction, referring not only to social and public assemblies of any kind, but also to human individuals in relation to society, and to the welfare of human beings in society. Expressions such as social problems and social housing exemplify this sense. The double meaning of the social includes therefore, on one level, social interaction both as singular incidents and communal structures, and on the other, associations between human beings and society. In common use, the term encompasses all these meanings, and that is also how it will be used in this study. Although this ambiguity renders it impossible to offer a finite and univocal definition of the social, it is nevertheless a relevant term, not least in architecture, where it may also be used when for instance bringing the role of users, residents and citizens to attention.¹² In architectural parlance, the understanding of the term social coincides roughly with its use in ordinary language. Still, this understanding is influenced by discussions in other disciplines, not least by Henry Lefebvre's notion of social space, which has particularly influenced architects' conceptions of the urban environment. Bruno Latour represents a more recent voice discussing and revising the conception of "the social" within social sciences.¹³

church social. **2. (the social)** (*Brit. informal*) short for social security: *not everyone's on the social and taking drugs*.

- derivatives **sociality** noun **socially** adverb

- origin late Middle English: from Old French, or from Latin *socialis* 'allied', from *socius* 'friend'

'Oxford Thesaurus of English', <<http://www.oxdnetn.no>>

social ▶ adjective

1. alcoholism is a major social problem communal, community, community-based, collective, group, general, popular, civil, civic, public, societal; endemic, pandemic.
opposite: individual.

2. a social club recreational, entertainment, amusement, leisure.

3. the mountain gorilla is a uniquely social animal | many venomous animals live in social groups gregarious, organized, civilized, interactional. ▶ noun

the club has a social once a month party, gathering, social gathering, social occasion, social event, social function, function, get-together, celebration, reunion, festivity, jamboree, reception, at-home, soirée; informal bash, shindig, shindy, do; Brit. informal rave-up, knees-up, beanfeast, beano, bunfight, jolly, thrash.

¹² Stan Allen provided a similar definition to the social while distinguishing between the social and cultural related to architecture. "Though we often blur the social and cultural when we talk about architecture, I believe it is important to be more precise. My dictionary defines social as 'of or relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of society,' whereas it speaks of culture as 'acquaintance with and taste in the fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills.' ... The irony is that architecture as a "fine art" is probably on the rise. The irony is that architecture, which is nothing if not a social art form, loses effectiveness precisely to the degree that it becomes exclusively a cultural phenomenon." He sees architecture as a public art form, however, threatened by cultural and artistic exclusiveness: "Perhaps we can say that *architecture will become an effective public art form at the moment when it can leverage its cultural efficacy toward social ends.*"

Stan Allen, Hal Foster, and Kenneth Frampton, 'Stocktaking 2004: Questions about the present and future of design', in William S. Saunders (ed), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, A Harvard Design Magazine Reader, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 120 and 122.

¹³ Bruno Latour includes in *Reassembling the Social* an etymological explanation of the word social. The Latin root *seq-*, *sequi* translates 'to follow' whereas the Latin *socius* denotes a companion or an associate. Latour defines the historical genealogy of the word 'social' as "construed first as following someone, then enrolling and allying, and, lastly, having something in common". "Social" as in social contract was, according to Latour, Rousseau's invention, whereas the social subject is a nineteenth-century innovation. Latour sees a drift of the word social where its meaning shrinks through history, particularly modern history and becomes subdivided into specific meanings such as social change, social constraints, social facts, social interaction, social structures, and so on. This is why, he argues, the adjective social gives little meaning without adding a substantive – whereas it gains numerous meanings. "The social", as well as the word "society", do not define

In his book *Words and Building – A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, Adrian Forty positions ‘the social’ in architecture into a duel: “Dead or Alive – Describing ‘the Social’”.¹⁴ He describes modern architecture’s deficiency in articulating social qualities. “For a practice with such strong claims to realize, and to improve, mankind’s social existence, architectural modernism was surprisingly inarticulate when it came to describing the specific social qualities aimed for in its works.”¹⁵ One response to these difficulties, as Forty points out, was to avoid the terms social and society all together, and instead refer to more specific or concrete conceptions: “Within architectural discourse, the two most regularly occurring conceptions of ‘society’ have been those contained in the notion of ‘community’, and in the dichotomy between ‘public’ and ‘private’”.¹⁶ Its slipperiness notwithstanding, Forty offers a short historic review on the term, touching upon different meanings of “the social” as well as of society and related concepts. He makes only modest attempts, however, to define or clarify “the social” in architecture, providing instead “a general enquiry into modern architecture’s difficulties in expressing verbally the social qualities claimed for its works”.¹⁷ The changing significance of “the social” through a period of a hundred years is demonstrated through a reading of architects, groups and concepts such as the *Neues Bauen*, Bruno Taut, Herman Herzberger, Bill Hillier, the “organic” concept of William Morris, “realist” projects by Ludovico Quarino and Mario Ridolfi, “urbanity” of Lewis Mumford, and “pattern language” of Christopher Alexander. While architectural vocabulary contains a richness of terms that describe physical properties, Forty concludes that in the “attempts to define its social qualities it immediately reveal the poverty of the language”.¹⁸ Forty wants instead to discuss “the social” through other terms, as often in architecture, such as through “functional”, “organic”, “flexibility”, “reality”, “urbanity”, “living”, “alive”, “homely”, “the user”, even though this list itself, in Forty’s opinion, includes “some of the most overworked and unsatisfactory words in the architectural lexicon, and others are hardly the freshest of metaphors”.¹⁹

Through his review of statements and works, Forty seeks to explain how “architecture might give expression to the collectivity of social existence” stating as the “dream of architectural modernism, the moment of fusion when the physical becomes social, and the social becomes physical”.²⁰ He searches

stable entities, but rather volatile associations. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

for words that can capture “the merging of the social with the physical”, but concludes that the quest has proven difficult both in works and words. In Forty’s discussion, the “merging of the social and the physical” boils down to how “the social” is *represented* in architecture, giving little attention to works where architects actually and concretely aim to improve human conditions. Such endeavours are set aside and dismissed as instrumental.²¹ Forty seems less intent upon exploring and presenting architecture’s social dimensions than to demonstrate the deficiency of the term in architecture. With his dismissal, he leaves behind as irrelevant not only the term, but also what it describes. In this, his agenda is different from my own, and also from Margaret Crawford’s. The conclusion to the chapter “Dead or Alive – Describing ‘the Social’” may stand as a challenge rather than a veto: “In general, in the attempts to describe the ‘social’ aspects of architecture, language has let architecture down. Language’s particular strength – the creation of differences – has been of limited value in this domain; while the task of making evident a relationship between two such utterly disparate phenomena as social practice on the one hand and physical space on the other has proved to be largely beyond capacity of language.”²²

During the last decade, we have seen a proliferation of architectural practices, works, exhibitions, and debates referring to a renewed social interest, social responsibility, social landscapes, social practice or social conditions, etc. Given its frequent use, it seems safe to assume that the term is a useful one, denoting important conditions and occasions around us. And if – as Wittgenstein reminds us – the exact meaning of a term can only be determined by its use, then it seems sensible to look at particular uses of the term social in contemporary architecture.²³ I will attempt to do that, although not by means of theoretical or conceptual analysis.²⁴ Instead, I will try to tease out the way architects’ social concerns inform their work. By keeping close to the works, the contexts, and the practitioners, I hope to escape some of the “overworked and unsatisfactory words”, searching instead for a precise and unpretentious vocabulary that may help me describe what takes place in these practices. This vocabulary is formed by the many exhibitions, lectures, papers, and debates that I have attended in the last five years, as well as by conversations with the architects concerning their approaches, intentions and works. I treat this acquired vocabulary as something provisional, for it is the works and actions of the architectural practices themselves that form my most important material. Words, framework and concerns are developed and tested

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 117.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations* 2nd edn., Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, §77.

²⁴ Not even the concept of “the social” will be analysed. This rules out as a starting point Bruno Latour’s venture to reassemble “the social” through discussions of its dominant as well as suppressed meanings in the social disciplines. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*.

in a stepwise manner, and only in the end may we arrive at a more accurate understanding of the terms describing this particular architectural reality.

1.3 The limitations of architecture

The road to hell, as we know, is paved with good intentions. Despite planners' ambitions during the 1960s and 70s, social conditions did not develop as one had hoped in European satellite towns and post-war territories. The late modernist New Towns, part of large societal plans and ambitious public structures of European post-war urban development, did not live up to expectations as ideal environments. On the contrary, many of these places became marred by social problems, crime and dereliction. Modernism's architectural toolkit proved limited when it came to facilitate social development. Nevertheless, to recognize these limitations is not necessarily the same as saying that architecture has no social implications whatsoever. In contemporary discourse and practice, attempts have been made to establish more precisely what the limits are.

An important concern today is how processes of gentrification trail behind architectural interventions and urban regeneration projects, unhampered by architects' noble ambitions to improve quality of life and create vibrant urban spaces. Geographers such as Neil Smith takes this argument even further when he states in his article "The evolution of gentrification" that what is officially denounced by state authorities as an unwanted side-effect of urban regeneration, can actually be a hidden motivation for the economic drivers of a city.²⁵ Margaret Crawford called for architects with a sense of social responsibility to counteract social and economical injustice. This responsibility would have to include considerations on the many negative consequences of attempts to build "a better world".²⁶ David Harvey has engaged himself in these debates, expressing a deep scepticism as to whether architecture can play part in social and economic justice. At the AHRA conference in Oxford, 2006; *The Politics of Making*, Harvey argued that architects' tinkering cannot contribute to real social and economical justice, their contributions and architectural works more often lead to gentrifications and relocations of problems. The middle class is provided for whereas those of lesser means are bought out or expelled. In Harvey's opinion, the freedom of the city is appropriated by the

²⁵ Neil Smith, "The evolution of gentrification", in JaapJan Berg et al. (eds), *Houses in Transformation: Interventions in European Gentrification*, Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2008.

²⁶ "A better world" was used as part of the exhibition title *A Better World – Another Power* at the NAi during the 3rd *International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam* (IABR) in 2007. It is a simple phrase commonly used to denote contemporary social and environmental intentions in architecture.

self-interest of a capitalist elite and has yet to be reclaimed by citizens capable of considering structural changes rather than singular projects. He asked: “Can urban social movements emerge that are of the city rather than lost within the city’s fragments? If so, then one condition for the success of such movements is to confront the capital-surplus disposal problem at its root. And that means, quite simply, that the accumulation capital cannot continue on its current trajectory, abstractly determining our fates and fortunes, dictating who and what we are and what our cities must be. The right to the city is worth fighting for.”²⁷ Such systemic or structural problems cannot be solved by architectural tools but rather as part of larger urban social movements with power to make changes in practices, politics and legislations. In this sense, gentrification is a consequence of an economic system, but also a local issue in each particular situation in which these processes are ongoing. It is highly problematic in growing cities, while possibly more welcomed in empty and derelict areas.²⁸

Despite Harvey’s criticism, this study looks into local, singular projects that aim – implicitly or explicitly – to improve or enhance conditions of equality and social justice. Following three architectural practices, I will focus on a few, specific situations, looking at them in detail. To a certain extent, I will look at public debates surrounding the projects, but I will not study their wider consequences. Again, this approach reflects the working method of the practices that I study. These architects work at a social micro-level, addressing real needs locally, “on the ground”. A study hoping to understand this work must heed this approach, looking closely at each particular situation. Even so, it is necessary to keep in mind the systems these architects operate within and the wider consequences of their works.

The inherent limitation of architecture as a social instrument was revealed to me, in a very concrete sense, when listening to Professor Leslie Kanés Weisman at the 5th AHRA International Conference on *Agency* in 2008, at the time when George Bush Jr. was still president in the United States. Throughout her extensive practical and academic career, Weisman has been dedicated to community design in the U.S. In her talk, she listed the many pressing social problems in the U.S. Listening to the dire list, it became abundantly clear that these problems required political rather than architectural solutions: changes in taxation, health insurance, and school budgets. No wonder, perhaps, Weisman has left architecture and is now

²⁷ David Harvey, “The Freedom of the City”, in Mark Swenarton, Igea Troiani, and Helena Webster (eds.), *The Politics of Making, Critiques*; v. 3, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 23.

²⁸ Editors of the book *Houses in Transformation; Interventions in European Gentrification* addressed how architects can intervene in and counteract processes of intervention. In addition to Neil Smith, practices such as Stalker, Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori, Raumlabor and Santiago Cirugeda described their tactics. These are practices which will be presented in Chapter 2. JaapJan Berg et al., “Introduction”, in JaapJan Berg et al. (eds.), *Houses in Transformation*, Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2008.

involved in politics. And yet, the realisation of architecture's limited effect in the face of large, systemic conditions as provided by global capitalism and reduced public involvement, have no doubt contributed to architects withdrawing from social issues, embracing formal autonomy or pragmatist relativism as they see fit. At a seminar on the "Art of Welfare" in 2006, Jeremy Till confronted the split between architecture on one side and the social reality on the other side, suggesting a new route: "My partial response, very partial, as an educator of architects is to repoliticise architecture and to accept its fragility in the face of contingent forces. To act modestly and partially and politically, making small moves towards a slightly better place rather than large moves towards a reinvented world."²⁹ Till is one of the voices in contemporary architectural debate arguing for a repoliticised architecture. He sees architecture not as an agent of revolutionary change but as a vehicle for piecemeal, gradual, and local improvement. For Till, architecture has the potential to provide more than shelter, infrastructure and beauty – a potential that cannot be ignored and that should rather be explored. The overall aim of this study is to explore some such small and practical moves towards creating slightly better places.

1.4 Approach

In the course of this study, I have visited projects and sites, participated in workshops, conferences and building processes, and interviewed practicing architects as well as organisers of events. I have looked at a selection of specific architectural and urban situations, trying to understand the architects' strategies, tactics and works, as well as their motivations and reflections. My work has been guided by an interest in works and ways of working: a wish to see and learn what actually takes place on site, and what the architecture, the event, or the installation actually does. I start each case study by looking at the place and the specific situation, studying ideas, layout, plans, writings, constructions, and details. Programmes and uses are important, both planned and unplanned, along with my own and others' experience of the place. I have looked into a variety of aspects in each case study, ranging from the material presence of whatever is built, to the kind of activity it engenders and facilitates, as well as contributions from citizens, residents and users. Observing on site, collecting documentation, and interviewing the architects have been essential parts of the study. The highly processual work of Fantastic Norway and Exyzt, for instance, depending on improvisation as

²⁹ Jeremy Till, "Modernity and Order: Architecture and the Welfare State", *Verksted*, 7, 2006, p. 58.

well as on initiatives from local people, cannot be understood on the basis of plans or written documentation. To understand these projects, one needs to be there – and I have been lucky enough to participate in several events by Exyzt. Where direct participation has been impossible, I have relied on interviews with the architects, finding this a valuable source for information that cannot be experienced or read. Each situation and work that I have studied is rich, complex, and sometimes contradictory. By studying them ‘as found’, attempting to take nothing for granted, I try to tease out the concerns, positions and working methods that have produced them. Only subsequently are theoretical and historical references introduced, for discussions and clarifications. In this sense, my approach is shaped by 10 years as a practicing architect.

“Only by generating earthly accounts of building and design processes, tracing pluralities of concrete entities in the specific spaces and times of their co-existence, instead of referring to abstract theoretical frameworks outside architecture, will architectural theory become a relevant field for architects, for end users, for promoters, and for builders.”³⁰ Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva argue for the relevance of concrete and detailed studies as the way of doing architectural research today. With a similar focus, I study the works in their earthly complexity, using interviews and on-site participation as ways to better see various parts that constitute the works and the ways of working. It has been a highly incremental process. Rather than starting from one overriding research question, I have approached my material in a step-by-step manner, identifying both questions and the possible answers along the way. The concepts and thinking by Bruno Latour have been helpful when conceptualising this approach, but my study does not adhere to methods of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), or to the pragmatic mapping of controversies as developed by Alben Yaneva at the University of Manchester. I rely on detailed and concrete investigations of architectural works and processes as a way to capture novelties, nuances and complexity, yet not as ANT by studying traceable and readable objects as networks of associations. In my research approach, I start from within, familiarising myself with the situations while assembling information and knowledge on works and ways of working as well as the architects’ concerns and intentions. The way of looking at situations and knowledge is conceptualised as in a flat landscape where what is abstract and concrete stand side by side. It is important to note that this research does not include experiences and opinions of users and clients in general – that would expand the study to an unfeasible size. Neither does this research enter inside the architectural “office” to

³⁰ Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva, “Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move”: An ANT’s view of architecture”, in Reto Geiser (ed.), *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching Design Research*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2008, p. 88.

observe internal discussions and design processes, such as the studies by Donald A. Schön on the “reflective practitioner” or the ANT study on OMA by Albená Yaneva.³¹ Instead, I interview practitioners about his or her ideas; their works, concerns, the ways of working, and their reflections – all closely related to specific works. In addition, I look at publications and accounts produced by the architects, along with written reviews on the works by users and critics. I add to these accounts my own on-site experience, as user, volunteer, participator, and observer. The available empirical material varies quite a lot from project to project, making it necessary to follow slightly different procedures for each work, tailoring my own approach to the specific situation. The study deals with several kinds of social concerns and many ways of working – at the expense of pursuing any one of them in great depth. In order to understand each approach, I gradually bring in theoretical references and historical precedents that seem helpful and relevant. This strategy does not pretend to constitute a comprehensive systematic approach but is still far from random. It just means that theory is brought in as occasion requires, rather than as a predefined point of departure. The study, then, follows an inductive method, learning from examples and from within architectural practice, rather than applying theory from without.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

To gain insight into the social concerns of contemporary architectural practices, and to capture themes and examples, I attended a set of exhibitions, conferences and debates from 2006 onwards. I was interested to learn how the new social engagement was pursued in practice. Three events became particularly important. Each of them presented a range of contemporary practices, situating them in relation to social, political and environmental concerns. This forms the material of Chapter 2, which opens with a few early voices speaking about the emerging social or political engagement in contemporary architecture. I concentrate on three events: *A Better World – Another Power* at the NAI as part of the 3rd *International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam* (IABR) in 2007, the *Alternate Currents* symposium in Sheffield of November 2007, and the exhibition *Experimental Architecture* at *La Biennale di Venezia* in 2008. The themes of each event are introduced along with short descriptions of the participant practices relevant to this study. This way, I gain a pool of practices from which I select three for close

³¹ Albená Yaneva, *The Making of a Building: A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009. Donald A. Schön, *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1991.

readings. In addition to a list of practices, these three events have given me, firstly, a broad overview over contemporary practices in the field, secondly, information on different explorative ways of working, and thirdly, some insight into social concerns as they were expressed and discussed. As we will see in the next chapter, three distinct concerns may be discerned from these events. These concerns frame important themes and provide comparative tools for my close readings.

The practices of Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes each exemplify a distinct way of working and will be explored in the chapters three, four and five. These three chapters present in-depth studies of the selected practices, using three works from each practice as the core material. It has been important for me in this study to let the empirical material guide the way. Consequently, my selection, discussion, and reading of each practice have developed gradually during the course of the study. Only in this final, written account, does it all come together, seemingly as a logic procedure. My intention is not, however, to develop a coherent theoretical framework for understanding architectural practice, but rather to look at practice as such. Only in Chapter six do concerns, practices, positions and theoretical debates come together in a concluding discussion.

2 Contemporary concerns

2.1 From “The Reluctant Turn to Us” to “Camp for Oppositional Architecture”

In the architectural discipline of the 1980s, theories of the meaning of architecture and its communicative capacity held the stage. In the 90's, the discipline could be said to continue the exploration of architectural appearances, mainly by pursuing the purity of formal and tectonic qualities, the production of new expressive forms, and elaborating material authenticity, aesthetic perfection, and sensorial experience. By the late 1990s, however, a few small scale works emerged, addressing social and political conditions in new ways. These projects were not carried out by old “68'ers”, but by young architects, some of them students. In 1993, Lacaton & Vassal Architectes constructed the inexpensive single family *House Latapie* in Bordeaux, presenting it in a French booklet the following year.¹ 1994 was also the year Muf Art|Architecture started their practice in London. The year after, Italian Stalker gathered about 100 people for a continuous four days' walk and *dérive* around Rome's periphery, while Santiago Cirugeda started to intervene in the urban context of Seville in 1996.² Predecessors to Raumlabor Berlin, the Institute of Applied Building Arts, with Christoph Bruckner, Matthias Rick and Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius in charge, performed a series of self-organised projects in their Berlin neighbourhood

¹ Hubert Tonka and Jeanne-Marie Sens, *Une Maison Particuliere: A Floirac (Gironde) de Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal Architectes*, Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1994.

² The group members first came together during students' strikes demonstrating against part-privatisations of state universities in 1990. They gradually started a collaborative practice and took the name Stalker in 1995. Stalker uses the Situationists' method of *derivé*, organising drifts for unfiltered experiences through urban landscapes.



Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, *Latapie House*, Floirac 1992-1993. Ph: Philippe Ruault
Source: www.lacatonvassal.com



Santiago Cirugeda, *Skips*, Seville 1997. Source: www.recetasurbanas.net

from 1997 until 1999.³ They were part of an environment encouraging self-organisation, appropriations of city space, public accessibility, and new leisure uses. In 2000 the Venice Biennale under leadership of Massimiliano Fuksas was themed *Less Aesthetics – More Ethics*; an interesting signal, even if the actual exhibition included few clear adherences to the call.

These examples from the 1990s addressed places, groups, and issues not usually served by architectural commissions. Entering the 21st century, many more such practices, projects and incidents occurred, giving rise to the first publications, events and exhibitions specifically targeting this new phenomenon. A few early voices contributed to define and describe the renewed social and political interest among young architects.

In 2003, NAI Publisher introduced their new journal *Reflect* with a first issue titled *New Commitment: In Architecture, Art and Design*. While its editor, Simon Franke, saw in art, design and architecture “a new form of commitment to current social problems” and “an interest in society which finds expression in the most diverse forms”, architectural writers such as Hans Ibelings and Ole Bouman (editor of *Archis* at the time) were less sure how to interpret these expressions.⁴ Bouman argued that there had always been some architects occupied with the social significance of architecture, and he was doubtful whether this “change in fashion” would actually imply a “change of the current social significance of architecture...”⁵ What both writers had detected, however, was a small but discernable change of interest, signalling a real and “actual” social engagement. They were still rather cautious in trying to pin it down, labelling it a “need” (Bouman) and a “longing” (Ibelings) rather than an actual change.⁶ Hans Ibelings expressed hope that the engagement would not be an “echo of the last time architecture and criticism engaged with social and political developments.” As he elaborated: “I do not regard the 1970s as a tempting prospect for the near future. Seldom has there been so much self-righteousness, polarizing rabble-raising and vilification of anything that did not fit a doctrinaire view of architecture and history. What is more, architecture itself all but disappeared from view, not just among critics and historians, but also, in a rare moment of self-hatred, among architects.”⁷ Ibelings articulated the fear aroused in many

³ Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, “The Field of Temporary Structures”, in Kyong Park / iCUE (ed.), *Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond*, Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers, 2005. Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*, Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008.

⁴ Simon Franke, “Foreword”, *reflect #01: New commitment in architecture, art and design*, 2003, p. 5.

⁵ Bouman pointed out that there have all the time been architects occupied with the social significance of architecture. He wondered whether the new commitment was only a “change in fashion” or if it would actually be a “change of the current social significance of architecture...”, Ole Bouman, “The invisible in architecture”, *reflect #01: New commitment in architecture, art and design*, 2003, p. 48.

⁶ Hans Ibelings, “About more, for more: Engaged architectural criticism”, *reflect #01: New commitment in architecture, art and design*, 2003, p. 53. Hans Ibelings does not regard it illogical that “[a]fter two decades of post- and supermodernist irony and concomitant detachment, it is time again for a bit of involvement.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

architectural camps whenever social and political commitment is mentioned. Bouman, on the other hand, did not share these worries, emphasising instead the “need for a clearly defined task, a mandate that lends architecture its social relevance”, sure that there would be “no rush to establish a dogma for architecture as happened repeatedly in the past”.⁸ The editor of *reflect #1*, similarly, was of the opinion that the new commitment was barely linked to ideological debates in the old-fashioned sense.⁹ “[T]he social commitment of the 1960s and 70s was part of political movements with a corresponding ideology” and the “‘task’ of the artist, architect or designer was a logical consequence of that”, Simon Franke firmly stated: “There can be no doubt about the fact that commitment as we knew it thirty years ago is out of the question.”¹⁰ Attempting to locate a new debate under way, the publisher and editor of *reflect #1* not only identified a growing engagement but regarded *reflect* as a mean to further fuel it.

Two years later, in 2005, Ole Bouman, now editor of *Volume*, concluded that the “reluctant return to ‘us’” was a fact.¹¹ Issue #4 of *Volume* had the subtitle – *Break Through, How Reality Seeps through the Cracks in our Myth* – introducing “a return to valuing the collective” as a new tendency in architecture, and set to forward this message to a broader architectural audience.¹² The return was described in somewhat reluctant terms, but Bouman nevertheless claimed that “people are now craving the return of a sense of community.”¹³ Architectural projects worldwide were presented, yet, with a European emphasis, including a broad multidisciplinary selection of practices and events which, as Bouman pointed out, “reconsider the act of getting people together not through building per se, but through means that can also be completely non-constructivist.”¹⁴ What Bouman emphasised was that these signs of a turn-around are manifold and very practical, opening for a renewed focus on architecture as an organisational discipline of social patterns and collective space, not only a discipline concerned with material forms.

In Berlin, decisive action was called for by the editorial group of the journal *An Architektur*.¹⁵ Founded in 2002, they organised in Berlin the *Camp for Oppositional Architecture 2004* as an international, open congress, “searching for possibilities of resistance within the field of architecture and

⁸ Bouman, “The invisible in architecture”, p. 49.

⁹ Paraphrasing: Franke, “Foreword”, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹ Ole Bouman, “Designing to Socialize: The Reluctant Return to ‘Us’”, *Volume*, 4, 2005, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Editorial board of *An Architektur 2004*: Oliver Clemens, Jesko Fezer, Kim Förster, Anke Hagemann, Sabine Horlitz, Andreas Müller. The board of *An Architektur* continue, as they say, the work by the architecture collective *freies fach* operating in Berlin from the mid 1990s.

planning.”¹⁶ The organisers asked at the outset of the Camp: “What progressive social roles can architects take over? Where are the opportunities for action in planning? Are there any possibilities to challenge and oppose the social order from within the field of planning in a productive way? What are the relevant oppositional stances, practices, strategies or coalitions that might be imagined and realized today?”¹⁷ The organisers called for a critical and oppositional stance against prevailing societal conditions and against the passive or relativistic positions held by architects, regarding the new rebellion and opposition a generational shift in architecture.¹⁸ Exploring oppositional thinking and practice, this group did not explicitly detach themselves from more ideology-based architectural practices in the 1970s. They were interested in both the present and the history of radical social and political engagement in architecture – including participation and American community design. A number of individuals and practices presented their works and thinking at the camp; among them were Exyzt, GLAS, Mathias Heyden, and Raumlabor Berlin.¹⁹ *An Architektur* published papers, lectures, and debates from the camp, confronting the architectural establishment head on: “The worldwide dissatisfaction among young architects and planners with the dominant practices of architecture is growing” as the establishment of architects “have lost touch with political reality, are caught up in classical

¹⁶ *An Architektur*, “Camp for Oppositional Architecture”,

<http://www.oppositionalarchitecture.com/oa_2004/cfoa_2004.html>, accessed 26/01/2011.

¹⁷ Oliver Clemens et al., “Camp for Oppositional Architecture: Berlin-Wedding, Summer 2004”, *An Architektur*, 14 2005, p. 3.

A set of workshops opened for adjacent questions. The workshop on “Oppositional Social Engagement” raised the question: “... how can we grasp and relate to contemporary social reality?”, the one on “Oppositional Design Concepts” tried to answer “... how can we imagine and design critical forms and architecture?”, while the third, “Oppositional Strategies of Intervention” dealt with the question “... how can we reflect on and intervene in the built environment?”

¹⁸ The editorial team of *An Architektur* has organised two more seminars on oppositional architecture: *Camp for Oppositional Architecture, Theorizing Architectural Resistance*, Utrecht, 2006, together with Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory, and *Ten Days for Oppositional Architecture: Towards Post-Capitalist Spaces*, November, 2009, New York City, together with Performa and Storefront for Art and Architecture.

¹⁹ List of speakers at *Camp for Oppositional Architecture: Berlin-Wedding, Summer 2004*:

Simone Hain, Berlin; Bryan Bell, Design Corps, North Carolina; Roemer van Toorn, Berlage Institute, Rotterdam; Peter Marcuse, Columbia University, New York.

List of participants at the workshops:

Aeswad, Malmö; Agentur Urbane Anarchisten, Berlin; An Architektur, Berlin; Architough, Berlin/Copenhagen; Diane Arvanitakis, Johannesburg; Basecamp, New York/Philadelphia, Jochen Becker, Berlin, Carlos H. Betancourth, Maastricht; Knut Birkholz, Permille Skov, Søren Hom Hviltsby, Rotterdam/Copenhagen; Casagrande Laboratory, Helsinki; Bernard Cherix, Berlin; Krzysztof Cibor, Warsaw; Club Real, Berlin; Monika Codourey Wisniewska, Zurich; Ulrich Doenitz, Dortmund; Saskia Draxler, Berlin; Alejandro Duque, Luzern; EXYZT, Paris, Bettina Fitz, Vienna, Anselm Franke, Berlin; Freie Klasse Project, Berlin; GLAS, Glasgow; Florian Haydn, Rudolf Kohoutek, Vienna; Mathias Heyden, Berlin; Shirin Homann-Saadat, London; Ideenaufwurf, Berlin; Ifau, Berlin; Informal University, Berlin; Jargon, London/Milan; Martin Kaltwasser, Berlin, Hüseyin Karakakaya, Düsseldorf; Daniela Karow, Aachen; Viktor Kittlausz, Bremen; Martina Kögl, Vienna; Lab-Place Istanbul, Istanbul, Deborah Ligorio, Milan/Berlin; Lorma Marti, Berlin/Rome; Martin Luce, Wien; Rikke Luther, Copenhagen; John J. McGurk, PIPS Collaborative, Providence; Tanja Mergler, Gabriele Moritz, Berlin, Ruth Moser, Vienna; Annie On Ni Wan, Gothenburg; Ortlos Architects, Graz; Peanutz, Berlin; Platforma 9,81, Zagreb; Polar Inertia, Los Angeles; Raumlabor, Berlin; Rauntaktik, Berlin; Patricio del Real, Barcelona, Sarah Riviere, Berlin; Katharina Rohde, Berlin, Jochen Specht, Achen; Sprengantrag, Berlin; Stadt im Regal, Berlin; Stalker, Rome, Rachel Steward, London; Frederk Svensk, Kristoffer Gansing, Gothenburg/Malmö, Thomas Trinkl, Düsseldorf; Annette Ueberlein, Berlin; Rochus Wiedemer, Berlin; Oliver Ziegenhardt, Erfurt.

role models, placing too much faith in the old tools of the trade, ignorant and uncritical of their economic, political and social significance and effect, and too affirmative towards the neo-liberal hegemonic concepts of society. The consequences of the erosion of social states, the globalization of markets, and exploitation mock what little remains of the ethical rhetoric in the architectural community.”²⁰ As these words confirm, the organisers of *Camp for Oppositional Architecture* and editors of *An Architektur* formed a more radical, politicised and oppositional approach.

Architectural theorist Roemer van Toorn was invited as one of the speakers to the *Camp for Oppositional Architecture 2004*. He had published the article about “Fresh Conservatism” in 1997, where he questioned the claim of a return to the Real World by the new Dutch generation of supermodernists who, he said, “throw up fresh ideas non-stop, amusing us and keeping us happy.”²¹ In the article, published in several architectural journals, he pointed out that these architects held up conflict as stimuli and identity, while “the results of conflicts in power and interests are swept under the carpet.”²² Roemer van Toorn directed his criticism particularly at MVRDV and their likes, concluding that “Fresh Conservatism overlooks the fact that there is such a thing as a political dimension to everyday life.”²³ Toorn took the recent dichotomy between critical and projective practice in architecture as his point of departure, blaming the projective camp for taking “traditional Dutch pragmatism to absurd, deadpan extremes” in order to generate “new, wholly unexpected forms” while keeping to “a kind of degree zero of the political” with no considerations of social consequences in reality.²⁴ Roemer van Toorn, then, questioned the relativistic attitude of these practices at the *Camp of Oppositional Architecture*, nonetheless interested in exploring the social and political potentials of this way of working.

Architects, theorists and critics of the early 2000s, then, pointed towards an emerging shift in contemporary architecture. They based this observation on the emergence of architects and groups adhering to “a new commitment”, “new formations of democracy”, “a sense of community”, or an “oppositional architecture”. Ibelings welcomed the turn, but worried that it would devalue architectural knowledge of material design and aesthetical values. Ole Bouman embraced a renewed social commitment while positively assuring us that dogmatic versions of earlier commitments would not reappear in contemporary architectural practice. The editorial team of *An Architektur* took on a political, oppositional standpoint closer to the radically of the

²⁰ Clemens et al., “Camp for Oppositional Architecture: Berlin-Wedding, Summer 2004”, p. 3.

²¹ Roemer van Toorn, “Fresh conservatism”, *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme*, 219, 1998, p. 91.

This article was published in different versions in several journals.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁴ Roemer van Toorn, “After Criticality, The Passion for Extreme Reality in Recent Architecture ... and its Limitations”, *An Architektur*, 14, 2005, p. 29.

1970s, while Roemer van Toorn suggested exploring “new formations of democracy” in conjunction with the pragmatic approach of the so-called projective architecture. Simon Franke pointed at an interesting characteristic from his viewpoint as editor of *reflect* #1, *New Commitment: In Architecture, Art and Design* when he lamented the problems of defining what was actually emerging. Diversity and lack of overarching ideologies made tidy categorisation impossible: “... sometimes it looks as though there is no clear-cut topic of debate at all, and thus no new commitment either.”²⁵ Nevertheless, these attempts to distinguish a social and political commitment in contemporary architecture did not only identify an engagement, but actively advocated it.

2.2 Three events: Exhibitions, symposiums and debates

In the autumn of 2010, MoMA launched the exhibition *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, where they displayed a selection of architectural projects over five different continents. By then, the conception of a renewed commitment to social responsibility in architecture had been relatively well established. When I started this study in 2006, however, social engagement in architecture was still tentative and emerging, meaning that I could not rely on published material only – the publications were simply not there yet. Instead, exhibitions, conferences and debates became some of my most important sources. As described in the introduction, three events during 2007 and 2008 were particularly informative, constituting the entry into this study:

- *A Better World – Another Power* included an exhibition and debates at the Netherland Architecture Institute (NAi) as part of the 3rd *International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam* (IABR) 2007.
- *Alternate Currents* was a symposium organised by Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider in conjunction with the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield in November 2007.
- *Experimental Architecture* titled the exhibition set in the Padiglione Italia of Giardini at *La Biennale di Venezia, the 11th International Architecture Exhibition 2008*.

Practice was in focus at all the events, where the participants displayed, explored and discussed how practitioners of architecture may contribute to “a

²⁵ Franke, “Foreword”, p. 6.

better world". These three events provided me with a pool of architectural and multidisciplinary practices, all sidestepping conventional methods in order to address pressing social, political and democratic conditions through architecture. Through these events, I gained insight into debates and arguments; contemporary practitioners' reflections on their works, their ways of working, their successes, and some of their failures. Lectures, oral introductions, and reviews summarised works and practices; all valuable when trying to discern similarities and differences across an emerging field. While the practices displayed a diversity of works and ways of working, there were also common themes, similar ways, and shared concerns. I have identified a specific set of concerns operative in contemporary architectural practice; all of them, in one way or another, demonstrating aspects of a new social responsibility. The three events were central in bringing together new ways of practicing and producing architecture, seeing the alternative architectural practices not as singular instances but rather as something that could and should contribute to an expansion of the architectural discipline at large.²⁶ In the following I will go through the three events one by one.

A Better World – Another Power at the 3rd International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2007

The 3rd *Biennale in Rotterdam* (IABR) 2007 hosted by the Berlage Institute was entitled *Power – Producing the contemporary city* and comprised exhibitions, conference and debates. While NAI curated the exhibition *A Better World – Another Power*, which will be reviewed, Berlage Institute curated the main exhibition for the Rotterdam Biennale in the Kunsthalle, along with a parallel conference.²⁷ 14 young and relatively unestablished teams of architects exhibited here.²⁸ Organisers from Berlage presented the theme of *Visionary Power* along with the young architects, asking "how policymakers, companies and inhabitants will manage to steer global forces in the right direction locally; and, especially, how they, the

²⁶ The three events differed in whom they addressed, be it architects, an informed public, or the academic community. The exhibitions and conferences per se; how they were organised and curated as well as how works and practices were displayed, have not been part of my investigation.

²⁷ A year earlier, the Berlage Institute had asked five international teams to reflect on "forces that affect cities – like migration, fear, commerce, tourism and representation" and to propose "an urgent question about the possible future of the city." The themes, problems and curator teams were: *Capital Cities*, *The City as Political Form*, Pier Vitterio Aureli & Martino Tattara; *Corporate Cities*, *The Zone*, Keller Easterlings; *Spectacle Cities*, *The Power of Spectacle*, John Urry; *Informal Cities*, *Failure of the Formal*, Alfredo Brillembourg & Hubert Klumpner; *Hidden Cities*, *Mediations on Razor Wire*, Lieven DeCauter & Michiel Dehaene.

3rd Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2007, "Visionary power", <http://www.iabr.nl/2007/Visionary_Power>, accessed 24/05/2007.

²⁸ 'Makeable' is a literal translation of the Dutch word 'maakbaar'. The concept of 'maakbaarheid' or 'makeability' is often translated with social engineering. Jorinde Seijdel, "Editorial", *Open: Social Engineering: Can Society Be Engineered in the Twenty-First Century?*, 15, 2008.

architects themselves, will succeed in bearing a visionary and directive part once again.”²⁹ Concurrently claiming that “visionary plans are out of fashion, and society has turned out not to be ‘makeable’”, the organisers presented the analyses, projects and strategies at the Biennale as being counter-forces.³⁰ Their interest in power and forces led me to believe that the Berlage Institute exhibition and conference would promote explicit standpoints, for instance advocating interests of the less powerful. Surprisingly, however, there appeared but few critical discussions on power during the conference. The question of power in the obvious sense – who has power and who has not? – was only partially or implicitly addressed, and well-known arguments regarding the architects’ professional power were repeated.³¹ As a whole, the *Visionary Power* exhibition and conference demonstrated a well-established postmodern relativism, where any viewpoint is as relevant as another, thereby side-stepping questions of social responsibility. Idealistic projects calling for change were at display side by side with well rendered ironic gestures.³² Yet, there were several examples of architects defending an architecture for the less powerful, the most obvious examples being the Latin-American contingent of Teddy Cruz, working in San Diego and Tijuana at the Mexican border city of the United States, the MMBB from São Paulo in Brazil, and the sub-curator team of Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner leading Caracas Urban Think Tank.³³ In this context their viewpoints appeared as one position among many others, rather than a call for responsibility and justice.³⁴ On the whole, the Kunsthalle seemed dominated by Generation X with their relativism, irony and sharp elegance.

Vis-a-vis the Kunsthalle, at the Netherland Institute of Architecture (NAi), an additional Biennale exhibition was on display. While the exhibition in the Kunsthalle titled *Visionary Power*, the one at NAi answered with – *Another Power*. The full title of the exhibition at NAi sounded *A Better World – Another Power*, presenting four architectural and multidisciplinary

²⁹ 3rd Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2007, “Visionary power”.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The mayor of Tirana, artist Edi Rama, presented his colour scheme for an urban renovation of the city centre, intended to change people’s perception of the city and of collective space. Mark Brearley from Design of London explained the efficiency of their small organisation directly linked to the Mayor of London so that bureaucracy and complex democratic structures would not disturb their plans. Both stated the importance of well-intended architectural leadership, without reflecting on their own power.

³² Young teams of architects had been selected for the exhibition after a competition. Many of the projects were visionary or debating student projects rather alternatives to be realised.

³³ Brillembourg and Klumpner proclaimed that “[t]he urban and architectural theories and ideologies emerging from the university and from ‘signature’ architects fail precisely where they should be most intensely focused: on the city as a place for equal opportunities, urban culture, and policies in the service and the well-being of the citizens.” Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, “Power to the People?”, in Jennifer Sigler et al. (eds.), *Visionary Power: Producing the Contemporary City*, Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2007, p. 185.

³⁴ The “visionary power” was demonstrated as a caricature in the lecture of Elia Zenghelis. He argued strongly against informality and “bottom-up” urbanism, proposing instead “large-scale architectural installations of unprecedented size, punctual, limited and simple large-scale urban forms – *topographic acupuncture with a big needle*” as a solution to contemporary problems. Elia Zenghelis, “The ‘immeuble-cité’: A strategy of architecture”, <http://www.iabr.nl/2007/PowerNotes_06/top/140>, accessed 28/03/2011, 2007.

practices who had been active a few years. Along with the exhibition, NAI organised three evenings of debates, succeeding the *Visionary Power* conference.

Characteristic of these debates at NAI, and unlike what took place in the Kunsthal, was an absolute absence of relativism and ironic distance. There were no grand visions and ironic abstractions, instead the exhibition presented works and situations where architects and experts teamed up with residents and citizens in various ways. As the *Guidebook* for the 3rd *International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam* proclaimed: “With A ‘Better World – Another Power’ the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) presents the power and potential to make the opinions of its most important users in the city, the residents, count once more.”³⁵

The four practices exhibiting at NAI were; F.A.S.T. – Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory, from Palestine and Amsterdam; Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori based in Rotterdam; CUP – Centre for Urban Pedagogic from New York; and Santiago Cirugeda from Seville in Spain. NAI’s curator was Emiliano Gandolfi. The practices all demonstrated a clear standpoint with regards to power and the role of the architectural expert. NAI introduced them as follows:

In collaboration with International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, which this year takes the theme of Power – Producing the Contemporary City, the NAI presents an exhibition about the groups who “overthrow power”. In their practice they are not interested in defining just the form of a building, but rather in stimulating collective processes, spontaneous creativity and activism in order to incite a new political role for architecture. FAST in Amsterdam, Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori in Rotterdam, Santiago Cirugeda in Seville and the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) in New York all favour a bottom-up approach to urban development and urban design. These groups listen to the remarks of residents, try to understand their problems, and create devices (including spaces, interactive software and actions) that stimulate people to take a critical attitude.³⁶

F.A.S.T., lead by Malkit Shoshan, used their part of the exhibition to tell the history of Ein Hawd, one of the many unrecognised Palestinian villages

³⁵ 3rd International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, “A Better World - Another Power”, <http://www.biennalerotterdam.nl/page/A_Better_World_Another_Power>, accessed 24/05/2007.

³⁶ NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, “Exhibition: A Better World - Another Power”, <http://www.nai.nl/e/calender/activities/iabr_betterworld_e.html>, accessed 27/06/2007.

inside Israel, and the story of their ongoing collaborative work with village residents and local leader Muhammad Abu el Hayja. Since 2004, they had worked together to develop inventive tactics of resistance against Israeli authorities.³⁷ Based in Amsterdam, F.A.S.T is organised as a NGO and works in several conflictual zones “to expose and counter situations of human rights violations and segregations caused by the use of architecture and planning instruments.”³⁸ In their practice of self-initiation, they plan, design, curate, write, edit, and organise workshops and events in the intersection between planning, architecture and art.



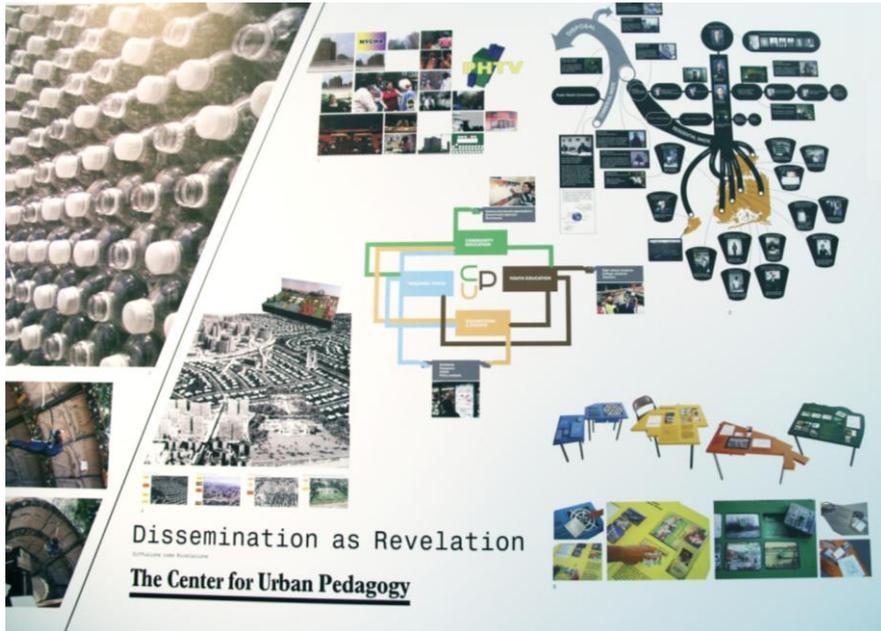
F.A.S.T. – A section of the exhibition for *A Better World – Another Power*, NAI Rotterdam 2007: “One land Two Systems” calling for a sustainable planning solution for Ein Hawd.

Ph: Author

Damon Rich and Rosten Woo from CUP (Center for Urban Pedagogy) had travelled from Brooklyn in New York to present their self-initiated works. One of their educational projects performed by high-school youths investigating the routes of garbage from Brooklyn and the complexity of partners involved. The pupils revealed smoke screening manoeuvres: an architectural competition for a park gave the false impression that this garbage landfill, neighbouring a poor residential area, would soon be removed. They seek to “develop an understanding of our urban realm”

³⁷ FAST’s exhibition panels told the chronological history of the village and its present struggles of obtaining planning and building permissions, including the “permission” to exist as village.

³⁸ FAST, “The Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory: Introduction”, <<http://www.seamless-israel.org/Introduction.html>>, accessed 22/02/2011.



UP (Centre for Urban Pedagogy) – A section of their exhibition panels for the American pavilion at *La Biennale di Venezia, the 11th International Architecture Exhibition, 2008*. Ph: Author

among general residents and “to bridge the gap between the community and politicians”.³⁹ Here, investigations are seen as an important tool to develop “the power of imagination”.⁴⁰ CUP is a non-profit organisation based largely on private donations. Since the start in 1997, they have worked interdisciplinary, bringing art and design professionals together with community-based advocates and researchers, collaborating closely with community groups and organisations to develop educational programs, exhibitions, and local campaigns.⁴¹

The Dutch practitioners at the exhibition, artist Jeanne van Heeswijk and urbanist Dennis Kaspori, initiate and organise long term processes; at NAI displayed as “Fields of (Inter)action: models for collective change”, including *The Blue House* (Het Blauwe Huis) in Rotterdam, *Face Your World Stedelijk Werkplaats* in Amsterdam, and *The Strip* (De Strip) in Vlaardingen. Jeanne van Heeswijk coins her and their role as “urban curator” and “mediator”, being an “active participant of all participants in the cultural

³⁹ Poster at the exhibition: NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, “Center for Urban Pedagogy”, *A Better World - Another Power*, 2007.

⁴⁰ Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), “CUP”, <<http://anothercupdevelopment.org>>, accessed 28/06/2009.

⁴¹ CUP aims “to foster a new awareness and stimulate creative interventions as a collective practice accessible to all citizens”. Poster at the exhibition: NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, “Center for Urban Pedagogy”.



Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori – Sections of exhibition panels displayed at *A Better World – Another Power*, NAI Rotterdam 2007 and the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, the Venice Biennale 2008. These exhibition extracts show the “Dwaallicht (Will o the wisp)” and “The Blue House”. Ph: Author. Source bottom right: The Blue House, Irene den Hartog.

process”.⁴² With their “fields of (inter)action” and interaction in the public domain, addressing the challenges and problems of this district or neighbourhood.⁴³ At the time of the Biennale, Heeswijk and Kaspori worked on the project of *The Blue House*, initiated during 2004 in the suburb of Ijburg, where an all new artificial island was filled with 18,000 dwellings for 45,000 residents in a *Tabula Rasa* development which, they argued, left “no room for the unexpected, uncontrolled and unplanned”.⁴⁴ Their idea was therefore to “create a place for precisely these three – and other – urban qualities...” During a four-year period, a blue villa and its surroundings served as a platform for shifting activities, happenings and social exchanges,

⁴² NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, “Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori”, *A Better World - Another Power, 3rd International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam*, Rotterdam, 2007.

Axel Lapp, “Games People Play”, in Axel Lapp et al. (eds.), *Jeanne van Heeswijk, Systems*, Berlin: The Green Box Kunst Editionen, 2007, p. 22.

Marjolein Schaap, “Superdirecting - The Work of Jeanne van Heeswijk”, in Axel Lapp et al. (eds.), *Jeanne van Heeswijk, Systems*, Berlin: The Green Box Kunst Editionen, 2007, p. 11.

Mirjam Westen, “[Atelier] Interview with Jeanne van Heeswijk”, <<http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/atelier/2004-July/000137.html>>, accessed 11/07/2008, 2004.

⁴³ Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori, “Jeanne van Heeswijk + Dennis Kaspori”, *Experimental Architecture, Padiglione Italia in Giardini at La Biennale di Venezia, 11th International Architecture Exhibition*, 2008. Many works by Jeanne van Heeswijk are commissioned or funded by public art funding in the Netherlands.

⁴⁴ Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori, exhibition project “Fields of (inter)action”, at the exhibition *A Better World – Another Power*, NAI, 2007 and La Biennale de Venezia 2008.

defined and funded as a public art project.⁴⁵ As Jeanne van Heeswijk told Marjolein Schaap: “My goal is not so much a communication project. I am interested in setting up a collaborative production whereby acting together establishes a locus, a community.”⁴⁶ Based on, as they emphasise, an embedded practice they locate both problems and resources, constructing “fields” or “platforms” for actions, interactions and stories, while working with the specificities in the local regarding collective and urban life as well as related to empowerment and expansions of the public domain.⁴⁷ Jeanne van Heeswijk has an extensive art practice engaging with communities, collaborating with Dennis Kaspori on urban projects. Their community works are always self-organised, and several are also self-initiated. Dutch regulations on funding of public art in new developments and public art foundations have been important sources of funding for Jeanne van Heeswijk.

⁴⁵ Artists, architects, thinkers, writers and scholars were invited to live and work in *The Blue House* for six-month residencies with the assignment to actively enter into dialogue with their co-inhabitants in IJburg and the public. Visits and initiatives from people in the neighbourhood were welcomed, making way for a local radio station, Radio Ruisriet and community dinners, as well as, in the beginning, a weekly children’s library, a flower stall, and a café. At the time, there were no public services or cafés in the area.

⁴⁶ Schaap, “Superdirecting - The Work of Jeanne van Heeswijk”, p. 10.

⁴⁷ Jeanne van Heeswijk: “From within the realm of art I try to create platforms where people can meet. It may seem easy to intervene in this way, but during my career I have discovered how difficult it can be to achieve this in collaboration with the community you focus on. It is vital that I am inside the community, become part of it, and develop the ability to “listen”. I want to encourage people to take an active part in what I see as the starting point of processes that may continue, which will ultimately give them more control over their environment. That can be a long-term and sometimes painful process, as we have to get used to each other’s different ideas and views. Urban curating to me means maximising the potential for open dialogue, communication and acting communally within communities. The key to this is creating and implementing an infrastructure or network which can maintain such a dialogue and can establish the conditions for a critical discourse that clarifies the possibilities for social change. To achieve this you constantly need to go back, need to listen time and time again and make it clear that public space in essence means shared space, where everyone’s contribution is important.” Westen, “[Atelier] Interview with Jeanne van Heeswijk”.

In Spain, architect and artist Santiago Cirugeda, with *Recetas Urbanas*, deal with pressing issues in the city, such as the deficit of collective spaces, playgrounds and affordable housing. At the NAI, Cirugeda exhibited his prescriptions, his “recetas”, not unlike instructions from IKEA or Lego, displaying procedures, material needed, and legal documents, while demonstrating ingenious ways of squatting, for instance by constructing “prostheses” on facades, roofs, in trees, and on vacant lots, or inventive ways of making temporary playgrounds which may still last relatively long.⁴⁸ Through constructions, collaborations and prescriptions, Cirugeda holds a social and political engagement demonstrated through series of self-initiated projects. He unyieldingly defends the interests of citizens and residents who lack means or influence. With concrete and realistic tactics, he tests limits and loopholes of the law, locating pockets of non-law to expand “freedom of action” as he calls it.⁴⁹ Different from Heeswijk & Kaspori, and in part CUP, Cirugeda uses “subversive” means and makes explicit political statements, not least through the prescriptions spread by the web.

Although not part of the biennale programme; at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, positioned just in between the Kunsthalle and the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), Crimson’s urban project *Wimby!* was exhibited. They told the story on a five years engagement in the urban renewal project of the Rotterdam suburb, Hoogvliet. On the opening weekend of the exhibition and the Biennale, Crimson offered a guided bus trip around Hoogvliet to see the urban plans and projects.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Poster at the exhibition: NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, “Santiago Cirugeda”, *A Better World - Another Power*, 2007.

⁴⁹ Santiago Cirugeda explains how to apply to local authorities regarding temporary works and repairs, such as a skip at a square or “prosthesis” on scaffolds: “forget” to fill in date of completion. Without a date of completion, you do nothing illegal by just letting it be. Most often, nobody detects this mistake when the form is handed in. The recipe for *Alquiler de Azoteas, Roof Rental*, describes how owners of flat roofs may “rent” these out for the construction of a temporary “squatted” house. Included in the recipe is legal information and recommended agreements between the roof owner, the tenant building his house on the roof top, and the architect. However, the project is still not publicly legal. The recipe of *Alquiler de Azoteas* include three parts: An agreement of seven points signed by the three parties, a handbook showing step by step how to build the house, and an instruction video presenting materials, necessary tools, and the building process. With these proposals, Cirugeda look for “possible legal loopholes and grey areas which allow the inhabitants freedom of action.” Santiago Cirugeda, “Recetas Urbanas: Urban Prescriptions”, <<http://www.urbanasrecetas.net>>, accessed 19/04/2010.

⁵⁰ *Wimby!* – Welcome into my Backyard – answers the expression *Nimby!* – Not in my Backyard! The *Wimby* team: Felix Rottenberg (mandate holder), Henk Molenaar (business manager, ad interim), Michelle Provoost (programme director), Wouter Vanstiphout (programme director), Simone Rots (programme manager), Liesbeth Meijer (office manager), Annuska Pronkhorst (project manager), Nikkel Reinhoud (business manager, 2001-2002), Margret Andrea (office manager, 2001-2003), Hind Belhirsch (office manager, 2003-2004). Home pages: www.crimsonweb.org/ and www.wimby.nl/index.php?newlang=eng In 1999, Crimson Architectural Historians engaged themselves in 1960s New Town of Hoogvliet, not merely as historians, but as planners and organisers. Crimson performed an initial development vision for Hoogvliet already in 1996 in collaborations with people and groups in the area. Initiating in 2001 a long-term *International Building Exhibition (IBE) Rotterdam-Hoogvliet* running until 2010, Crimson was commissioned as planners and organisers to explore the possibilities for a contextual urban renewal of this New Town. The project of *Wimby!* had a budget of 2.7 million Euros from 2001, starting up with an organisation of six people and a local office. Michelle Provoost, “How to Survive the Twentieth Century: Recent Works on the Postwar City by Crimson Architectural Historians”, <http://www.thenewtown.nl/article.php?id_article=99>, accessed

Accompanying the exhibition *A Better World – Another Power* at the NAI, was three nights of debates, offering insight into the architects' ways of working and the practices' own reflections on their work, their role, and the role of residents and citizens. A wider range of practices had been invited for these debates. The first debate of "Le Corbusier's Orphans" was organised by curator Emiliano Gandolfi at the NAI together with Wouter Vanstiphout from Crimson Architectural Historians where the theme of discussion was bottom-up versus top-down.⁵¹ For the next two nights, the debates were titled: "Open! Strategies for a Better World" and "Activism! Strategies for a Better World".⁵² Here, CUP (Center for Urban Pedagogy), Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori, and F.A.S.T. focused on the specifics of the individual situations – on resources and problems concerning physical, social and economical conditions. None of them resorted to generalisations or manifesto-like proclamations, but told the stories of their work in remarkably concrete terms.⁵³ CUP's Damon Rich and Rosten Woo pointed out that the questions addressed in their work arose from the specific context and from the people they work with. Heeswijk and Kaspori went even further and spoke about being locally grounded as "emerging in place" and as "investigation through habitation", yet, referring to a local office rather than residencies. They, like Crimson, saw the necessity of long term engagement in order to effect changes in the communities, in the physical *and* social environments.

These practices do not start or end with solving the specifications of a brief written by "bureaucrats, authorities and market players" but look out into the world to see where they can contribute with their skills and knowledge – and where they themselves would enjoy working.⁵⁴ Their works may be self-initiated or commissioned, but are in either case generally self-organised and self-programmed. These practices all take on a responsibility, using their professional architectural and artistic knowledge to change conditions in the local physical and social context. At the same time, they

11/06/2007, 2006. Michelle Provoost (ed.), *WIMBY!: Welcome into my Backyard!: International Building Exhibition Rotterdam-Hoogvliet*, Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2000.

⁵¹ The debate "Le Corbusier's Orphans" took place on the 27th of May 2007. The exhibition of *A Better World – Another Power* was situated at the top-floor of the Netherlands Architecture Institute – quite hidden. What took up the large public spaces of the building was the touring exhibition "Le Corbusier: The Art and Architecture".

⁵² This second debate, "Open! Strategies for a Better World" on the 28th of May gathered a whole range of architects and artists for informal dialogues: Francesca Recchia and Lorenzo Romito from Stalker in Rome; Alexander Vollebregt from Spacelab at TU Delft, Matthias Pauwels from BAVO in Rotterdam, Arjen Oosterman from *Volume* in Rotterdam; Ana Dzokic Stealth Unlimited from Rotterdam; Malkit Shoshan from F.A.S.T. in Amsterdam and Israel; Dennis Kaspori and Jeanne van Heeswijk from Rotterdam, Damon Rich and Rosten Woo from CUP – Centre for Urban Pedagogy in New York, Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout in Crimson Architectural Historians and their Wimby! Friends, Zvi Efrat and Kowalski from Bezalel Academy of Art & Design in Jerusalem and Hebrew University Jerusalem. The host of NAI was Emiliano Gandolfi.

⁵³ Santiago Cirugeda was not present at the debates.

⁵⁴ 3rd Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2007, "A Better World - Another Power",

<http://www.biennalerotterdam.nl/page/A_Better_World_Another_Power>, accessed 24/05/2007.

attempt to facilitate democratic possibilities and challenge top-down systems. What became very clear during these presentations was how the act of designing architectural objects and spaces constituted only a part of the work done by these practices.

Curator Emiliano Gandolfi at the NAI emphasised how these practitioners worked context-based, taking the viewpoints of residents and users while collaborating with local people and groups. He concluded: "FAST in Amsterdam, Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori in Rotterdam, Santiago Cirugeda in Seville and the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) all favour a bottom-up approach to urban development and urban design."⁵⁵ In the introductions to the exhibition and the debates, bottom-up was seen as the most important common approach or strategy characterising the practitioners. Given the importance of this term, it was natural for me to use this interest in bottom-up approaches as one of the key concerns to look for in my reading of the practices. Let us take a preliminary look at what it stands for.

Bottom-up has been used more politically to denote, on the one hand, engagement, initiatives and informal processes generated at a grassroots level, possibly leading to large movements; the Arab Spring being a recent example, demonstrating the potentials of new media. On the other hand, the term has been used in planning and other areas to describe participatory processes that include users, offering them more influential positions. In this sense, bottom-up comes close to participation in architecture and planning. Bottom-up inscribes into a dichotomy with top-down, establishing a hierarchy where one could say that "ordinary" and "weak" residents, users and citizens form a bottom level, while at a top level are bureaucrats, public authorities, experts, property owners and economic systems. Bottom-up, thus, make up a correction or opposition to the ruling system, but may also be configured as an alternative or an addition.

At the NAI, bottom-up was not defined, yet short introductions contributed to give a first sketch, and were filled in by examples from practice. The term was used primarily to talk about approaches in which architects (and artists) took the viewpoints of residents, citizens and users; where they "listened to the residents and users of the buildings" and tried "understand their problems".⁵⁶ These grounded viewpoints were accompanied by an enthusiastic commitment to the specific situation and the people in it, without excluding social, economical and political issues. The architects engaged with residents, citizens and users in ways resembling participatory processes, however, the term participation was not used at all during this event. Even so, F.A.S.T worked in collaboration with the inhabitants of *Ein Hawd* like an extended group of clients; Heeswijk and

⁵⁵ NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, "Exhibition: A Better World - Another Power".

⁵⁶ 3rd Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2007, "A Better World - Another Power".

Kaspori instigated actions, interactions and initiatives of residents through their works; and Santiago Cirugeda shared his prescriptions with all, while also organising participatory processes to create common spaces. CUP educated and encouraged different groups of citizens and pupils in their projects on urban and public environment. However, instead of discussing these actions as participation, they framed them as attempts “to establish a bottom-up relation to urban planning and design.”⁵⁷ By eschewing traditional top down planning and design processes, these practitioners tried “to stimulate people to think critically and actively about their environment.”⁵⁸ Of course, it is not only a question of *thinking* actively. Rather, practitioners presented at NAI sought to identify and encourage actions, interactions and initiatives coming from residents, citizens and users. Though bottom-up actions in the form of grassroots activities may lead to social mobilisation, protest movement and revolt, however, at NAI, in 2007, the concept was not addressed other than through specific project examples. Nor were large sweeping visions presented, except as illustrations of the top-down versus bottom-up approaches. Rather, a situated approach was promoted, where questions and issues were always grounded in and extracted from the reality of the concrete situation. This situated approach fits well with the idea of bottom-up, and adds to the multiple meanings of the bottom-up approach in ways that will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

The first debate, as mentioned above, was constructed as a confrontation between top-down and bottom-up strategies. Damon Rich and Wouter Vanstiphout fronted bottom-up approaches, using their own work as examples. Crimson’s work in the large and devaluated suburb of Hoogvliet had been specifically conceived as a critique of top-down planning, subverting the planned clearance of several neighbourhoods in Hoogvliet. These demolitions were meant to clear away social problems and to improve a bad image, to be replaced by a Tabula Rasa in disguise – dressed as plurality. To present top-down strategies, NAI had invited Rients Dijkstra from the Maxwan Architects + Urbanists who presented their Russian Project *A101* for a new town outside Moscow housing 320 000 residents as well as Alexander d’Hooges from MIT presenting a project titled *Suburbia after the Crash*. It projected large scale strategies at an imagined total economic crash.⁵⁹ These top-down proposals were extreme cases, neither of them built. Because of this, they were not very helpful in defining the particularities of the new bottom-up strategies, nor did they lead to any confrontations.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ New Jersey’s Passaic County was the site for the imaginary vision of *Suburbia after the Crash* by Alexander d’Hooges.

In fact, the most interesting critical reflections on the bottom-up approaches came from the practitioners fronting them, Rich and Vanstiphout. Both of them adhered strongly to bottom-up approaches, yet they were critical of the polarisation between top-down and bottom-up. Although the viewpoints and main approaches of Crimson and CUP are bottom-up, they insisted on allowing the processes to unfold in all directions. They argued that certain top-down strategies are necessary, particularly when operating in relation to powerful institutions such as the national road authorities. Refusing any rigid definitions of what they can or cannot do, these practitioners treat bottom-up as a strategy as opposed to a tactic, in Michel de Certeau's sense of these terms.⁶⁰ Concluding the debate, Vanstiphout argued that bottom-up must be understood as both a rhetorical and very real approach, while CUP pointed out how they strived to develop the quality of their bottom-up strategies. In my reading, defending a bottom-up approach while at the same time challenging the dichotomy between bottom-up and top-down, is a good example of how these practitioners refuse to surrender their professional power in collaborative processes, rarely involving residents in the actual designs. Instead, they developed forms of collaborations that allowed both the residents and the professionals to use their expertise, holding on to the right to choose collaborators and shape projects. This is a trait that distinguishes this generation practitioners from earlier and more ideologically charged attempts at user participation.

The powerful subtitle, *Another Power*, was constructed as a local opposition to the title of *Visionary Power*. It related precisely to the bottom-up approaches. However, the debate and the projects at display in the NAI did not demonstrate radical changes of power but rather subtle shifts in influence and perspective.⁶¹ Yet, all participants in exhibitions and debates took a clear standpoint, all of them allying with citizens, residents and users. The robust pragmatism in the Wimby project was criticised by Matthias Pauwels in BAVO, a theoretical practice with a persistent focus on the political dimensions of architecture. The critique was a familiar one to many of the Dutch architects in the audience. The weakest residents of Hoogvliet – illegal immigrants, drug addicts etc. – did not benefit from the Crimson team's bottom-up strategies. They were expelled, as the developers decided to demolish the housing blocks they had occupied. Vanstiphout argued that Crimson had worked hard to avoid these evictions but when they did not succeed, they decided to let go and concentrate their efforts where they could make a difference. The argument demonstrates a characteristic combination of idealism and pragmatism; a necessity, Vanstiphout argued, when dealing

⁶⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984.

⁶¹ Emiliano Gandolfi points out that the subtitle *Another Power* was not used outside the context of Rotterdam, only *A Better World*.

with a large complexity of economic, social, architectural, urban, political and administrative conditions, such as in Hoogvliet. These compromises were not acceptable to BAVO, however, who defined Hoogvliet as just another gentrification process. The exhibitions and debates in Rotterdam thus revealed a considerable span in the dedication to bottom-up. During the presentation of practices and discussions at the NAI, I have referred to residents, citizens and users without further discussion. These practitioners are generally concerned with groups not usually served by architects or planners – their clients are not usually residents of luxury apartments or users of Prada shops, to make the point bluntly. However, any attempt to label these clients “ordinary”, “weak”, or “deprived” is a pitying condescension totally alien to this way of working.

Seeking situations where their knowledge is needed but not provided, the architects seek actively to improve peoples’ lives. Yet, as BAVO pointed out in regard to Hoogvliet, it is not necessarily so that these professionals serve the ones most in need – rather they see what it is possible to achieve, within the particular situation.

The clear commitment to the bottom-up approach constituted an important common theme at the *A Better World – Another Power* exhibition and debates, coming across as an encompassing overriding concern. In the case studies, we will see more carefully at how this concern manifests itself in practice.⁶²

***Alternate Currents*, symposium by the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, 2007**

During 2007 and 2008, Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield were involved in organising two conferences, both very relevant to my research. The *Alternate Currents* symposium in 2007 and the AHRA conference (Architectural Humanities Research Association 5th International Conference) themed *Agency* in 2008 had architectural practitioners and theorists discussing social responsibility in architecture and urbanism, with respect to democratic, social, economical and environmental issues. While the *Agency* conference adopted a wider and more theoretical approach, *Alternate Currents* was marked by a concrete and critical focus, where architects, many of them working in Northern Europe, presented and discussed their ways of working and their concerns. I attended both conferences, but found the *Alternate Currents* particularly informative

⁶² NAI: Netherlands Architecture Institute, "Exhibition: A Better World - Another Power".

for my research due to the case-oriented and self-reflective mode of the papers.⁶³

There is in Sheffield a strong concern for the complex entanglement of economic, social, environmental and political aspects in relation to architectural production and occupation. On these grounds, the organisers of the *Alternate Currents* symposium asked for papers on and introductions to alternative forms of architectural praxis. The symposium was part of the AHRA research project *Alternative Architectural Praxis*, led by Till and Schneider.⁶⁴ Mainstream practice harbours a relativistic rather than critical attitude towards societal conditions, they argued, and continues to promote the aesthetic autonomy of architectural works. Discussing the consequences of these attitudes within architectural culture, Schneider and Till wrote: "As long as priorities lie in the aesthetic and technical – both aspects of architecture that can easily be commodified – it is all too easy to turn one's attention away from the social and political aspects of architectural production and occupation. This is most clearly exemplified in the rush to build Dubai and other Middle East feudal states. Architects have abandoned all ethics in these formal playgrounds, turning a blind eye to the near slavery of the imported labour that builds them, the unsustainability of running them and the undemocratic nature of the regimes that support them. Such inequities are hidden under the glittering surfaces of fresh formal bling."⁶⁵ In a strong opposition to generic architectural practice, the call for papers asked for an "architecture that desists from any autonomy but rather sees itself as part of a wider social and political landscape", being "inclusive to the user" and "communicative of all phases in the process of its production."⁶⁶ Looking for ways of working capable of escaping or resisting the global market, the organisers targeted "...people operating beneath the radar, taking one or more of a number of positions: the social, explicitly political, feminist, participatory, encouraging self-management, bottom-up, non-hierarchical and/or cooperative."⁶⁷ Based on these positions, the papers presented ideas on "how to conduct architectural practice in new and reflective ways" as "innovative ways of thinking about the future of architectural practice".⁶⁸ Yet, with the title *Alternate Currents*, Schneider and Till wanted to move

⁶³ The symposium "Alternate Currents" was held in Sheffield in November 2007. The symposium was a co-production between "Alternative Architectural Praxis" research project run by Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, and research centre "The Agency" for Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education. All units are located at the School of Architecture University of Sheffield.

⁶⁴ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, "Alternative Architectural Praxis", <<http://altpraxis.wordpress.com>>, accessed 11/03/2010.

⁶⁵ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, "Alternate Currents: An introduction", *arq - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008, pp. 109-110.

⁶⁶ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, "Alternate Currents: Editorial", *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007, p. 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, "Alternative Architectural Praxis: Alternate Currents", <<http://altpraxis.wordpress.com/alternate-currents>>, accessed 11/03/2010.

away from the binary conception of mainstream versus alternative, because in this pair, they argue, the alternative is defined by the mainstream.

Speakers were architectural practitioners, educators and theorists. I will not provide a general report of the event but give an outline of those parts most relevant for this research, emphasising particular architectural practices and shared concerns.⁶⁹ Based on my own impressions and notes from the symposium in Sheffield, introductions and reviews by the organisers as well as papers published, I will seek to display relevant practices and to derive key concerns from this event.⁷⁰



Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden, *Hier Entsteht: Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung*, Berlin 2003. Left: Ph: Mathias Heyden. Right: Book (cover): Fezer, Jesko and Heyden, Mathias, *Hier Entsteht: Strategien Partizipativer Architektur und Räumlicher Aneignung*. Berlin: b_books Verlag, 2004/2007. Cover design: bildwechsel / www.image-shift.net. Source: www.field-journal.org, vol.2(1)

⁶⁹ Papers and reports from the *Alternate Currents* symposium have been published in the journals: *arg Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008 and *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007.

⁷⁰ Speakers and papers at the *Alternate Currents* symposium 2007:

Maria Lucia Malard, Ana Paula Baltazar Dos Santos, Renato Cesar Ferreira De Souza: Belo Horizonte,

“Design process, self-management and sustainability for low-income housing in Brazil”,

Mathias Heyden: Berlin, “Evolving participatory design”,

Helen Stratford, Constatin Petcu and Doina Petrescu: Cambridge + Paris, “Forms-Trans-Inform: the ‘poetic’ resistance in architecture”,

Jonathan Charley: Glasgow, “Eleven questions on alternative architectural practice”,

Jean-François Prost: Montreal, “Adaptive actions”,

Flora Samuel: Bath, “Suburban self build”,

Andreas Müller: Berlin, “The fundamental protagonist”,

Ruth Morrow: Belfast, “Alberti’s missing appendix”,

MOM (Morar de Outras Maneiras) / LOW (Living in Other Ways): Belo Horizonte, Brazil,

Tessa Baird, Anna Holder + James Wakeford: London, “Dipping our toes in alternate currents” – seeking out a working definition of alternative practice”,

Colin Ripley: Toronto, “Collaborative synergies: new relationships in Toronto”,

Prue Chiles + Leo Care for the BDR: Sheffield, “Between the academy, community and practice”,

Pedro Gadanho, Lisbon: “Open source architecture”,

William Tozer: London, “A theory of making – methodology versus process in architectural practice”,

Carolyn Butterworth + Sam Vardy, Sheffield, “Site-seeing: constructive the creative survey”,

Jens Brandt: Copenhagen, “The emergence of Supertanker and Urban Task Force”,

Andreas Lang for public works: London, A space of mixed methodologies”,

Emiliano Gandolfi: Rotterdam, “Strategies for a better world”.

Mathias Heyden from Berlin explained how he has explored participatory strategies in architecture, first through self-initiated housing squats and later also in urban projects and through research. Heyden runs a combined practice between teaching, researching and building. At his talk in Sheffield, he focused on informal urbanism, presenting Berlin as a city where bottom-up and top-down cultures cross. Through the house squat project *K77* as well as in the combined urban project and research of *Hier Einsteht: Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung*, Heyden has explored architectural participation, and appropriation, lately in collaboration with Jesko Fezer who is part of the *An Architektur* team.⁷¹ *Hier Einsteht* included a temporary structure at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, built to initiate actions, interactions and debate, as well as a book of interviews on participation with both practitioners and theorists. Having worked with bottom-up approaches through occupation, appropriation and participation within collectives of artists and architects in Berlin, Heyden wanted to step outside what he regarded a limited circle. Following his intention of breaking out of the “artist’s collectives”, Matthias Heyden in collaboration with *An Architektur*, has engaged in research on the history and contemporary practice of U.S. community design.



Bureau Research Design (BDR) – Workshop as *Design Enabling*, to help stakeholders develop a common design language that aids communication across all parties. Ph: BDR. Source: www.field-journal.org, vol.2(1)

Based in the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, Bureau of Design Research (BDR) has operated as a non-profit design and research practice since 2002. Presenting their organisation and way of working at the

⁷¹ Mathias Heyden and ISPARA, “Evolving Participatory Design: A Report from Berlin, Reaching Beyond”, *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007.

Alternate Currents symposium, Prue Chiles and Leo Care linked their own practice to a history of politically radical project offices within schools of architecture and planning in the 1960s.⁷² BDR takes on architectural commissions, operating as consultancies and designers yet retaining a clear emphasis on user perspectives. Participatory and educational processes in communities subjected to regeneration and transformation, together with community-led planning and design, constitute important fields of exploration for BDR, who “mediate between the strategic agencies involved in policy-making and the affected communities” and explores narratives as a tool for communication with and in between community members, groups and different parties.⁷³ Reflecting on their practice, Chiles and Care denied cultivating any one particular agenda, as was common for the 1960s school project offices. Instead, they defended a reactive approach formed by the needs and demands from residents and stakeholders with whom they worked. Adopting this position, Chiles and Care focussed on the demands of any given situation, distancing themselves from the ideologically driven radicalism of the 1960s and 70’s, yet retaining a strong sense of responsibility and interest in “the social role of the architect”.⁷⁴

Public Works is an art and architecture practice based in London working with public and common space.⁷⁵ Registered as a non-profit company, the group started in 1999 to explore “how the public realm is shaped by its various users and how existing dynamics can inform further proposals”.⁷⁶ In Sheffield, Andreas Lang presented a few of their projects starting with their monthly Friday Sessions of talks and discussions, organised in their own office space but open to the public. Lang also explained the *Mobile Porch* project as an example on how they work. Responding to requests and commissions for public art, Public Works have produced mechanisms to generate activities and unexpected moments in the public realm – set on site for a limited period of time. They designed the *Mobile Porch* to be rolled along a one mile site next to Portobello in London, a mechanism which at different locations could open and transform into a stage, a reception desk, a dinner table, a shop, an exhibition board, a workshop, as well as a hang-out. During a period of two months, the *Mobile Porch* was available on this long site for anyone who wished to organise events or gather an audience, an offer greeted by local community groups and artists. Using vehicles, empty shops

⁷² BDR includes students of architecture in actual projects, linking academia with practice while working with design, planning and education. bdr, “bureau – design+research (bdr)”, <<http://bdrblog.wordpress.com/>>, accessed 13/04/2011.

⁷³ Prue Chiles and Leo Care, “A Vocabulary of Engaging Practices: Reflecting on the Work of the Bureau of Design Research”, *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007, pp. 90-91.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Current members of Public Works are Kathrin Böhm, Torange Khonsari, Andreas Lang and Polly Brannan. Initial founding members were Kathrin Böhm, Sandra Denicke-Polcher, Torange Khonsari, Andreas Lang and Stefan Saffer.

⁷⁶ public works, “public works”, <<http://www.publicworksgroup.net/>>, accessed 02/03/2011.

and gardens, Public Works seek to facilitate new activities, entrepreneurship, and interests in the public sphere, inviting local groups, communities and individuals to contribute in the production. Their projects may also be about gathering stories and local information. Public Works have designed several vehicles to generate temporary but distinct public spaces. Andreas Lang told how these vehicles make it easier to engage residents and citizens without the architects being continuously present. Insisting that their works generate not only physical results but also actions and processes which contribute to social changes in some kind of way, Public Works announces: “Outputs include socio-spatial and physical structures, public events and publications. Our work produces social, architectural and discursive spaces.”⁷⁷



public works, *Mobile Porch*, London 2000 – still rolling. Ph: public works

Jens Brandt came from Copenhagen to present the work and theories of the network of Supertanker which includes Urban Task Force (UTF); an interdisciplinary practice including an architect (Brandt), a sociologist and an urban geographer, central as well in the network of Supertanker.⁷⁸ UTF is a non-profit enterprise formed in 2004 engaging, Brandt explained, as urban planners, catalysts, go-betweens, and researchers while aiming to contribute to an urban life of diversity, inclusion and coexistence. Their various participatory tools and ideas have been explored through several urban

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Members of Urban Task Force, UTF, are: Jens Brandt (architect), Martin Frandsen (sociologist), Jan Lilliendahl Larsen (urban geographer). All three teach at the Roskilde University Center. UTF grew out of the network Supertanker inaugurated in 2002 as a non-profit organisation to deal with a large redevelopment at the “Grønlands Brygge” harbour area in Copenhagen. This development threatened the existing activities of the “urban pioneers”.

renewal processes in Copenhagen, testing out tools of “playful participation” and potentials of urban “terrain vague” as proactive and participatory means in urban development.⁷⁹ In 2004, the group engaged in the conflict between the residents of Christiania – the forty year old alternative and self-built community in Copenhagen – and the Danish government, who wanted to regenerate this attractive area in the city. Supertanker/ UTF used their tool of “Free Trial”, inviting to public meetings organised as a court case for “both positions to be presented and discussed on an equal level”. Journalists would take the role as lawyers to represent and defend opposing views and calling on witnesses. The trial was followed by workshops to develop new solutions to the conflict. Based on an underlying idea to combine “three concepts: agonism, advocacy and animation”, the “Free Trial” allowed for open discussions despite a polarized climate.⁸⁰ Supertanker/UTF wants neither to fuel nor to ignore these conflicts, but seeks instead tools and situations that can allow open discussions between the parties, thus contributing towards



Supertanker/UTF, “Free Trial” at Nørrebro, Copenhagen 2006. Source:

<http://www.urbantaskforce.dk/>

⁷⁹ Supertanker/UTF has worked with urban development projects in the Copenhagen: Grønlands brygger, the Carlsberg district, the Charlotte quarter, and the Nørrebro district. At Nørrebro, they were commissioned by “Kvarteløft”, a publically organised participatory urban renewal project counting several city areas in Denmark.

Jens Brandt, Martin Frandsen, and Jan Lilliendahl Larsen, “Supertanker: In Search of Urbanity”, *arg Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008, p. 180.

Supertanker, “Supertanker”, <<http://www.urbantaskforce.dk/>>, accessed 01/03/2011,

Supertanker, *Mangfoldige Nørrebro*, København: Forlaget Supertanker, 2006.

Supertanker and Kvarteløft Nørrebro Park (ed.), *Borgerdeltakelse: Reel innflytelse eller varm luft?* København: Forlaget Supertanker, 2008.

⁸⁰ Brandt, Frandsen, and Larsen, “Supertanker: In Search of Urbanity”, p. 175.

agreements and future solutions.⁸¹ With their transdisciplinary professional knowledge, Supertanker/UTF wants to deal with complex urban processes, addressing social and democratic conditions as well as urban and architectural ones. The network of Supertanker also publishes, actively communicating research, projects and urban interventions.

The practices presenting their work and thinking at the *Alternate Current* symposium all combined academic work and architectural practice. The academic work allows some economic flexibility for the practitioners. For some of them, such as Supertanker/UTF, theoretical concepts and reflections are very present. Curator from NAI, Emiliano Gandolfi, talked in Sheffield about *Strategies for a Better World*. His talk was based on the exhibition and debates in Rotterdam half a year earlier. He stated that an increasing number of architects are seeking new instruments to cope with pressing social issues. Being the last one out at the symposium, Gandolfi used the opportunity to comment on a discussion from the night before, when MOM from Belo Horizonte in Brasil, counting Silke Kapp and Ana Paula Baltazar, explained their application of critical theory when working in the *favelas* to assist and defend self-builders and users. MOM regarded their work as mediation while defending critique as a legitimate means. Taking the Frankfurter School as their point of orientation, MOM distinguishes between destructive and constructive critique. It is not always possible to be constructive, they argue, defending the need to protest, criticise and oppose. Gandolfi, for his part, argued against critical resistance, emphasising instead the possibility of being revolutionary in a positive way, using all available means to achieve change, including commercial ones: "I don't believe in resistance. I believe in action!"⁸²

The two events, in Rotterdam and Sheffield, had much in common, but a few key conceptions were treated differently. At the *Alternate Currents* symposium, MOM was not alone in defending a critical approach, even though they were the only ones to invoke critical theory. The Sheffield organisers announced that "many of the speakers start from a critical position in regard to the normative models of architectural practice and the values embedded in it."⁸³ The speeches took a critical position in regard to embedded values in the profession. But what does this really mean? All the practices presenting their works in Rotterdam and in Sheffield seemed to take some kind of critical stance to existing conditions, not only the built environment, but in regard to social, political and democratic aspects. The

⁸¹ The organisers of *Alternate Currents* wrote about Supertanker: "Their methods consist of a high degree of receptivity and constructive dialogue, with consideration given to cultural diversity in the city and asymmetric power relations between stakeholders..." Schneider and Till, "Alternate Currents: An introduction", pp. 109-110.

⁸² Based on my own notes from the *Alternate Currents* symposium.

⁸³ Schneider and Till, "Alternative Architectural Praxis: Alternate Currents".

question is, however, how the critique is played out – a contentious issue indeed in this emerging field. Chapter 6 will explore the opposition between critical resistance and positive actions further. Here, we can conclude preliminarily that critique is an important part of the field, but conceptualised in many different ways.

If critique proved a contentious issue, what everyone at the Sheffield symposium seemed to agree on was a shift in the professional role of the architect from being designers of buildings to work more as strategists and mediators. Gandolfi introduced the term “mediating strategies” to include practices who “demonstrate instances in which the architect is becoming more and more a strategist rather than a designer of buildings.”⁸⁴ He emphasised how the four exhibiting practices in Rotterdam as well as Stalker in Rome and Teddy Cruz in United States, produce “projects both in terms of constructions and intangible actions.”⁸⁵ Almost all speakers at the symposium presented the process-oriented parts of their works as essential or dominating. Commenting on a talk by MOM, Schneider and Till discerned “a fundamental ideological and political shift [in architecture], namely the move from product to process”.⁸⁶

Given the emphases on processes, less attention was directed at physical results. Many of the presentations and discussions concerned tools and ways of working promoting activities and urban space, social interactions, social justice, people’s influence, and democratic opportunities. The organisers noted that speakers at the *Alternate Currents* symposium “concentrated on alternative methods of thinking and doing rather than alternative modes of appearance.”⁸⁷ In their review, Schneider and Till regarded as the best practices the ones that “start with a reflection on the role of the architect, asking how he or she might operate in a manner that serves a constituency beyond themselves. In acting for others, other value systems come into play that far exceed internalised discussions of taste, typology, look and making that architects are so comfortable with.”⁸⁸ Matthias Heyden, BDR (Bureau of Design Research), Public Works, UTF (Urban Task Force) can all be said to demonstrate this approach in interesting ways. These are architects interested in participation and collaboration, empowerment and expanded democratic practices. All of them promoted a situational approach, working concretely with the given situation in terms of practicalities, organisations and people. In

⁸⁴ Emiliano Gandolfi, “Strategies for a better world”, *arq architectural research quarterly : an international forum for knowledge and ideas*, 12 (2), 2008, p. 126.

⁸⁵ Emiliano Gandolfi, “Strategies for a Better World”, *arq - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008, p. 126.

The practice of Jeanne van Heeswijk is according to Gandolfi characterised by immersion, confrontation and communication. He characterises her as someone who “... sees herself as a go-between, a mediator between situations, places and the people who inhabit them”. Gandolfi, “Strategies for a Better World”, p. 130.

⁸⁶ Schneider and Till, “Alternate Currents: Editorial”, p. 111.

⁸⁷ Schneider and Till, “Alternate Currents: An introduction”.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

this way, they sought to achieve real, but not necessarily built, results. The overriding concern of the *Alternate Current* symposium is in which way architecture may contribute to something outside itself. For these practitioners, the physical completion of a new square, a mobile structure, an urban plan, or a building, is not the only or even the primary goal. They are concerned instead with how physical changes might contribute to “other ends,” and how the architectural process is part of this.⁸⁹ To find alternatives to the conception of architecture as an enclosed and autonomous field where elaborations of forms, aesthetics and tectonics, constitute the discipline, was a shared concern for both organisers and speakers at Sheffield. “This is not to dismiss aesthetics and tectonics *tout court*,” Schneider and Till wrote, “but to see them always in the service of other ends. In particular there is a need, as these papers often argue, to address the social, economic, environmental and political issues of the day.”⁹⁰ The architects at the symposium presented their approaches, tools and works as ways to partially change some of these conditions, regarding their work as being “in the service of other ends” – local and situation-specific ends, for the most part.

***Experimental Architecture* exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia, 2008**

The Venice Biennale 2008 was named *Architecture beyond Building*.⁹¹ Visiting its main display at the Arsenale exhibition, I was not the only one lured by that title to believe that the exhibition would demonstrate how architects and architecture may expand beyond the incessant attention to material representation and formal experimentation to include sustainable, social and political concerns. In the main exhibition at the Arsenale, “starchitects” exhibited sculptural and conceptual pieces, among them Frank Gehry, UN Studio, Zaha Hadid, MVRDV, and Nigel Coates. Entering the show, we could not help bursting out in laughter when faced with what looked like outdated conceptual artworks. The jokes looked expensive though. Less pricy jokes were made by critics of the exhibition.⁹² Critical reviews were extensive, such as that of Justin McGuirk, who reviewed the biennale for *Icon*: “Here I thought, was a chance to showcase an emerging generation of activist architects tackling urban issues in ways that are nimbler

⁸⁹ Schneider and Till, “Alternate Currents: Editorial”, p. 111.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *11th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2008* was directed by Aaron Betsky.

⁹² The most quoted comment is a title by Kieran Long for the *Architectural Journal*: “Like nerds talking about sex”. He concludes: “This year’s Venice architecture biennale has been hijacked by awkward ambassadors of the parametric mafia and the elite of the avant-garde...”, Kieran Long, “Like nerds talking about sex”, *The Architects’ Journal* 18.09.08, 2008.

and more tactical than buildings.”⁹³ In stark contrast to the main show, therefore, the low-cost exhibition *Experimental Architecture* at the Italian Pavilion of Giardini, curated by Emiliano Gandolfi and Aaron Betsky, showed experimental practices pursuing social concerns through unconventional means. The curators presented the exhibited practices as working ethically and experimentally while addressing the social context; locally embedded and socially engaged while working towards changes in everyday environments.⁹⁴ The events in Rotterdam and Sheffield provided more extensive presentations of the practices and their actual works whereas displays in Venice relied on more communicative and playful contributions. Many works in this field are not easily explained by visual means and, in addition, the lavishness of the Arsenale exhibition seemed to have left small resources to the one in Giardini.⁹⁵ However, the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition did add more practices to my list; architects who clearly include social concerns in their practice. An essay by curator Emiliano Gandolfi “Think different, act different – Architecture beyond building” introduced the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition with something like a manifesto.

At a time of great urban emergency – it suffices to think of the data collected by UN Habitat, which show that by 2030 one person in three in the world will be living in a shantytown, and the growing prevalence of social inequity – architects seem to be gradually losing their importance, squeezed between the star system of architecture as spectacle and the ever more imperious demands of a global capitalism that approaches urban growth exclusively on the basis of economic calculations. In a climate like this, experimental architects are losing interest in the definition of increasingly sophisticated new forms, in expressive qualities or biomorphic structures, and are openly focusing on an observation of the current state of our towns and cities. Utopia emerges out of reality, out of study of the dynamics that govern spatial policies, and out of an understanding of social structures. It aims to define a different society that will be more equal and more permeable to different influences and cultures. If these objectives are going to be attained, there is an urgent necessity for a redefinition of the architect’s role, along with the formulation of strategies and

⁹³ McQuirk, “Venice Biennale 2008”, *Icon Magazine*, 065 (November), 2008.

⁹⁴ The exhibition included practices projecting ecological and sustainable visions as well as the “Master of Experiments” encompassing early drawings by Coop Himmelb(l)au, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, Morphosis, Madelon Vriesendorp.

⁹⁵ Visiting the biennale in October, I missed for instance talks and debates during four seminar days in the Dutch pavilion. Many exhibitors at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition talked here. However, all talks and debates were recorded and can be viewed on www.facultiesforarchitecture.org.

instruments capable of comprehending the surrounding context, of acting on complexities of the urban situation, of imagining an alternative.⁹⁶

The exhibition assembled practices who explore new or redefined ways of working, exploring and testing various tools in order to face situations and issues in more appropriate ways. These ways included more processual and immaterial works and elements of work. Here, Gandolfi suggested a radical redefinition of the architect's role "from that of a designer of buildings to that of an initiator of processes of urban change", perceiving a shift in architecture where actual buildings become "just one aspect of a more complex work of mediation ... between the needs of citizens on the one hand and local politicians on the other."⁹⁷ Architecture, he argues, is no longer considered an autonomous discipline. The hybridizations between different disciplines has led to a "shift from the image, object, the building towards the definition of relational strategies..."⁹⁸ Although the exhibited works ranged from actual buildings to ephemeral acts, the role of the architect as a mediator and the inclusion of social-processual works, defined many of the practices.

All four of the exhibitors at the *A Better World – Another Power* exhibition in NAI were present at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, with the same display: F.A.S.T., Recetas Urbanas (Santiago Cirugeda), Jeanne van Heeswijk + Dennis Kaspori, and CUP, while none of the participants at the *Alternate Currents* symposium in Sheffield were present in Venice. However, the list of practices at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition was quite extensive, the curators included for instance the French practice Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. In contrast to the four practices above, Lacaton & Vassal concentrate mainly on physical solutions. Their practice has been fighting against the Tabula Rasa-based planning policies of the French state, opposing plans to demolish post-war high-rise housing blocks on a large scale. In Venice, Lacaton & Vassal Architectes and Frédéric Druot displayed parts of their project *+Plus* where, instead of demolition, they proposed to add more space architectural qualities to the existing blocks, enabling effective, economic and sustainable solutions while preserving an established social environment. In the following, I will introduce a few of the practitioners participating in the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition.

⁹⁶ Emiliano Gandolfi, "Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building", in 2008 Fondazione La Biennale de Venezia (ed.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, pp. 18-19.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 19 and 28. Emiliano Gandolfi speaks about relational strategies. This phrase leads attention to relational aesthetics; however, the concept will not be discussed in this study.

ZUS [Zones Urbaines Sensibles] founded by Elma van Boxel and Kristian Koreman, develops both unsolicited and commissioned works, as well as research projects and publications. With their project *Glocal District* in Rotterdam, they displayed an alternative future for the central district of the city, currently set out to be a new office area. ZUS suggested an evolutionary development of smaller units where a bazaar – Bazar Curieux – was introduced as part of the new Rotterdam Museum.⁹⁹

A commission-based and grounded approach was displayed by the London practice of AOC (Agents of Change), who demonstrated one of their participatory tools for planning and programming – the *Polypoly* board game.¹⁰⁰ AOC explores processes of participation in commissioned works, developing programmes such as the mobile *Lift pavilion* – a covered public space – and several school extensions. Daisy Froud, scholar in modern languages and cultural studies, has led the exploration of dialogical tools on behalf of AOC. She searches for ways to include stakeholders and users in the programming process, teasing out needs and priorities at an early stage of the projects.



ZUS [Zones Urbaines Sensibles] at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, Venice 2008

Ph: Author

⁹⁹ ZUS has initiated, designed and organised funding for *De Dépendance*, which they call a centre for urban culture. This project gained support of LSI Project Investment and the Municipality of Rotterdam / Bureau Binnenstad. When NAI, Netherland Architecture Institute rebuilt their house in 2010-2011, debates took place at the *De Dépendance*. ZUS Zones Urbaines Sensibles (Elma van Boxel and Kristian Koreman), <http://www.zus.cc/work/urban_politics/127_De-Dependance.php?l=n>, accessed 20/03/2011.

¹⁰⁰ AOC has also designed the *Building Futures Games* for the Royal Institute of British Architects.



AOC (Agents of Change) demonstrating *Polypoly* at large scale at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, Venice 2008

Ph: Author



AOC – *The Lift*, 2008.

On photo: London 2010.

Ph: Author

The young practice Fantastic Norway came to Venice with their red caravan in tow, reporting from their tour through Northern Norway. Using an unconventional array of tools, Fantastic Norway sought to encourage local citizens to share ideas and wishes for their local environment. The duo of Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner presented their *Make-it-Fantastic-Method*, encouraging public debate and identifying local enthusiasts for collaborations in order to initiate and push local projects. At the opening of the Biennale, Fantastic Norway served waffles from their caravan. Many of the practices at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition in Venice explored new kinds of informal and temporary public spaces through interventions, finding new ways of being together. feld72 was one of them, combining a commission-based practice operated from Vienna with self-initiated urban interventions. Their *PublicTrailers* have been around London, Milano and Scenzhen/HongKong during international festivals of 2010 and 2009. At the Ring, outside Museumsquartier in Vienna, they organised a one week *Toronto Barbeque* in 2002 as their first intervention.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ The *Million Donkey Hotel* from 2001, situated in the Italian village Prata Sannita, is of the most published work of feld72. Feld72 reinstalled new use, hotel rooms, in rustic and abandoned stone wall spaces, feld72, "feld72", http://www.feld72.at/feld72_en/home.php, accessed 04/03/2011.



Fantastic Norway architects – Caravan. Source: Fantastic Norway



feld72 at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, Venice 2008. Ph: Author



feld72 – *Toronto Barbeque*, outside Museumsquartier along Ringstrasse, a week, Vienna 2002.
 Ph: Julia Lorber. Source: <http://www.archined.nl/nieuws/2010/december/alles-dreht-sich/>

The interventions by the Swedish duo of International Festival, architect Tor Lindstrand and choreograph Marten Spangberg, range from temporary public spaces to street theatre in a part-time practice.¹⁰² They presented *Piazza Taxingepplan* where they use the parking area of a shopping mall as a social and performative public space, occupying “a terrain where opportunities to activate and change spatio-temporal coordination in a pro-active manner are central.”¹⁰³



International Festival at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, Venice 2008

Ph: Author



International Festival, *Piazza Taxingepplan*, with Tensta Konsthall and Front,

Sweden 2006. Source: <http://international-festival.org/node/28567>

add on. 20 höhenmeter at the public square of Wallensteinsplatz in Vienna organised by Peter Fattinger, Veronika Orso and Michael Reper together with students of TU Vienna was a singular work, not a practice.¹⁰⁴ The temporary structure and usable object was on site for six weeks with intentions to provide for new experiences and a more active use of public space. Custom-made and prefabricated objects were added to the scaffolded structure, housing exhibition spaces, garden landscapes, a whirlpool, a music room, a table football game, a workplace, a canteen with an adjoining lounge, a panorama café, and an artist-in-residence area. A dense program of daily events included lectures, concerts, projects by visiting artists, and film screenings as part of the work.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Lena From, "Bortom det byggda", *Arkitektur*, 6, 2008, p. 73.

International Festival, Tor Lindstrand, and Marten Spangberg, "International Festival", <<http://www.international-festival.org/>>, accessed 19/03/2010.

¹⁰³ 11th International Architecture Exhibition Venice, Aaron Betsky, and Emiliano Gandolfi, *Out there: Architecture beyond Building: Experimental Architecture*, New York: Marsilio, 2008, p. 113.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Fattinger, Veronika Orso, and Michael Rieper, "add on. 20 höhenmeter", <<http://www.add-on.at/cms/cat23.html>>, accessed 19/03/2011.

¹⁰⁵ Aaron Besky and Emiliano Gandolfi (eds.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*. La Biennale di Venezia, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, p. 77.



Peter Fattinger, Veronika Orso, Michael Reper, students at TU Vienna, *add on. 20 höhenmeter*, Wallensteinsplatz, Vienna 2005. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/panlux/29949232>, ph: André3000.

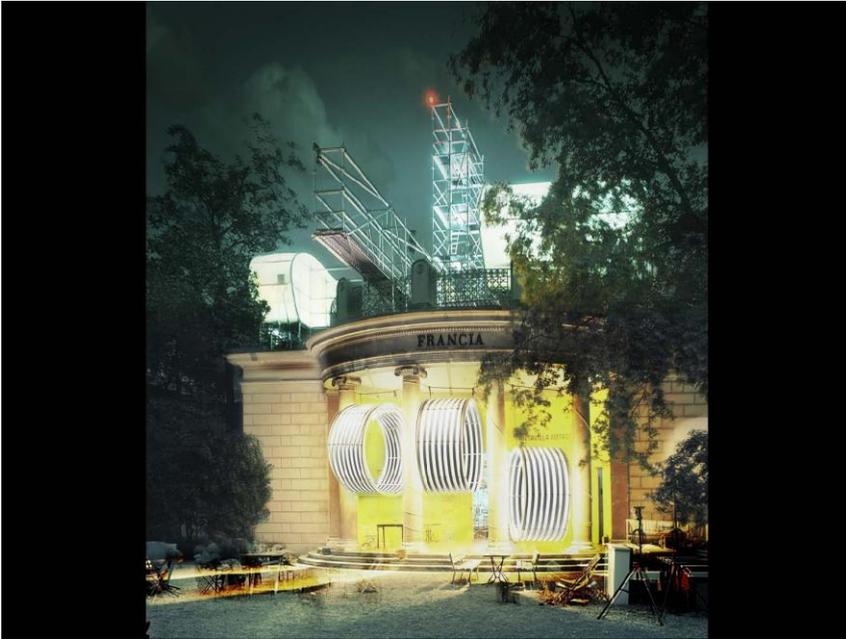


Source: <http://www.add-on.at/cms/side134.html> Ph. bottom right: © Peter Fattinger

Exyzt came to the Venice Biennale 2008 with their punching bag, not only participating in the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, but also in the afterlife project of *Re-Biennale*, comprising the reuse of biennale materials for the local self-initiated community centre of Morion. In the former Biennale of 2006, Exyzt had “occupied” the French pavilion with their work *Metaville*.¹⁰⁶ By means of a scaffolded structure inside and up through the roof, the group lived on site and hosted a series of public events, dinners and debates in collaboration with architect and curator Patrick Bouchain. The

¹⁰⁶ EXYZT, “Metaville”, <<http://www.exyzt.org>>, accessed 11/06/2009.

multidisciplinary group explores interventions of in European cities; planning, designing, building, hosting, and living on site.



EXYZT – *Metaville* in the French pavilion of *La Biennale di Venezia, the 10th International Architecture Exhibition*, Venice 2006. Ph: Brice Pelleschi / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

Raumlabor contributed to the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition with an interactive city drawing, inviting visitors to insert their own visions – as a kind of “training ground for utopians”.¹⁰⁷ Raumlabor Berlin has since 1999 been organised as a full-time project-based working collective, they intervene in the city to generate temporary public spaces; physical, theatrical and social spaces. However, interventions form only one part of their ways of working and their practice include a span from urban development strategies, dialogical processes, and playful design down to the scale of a chair like the prescriptions for *chaise bordelaise* conceptualised as a “participative, educative, social sculpture” and a “generator”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ The idea for the “stick on city” came after a visit by Dennis Crompton, member and activist of the Archigram. “Amazing, fanciful, quixotic. Undoubtedly they are among our architect-heroes.” This is Raumlabor’s characterisation of Archigram. Raumlabor Berlin, “Architecture beyond building - Stick on city”, <<http://www.raumlabor.net/?p=336>>, accessed 03/04/2011.

¹⁰⁸ Raumlabor Berlin, “Raumlabor Berlin: A New Approach to Urbanity”, <<http://www.raumlabor.net/>>, accessed 13/01/2010.



Raumlabor Berlin – *Kitchen Monument*, unpacking, opening, partying. Prototype in collaboration with Plastic Fantastic. Ph. below: © Rainer Schlautmann. Source all: © Raumlabor Berlin



Raumlabor Berlin – *Chaise Bordelaise*
Source: © Raumlabor Berlin,
<http://www.raumlabor.net/>



Raumlabor – Exhibition at Aedes Land of
Eichbaumoper, Berlin 2010. Ph: Author

The Italian group Stalker made a contribution at both the national pavilion of Italy and – rather modestly – in the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, writing with pencil in a corner of walls. As a collective of architects, artists and researchers in Rome, Stalker came together in the mid-1990s, exploring the city's margins – forgotten areas, particular qualities, and human occupations. Stalker has been organised as a non-profit network and has done mostly self-initiated projects, but also commissions, combining and partly financing their practice by positions in universities.¹⁰⁹ Stalker's approach is poetic and artistic while also politically engaged, focused on both sensuous experiences and social realities. In October 1995, Stalker gathered over 100 people for a continuous walk during five days, starting at 8 different destinations while following a 70 km circle from the centre of Rome. These walks, *dérives*, went through parts of the *Roman Campagna*, seemingly empty “beyond-city” areas with potential grounds for future actions as well as a growing number of both formal and informal undertakings – all contributing to the complexion, sensorial perception, and transformation of the city.¹¹⁰ Engaged in marginalised areas as well as communities, Stalker worked on an inventive participatory urban renewal of the 1km long housing block of Corviale, and has been engaged with groups of illegitimate residents, raising media attention, discussions and political debates.¹¹¹

All the practices at the *Experimental Architecture* assume social responsibility in a very direct way, facing issues of equality, accessibility, and diversity head on.¹¹² The particular problems, needs, resources and challenges posed by the situations in which these architects choose to work, form the ground and generator for their work. Yet, beyond some shared

¹⁰⁹ During 2002, Stalker founded the network Osservatorio Nomade (ON): “Stalker/On proposes experimental strategies for intervention founded on exploratory spatial practices, using playful, convivial, and interactive tactics that relate to an environment, its inhabitants and their local culture.” Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade, “Stalker/ON”, <http://www.osservatorionomade.net/>, accessed 12/10/2010.

¹¹⁰ In the first issue of the *Situationist International*, *dérive* was defined as: “A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. The term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of deriving.” “Definitions”, in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, Cal.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1958/1981.

¹¹¹ In 1999, Stalker invited a community of 5000 Kurds to stay at Campo Boario, a former slaughterhouse area in Rome. Several immigrant groups and Roman communities occupied the place but it also hosted an alternative cultural centre and Stalker's project office. A series of events were organised by Stalker, including large community lunches with all groups on site and the neighbouring communities to mix people and to sort out conflicts. The mayor of Rome decided later that the community of Kurds could stay at the Campo Boario, but the other occupants had to leave the place.

¹¹² Commissioned by ATER, the Public Housing Institute, in 2004, Stalker/ON worked for one year inside what had become a symbol of Italian social housing, the 958 metre long block of Corviale. Much of the common areas in the housing block had been squatted. The building was derelict, but even more problematic for its residents was its bad image. Stalker developed the work as “a multidisciplinary laboratory on urban space” where they collaborated with the residents. The process was named “Immaginare Corviale”. They started by setting up a local television channel managed by the residents. The channel displayed everyday life in Corviale and included residents in the transformation process while preparing the ground for more experimental solutions. Architects, artists and video makers organised series of workshops and projects to engage residents. A series of micro-transformations was realised by the residents themselves – such as to re-establish the common spaces in the block that had been occupied. Luca Molinari, “ON - Osservatorio Nomade / Stalker: Immaginare Corviale”, *A+U Architecture and Urbanism*, 420 (9), 2005.

concerns, it is not obvious how to depict and describe the common aims or ways of working for these practices. As long as the specificities and complexity of each situation stand as premises, each practice and indeed each project will turn out quite different. What they do have in common, though, is their willingness to experiment with many means and media in order to improve and change the current situation.



Stalker – Community lunch at *Campo Boario*, Rome 1999.

Source: www.osservatorionomade.net/

The *Experimental Architecture* exhibition was one of the few displays in Venice to actually explore *Architecture Beyond Building*. Neither chief curator Aaron Betsky nor Emiliano Gandolfi abstained from referring to utopia – but a utopia emerging out of realities. What Gandolfi emphasised and repeated in his introduction essay was how these architects work towards “imagining an alternative”.¹¹³ Aiming for a new awareness and possibilities of change, “the ultimate aim is imagination” Gandolfi wrote.¹¹⁴ Not all the exhibited practices would subscribe to talk of utopia, but they all seemed to look for new and shared ways of imagining. As Gandolfi continued,

The utopia of these proposals emerges from the reality that surrounds us, and is proposed as the limit to which experimental architecture tends, embarking on a search for a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings. It is imagining a more equal society, one that is more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the context.¹¹⁵

CUP (Center of Urban Pedagogy), present both at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition and at the American pavilion in Venice the same year, articulated the same concern when they stated the importance of “a

¹¹³ Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”, p. 18.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

critical sense and the imaginations of alternatives.”¹¹⁶(Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)) CUP emphasises the power of imagination in the practice of democracy, contributing to and educating people to develop a critical yet imaginative sense. “[E]mbarking on a search for a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings” was perhaps the most important common concern at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition; a concern we will revisit in connection to the following case studies and discussions.



Stalker – *Derivé* – Part of *Corviale* (958 metre long) rise in the front. Source: “Immaginare Corviale. Osservatorio Nomade”, *roulette:01*, 2006. <http://www.roulottemagazine.com/?p=128>

¹¹⁶ Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), “CUP”.

2.3 Selecting three architectural practices for further studies

Having visited the exhibitions and debates of *A Better World – Another Power* at NAI in Rotterdam, the *Alternate Currents* symposium in Sheffield during 2007, and the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition at *La Biennale di Venezia 2008*, I was equipped with a list of architectural practices, a set of concerns, and knowledge of a wide range of works and working methods characterising contemporary practice. The practices I had encountered shared a renewed interest in the social dimension of architecture; not as an ideological program but as a situational and context-specific approach. What nevertheless struck me, was the diversity of approaches and works, and how many of these practices tended to diffuse the distinctions between physical space and social practice treating involvements and initiatives of local people as an integrated and important part of their projects. In fact, the organisers and curators at the three events seemed mainly interested in practices who displayed processual works rather than buildings. There might be several reasons for that. Firstly, because what matters to these organisers is the way the architects' knowledge and competence can be used to serve people, environments and issues that are not well served by public authorities and market forces. Processes of spatial production, occupation, and social practices seem to have a more direct link to social concerns and political discussions. Secondly, through their processual work, the presented practices seem able to create something genuinely new in contemporary architecture. In contrast to the material focus on expressive forms, aesthetics and tectonics, today's processual works based on architectural knowledge are new and refreshing; expanding the discipline and demonstrating its multidisciplinary.

The aim of this study is not to identify or explore any one particular way of working, but rather to look at a range of ways in order to discover and understand the multiple ways in which social concerns informs contemporary architecture. Exposed to this diverse range, I have used the most basic tool; searching for similarities and differences, trying to find ways of classifying the varieties of approaches, strategies, tactics and tools. Three categories have been particularly important for capturing the practices' different ways of working; those are the mediating practices, the intervening practices, and the making practices. Let me briefly introduce each.

The three categories of making, intervening and mediating refer to different ways of working, yet as we shall see, they are also relevant for capturing the content of the works and for conceptualising how the architects engage with particular situations. We have encountered the categories of intervening and mediating in many of the debates, talks and writings at the

events reported here. To be sure, other attempts of classification have also been proposed. Ole Bouman, director at the NAI, classified the new ways of practicing architecture at one of the debates of *A Better World – Another Power*. He emphasised how the exhibiting practices cultivated a potential for change, not by escaping reality and complexity, but by dealing with reality in its most concrete manifestation, which includes organisational and bureaucratic levels. Bouman saw these practitioners as “dealing with the unknown unknown”; researching and exploring new ways of doing and thinking, aiming to pursue change on several levels which he described as form, organisation and mentality.¹¹⁷ The organisers and hosts of the *Agency* conference of 2008, classified practices according to “three broad thematic activities” which they named intervene, sustain and mediate. Although these categories resemble my own, they – with the exception of ‘sustain’ which refer primarily to sustainability – denote somewhat broader themes than the ones I introduce.

This study will investigate how architecture is practiced. Three practices have been selected for closer study. I am interested in the actual works as well as the architects’ strategies and tools; how they acquire, plan, and execute their works, whether self-initiated or commissioned. My selection was based on five criteria. Firstly, I looked for practices that demonstrated different approaches and ways of working, ‘making’, ‘intervening’, and ‘mediating’ kinds of practices. Secondly, I was primarily interested in full time practitioners, not theorists, or academics with a practice on the side. I looked for ways of working and reflections developed by means of, and within practice. Thirdly, I have chosen practices whose projects specifically address and involve residents and users. The selected practitioners all work in environments outside their own social class and cultural networks, consciously breaking away from art-events and closed collegial networks. They intend to shy away from those “alternative” projects that tend to attract the “open-minded” cultural class, working more often with rather unglamorous issues and situations. Fourthly, all three selected practices are concerned with the corporal reality of architecture, even when their work has a strong, processual dimension. This means that I am not looking at purely activist practices in the sense of those creating only single stunts and events, neither am I looking at practices whose output is mainly exhibitions and publications. Fifthly, the works I have chosen to study are all specific projects of a limited size, not projects on the scale of urban planning. In addition, I have stuck to European practices, both because they work within commensurable social frameworks, and because it was possible for me to follow their work reasonably closely over some period of time. Like

¹¹⁷ Based on my notes from the debate, “Open! Strategies for a better world” at the NAI, as part of the exhibition *A Better World – Another Power*.

Margaret Crawford, I am not only interested in one-off examples of socially engaged architecture, but to what degree social responsibility may become part of the architectural profession, its discourse and its practice.

Mediating – intervening – making: three ways of working

The term mediating has appeared several times through the presentations of practices and events. Prue Chiles and Leo Care in BDR, for instance, use the term to denote architects who “mediate between the strategic agencies involved in policy-making and the affected communities.”¹¹⁸ FAST (Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory), similarly, states that they mediate in cases of abuse of power in the field of urban planning. Emiliano Gandolfi speaks about mediation in its wider sense, and argues, under the subtitle “Mediating strategies” in *arg*, in which he refers to Stalker, FAST, Estudio Teddy Cruz, CUP, Santiago Cirugeda and Jeanne van Heeswijk, that “These practices demonstrate instances in which the architect is becoming more and more a strategist rather than a designer of buildings...” acting as “go-between” or as “mediators between situation, places and people who inhabit them.”¹¹⁹ Gandolfi redefines the architect’s role “from that of a designer of buildings to that of an initiator of processes of urban change.”¹²⁰ As mentioned earlier, Jens Brandt of Supertanker/UTF in Copenhagen presented several urban projects where they operate as “catalysts” and in “go-between” positions. Here, architects are seeking to raise awareness about the qualities and problems in the local environment, thus preparing for social interaction, encouraging local engagement and promoting participation – also at the level of building.

In the *Oxford Thesaurus of English*, the verb mediate spans from communicate, moderate and transmit, to negotiate, interpose, intercede, and reconcile. A mediator could be regarded someone who transmits and negotiates as well as intervenes, like an agent. The organisers of the AHRA *Agency* conference defined mediator as “not only an intermediary but also pro-active and practical when working with and within the production of space.”¹²¹ Mediating encompasses a variety of processes concerning programming and planning, but also educational activities, and processual works per se.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Chiles and Care, “A Vocabulary of Engaging Practices: Reflecting on the Work of the Bureau of Design Research”, pp. 90-91.

¹¹⁹ Gandolfi, “Strategies for a Better World”, p. 130.

¹²⁰ Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”, p. 25.

¹²¹ Florian Kossak et al., “Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures”, in Florian Kossak et al. (eds.), *Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 6.

¹²² This active or proactive significance of mediation may be compared with Bruno Latour’s conception of actors – as mediators rather than just transmitters. This notion forms part of his theories which I will touch

Mobile structures and gardens are common tools in such mediating strategies, Public Works use both. They explore these tools, attempting to gather, engage and activate people, to facilitate new connections between users and public space. As mediating practices, their works include not only architectural objects or things, but also intangible parts called “socio-spatial structures” and “social and discursive spaces”.¹²³ Several architectural practices, or practices combining architectural and artist strategies, have utilised caravans or mobile constructions; for instance such as Raumlabor, Jeanne van Heeswijk, and Fantastic Norway.

Many mediating practices work in ways also found in contemporary art, what is often labelled community-based art, socially engaged art, participatory, interventionists, research-based, or collaborative art. Claire Bishop observes that these art “practices are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity”.¹²⁴ The same might be said of the architectural practices, which seem to cultivate multi- or interdisciplinary works of spatial practice. Public Works provide one example consisting of both of architects and artists. Cirugeda regards himself as both architect and artist while FAST collaborates closely with artists.

Yet, if we are to understand how these theoretical elaborations on mediating relate to architecture and architectural practice, we need to study actual works and specific situations. I have chosen the architectural practice of Fantastic Norway in order to explore and investigate mediation as an architectural strategy.

My second category is made up of intervening practices. The term frames a way of working, suggesting works that materialise in between or in the midst of something else – as an intervention in the city. The term covers meanings such as to intercede, interpose, take place, step in, interfere, and intrude. Unlike making, intervening suggests more readily an ethical or political meaning, something posing an alternative, and with some expectations of affecting change. In the urban field, imaginative projects are often said to intervene in hegemonic and familiar environments, adding to and interfering with established structures. Intervening is framed by actions and temporary physical presence. The term often refers to activism and activist approaches. Concepts such as pirating, guerrilla activities, and urban

upon later. With his conceptions of mediating human and non-human actors, Latour seeks to get beyond deterministic explanations of cause and effect when explaining the social world and its constructions. In his theory, mediators transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they carry, “offering occasions, circumstances, and precedents” where “new and unpredictable situations will ensue”. Latour’s theories relate to all kinds of social connections and certainly not only to architecture. His emphasis on active and proactive agents may serve to expand conceptions of mediation in an architectural context.

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 59.

¹²³ public works, “public works”.

¹²⁴ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents”, *Artforum International*, February 1st., 2006.

pioneers may also be included in the notion of intervention. This approach has a long tradition in the art world and may be exemplified by for instance Christo and Jeanne Claude's "textile" interventions. The temporary work by Feld72 such as the urban strategies applied at the Toronto Barbeque in Vienna can stand as a characteristic example of interventions by socially engaged architects. International Festival is another group combining performance and spatial practice in their interventions. These works, and certainly those by Santiago Cirugeda, demonstrate how such interventions are used to carry and communicate a message – concerning urban, social and political issues. While none of the interventions presented in this chapter are conceived as negative protests but rather as positive contributions, they do communicate the need for change. Cirugeda expands the communicative part of his projects by publishing prescriptions and videos on the internet, thus adopting a mediating approach as well. Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kasper's *Blue House*, similarly, started off as an intervention, but developed over several years to become a place which mediated between different groups and forces. When it comes to the mediating practice I have chosen for my close reading – Exyzt – they have performed playful interventions in many European cities, occupying and running a site for a period of weeks. I have chosen them because of their consistent exploration of intervention as an architectural strategy, and as a way for architects to contribute to society. Exyzt thus provides a valuable example of how social concerns trigger new ways of working in the urban environment.

The third category in my tentative categorisation is making. I use the term to denominate practices who maintain a relatively traditional architectural practice in the sense that they work with design and the making of buildings: the physical realisation of plans and projects. These practices are less likely to be considered alternative, as their work and "end-products" are typically not processual. Making is not solely about tectonics and aesthetics, however, nor is it about communicating or representing meaning. It is used here in an eminently concrete sense, to denote the construction of physical environments, large or small, including all the pragmatic, functional and economic choices that go into their making. This is not a discussion on the poetics of making or an attempt to defend a dispersing discipline. It is meant as a simple and open category; a help to see what is done and why it is done in that particular way. Had I drawn solely from the practices usually associated with social engagement, making would not be a category. At the three events presented above, it was rather "activism, "alternatives" and "architecture beyond building" that constituted the selection criteria, and the selected practices tended to rely on mediating or intervening approaches in their work. Even in the case of practices actually doing buildings, such as AOC (Agents of Change), it was their mediating strategies that were

emphasised, while the impact of these strategies on their making of buildings was not in focus. For my own part, I am interested in the way social concerns and political consciousness are integrated into architectural practice. The most persistent and innovative investigators of social concerns through the making of architecture is, in this study, Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. While the exhibition in Venice displayed only the argument of *+Plus*, this study will look at several of their works.

Of course, none of the three practices, Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, keep to one way of working only. Making, mediation and intervention are integral aspects of all the practices presented above, not least the practices we will look at in the next three chapters. Nevertheless, by defining these three types, and using them as provisional sorting device, I believe nuances and differences may become apparent, allowing us a more incisive understanding of these architects' way of working.

To briefly sum up my selection criteria and my main perspectives. From the three events described above, I gleaned some key concerns, characterising this particular field. *A Better World – Another Power* focused on bottom-up approaches and activism, the Sheffield symposium called for alternative ways of working, putting aesthetics and tectonics in the service of other ends.¹²⁵ At the Venice exhibition, Emiliano Gandolfi, asked for architects to take responsibility and to search for a “shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings.”¹²⁶ Based on these concerns and on the pool of practices presented at the events, I have singled out three ways in which this engagement has been attempted translated into architectural practice, using them as selection criteria for my case studies. I wanted by this to include a broad range of ways in which social concerns are explored in architecture, avoiding the opposition between mainstream and alternative as well as between building and process. By looking intently at works and ways of working, I seek to elucidate some of the ways new social concerns inform contemporary architectural practice.

¹²⁵ Schneider and Till, "Alternate Currents: Editorial", p. 111.

¹²⁶ Gandolfi, "Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building", p. 28.

3 Fantastic Norway

The duo Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød established the architectural practice Fantastic Norway in 2003. They set off, with their red caravan in tow, to live and work in towns and villages of Northern Norway. Their residencies lasted from two weeks to seven months, and for three years, Haffner and Aasarød moved continuously. In 2008, Fantastic Norway settled in Oslo, however, still exploring strategies and tools developed during their nomadic practice.

To study their works and their practice has been an enjoyable but challenging journey. Focusing mainly on processes during their travelling practice, the outcome is often intangible, leaving few traces in the built environment. To study their work, therefore, written sources became particularly important. Haffner and Aasarød used local newspapers as an important tool, and their columns and interviews offer key material to the researcher. Beyond the booklets produced by Haffner and Aasarød, they did not document their own work during the tour and neither did they actively document their actions. The only exception is the work at Kolstad in Trondheim, which was submitted as a diploma project for Håkon Matre Aasarød.¹ Interviews with Erlend Blakstad Haffner (once) and Håkon Matre Aasarød (several) have therefore been essential sources of information in my research. During these interviews, Aasarød described their tours and reconstructed the tacit, processual aspects of their work. My knowledge of these processes – who they met with, what kind of dialogues took place, etc. – is largely based on these interviews and newspaper interviews. Written sources and interviews are generally in Norwegian and I have translated the extracts and quotes included.

¹ Håkon Matre Aasarød: "We did not think about photographing ourselves... When you are two persons communicating with people, you cannot leave the situation to photographs." Lisbet Harboe and Håkon Matre Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*, Oslo, 2010.

3.1 *The tour of Northern Norway, 2003-2007: “Architects have to remember their social responsibility.”*²

“Architects have to remember their social responsibility. They serve not only the ones with the money bag, but just as well the general public.”³ This statement came from Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød during an interview in 2004. Published in a local newspaper, it expresses a concern essential to their practice – a concern that sent them off on their explorative architectural journey.

In 2002, starting their third year of study at the Bergen School of Architecture (BAS), Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner joined the school excursion to the northern parts of Norway, which included a stop in the town of Brønnøysund. At BAS – led by Svein Hatløy and deeply influenced by Oskar Hansen and his concept *open form* – education proceeded through three steps. First year the education concentrated on “me”, second year on “you” – referring to clients – and finally in third year they expanded to the whole “we”.⁴ Aasarød explains what a revelation it was for them to reach the “we” – where architecture started to gain real meaning. “I believe both Erlend and I had a sort of epiphany, feeling that things started to connect, and we saw how we set upon a knowledge that mattered, not only regarding the location of ceilings, walls and beams, but in a larger context.”⁵ When the school excursion reached Brønnøysund, the group became aware of a public space, an “allmenning” in the process of being sold to private developers.⁶ The sale would lead to privatisation of the one public space on which the town was founded. Haffner and Aasarød, together with a group of residents in Brønnøysund, did not see how the sale would benefit the town. So when the school excursion continued, Haffner and Aasarød stayed behind to work in collaboration with the residents’ association and the local artist Vibeke Steinholm, organising public meetings and distributing pamphlets, while calling attention to the significance of this common space named Sørbytorvet. The sale was stopped and the public space saved – at the last

² Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Fantastic Norway Architects: Profile”, <http://fantasticnorway.no/?page_id=11>, accessed 30/04/2010.

³ Trygve Lundemo, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Mobile arkitekter på folkets side”, *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 21/12/2004.

⁴ Lisbet Harboe, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*, Oslo, 2010.

The Bergen School of Architecture (BAS) with Head of school, Svein Hatløy, as the ideological leader, was grounded on the idea of open form by Oskar Hansen, giving attention to: identity of place and its people, where BAS took a particular responsibility for the coastal culture; the human subject as the ever centre of spatial and architectural explorations; and the socially engaged architect in dialogue with individuals and society.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶ The “allmenning” is a common space of free access in an urban environment or an area of shared access in rural and wild landscapes. The “allmenning” will be better explained later in this chapter, in relation to the work by Fantastic Norway at Kolstad.

minute.⁷ Haffner and Aasarød, together with their artist collaborator, continued their work and developed an alternative plan for Sørbytorvet, a plan including new use of the old run-down fire station at the back of the public space. The two students collaborated with local enthusiasts, groups and organisations to develop a programme and a project for an “art-base” – a place serving residents mainly, but catering for tourists as well.⁸ They were involved in all aspects of its development, including financial ones.



Students of architecture at Sørbytorvet in Brønnøysund. Source: Fantastic Norway

⁷ Kirsti Hovland, "Gamle bygg resirkuleres", VG, Oslo, 15/01/2004.

⁸ Haffner and Aasarød went back to Brønnøysund many times to develop the art-base and to do other works. They continued to develop the programme for the *Brønnøy Art-Base* together with local groups and interested parts, working to raise enthusiasm, and to secure popular and political support. They took part in the work to seek funding from different sources in order to realise the project. The project went through several phases while growing in programme, complexity, and partners. The programme for the art-base included exhibition space, workshops, sound studio, residency accommodation, as well as an art and dance school for children. They designed a new building. However, the *Brønnøy Art-Base* was cancelled right before construction work was due to start in 2010. In addition, they were commissioned by the Brønnøy Harbour Authorities and Brønnøy Council to develop plans and strategies for the harbour areas and the centre of Brønnøysund based on their methods of civic mobilisation, a method which will be explained and discussed later in this chapter.

For Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Asarød, the encounter with Brønnøysund was momentous. They stumbled over a situation where public space was threatened by destruction – they acted against it – and in collaboration with local enthusiasts they succeeded to preserve the common public space. Haffner and Asarød discovered that they enjoyed this way of working: in close dialogue with both citizens and the specificities of the place, contributing to a process and a project that secured and developed important public qualities and common activities for the residents of Brønnøysund.

They learned also that they possessed knowledge about the physical and social environment that was actually much wanted and needed. “It gave us lots of self-confidence when we discovered that what we had learned at BAS was not general knowledge.”⁹ At their first public lecture in Brønnøysund, Haffner and Asarød talked about the value of public space. The audience consisted of inhabitants of Brønnøysund, including representatives from the local council and the newspaper, *Brønnøysund Avis*. “I remember we thought people would regard it as boring; that they would not care. But people thought it was so exciting.”¹⁰ For Haffner and Asarød, the meeting with Brønnøysund offered another meaning to architecture; working in reality and with reality, pursuing a social responsibility through architecture. Back in Bergen, they started to “cook and think” on how to work as architects. They had experienced how they were able to manoeuvre in the public realm and among non-architects, and had got a sense that they “could be the ones moving it in the right direction.”¹¹

The two students continued to work on the *Brønnøy Art-Base* project alongside their school assignments, not only planning and designing but also working persistently to realise the project. They helped applying for funding from a variety of sources; contributed to keep dialogues going with neighbours and other groups, and they kept trying to involve interested parties in the project. Keeping in close contact with citizens as well as people in power positions on different levels was vital to gain local and regional support.¹² After 3rd year, Haffner and Asarød decided to leave school and head for the road, looking for places in transition that could benefit from their architectural knowledge and ways of working.

⁹ Lisbet Harboe and Håkon Matre Asarød, *Interview (07.01.2010) with Håkon Matre Asarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*, Oslo, 2010.

¹⁰ Lisbet Harboe and Håkon Matre Asarød, *Interview (11.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Asarød*, Oslo, 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*



Source: Fantastic Norway

The caravan tour

Helped by a modest grant from the National Association of Norwegian Architects (NAL) in 2003, the two students scraped together the money to buy an old Toyota estate car and a used caravan, a *Bjølseth 470 deluxe* from

1984.¹³ They painted the caravan red. The choice of a caravan was a pragmatic one, but included also a conscious play on its connotations. The distinctive red was a means to attract attention as well as a way to transcend and subvert class expectations: “We chose to use the caravan because we thought it would make it easier for people to contact us.”¹⁴ The caravan was “one of our most important tools”, they recount, constituting also a distinctive and easily recognizable brand mark. It was not their only tool, however.¹⁵ The caravan contained an equipped office, a small meeting table, a kitchen, and beds to be used when driving between places.¹⁶ They had a drive and a mission to work pro-actively, to share their knowledge of the value of architecture and common space, to include local residents in developing their own environment, and to initiate projects wherever there was a need. “We wanted to get away from what we experienced as a passive architectural discipline. We wanted a more active approach to the field, where we ourselves initiated projects and come into dialogue with the local community at an early stage.”¹⁷ These intentions, as Aasarød pointed out, matched their wish for adventure.

The coastal towns of Northern Norway are mostly developed and built in the post-war era. Several of them were bombed or burned during the Second World War.¹⁸ None of these towns appear with narrow streets, charming houses and small public squares. Instead, they have a dry post-war look, gridiron plans, vast open spaces, and simple, low houses. Residents in general take little pride in their town or their public spaces; their pride is rather invested in the spectacular surrounding landscapes. These Northern towns are now places in transition, undergoing extensive changes from communities built on fishing industry and general industry to situations where prospects of growth seem all in the service sector as commercial and touristic enterprises. They are threatened by decline, and many of them are shrinking. Yet, the spectacular nature in the region attracts tourists and the Coastal Express; subsidised by the state government, it still maintains an important route along the coast. Haffner and Aasarød experienced how difficult it was for local politicians in this region to abandon the traditional

¹³ The grant from NAL, the National Association of Norwegian Architecture, 2003, amounted to NOK 15 000. Paint was sponsored (offered for free) by Jotun and fabric by the Gubrandsdalen Uldvare. Haffner and Aasarød did the work themselves.

¹⁴ Sonja B. Wimpelmann, "Spenstige ideer om Brønnøysund sentrum", *Helgeland Arbeiderblad*, Brønnøysund, 07/09/2004.

¹⁵ Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*.

¹⁶ “We wanted to be visible as architects and easy to relate to for the general public. It is easy to take equipment with you and it’s easy to spot you when you arrive in a new place.”

Anna Bates and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Fantastic Norway", *Icon Magazine*, 040 (October), 2006.

¹⁷ Kristin Guttormsen, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Vafler i Venezia", *Dagbladet*, Oslo, 25/05/2008.

¹⁸ In Finnmark and Northern Troms, the most northern parts of Norway, all towns were burned down by the German army in at the end of the World War II as part of a scorched earth policy.

notion of industry, with its emphasis on land use, infrastructure, and global companies, and to turn their attention to local initiatives and enterprises, focusing more on physical environments, social life, and leisure activities in town. And even if such a change was accepted by the local councils, they were quick to call upon the branding industry to attract residents, enterprises and tourists. Haffner and Aasarød considered these campaigns often to be superficial and expensive ventures. The two were concerned with the power held by global capitalistic and commercial powers in the small towns of Northern Norway, threatened by both enterprises and people leaving.¹⁹ They themselves looked for other and more grounded ways to transform and develop these shrinking communities. “We wanted to let the caravan lead us to local societies in transformation who should get some help to state values and to form a basis for the development of the place. We wanted to make the caravan a forum of discussions...”²⁰

When Haffner and Aasarød left school in 2003, there were no clear plans for a tour. Quite early on, however, the initial ideas evolved into a mode of practice. The list below, based on newspaper articles and conversations with Håkon Matre Aasarød, more or less reconstructs the caravan tour during 2003-2008.

Brønnøysund, 2002-2003: 2 weeks + many additional visits until 2010

Narvik, 2003-2004: 6 months + additional visits = a total of 8 months

Brønnøysund, 2004: 6 weeks

Bodø, 2004-2005: 2 months

Vardø, 2005: 3 weeks

Henningsvær in Lofoten, 2005: 3 weeks

Nyvågar in Lofoten, 2005: 2 weeks

Vega, 2005, 2 weeks

Kolstad in Trondheim, 2006, 2 weeks + many additional visits

Exhibition in Berlin at Projekt 0047, 2006: 1 week²¹

Svartisen in Meløy, 2006, many visits and without the caravan

Levang in Leirfjord, 2007, many visits and without the caravan

Larvik, 2007, many visits and without the caravan

Romsås in Oslo, 2007, 1 month

Venice, Italy, La Biennale, 2008, *Experimental Architecture*, 1.5 week²²

¹⁹ Håkon Matre Aasarød, *Tjåna som kjem tå sæ sjøl*, Oslo, 2007, p. 17.

²⁰ Jan Carlsen, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "De nye barfotarkitektene", *Arkitektmytt*, 16, 2004.

²¹ *Dugnad: Social Design for Scandinavian Towns*. Exhibitors: Fantastic Norway and artist "Håkki" from Sweden.

²² The list includes town and villages where Haffner and Aasarød used their specific way of working.



Fantastic Norway at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition at *La Biennale di Venezia*, the 11th *International Architecture Exhibition 2008*. Ph: Author

A similar approach was used for all the places on this list, although the stay in Henningsvær, Nyvågar, Svartisen and Levang focused more on single projects than the others. After each of the residencies, Fantastic Norway would continue to work on the projects initiated during their first stay, often leading to one or more additional visits. Haffner and Aasarød described their way of working for the national newspaper *Aftenposten* in 2005:

We always map the places in advance, we are conscious about where we are going and what we can contribute with. We take up residency in the towns were we work, staying overnight at “uncle and aunts” whom we meet on the way. We aim wide and get in contact with everybody from the community’s enthusiasts, to schools, politicians, organisations and local businesses. Then we conclude the stay by presenting an architectural idea. When we leave, it is important that the development continues and that people in the community take on the project.²³

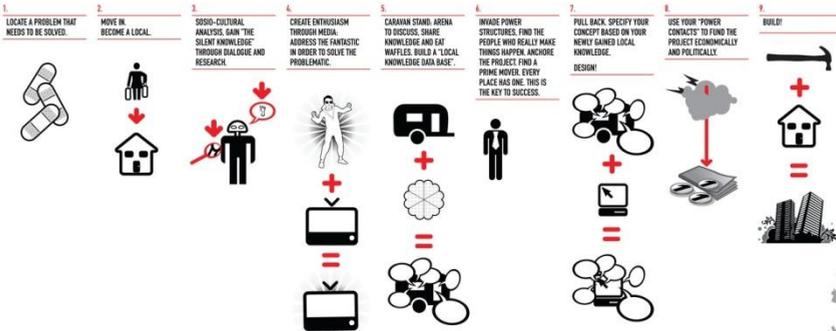
This account has been developed and refined in later presentations of Fantastic Norway’s work. At their 2006 exhibition for the gallery of Projekt

²³ Caroline Korsvoll, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Unge arkitekter i skuddet”, *Aftenposten*, Oslo, 24/04/2005.

0047 in Berlin, their way of working was presented as recipes. In the 2008 Venice Biennale, the method was comprised into nine points, into what they called the *Make-It-Fantastic-Method*:

MAKE IT FANTASTIC

ARCHITECTS ARE LIKE DOGS. YOU HAVE THE DOGS THAT FETCH THE STICK THE OWNER TROUGHS. THEN YOU HAVE THE HUNTING DOG THAT SCARES UP BIRDS FOR THE OWNER TO SHOOT DOWN. FANTASTIC NORWAY ARCHITECTS AIM TO BE THIS KIND OF DOG. FOLLOW OUR MANUAL AND LEARN HOW TO MAKE IT FANTASTIC.



Fantastic Norway – The “Make-it-Fantastic” method at the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2008. Source: Fantastic Norway

1. Locate a problem that needs to be solved.
2. Move in. Become local.
3. Socio-cultural analysis. Gain “the silent knowledge” through dialogue and research.
4. Create enthusiasm through media. Address the fantastic in order to solve the problematic.
5. Caravan stand: Arena to discuss, share knowledge and eat waffles. Build a “local knowledge data base”.
6. Invade power structures. Find the people who really make things happen. Anchor the project. Find a prime mover. Every place has one. This is the key to success.
7. Pull back. Specify your concept based on your newly gained local knowledge. Design!
8. Use your “power contacts” to fund the project economically and politically.
9. Build!²⁴

²⁴ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Make it Fantastic”, *Venice Biennale 2008, 11th International Architecture Exhibition*, 2008.

This ‘nine point method’ offers a short-hand introduction to Fantastic Norway’s way of working. It describes how they approach a local situation and seek extensive knowledge about the place to take part in urban planning, project initiations, programming, design, and - wherever possible – follow the subsequent development. However, the nine points give little hint of the way they adjust their approach to the reality of each specific situation. In this sense, the *Make-It-Fantastic-Method* is not only a simplification, but in parts a reduction of what they actually did.²⁵ Looking at their work Bodø and Kolstad later in this chapter, the practice will be revealed as richer and more complex than what the nine point method gives credit for.

Self-initiation is at the core of their tour and a point of departure for their way of working.²⁶ To locate problems, ideas, local enthusiasts, interesting places, and sources of funding, Haffner and Aasarød regularly skimmed through local newspapers and watched local television news. After their first few residencies, they had built up a network that would support their work throughout the region. Although at first sight it may look as if Fantastic Norway travels from town to town hitting on whatever is there, yet they always framed an issue or a transformation process to work with, and they were careful to ensure funding to cover a considerable part of their stay and work. The two became experienced in fundraising and in how to identify and get in contact with potential project supporters. During their tour, Fantastic Norway worked on all scales, ranging from large strategy plans to small interventions, balancing between self-initiated works and commissions by public or private developers, local councils, and public institutions. For instance, the very far Northern town of Vardø, with its 2000 inhabitants, was a town in real decline. Haffner and Aasarød discovered a local enthusiast with interesting ideas, and secured the support of the local council. There was no local money available, so Fantastic Norway applied to the Freedom of Expression Foundation, *Fritt Ord*, and received funding to raise local engagement and develop the ideas.

During the five year tour, Haffner and Aasarød developed their ways of working, their use of media, and their writing, while teaching themselves the necessary architectural tools and techniques. Their residency of in Narvik – the first stop on their caravan tour – was particularly important in this respect. They stayed for six months and came back several times to follow up on projects. The two students had not previously worked in an architectural office or for clients. As Aasarød pointed out, they are rather autodidact – with

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Self-initiation is used for works and processes initiated by non-professionals and/or architects. Likewise, self-programming is used where architects and/or non-professionals initiate and develop the programmes themselves, for both projects to be built and for processual work.

“a really steep learning curve in Narvik”.²⁷ Narvikgården AS, a private enterprise owned by the Narvik municipality, commissioned Haffner and Aasarød to initiate a broad public process that was to discuss the potential development of the vast industrial site, “Trekanten”, in the middle of town, an area gradually deindustrialising.²⁸ Arriving to Narvik with their newly acquired caravan, Haffner and Aasarød started up by mapping the town and its industrial areas, writing in the local newspaper, and engaging in dialogues with people. Every Saturday, at the main square, the caravan was open to visitors.



Narvik – In between sea and mountains with the industrial area of “Trekanten” [The Triangle] occupying the midst of town. Source: <http://norgebilder.no/> © Statens kartverk.

Narvik has about 18.500 inhabitants and most of them saw an ugly unworthy town, situated in the midst of fantastic natural surroundings. Haffner and Aasarød wrote a series of ten columns and gave several interviews in the local newspaper *Fremover*, to create interest, enthusiasm, pride, and engagement – and to encourage the inhabitants of Narvik to visit the caravan on Saturdays. In the first interview they announced: “Through our weekly column we wish to create engagement and accomplish a dialogue with inhabitants of Narvik. Saturdays the column will be on print and we will be outside Folkets Hus with our red caravan.”²⁹ They encouraged people to

²⁷ “We sat and drew plans in Photoshop. We had an intense meeting with reality. I believe we handled it quite well... But we knew nothing about the professional life and had a very steep learning curve.”

Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

²⁸ Haffner and Aasarød had earned this commission on the strength of their work and lectures in Brønnøysund. At one of these lectures, this time for the tourist industry, Bård Jervan from Mimir was present. He recommended Fantastic Norway. “We got a telephone from Narvikgården” Aasarød recalls, “saying: “In our strategy document it says that we absolutely have to get you up here. Can you come now?” To assign two students of architecture to such a job demonstrates certain open-mindedness of the commissioners, but, not at least, I believe, it demonstrates, the communicative abilities and broad architectural knowledge by Haffner and Aasarød. *Ibid*.

²⁹ Karen Marie Berg et al., “Inviterer til tidenes idédugnad”, *Fremover*, Narvik, 24/10/2003.

come with their proposals, ideas and thoughts about Narvik – what they denoted “the silent knowledge”. They asserted that all information from people in town would be written down and registered. This information was assembled into a “local knowledge database” – continuously expanding. The two developed programmes and sketch projects on the basis of ideas and initiatives from citizens and local groups, as well as from Narvikgården AS, and in collaboration with local enthusiasts, they helped secure political and financial support. Their initial commission concerned “Trekanten” only, to propose development strategies and future projects for the area, yet in their newspaper writings and caravan dialogues, they took on the whole town. Haffner and Aasarød sought to raise awareness of Narvik’s qualities, activities, and public life, to promote initiatives from people who were not part of local power networks, while developing ideas and designing projects emerging in the process.



Fantastic Norway at the main square “Torvet” of Narvik. Source: Fantastic Norway

Haffner and Aasarød’s weekly newspaper column lasted ten weeks. Given the central civic role of local newspapers in Norway, the choice of media was hardly coincidental.³⁰ The column was a forum to talk about Narvik;

³⁰ In 2003 the local newspaper *Fremover* had a daily circulation of nearly 10 000 copies, 9 902 to be correct, and about 27 000 readers, according to Mediebedriftenes landsforbund, Norwegian Media Businesses’ Association, <http://mediebedriftene.no>. The newspaper is published in Narvik, serving the town and the

informing and discussing specific places, buildings and activities, and trying out ideas regarding public spaces and urban life. These writings allowed for two things. Firstly, it gave them a forum in which to elaborate on and argue for important values and qualities in the environments – raising pride and engagement. Secondly, they could present the ideas and contributions they had collected through dialogues and discussions in the caravan and around town. Ten Saturday mornings their column appeared in the newspaper. Haffner and Aasarød were present in or outside the caravan at the town square, ready to continue discussions. An extract from one of their ten columns in *Fremover* demonstrates their way of communicating, their values and views. This is their ninth article in a row. The previous ones had enthusiastically highlighted qualities in the built environment and the public squares in the whole of town, suggesting humorous and provoking changes. Their Christmas story on December 21st called attention to the potential of the large underused industrial area of “Trekanten”, emphasising the role each citizen may play in the development of their hometown and its life. “At the beginning was the will” is the title of this story.

Once in a while something beautiful happens down at Trekanten. In the evening, when the winter night is closing in and the locomotives are placed for rest in the stalls, something warm and enchanting sneaks along the house walls. The first time we became aware of it was after a long and hard working day. With a simple dinner inside, we sank down in the sofa-corner letting TV take control. While we sat there, winter sick and mope, something, like a magical ambience, gradually entered the living room. Through snow and darkness outside, passed railway points and parked locomotives, the contours of a melody sneaked through our window. Was it a figment of our imagination? Maybe dark days and long working evenings had just simply gone to our heads. Still, both heard the frail melody through the snow flurry outside. We opened the window, slightly confused, and the living room was suddenly filled with beautiful voices in harmony. Passed the railroad tracks, we dimly saw an open window with light inside wherefrom choral singing poured out. “Deilig er jorden” [Beautiful Savior] The railroad choir was rehearsing. The unassuming choral singing made the railroad area of Trekanten to a completely new place. We turned off the TV, opened the window, letting snow and melody into the living room. Song after song we sat in the sofa

surrounding region. The population of Narvik on 1 January 2004 was 18 542, according to Statistisk sentralbyrå, Statistics Norway, <http://www.ssb.no>.

corner without exchanging many words, but with the strong sense that several surprises were lurking at Trekanten. Music and words have much in common. Both song and words has the objective to communicate something, be it just a meaning, an atmosphere, or a story. In beginning was the Word, as it is written. Or call it just as well the will. The will to express. At Trekanten, the will can be found already. The choir sings it songs at Trekanten and this community makes the railroad area into a unique place every week. Because will is the key to all development and growth. The will is the driving force that makes dreams into reality.³¹



Narvik in December daylight – “Trekanten” above and the main square “Torvet” below.



Ph: Tore Solberg. Source: <http://www.botsfor.no/dugnader/narvik/Narvik4-A4.pdf>
Ulf Haraldsen, et al., *Dugnadsrapport "E6 gjennom Narvik"*, 2005.

Haffner and Aasarød wanted residents of Narvik to realise the potential significance of their own actions. Concluding their Christmas story, they encouraged local people to reclaim the area of “Trekanten” right away,

³¹ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "I begynnelse var viljen", *Fremover*, Narvik, 20/12/2003.

because, as they argued, “The foundation of urban development has to come from those who make up the town; namely the citizens.”³² This conclusion was an authorisation of the citizens of Narvik, and a call for them to act.

“We want to draw attention to the social responsibility of architects”³³ proclaimed Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød in several interviews during 2004 and 2005, echoing their statement at the opening of this chapter; “The architects have to remember their social responsibility. They serve not only the ones with the money bag, but just as well the general public.”³⁴ Social responsibility is a translation of the Norwegian term “samfunnsansvar”, which literally translated would be “societal responsibility”. The responsibility flagged up by Fantastic Norway is societal in its conception and approach, not focusing on specific social problems, but taking up a rather broad perspective, integrating social, economic, cultural, organisational, political, and architectural aspects. Their sense of social responsibility led Haffner and Aasarød to step out of the architectural community, to travel far away from the consensus of professional architectural critique. They wanted to take an active as well as a pro-active role, contributing to shape the everyday environment of Norwegian towns and satellite towns.³⁵ Among all the people Fantastic Norway met on their trip, hardly anybody had been in contact with architects before. “We are tired of architects sitting at the 14th floor, we want to be on the ground and talk with people where they live”, Haffner and Aasarød said.³⁶ They wanted to take a different viewpoint. By moving around in a caravan, they kept literally on the ground; entering town centres and city squares where people met.³⁷ Thus, their sense of social responsibility translates into a bottom-up approach which focuses on local realities, the opinions and wishes of local people in each town and village.

Through mapping processes and a diverse and collaborative assembling of knowledge, Fantastic Norway built a grounded database of stories and detailed information about the places they stayed in. They sought to include a

³² Ibid.

³³ Carlsen, Aasarød, and Haffner, “De nye barfotarkitektene”.

³⁴ Lundemo, Aasarød, and Haffner, “Mobile arkitekter på folkets side”.

³⁵ Aasarød, *’I tinnå som kjem tå se sjøl’*, p. 17.

³⁶ Linn Karen Ravn, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Fantastiske folk”, *Putsj*, 04/05 (September), 2005.

³⁷ *Arkitektmytt* described the practice of Fantastic Norway as “The new barefoot architects” because they travelled to distant areas where architects’ expertise is somewhat scattered.

Carlsen, Aasarød, and Haffner, “De nye barfotarkitektene”.

The barefoot term origins from China denoting trained medical assistants, but was further developed in India during the 1970s. The term does not so much refer to experts travelling to poor rural areas to share their intelligence and offer their services, but more so to locals trained to perform expert services. The Barefoot College in India led by Bunker Roy have moved away from the use of imported experts, emphasising instead the education of local skills. Micro credit volunteer organisations and commercial banks are also included in the concept as a barefoot capitalism. The term seems less relevant to denote the role of Haffner and Aasarød. The Barefoot College, “barefoot college”, <<http://www.barefootcollege.org/default.asp>>, accessed 06/11/2010. Jim Klobuchar and Susan Cornell Wilkes, *The miracles of barefoot capitalism: Aa compelling case for microcredit*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Kirk House Publishers, 2003.

diversity of voices; in particular to reach the ones not well represented in the local networks where decisions are made and money distributed. Travelling around with a red caravan in tow, inviting all kinds of people in for dialogues and discussion, they regarded their work as participatory. Although, they did not secure a representative selection or follow any formal procedures of participation, they nevertheless sought to engage with as many different people and segments of the population as possible, using highly informal ways and low key strategies to involve anyone interested in the development of their home town.³⁸ As they became well known figures in town, they got into dialogues with people everywhere they went.

Another important aspect of Haffner and Asarød's way of working is their belief in public education. The newspaper columns and articles were important in this, singularly and in combination with dialogues and discussions inside and outside the caravan. Their intentions to inform and educate the public, is a strategy they have in common with Centre of Urban Pedagogy (CUP). Although Fantastic Norway and CUP work in radically different situations, they both seek to raise local engagement and discussions, as well as to encourage imaginations and promote alternatives to top-down and centralised plans. "In many Norwegian towns, it is the big money that rules. We wanted to create debate about questions like "how should the town be?" What values should be at the base?" "What is my town?"³⁹ Using media and participatory processes in their own inventive way, Haffner and Asarød addressed values and conceptions and directed new plans and projects. "With the caravan as an arena for discussion and dialogues with local people, we had ambitions to make architecture more accessible and wished to inspire discussion and debate on which values the development of these towns should be built."⁴⁰ A few extracts from the columns written by Haffner and Asarød are included to demonstrate their way of writing, what they emphasise, and how they seek to raise pride and engagement. On the first Saturday, October 25th 2003, Haffner and Asarød asked "Narvik – a threadbare pearl?"⁴¹ In a tribute to Narvik they stated:

³⁸ Harboe and Asarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Asarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

³⁹ Hilde Kristin Strand, Håkon Matre Asarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Ei 'Fantastic' utstilling", *Bergens Tidende*, Bergen, 20/07/2006.

⁴⁰ Asarød, *I tinn som kjem tå see sjøl*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Haffner and Asarød's series of columns in the local newspaper *Fremover*:

1st Saturday, October 25th 2003: "Narvik – a threadbare pearl?"

2nd Saturday, November 1st 2003: "A wish list for Narvik"

3rd Saturday, November 8th 2003: "Move the museum"

4th Saturday, November 15th 2003: "Street 1, Street 2, Street 3"

5th Saturday, November 22nd 2003: "Class distinctions in Narvik?"

6th Saturday, November 29th 2003: "The brilliant Hovig"

This column pay tribute to Narvik's eccentric modernist architect during 1960s and 70s, Jan Inge Hovig, who contributed with exemplary buildings: the sports hall, the two high-raised housing blocks (Tøtta 1 and 2), the public pavilion (Haikjelften [the Shark Jaw]). Yet, today, these buildings are not well kept or cared for.

7th Saturday, December 6th 2003: "Rånerne' lead the way"

8th Saturday, December 13th 2003: "A challenging 'Trekant'"

Contrary to cities like Trondheim and Kristiansand, Narvik is not subject to power institutions like the church or the military, but is grounded on democratic values: The main focus has been its citizens. Narvik is organised around the market square where the buildings around are open and inviting at street level. Very few towns are able to display such a consequent completion of human values in its townscape. We think this is beautiful.⁴²

On the fourth Saturday, their column titled “1, 2, 3”, pointed at a peculiarity in Narvik. “First we thought it was a joke. A deceiving story not founded on facts. Street 1, Street 2, Street 3, Peak 1, Peak 2, Peak 3, Lake 1, Lake 2, and so on. We nearly died laughing. This could not be true. It is insane. Too good to be true.”⁴³ Aasarød and Haffner hailed the prosaic and logical character of these names in Narvik. No other Norwegian city or town had such street names, “in fact, we have to cross the Atlantic to find Narvik’s twin city: New York.”⁴⁴ In their view, Narvik bypasses New York, numbering the surrounding mountains and lakes as well. These names are the ones in use but not the official ones, however, Aasarød and Haffner encouraged local authorities to do “just as Per Bjørnstad forwarded in *Fremover* July 11, 1997”: to leave the snobbish names of Queen’s Street and King’s Street and make officially the popular names of Street 1 and Street 2.

As a third part of their strategy, Haffner and Aasarød sought to attract “the people who make things happen” and the local enthusiasts.⁴⁵ To attract such people was not difficult. When Fantastic Norway announced their presence at the market squares, asking for contributions, some of the first ones to come were these local enthusiasts; groups and individuals with strong ideas – lofty or realistic.⁴⁶ They developed several ideas and sketch projects in Narvik, one of them an alternative sports field, concocting with this diverse group of “extreme” and “street” sports enthusiasts.⁴⁷ The towns and

⁹ Saturday, December 20th 2003: “At the beginning was the will”

¹⁰ Saturday, December 27th 2003: “Forward [Fremover] with Narvik”

⁴² Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Narvik - en slitt perle?”, *Fremover*, Narvik, 25/10/2003.

⁴³ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “1, 2, 3...”, *Fremover*, Narvik, 15/11/2003.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*. Cultural planning had gained interest among a few planners of tourism and towns, also Gunnar Skårvold in Narvikgården AS. According to Aasarød, Phil Woods and Richard Florida were main references.

⁴⁶ “Some of them were more professional actors and others were groups of teenagers or people with somewhat naive ideas where we would provide the tools to get in touch with a network”.

Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*.

⁴⁷ Erlend Blakstad Haffner: “Narvik is an old industrial Norwegian town which used to be a port for shipping iron ore, but the export industry dried up. There was a lot of money to help regeneration but not many good ideas. We found two guys who wanted to create a park for extreme sports. We identified this old railway

villages visited by Fantastic Norway varied in population between 1000 and 45 000 people. Given the size of these places, distances between individuals and establishment should be relatively short – but this proved not always the case. To amend this, Fantastic Norway sought to encourage bottom-up initiatives and activities, and to prepare the developments of these initiatives. Their emphases and alliances with local initiators resemble some of the bottom-up approaches of the Wimby! project as described by Crimson Architectural Historians. However, the two Norwegian students worked at a smaller scale, with smaller budgets, and without the opportunities of an architectural exhibition such as IBA to back them up. Rather than actually realising projects, Haffner and Aasarød raised discussions, contributing to create knowledge, ideas and pride in and about the towns they visited.

Like CUP (Centre for Urban Pedagogy) and Crimson, Fantastic Norway worked primarily bottom-up. Their first aim was to locate individual initiatives, encourage local enthusiasts and all sorts of people to contribute building the urban landscape and its life; allying themselves with the bottom or middle level of local hierarchies yet making sure they had contact also with the top. Their bottom-up efforts were aimed to work on many levels: for a richer urban life, to expand local democracy, and to contribute to redistribute power and influence in town development. They aimed to create more fantastic and enriching environments that would add to the life in town, and to realise important ideas into built projects.



Narvik – Pages from sketch project report by Fantastic Norway, located on a former industrial site at “Trekanten”. Derelict industrial structures are utilised: Sports fields for “unorganised” sports and extreme sports such as BMX, climbing, skating, basketball, and paragliding.

Source: Fantastic Norway

viaduct as a place for it and then we found someone to pay for it.” Fantastic Norway by Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Blueprint, “Portfolio: Fantastic Norway”, *Blueprint*, 246 (September), 2006. Haffner and Aasarød organised a common workshop and the group developed a joint programme for an activity-park of skating, climbing, abseiling, bicycling, hang-gliding and paragliding; for the two latter activities, the park would provide a landing strip. Fantastic Norway introduced the group and their project to Narvikgården AS. Haffner and Aasarød visualised the project and made a booklet to be used in seeking economical, bureaucratic and political support. This project has not been built but the sports network, though, gained an area at “Trekanten.” Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

27. desember 2003 • *Fremover* Narvik

Fremover med Narvik

Veggen i samarbeidsprosjektet har blitt krevende mange kommentarer om Narviks fremtid. Etter 12 år med "Fremover med Narvik" til samarbeidsprosjektet harver, etter vi igjen mått at holde av oss by som menneskelig ressurser over årstider og generasjoner. Etter å ha holdt av på å komme til gjennomgått, har Narvik, og byens fremtid fremme seg. Etter 12 år med samarbeidsprosjektet, har vi nådd et punkt der nye samarbeidsprosjektet må holdes for det som er det beste for byen fremover.

En av samarbeidsprosjektet er å finne i veggen og nye søk, har vi vært et av de første til å komme innom. Sammen vilger de en frem som vi og så den så ikke vilger for "trekantens løst". Trekantens.

1. Selveierlig skal Narvik ha et bybilde. En by som vil gi gode trykninger til bygge, har et uttrykk som det som kjører for. Mange trenger et godt uttrykk, og det skal være et uttrykk som er godt uttrykk. Det skal være et uttrykk som er godt uttrykk.
2. Trafikkplanen Narvik trenger en tydelig struktur. Det kan bevokses og andre lokale trafikkplaner bli bedre og finere.
3. Fremtidig og senere vil legge til grunn for utviklingen. Selveierlig skal de bli plan i senere tid.
4. I de nye administrasjon er et samarbeidsprosjekt er å finne ut hvordan det skal bli. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk.
5. For å få det beste av det beste, er det viktig å finne ut hvordan det skal bli. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk.
6. En viktig del av det beste, er å finne ut hvordan det skal bli. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk.
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18. I de nye administrasjon er et samarbeidsprosjekt er å finne ut hvordan det skal bli. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk. Det skal være et samarbeidsprosjekt som er godt uttrykk.

The last of Fantastic Norway's columns in Narvik's local newspaper *Fremover*, on December 27, 2003, communicated suggestions for "Trekanten". Source: *Fremover*.

After Haffner and Aasarød had published the ninth of their ten columns in *Fremover*, a reader's letter appeared, written by landscape architect Rønnaug Indregard who worked for the planning authorities of the region. With the heading, "Do not mess [kødd] with our town", she raised critical questions concerning the participative processes initiated by Haffner and Aasarød on commission from Narvikgården AS. Indregard had noticed that the duo would leave it to Narvikgården AS to handle the ideas, wishes, projects and knowledge assembled, continuing what Haffner, Aasarød, and residents of Narvik had started on. What, Indregard asked, will be the concrete and long term outcome of this process? Aasarød and Haffner were only staying for a short period, while "urban planning is long-term and real results can only be achieved through determined work over time."⁴⁸ The landscape architect also questioned the competence of Aasarød and Haffner, pointing out that they were still students – or half-educated charlatans [halvstuderte røvere], as she called them.

In one of the interviews I made with him, Aasarød responded to Indregard's criticism. "We gave a voice to many of the people without."⁴⁹ He argued for open participatory processes and for free discussions; giving

⁴⁸ Rønnaug Indregard, "Ikke kødd med byen vårres!", *Fremover*, Narvik, 22/12/2003.

⁴⁹ Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

opportunities for everyone to be heard and for residents to gain more insight and influence on the physical reality and life of the town.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, ideas and contributions would indeed be left with Narvikgården AS when Fantastic Norway went away, and there was no guarantee that they would be followed up or realised by their commissioner. They had been commissioned by a powerful actor in town, but did not want to become, nor look like, a public relation team for Narvikgården AS. In Narvik, Indregard's criticism forced Haffner and Aasarød to seriously consider their role and their work. Fantastic Norway had certainly not limited their involvement to Narvikgården's commercial interests, Aasarød argued; in fact, on several occasions, they worked counter to their commissioner. They had considered the whole town, and were working to develop non-profit facilities at "Trekanten". However, Haffner and Aasarød moved in a grey area between commercial interests and public engagement, and were forced to repeatedly discuss their role and position. There was no obvious answer. They defined for themselves some principles which they would uphold vehemently. Above all, the processes of participation had to be real. Fantastic Norway aimed to be in dialogue, listening closely to local citizens. Of course, Haffner and Aasarød moved on to the next place and could not guarantee that a publically owned developer, such as Narvikgården, would pursue the ideas and contributions from inhabitants. In Narvik, as in many other towns, the power network of political and economical figures was rather closed, with an inside and outside, and Indregard had reasons to distrust Narvikgården and its board of old-guard labour party politicians. Yet the reports that Haffner and Aasarød handed Narvikgården, filled with new knowledge and ideas, were just one part of Fantastic Norway's work in Narvik. The other part was made up by the way they shared their "local knowledge database" with residents of Narvik through caravan discussions, newspaper publications, and open meetings. For Haffner and Aasarød, it became very important to publish and communicate these contributions. This public communication was additional to sketch projects and strategies for funding, handed over to local enthusiasts, the "extreme" sports field at Trekanten being one example of this strategy.

Reading the newspaper critique, Haffner and Aasarød considered stopping the tour all together. However, they received a lot of positive feedback in the caravan; people encouraging them to continue. On January 9th, another reader's letter appeared in *Fremover*, from a citizen provoked by Indregard: "I am provoked because the most enjoyable happening in Narvik in a long time, is met with sour Narvik-scepticism."⁵¹ Grethe Skarsfjord described how she every Saturday grabbed the newspaper to read the latest column by Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød, explaining

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Grethe Skarsfjord, "Kampen om Narvik", *Fremover*, Narvik, 09/01/2004.

how they, through their column, had changed her view on her hometown. “I had accepted what we have been told so many times. Narvik is filthy and ugly, looking like an East-European industrial city, lacking soul and charm. Then these two come along and explain to me that Narvik is a beautiful and special town... Suddenly, I look at my beloved town with new eyes... They have made me see things I have never noticed before.”⁵² She thanked Aasarød and Haffner for making the citizens of Narvik proud of their town, calling for contributions from all professionals and citizens in the area.

I do not doubt there to be many highly qualified experts in Narvik and its surroundings. I believe what was done at the 100 years anniversary turned out to be great, and I am sure that Narvik has about the world’s best department of parks and recreation doing a lot with small means. But honestly, the two students of architecture have done something no one else has managed, they have opened our eyes. We should all welcome them with open arms.⁵³

For Aasarød and Haffner these two readers’ letters at the very start of their tour became especially important.

In the region of Northern Norway, there is a scarcity of architects and Fantastic Norway saw a particular need for architects who could actively contribute to processes of transformation.⁵⁴ They regarded their own role as a free-standing, unrestrained and relatively fearless one. “We work in coastal towns that are in transition. When the industry is closed down, the towns need new functions. We like to talk with people on how the development should proceed and have the great advantage of being completely independent. We will not lose our job if we say something controversial.”⁵⁵ Many local architects appeared to appreciate the assertive approach, as they themselves would find it difficult to criticise local interests and power.⁵⁶ Yet, Haffner and Aasarød highlight the importance architects who through a lifetime are involved in the physical, social and economical development of a specific place. For Fantastic Norway, an engaged local architect with a social responsibility, high integrity, and professional competence, is really the best solution for a town; even better than caravans of travelling architects.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office.*

⁵⁵ Lundemo, Aasarød, and Haffner, "Mobile arkitekter på folkets side".

⁵⁶ More than once was Fantastic Norway offered the studio of local architects who were soon to retire.



Source: Fantastic Norway

3.2 Bodø, 2005: “How to make it fantastic”⁵⁷

After a year of touring Northern Norway, Aasarød and Haffner drove into the town of Bodø with their red caravan. The two students had been invited by Bodø’s planning office to explore potentials for urban life and public spaces in Bodø, and to contribute with ideas for the future of Stormyra – an area at the outskirts of Bodø’s town centre. The work was funded by Bodø Council and the Norwegian State Housing Bank.



Bodø is a coastal town built on trade. It counts about 45 000 inhabitants, which makes it a large town in Northern Norway. At the beginning of World War II, Bodø was heavily bombed, and consists therefore, like so many of these northern towns, of a post-war urban fabric in a regular street grid with no historical elements. Located on an open peninsula in the North Sea, the town is well known for its windswept streets as well as for the region’s fantastic natural environment. Despite Bodø’s regional institutions and public spaces, no aggregations of residents, functions or activities seem to animate the urban environment. The town harbour, earlier a place of activity and exchange, is now rather empty. The Coastal Express, these days loaded mainly with tourists, calls at the new harbour on the outskirts of Bodø. How should Bodø develop? What is important? Stormyra was another deserted asphalt landscape harbouring a recently developed industrial and shopping area outside the town centre. The task for the planning office, Bodø Council, and Fantastic Norway was to find potentials in Stormyra, looking at how the area may be linked to the town centre, and how the empty car parks and public areas could in some way be invigorated and developed.

⁵⁷ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “How to Make it Fantastic”, *Experimental Architecture, La Biennale Venezia*, 2008.

Fantastic Norway's residency in Bodø provides an example of their way of working; adjusted to and influenced by the specific situation. It serves here to demonstrate in more detail how they organise a civic mobilisation process and how it evolves. By following the process, I will explore what Haffner and Aasarød are up to with their slogan "make it fantastic".



Central parts of Bodø. Source: <http://www.1881.no/Kart/#> © 2004-2012 Blom ASA

Immediately upon their arrival, Haffner and Aasarød started searching through local history books, maps, town plans, newspaper discussions, and other published sources to get to know Bodø: facts and discussions, history and stories. Their research and mapping of Bodø included also informal sources of information obtained by walking the streets and by asking around. They noted down everything of possible interest to have a broad and operative knowledge, including urban plans and physical characteristics, social meeting places, habits, activities, enterprises, small businesses, associations, and the general development of Bodø with its economy and

prospects of growth.⁵⁸ They looked broadly but not systematically; rather, they picked up what they regard potentially relevant. For Haffner and Aasarød, these preparations are also a way of building trust and respect among the local population. Only when they knew the town well in terms of its history, its stories, and its physical environment, could they engage properly with people they met in the caravan. Assembling knowledges continued with contributions from visitors in and outside the caravan to develop the “local knowledge database”, expanding continuously throughout their stay.

Like in Narvik, Haffner and Aasarød made an agreement with the local newspaper to write a weekly column. In their first column, “Erlend and Håkon, in Fantastic Norway Arkitekter” described their approach and research on Bodø, the knowledge held by citizens of Bodø, and how the stories of each and everyone contribute to build the place:

As architects, it is important to learn to know the town you are working in. After moving to our new home town, we have diligently waded through history books, taking walks from pier to moor, and have looked at innumerable town plans and regional plans. However, the most important information we do not find in the library or in town plans, but in conversations and discussions with people in the “Glasshuset” or over a cup of coffee at “Min plass”. The town is a network of stories and personal experiences. Nobody sees the town the same way. Image by image, word by word, we form a more comprehensive impression of what Bodø is.⁵⁹

The day before, on October 29th, the newspaper *Avisa Nordland* and planner Hedvik Pedersen at the Bodø Council, had introduced Haffner and Aasarød under a big headline: “Seeking the fantastic”.⁶⁰ Pedersen announced: “We have hired the young architects in ‘Fantastic Norway Arkitekter’ who will be in Bodø and contribute until Christmas. On every Saturday, they will be in their red caravan at the market square [Torget] to meet people and hear what they wish for the town.”⁶¹ Aasarød made their mission clear, next to a photo

⁵⁸ Bodø, as administrative centre of the county Nordland, expected growth and was not threatened by decline like Narvik or other Northern towns relying on industry.

⁵⁹ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Manhattan og Minimumansk”, *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 30/10/2004.

⁶⁰ In 2004 the local newspaper *Avisa Nordland*, covering Bodø and its surroundings, had a daily average circulation of 25 524 copies. Surveys showed an average of 71 000 readers, according to Norwegian Media Businesses’ Association, <http://www.mediebedriftene.no>. In 2005 the population of Narvik was 44 414 according to Statistics Norway, <http://www.ssb.no>.

⁶¹ Hans Trygve Holm et al., “Søker det fantastiske”, *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 29/10/2004.

of Fantastic Norway outside their caravan: “Good ideas wanted for Bodø: On every Saturday you should meet up by this caravan, if you have opinions on how Bodø ought to be.”⁶² The newspaper quoted further: “We wish to make architecture available and create a forum where everyone may forward ideas and discuss urban development.”⁶³ Their intentions, Aasarød announced, were to establish an open dialogue on equal terms between lay men and professionals, inviting everybody to join.



Source: Fantastic Norway

Haffner and Aasarød were present with their caravan at the market square [Torvet], serving coffee and freshly baked waffles, taking part in dialogues and discussions. “Waffles are the best way of starting a dialogue” they argue, because when people are not sure how to approach or what to say, enjoying a waffle is always good – it naturalises the situation.”⁶⁴ The ubiquitous waffle, a favourite snack during informal social gatherings in Norway, contributed to create an atmosphere conducive to conversation and dialogue.⁶⁵ This was important, Aasarød pointed out, if one wanted to reach all those who dare not open their mouth in public meetings and who are not part of the local power

Hedvik Pedersen, urban planner at the planning office in Bodø, introduced Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød as architects although they had still not finished their education and were formally still students of architecture.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Guttormsen, Aasarød, and Haffner, “Vafler i Venezia”.

⁶⁵ “Discursive dinner” is a concept used by Raumlabor to announce the combination of debate and food.

structures, adding that most people are not confident speaking at public meetings without a specific and purposeful comment to offer. The caravan chats, on the other hand, allowed for worries, frustrations and questions to be expressed, as well as for local knowledge, concrete suggestions and wild ideas to be brought to the table. Some visitors had clear ideas or strong visions they wanted to share, others less so, but maybe they got a new story or just some impressions confirmed. Not only newspaper readers approached the red caravan, but also those just passing by, the ones hanging out in town, the ones notified by a friend or neighbour, or the ones whom the architect met around town and thereby invited.

Under the headline of “Manhattan and Mini-Murmansk”, Haffner and Aasarød opened with an acclamation. “Bodø is a dashing [feiede flott] place – wholly unequalled. A menhir among towns. Not many towns can serve up so much interesting architecture.”⁶⁶ The verdict was hardly shared by most Bodø citizens. Aasarød and Haffner mimicked a passer-by: “I am proud of being from Bodø, but honestly, I think the Germans should get another chance. Carpet bombardment of Bodø would be good. The town look like a Mini-Murmansk.”⁶⁷ The terse critique was quite typical. Most citizens encountered by the two architects conceived of their hometown as an unattractive and dreary place, seeing little potential in the built environment. “We have heard several reactions like this one after we moved to Bodø. And maybe we should not pretend being surprised because the town does not look like other towns one would call pretty. But what is it that makes Bodø so fascinating and interesting for a couple of architect?... We want to take a closer look at this.”⁶⁸ Offering a short and proud summary of Bodø’s history, Haffner and Aasarød told some of its stories:

The heathen Raud the Rame from Skjerstad was a rich and powerful chief who refused to be dictated and subjugated by the ruling king. Rampaging against the king, Olav Tryggvason, and with infernal sorcery, Raud conjured up the easterly wind. Ever after, the easterly wind has been a loyal companion and citizens have, since then, filled sails with easterly wind and boats with cod.⁶⁹

The ever-present wind of Bodø is here given a proud and important history. Constructing a historic foundation, Haffner and Aasarød celebrated the

⁶⁶ Aasarød and Haffner, “Manhattan og Minimurmansk”.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

modern town structure, arguing that Bodø has more in common with Manhattan than Murmansk.

32

kultur og underholdning

AVISA NORDLAND LØRDAG 30. OKTOBER 2014

Erlend og Håkon, i Fantastic Norway Arkitekter, har rullet inn i byen med sin røde campingvogn. Hver lørdag, kl. 12.00-15.00 blir de å finne i vogn på torget. Her er alle velkommen til å diskutere deres ukentlige innlegg, eller bare stikke innom for å ta en prat over en kopp kaffe.



Manhattan og Minimurmansk

- Bodø er et feiende flott sted. - helt uten sidestykke. En bauta blant byer. Ikke mange byer kan diske opp med så mye spennende arkitektur. Er du ikke enig?

- Æ e stolt Bodøværing, men ærlig talt: æ synes tyskeren burde slippe te på nytt. Tett teppesombing av Bodø, ville na gjort sa. Byen ser jo ut som et minimurmansk!

Denne type reaksjoner har vi fått flere ganger etter at vi flyttet til Bodø. Og kanskje skal vi ikke spille så overasket, for byen ligner jo ikke på andre byer man liker å kalle pene. Men hva er det som gjør byen så fascinerende og spennende for et par arkitekter? Har vi virkelig så ulike oppfatninger av hva som er fint, hva som er godt? Dette har vi lyst til å se litt nærmere på.

Som arkitekter er det viktig at man lærer seg å kjenne byen man jobber i. Etter at vi flyttet til vår nye hjemby har vi flittig pløyd gjennom historiebøker, gått turer fra molo til myr, og sett utallige by- og reguleringsplaner. Den viktigste informasjonen finner vi likevel verken på biblioteket eller i byplanene, men i samtaler og diskusjon i «Glasshuset» eller over en kaffekopp på «Min Plass». Byen er et nettverk av historier og personlige opplevelser. Ingen ser byen likt. Bilde for bilde, ord for ord, har vi begynt å få et mer helhetlig inntrykk av hva Bodø er – og noe av det første slo oss var at Bodø er moderne. Og ikke minst stort.

Stolte Bodø. Siden folk for første gang bet seg fast på Bodøhalvøya for 10 000 år siden, har Bodø vært en stolt bastion. Hedningen Raud den Ranne fra Skjerstad var en rik og mektig høvding, som nektet å la seg diktere og underlegge seg statsmakten. I rasert mot Olav Trygvasson manet han østervinden frem, med infernisk trodom. I ettertid har vinden vært byens faste følgesvenn og innbyggere har siden den gang fylt selene med østavinden og båtene med skel. Da stortingset i 1816 vedtok å anlegge et handelstede på Hundholmen, var det med store ambisjoner om å skape en av Norges største handelsbyer. Planene ble deretter. Allerede da byen ble bygget rundt påkøllingsøen og et knippe øyøst, ble den regulert i kvartaalstruktur. På lik linje med Paris og New York. Denne byen skulle bli atskillig mer enn et lite handelstede, og det har den i høyeste grad blitt.

En moderne by. Nå fikk ikke Bodø den eksplosive veksten som de høye herrer hadde sett for seg, og det var nok like greit. I motsetning til byer som Narvik, som over natta



Bildet er manipulert

tok på seg storbyens kler, fikk Bodø vokse jevnt og langsomt og utvikle sin stolle identitet. Takk gudskjelov for det. Da tyskerne bombet byen sender og sammen, hadde Bodø allerede planene klare for en bystruktur som var en videreutvikling av byen slik den så ut før bombetoktet.

Fra ruineene vokste det frem store bygg langs retlinjede gater. Byen fikk med dette et nytt og moderne uttrykk, som gjenspeilte etterkrigstidens gjennomgripende optimisme. Det moderne og det fremtidsrettede gjennomsyrer byen slik den fremstår i dag, og er en viktig del av Bodøs identitet. Dette synes vi er fantastisk.

Det er ikke rart de andre byene i Nordland er misunnelige på Bodø. Den moderne bystrukturen muliggjør nemlig en fortsatt utvikling av bykjernen, fra by til storby. Takket være de brede gatene og byens kvar-

taisstruktur, kan Bodø sentrum vokse seg enda større – og helst i høyden. Bodø har nemlig flere likhetstrekk med Manhattan enn med Murmansk.

Flytt heller sørover. Trass i til tider dårlig vedlikehold og enkelte tilfeller av velstandsvorter, er bygenes enkle og rene form en kvalitet som går igjen i Bodøs bebyggelse. Bygenes utrykk gjenspeiler den tiden de ble oppført, men den høye kvaliteten i materialitet og detaljer, reflekterer også gjennreisningsarkitekturens grundige og rasjonelle karakter. Svenskehussene, som i det siste har fått velfortjent oppmerksomhet, er gode eksempler på dette. Bolligstrøket som i sin tid ble spådd en fremtid som slum, er i dag blant Bodøs mest attraktive. Nettopp på grunn av sentral beliggenhet, høy tetthet og nær naboskap.

Bodø er ikke en romantisk by i tradisjonell forstand. Men så er de ikke Bodø noen hvitmalet plankby på Svalandet heller, og takk og pris for det. Bodø er Bodø, og skulle man ønske at byen kun var et tettsted av pittoreske trehus, kunne man like gjerne flytte sørover. Den dagen Bodø sentrum er brostein, rosebed og hvite panelvegger, har man beveget seg ett skritt bort fra Bodøs grunnliggende by-identitet. Måtte Bodø slippe en slik skjebne.

Bodø har en særegenhet som vi må ta utgangspunkt i når vi diskuterer hva byen skal være i fremtiden. Særegenheten er blant annet et modig, strekt og moderne uttrykk, et umulankolkt tilsnitt som muliggjør nye og spennende innslag i byen.

Kom og diskutur hva Bodø har vært, er i dag og ikke minst – skal bli. Vel møtt i vogn!

Source: Avis Nordland

Already, at the time when the town was built around the Jakhelln block and a few seafront warehouses, it had been regulated in a grid plan. Like Paris and New York. This town was planned to become more than a small post, which it has, superlatively... Bodø is not a romantic town in the traditional sense. Bodø is not a white painted panelled town on the southern coast, thank goodness. Bodø is Bodø, and if one wished the town to be a village of picturesque wooden houses only, one could just as well move south... Bodø has a distinctive quality which we need to take as a starting point when we discuss what the town should be in the future.⁷⁰

The architects take the distinctive characteristics of Bodø as starting point to highlight qualities in the build environment, the modernity and unromantic beauty, celebrating what is specific, fantastic and important in the midst of what is considered dreary and ordinary. This formidable tribute reached the people of Bodø early Saturday morning. Haffner and Aasarød invited everyone to drop by the caravan to continue the discussion they started in the morning newspaper: “Welcome to the caravan!” – and a lot of people came.



Bodø – The second presentation in the local newspaper *Avisa Nordland* reported the first Saturday, with Fantastic Norway present at the market square, to have been a success: “Popular architects: A small migration for the red caravan at ‘Torvet’ this weekend.”

Ph: Bjørn Erik Olsen. Source: www.an.no (*Avisa Nordland*)

The same headline announced every single column and the open caravan: “Erlend and Håkon in Fantastic Norway Arkitekter have wheeled into town with their red caravan. Every Saturday, 12 am to 3 pm, they are to be found in their caravan at the market square. Everyone is welcome to discuss the weekly column, or just to drop by for a chat over a cup of coffee.”⁷¹ This combination of the caravan and the local newspaper was highly efficient, attracting and engaging the citizens of Bodø. However, Haffner and Aasarød had several reasons for writing their column. They saw it as essential to

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

establish an atmosphere of generosity and openness where dialogues and real discussions can take place. In Bodø, as in many similar towns, Haffner and Aasarød argue, there are conflicting agendas where the medias forward complaints on what is wrong with the town, yet hold back engagements and initiatives. Haffner and Aasarød aimed to engage people through enthusiasm rather than criticism, and emphasise what they regarded characteristic and fantastic. “We always start with a focus on what is fantastic about the place. It creates enthusiasm and engagement.”⁷² Pointing at real and fantastic qualities not yet recognized by neither residents nor experts, became for Fantastic Norway a goal as well as a tool. Fantastic and humorous provocations were part of a strategy to get people moving, to make them come to the caravan on Saturdays with reactions, dialogues, engagement, stories, discussions, knowledges, contributions, and good ideas. The column sat an agenda to start dialogues and to avoid people repeating the same old discussion, shifting the emphasis to more important issues.



Bodø – At the pier in stormy weather. © visitnorthernnorway.com Ph: Bjørn Erik Olsen

Already next Saturday, on November 6th, did Aasarød and Haffner publish a preliminary list of ideas based on local suggestions as well as their own impressions, inviting people to come to the caravan with their own lists of ideas. These lists, Haffner and Aasarød explained in their second column, are like personal recipes for how to make Bodø a better place to live. “In the beginning we thought people were crazy in this town. In stormy gusts of wind, people were migrating in hordes out to the pier.”⁷³ First on their wish list, therefore, was a wind temple far out on the pier; constructing a place where the wind is strangulated to become even wilder. Their second wish was to relocate the Coastal Express port. “Where it lies today, wasted and

⁷² Guttormsen, Aasarød, and Haffner, "Vafler i Venezia".

⁷³ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Å legge lista høyt", *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 06/11/2004.

deserted, it seems if Bodø has given its old friend the cold shoulder. Almost 2000 visitors come every day – to this little town – to Bodø. However, they are met by a barren and uninviting landscape, a concrete desert between containers and lorries. This is not the way to treat guests. There was no doubt what would be the second point on our list: Move the Coastal Express back where it belongs, and roll out the red carpet from the gangway into town... The harbour will become a meeting place for residents and travellers... The Coastal Express is more than a boat; it is one of Bodø's most important neighbourhoods."⁷⁴ The third and last point on Fantastic Norway's initial list addressed the relation between the town and the landscape, touching upon the way Bodø's citizens use and take pride in the surrounding landscape. Haffner and Aasarød wished for a new and simple link between town and country in the form of a ski track, using a plastic foundation to prolong the skiing season. The ski track would go along "a green corridor" as a long and narrow park. It would start in the midst of the town centre; pass through Stormyra, all the way, through the woods and to the mountains beyond. "The future citizens will be able to leave their waffle at the café and put on their skies in the middle of town... This way the surroundings of Bodø are reachable from right in Bodø's town centre; culture and nature melt together."⁷⁵ They concluded the column by reminding everyone to present their own lists in the caravan. Haffner and Aasarød's own wish-list should also inspire and engage people to bring forward their wishes and ideas.

The accumulation of material, information, opinions and ideas building a "local knowledge database" on Bodø continued from the initial mapping throughout the whole civic "mobilisation process", with dialogues and small assemblies in and outside the caravan every Saturday from October 30th until Christmas. Pieces of history, facts, resources, stories, wishes, worries, ideas, suggestions, projects, problems, names of key people, and information on power structures, were received through dialogues and discussions in the caravan as well as through conversations around town.⁷⁶ While this local database did not adhere to a systematic inquiry, it is not an indiscriminate registration of everything, but focussed on whatever may initiate, inform and help developing future plans, activities and built projects.

During their stay, Fantastic Norway cooperated with the planning office and local administration in Bodø, discussing and meeting throughout the process. They gave a lecture at the Rotary Club and they were part of the winter festival *Mørke Nu* with debates at the square, in front of the caravan. Close to the end of their stay, Haffner and Aasarød organised a discursive dinner and invited all architects in town for discussions. Many of them had

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Aasarød and Haffner, "Make it Fantastic".

suggested issues of importance to Haffner and Aasarød which they felt they could not raise themselves. Fantastic Norway's presence was a way of counteracting the professional solitude of Bodø's architects.



Bodø – Drive-in cinema at Stormyra. Ph: Anders Bergundhaugen. Source: *Avisa Nordland*



Bodø – They play the “Game of Stormyra” in the caravan. Source: Fantastic Norway / *Avisa Nordland*

On November 13th, Haffner and Aasarød in their third newspaper column discussed the town plan of Bodø. In a straight forward manner, they educated their readers about the town's history, telling stories of town planners and town plan competitions, explaining modernist ideals of rationality and

functionality. They also reported from past week's activities where citizens visiting the caravan had played a game about Stormyra. Seeking whatever public potential there might be in Stormyra's large scale landscape, and developing a strategic plan to improve the quality and access of public areas, Haffner and Aasarød had mapped Stormyra's physical features and established dialogue with stakeholders in Stormyra's trade and industry.⁷⁷

Haffner and Aasarød engaged inhabitants of Bodø to join in making new urban plans. Each participant was given ten minutes to plan a game board representing Stormyra, using pieces of foam as their building blocks. The game was not primarily invented to offer new plans but to discover what mattered to Bodø's and Stormyra's inhabitants. A few themes became obvious, such as the wish to contrast the existing rectilinear plans with something more playful and subtle. Innovative ideas were also: "Shopping centres with football fields and ski tracks on the roof. An outstretched building development hiding the large road, Gamle Riksvei."⁷⁸ These ideas were incorporated into Fantastic Norway's future strategy for Stormyra. In this particular Saturday morning newspaper, Haffner and Aasarød also announced another game: "Hindsight is a foreign word in our caravan. Together, and again, we look ahead playing the follow-up to 'The game of Stormyra'. High bets and fresh ideas hold taste of success in 'The Game of Urban Spaces'. Today you are the boss! Heartily welcome."⁷⁹ Here, Fantastic Norway directed attention at public spaces in the windy and deserted centre of Bodø, where commercial indoor spaces were the only meeting places, in particular, "Glasshuset"; a street with glass roof operated as a shopping centre, complete with guards and opening hours.

Recurrent complaints in the caravan were how people missed open and shared urban spaces. To address the use of public space in Bodø, Haffner and Aasarød selected a specific group of individuals – in Norwegian called "rånere". "Rånere" are young men (mostly) and women socializing by cruising around in their cars, hanging out, and meeting in town. They are usually not appreciated as positive contributions to urban life or to the value of a square. Haffner and Aasarød, however, celebrated "rånerne" for their active use of public space, as someone who really appreciates free urban spaces without restrictions and opening hours. "'The Green Danger' drives around the hotel, passed Glasshuset, along Sjøgata, and around again. After a few trips around the figure-of-eight Renate parks the Volvo shoulder by shoulder to other "râne"-cars outside the SAS-hotel. Night after night they gather seemingly without any particular purpose. But the truth is a different

⁷⁷ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Fantasticmetoden: Fantastic Norway AS",

⁷⁸ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Spillet om Bodø", *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 13/10/2004.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

one. The “rånerer” have got the point!”⁸⁰ Following up from on this story, Haffner and Aasarød subtly addressed the distinction between public spaces with unrestricted access and the commercial spaces accessible only to certain groups and at certain times of day.

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kultur og underholdning

AVISA NORDLAND | LØRDAG 20. NOVEMBER 2004



Erlend og Håkon i Fantastic Norway Arkitekter har rullet inn i byen med sin røde campingvogn. Hver lørdag, kl. 12.00-15.00, blir de å finne i vogna på torget. Her er alle velkommen til å diskutere deres ukentlige innlegg, eller bare stikke innom for å ta en prat over en kopp kaffe.



Braker byen. Råneprinsesse Renate setts å være ekte råner, og et eksempel til etterfølgelse.

Renate har skjønt det

«Den Grønne Fare» tar runden fra hotellet, forbi Glasshuset, langs Sjøgata og rundt igjen. Etter noen turer rundt åttallet, stiller Renate volvoen skulder til skulder med de andre rånebilene ved SAS-hotellet.

Kveld etter kveld samles de tilvarende uten mål og mening. Men samheten er en heli sammen. Rånerne har nemlig skjont det.

Da vest hva vi snakker om. Rånerne nyrer byen på en måte man vanligvis forbinder med sydlige strøk. Å sitte på et gatehjørne og se utover et yrende folkeliv, er alltid spennende når man er ute og reiser i sydlige strøk. Tilbaketrakkert, men allikevel tilstede, tar man det i byens puls og kjører seg på følge-lengde med de fremmede. Men hvorfor forbinder vi denne gleden

med noe vi bare opplever på ferie? En Steuerooper ville forundret spurt: – Men hva braker dere byen til, som dere ikke møter hverandre og ser på livet? Ja, hva gjør vi egentlig i byen? Er bylivet mer enn det å shoppe, gå på posten og venste på bilen?

Tradisjonelt sett møttes man i finstasen på kirkebakken. Etter ruslene var unngjørt, støtte man på kjentfolk og ikke minst nye venner, – og kanskje til og med en kjæreste. Her ble det utvekslet ord om folk og fe i dag er det stort sett rånerne som svarer denne tradisjonen. Den eneste forskjellen er at bilen nå er finstasen. Men ellers er alt ved det samme. Under bilaken blir det snakket om alt og ingenting. Gjennom frontruta følger de samtidig med på folkelivet. Hvem vet? Kanskje skjer det noe i kveld!

I motsetning til kjøpesentre og butikker har rånerens møtested har ingen stengtild eller forpliktelser. I likhet med skatnerne braker de byen aktivt på sin egen måte. Et godt byrom skal ikke legge føringer

på hva som skal skje, men gi muligheter til de uforutsatte hendelsene. Alle skal ha lik rett til å være en del av bylivet. Denne «allmennessetens» er essensielt for at byen skal bli et godt sted å være. Tidlig på 1200-tallet, lovfestet Magnus Lagabøter denne allmennessetten. Alle byer skulle ha frontråder, som ga innbyggerne lik tilgang på sjø, handel og sosial omgang. Man kunne ikke bygge butikker eller boliger her, om man så var kongen av Danmark. På disse «allmennessetene» utspant bylivet seg. Her kunne man vise hvem man var, utrykke det man mente og møtte de man ville. Allmennessetene ble en felles referanse og bandt sammen byens aktiviteter. De ble et viktig bilde på bylivet og økte folkelstøtte og identitetsfølelse for hjembyen.

Bode har en slik allmenning. Fra nordre nord og opp til Solparken, var det i sin tid planlagt en allmenning som bandt sammen flere ulike byrom. Spilv, handel, rådhus og parkområde var lagt langs denne akse. Allmenningen definerer Bode sentrum. I dag er allmenningen

kun en oppbrudt bilvei. Gaten burde oppgraderes til en gågate, – en skikkelig allmenning som ville gjøre det betraktelig mer attraktivt å oppholde seg i Solparken såvel som på nedre torv. Bode kommune må åpne pengesøken på fullt gap, og satse på byens offentlige rom. En by av Bodes kaliber skal tilby mange ulike byrom, – som fører alt fra handel til skating, avslapping og lek. Det burde Bodewarnerne stille krav om. – Det er jo tross alt her man skal møtes.

I fremtiden skal man skal slippe å stå i køen på kjøpesentret for å få et innblikk i bylivet. Se på Bergen! Byen har satset på sine byrom. Byen har gjort allmenningen til sitt varemerke, trass i sitt beryktede kalkklima. Denne satsningen har gjort selve byrommene i Bergen til en attraksjon. Her samvirker kjøpesentre og byrom på en god måte, til glede for alle parter. Folkelivet i Bergen yrer døgnnet rundt, av lokale og besøkende, takket være allmenningene. – Trass i byens til tider harde klimatiske forhold.

«Vi observerer livet i byen. Alt fra de store bilene som legger til kal til fulle folk i gatene. Det er jo alltid noe som skjer i byen. Under «Mare Nis», var det spesielt mye artig å «se på». Renate bruker all sin fritid i sentrum og kjører byen sin beder en de fleste. «Hver kveld møtes vi, og folk kommer bort til oss og sier av en prat. Vi har det veldig fint!». Ordene til Renate klinger i våre ører. Det er slik byen skal brukes. Som et friti møtested, uten stengtild.

Utviklingen av det offentlige rom, dreier seg om å skape situasjoner for et levende folk i en levende by (selsanger i desember, mergerimmet) juni på en bank med kjæstene, hurtigruta som sakte glir inn i byen, lyden av folk i gatene og lovnaden om at noe kommer til å skje.

Dette er noe av det byrommene kan tilby. Dette har rånerne forstått. Håpet er at politikerne snart skjønner det samme.

Korn og råns campingvogn!

Source: Avis Nordland

⁸⁰ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Renate har skjønt det", *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 20/06/2004.

The article concluded by highlighting an important but dysfunctional public space in Bodø, Solparken (The Sun Park), pointing to its forgotten quality as an unrestricted public space. Open and free public spaces are important. “This is understood by “rånerne”. The hope is that politicians soon will understand the same. Come and “rån” in the caravan.”⁸¹ Fantastic Norway also organised an informal meeting with “rånerne” to discuss urban planning and their viewpoints. An unexpected benefit resulting from this praise was free rides at any time, for Haffner and Aasarød.

Fantastic Norway concluded the work by presenting an urban plan with a continuous string of public spaces going from the harbour, where the Coastal Express would re-enter, up to Bodø’s town hall and Solparken. For each of these spaces, they tried to solve climatic issues (too much wind and too little sun), as well as to explore and demonstrate potential activities and fantastic aspects.



Plan of urban spaces in Bodø published in *Avisa Nordland* on November 27, 2004.

Source: Avisa Nordland

“After many hours of discussions and dialogues in the caravan, there is no doubt about the Bodø citizen’s dedication to the public spaces in town. Last Saturday we played ‘The Game of Urban Spaces’ in the caravan: Tons of visionary ideas and realistic contributions came forward with great engagement. We have included some of these contributions and have made a sketch. This is how we think the urban spaces should look like five years from now.”⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid.
⁸² Ibid.

Their newspaper columns had several purposes: trigger engagement and attract people to the caravan, share the content of the “local knowledge database”, and contribute to public education and awareness concerning urban life and shared spaces as well as urban planning and spatial qualities. The columns demonstrate Haffner and Aasarød’s extremely developed communicative skills, using a mixture of humour, inventiveness and professional expertise to mobilise the local population. However, their communication through media has more to it, as will be discussed in the following.



Bodø – A public discussion at the main square, organised by the local festival *Mørke Nu* together with Fantastic Norway. Source: Fantastic Norway

To “address the fantastic in order to solve the problematic” is an important slogan for Haffner and Aasarød, guiding their work.⁸³ The fantastic has several facets. Fantastic Norway highlights objects, experiences and activities that are overlooked in the urban everyday environments such as in Bodø; the terse beauty of the grid, the thrill of the wind on the pier, and the resilient sociability of the “rånere”. The fantastic can be fascinating and engaging, activating and beautiful – bringing people together.⁸⁴ By focusing on the fantastic before addressing what is problematic, Fantastic Norway contributes to change the way residents look at, experience and value their town. For an environment to develop, Aasarød insists, “it is necessary to build upon people’s identity, common references, and their pride in the town.”⁸⁵ They have experienced again and again that to highlight the fantastic produces pride and positive engagement.⁸⁶ To strengthen local identity is a part of this project. Unlike most groups in this study, Fantastic Norway talks about identity, and sees it as part of their work to help establishing shared values as ways to find the right direction and priorities for new plans. This approach is undoubtedly influenced by the ideology of the Bergen School of Architecture (BAS), with its strong allegiance to Oskar Hansen’s *open form* and its interest in local cultural forms. Developed in the post-war period, the concept of *open form* merits some comments. Oscar and Zofia Hansen themselves presented it in this way at the CIAM meeting in Otterlo of 1959: “The Open Form, unlike the Closed Form, does not exclude the energy of the client’s initiative but on the contrary treats it as a basic, organic, and inseparable component element.”⁸⁷ Hansen has to be regarded part of the structuralist movement in architecture for whom “open” structures were considered helpful in providing adaptability and flexibility – in an architectural and human sense. However, with the concept of open form, focus is not firstly on framework and structure, neither physically nor metaphorically, but rather on opportunities created within it. This is a way of thinking which has shaped the BAS, and influenced Haffner and Aasarød. Their dedication to facilitate action rather than produce form is a testimony to this legacy.

Addressing the fantastic in the existing becomes a means to create a constructive debate; to address important issues and values while avoiding “trench warfare” between old oppositions. Fantastic Norway learned, by intuition as well as experience, always to start by stating the qualities of a

⁸³ Aasarød and Haffner, “Make it Fantastic”.

⁸⁴ The term beautiful is not used by Haffner or Aasarød. They use more specific terms denoting different aspects of beauty.

⁸⁵ Korsvoll, Aasarød, and Haffner, “Unge arkitekter i skuddet”.

⁸⁶ Aasarød regards pride as partly a tool. Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Oskar Hansen and Zofia Hansen, “The Open Form in Architecture”, in Oscar Newman and Arbeitsgruppe für die Gestaltung soziologischer und visueller Zusammenhänge (eds.), *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Documents of modern Architecture 1*, London: Alec Tiranti, 1961, p. 190.

place – praising the fantastic. This should not be read as a naive call for positive thinking, but rather as a call for generosity:

To become the victim of a kind of campaign where everyone wants to express how damned everything is and all that is wrong; that is really the killer of any creative process. That is why we have written and said a thousand times probably; that we always try to start with the fantastic before attacking what is problematic.⁸⁸

Not only qualities and shared experiences gather people together: so do stories. The town, says Fantastic Norway, is “a network of stories and personal experiences.” Haffner and Aasarød used stories to instil pride and enthusiasm, but also as a means to solve problems. Take the wind, which is considered a killer of urban life in Bodø. With the story about Raud the Rame who conjured the wind or about people who walk out on the pier in stormy weather, Fantastic Norway gathers people in an alternative imagination, abandoning for a moment the glass-covered main street turned shopping centre. Haffner and Aasarød seek to attract people to fantastic windy experiences, peaked by a wind temple out on the pier.⁸⁹

The fantastic is used as a catalyst for change, unifying different local forces to imagine alternative solutions to old problems. There can be no better example of this approach than the advent calendar Haffner & Aasarød created for Bodø. At the end of November, Fantastic Norway’s weekly column ended, only to be replaced by a daily, shorter column, organised as an advent calendar. Haffner and Aasarød had described fantastic qualities and stories for Bodø, now they wanted to present fantastic ideas from the “local knowledge database”.

Thursday December 2nd 2004: The Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 2
 “Today – Bodø town rail” in *Avisa Nordland*.

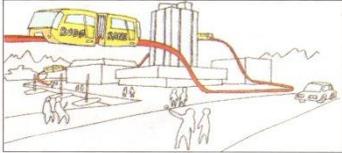


Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by. Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bode Torg.

Den fantastiske julekalender – dag 2

I dag – Bodøbybane.

Et av de friskeste forslagene vi har fått i campingvogna, er en Monorail – fra bybane som kunne forsere vær og vind, sveve over trafikkproblem og binde sammen bydelene i Bodø. Runden skulle gå fra høyskolen, gjennom sentrum (innom den nye kulturatorstus) ut til Bureya og tilbake. Kollektivtrafikken er et viktig offentlig tilbud og et godt utbygget kollektivtilbud ville skape sentrumsaktivitet. Dette er et fantastisk forslag som ville passet godt inn i Bodøs moderne uttrykk.



Source: *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 02/12/2004.

⁸⁸ Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

⁸⁹ Aasarød and Haffner, "Make it Fantastic".

Friday December 3rd 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 3
 “Today – Mirror in town” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Water in the summer and ice rink in winter at Nedre Torv [Lower market square]

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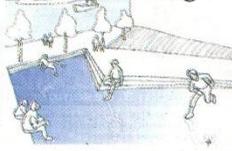


Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by. Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Asarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bodø Torg.

Fantastisk Julekalender - dag 3

I dag – speil i byen

Bodø har en rekke offentlige rom, de fleste inviterer til bruk. Vi har hatt mange besøk i vognen der folk i alle generasjonene etterlyser gode lekeområder i sentrum. På plasser med fontener og vannspeil er det alltid liv og leven. Nedre Torv er intet unntak. Et vannspeil blir et naturlig møtested på sommeren, mens det med vinterfrostens innlegg blir et sjeldent fint skøytespeil.



Musikerne refser skoleflytting

Musikerens felleorganisasjon reagerer med forferdelse over fylkesråd for utdannings forslag om å flytte musikklinja ved Sortland videregående skole til Kleva. Det er helt klart at den politiske ledelsen i Nordland fylkeskommune ikke har tenkt over konsekvensene om dette blir gjennomført, heter det i en uttalelse signert fylkesleder Johnny Gundersen.



Saturday December 4th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 4
 “Today – Hundholmens plass” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Landscape elements as windshields at the Hundholmen Square.

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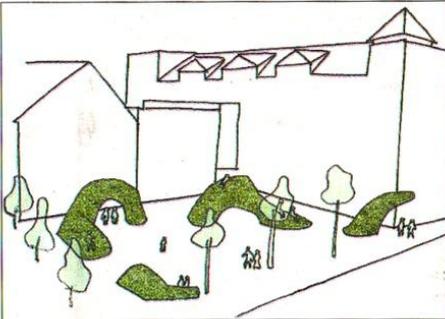
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Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by.

I dag blir ikke Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Asarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bodø Torg, men neste lørdag er de tilbake.

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 4



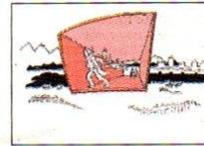
I dag – Hundholmen plass.

Bodø har sin historiske opprinnelse rundt Hundholmens Plass. Det er mange som kommer til vogn og forteller om plassens yrende folkeliv i gamle dager.

Hundholmens plass har fortsatt gode kvaliteter, men mangler den gode vindskjermingen som fantes i det gamle Bodø. Vi foreslår at Løvdold forlenger bygningsmassen mot Sjøgata og gjenska-

per den fine og lune plassen.

Bodø er litt hard i kantene. Vi foreslår å tilføre et nytt og mykere element på plassen. En gresskledd struktur som slynger seg gjennom et hardt dekke og skaper mange spennende situasjoner. Vi har kalt den grønne strukturen «Hundehalen». - selv om opprinnelsen til navnet Hundholmen kanskje er av samisk opprinnelse.



Fantastisk julekalender – dag 6

I dag: Vinden.

Vinden er tema som stadig blåser inn døren på campingvognen. Det er tydelig for alle at vinden er en viktig del av byens identitet og en patriot som holder gatene feiende rene. På de mest stormfulle dagene trosser Bodøværingene både fornuft og værguder og sleper seg utover moloen.

I Bergen har de gjort sitt innfåse regn til en opplevelse. Et «regnhus» fanger opp regnet og skaper en unik atmosfære. Når det regner som mest, kan man gå inn i mellom «vannveggen» og oppleve vannet der det renner, sildrer og glitrer. Bodøværiføenomen er ikke mindre spektakulært.

Bak luken i dagens julekalender er et vindtempel, - en hyllest til værgudene. Her man kan oppleve vindkraftene på nye og spennende måter. Det spektakulære bygget plasseres ytterst på moloen og får det til å kile i magen, ule i mastene og får kroppen til å løfte seg i de verste vindkastene. I Bodø er man ikke redd for blesten!

Source: Avisa Nordland

Monday December 6th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 6
 “Today – The wind”.

On day 6, Fantastic Norway reintroduces the idea for a wind temple to exaggerate wind effects. “The wind is a subject steadily blowing inside the door of the caravan. It is clear for everyone that the wind is an important part of this town’s identity and a patriot keeping the streets sweepingly clean. On the worst stormy days, people in Bodø defy both reason and the Clerk of Weather to pull themselves out on the pier.”⁹⁰ The spectacular wind temple furthest out on the pier “offers butterflies in the stomach, makes it howl in the masts, and raises the body at the worst gusts of wind. In Bodø, they fear no wind.”⁹¹

Tuesday December 7th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 7
 “Today – Solparken [The Sun Park]” in *Avisa Nordland*.

A new plan for this town hall square, making one square into two by suggesting a built volume. The new shape protects against winds while establishing a town hall square and a park.



Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by.

Hver lørdag fra 12.00 til 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bodø Torg.

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 7

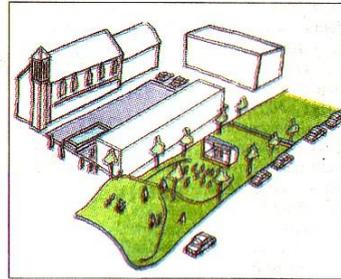
I dag – Solparken.

Campingvogna har blitt et møtested på Øvre Torg. Folk stikker innom for å slå av en prat eller gi noen velmenende råd. Mange nevner den triste rådhusplassen.

Det svært anerkjente arkitektkontoret Blakstad & Munthe-Kaas formga de «veggene» på plassen (rådhuset, domkirken og posthuset). Vi foreslår å bygge

den 4. veggen. Solparken og Rådhusplassen blir skilt med en bygningsmasse og fremstår slik tydeligere hver for seg.

I Solparken snus utescenen (Blakstad & Munthe-Kaas) mot vest og det anlegges et landskapsamfi som bygger seg opp mot torvgaten. Fra toppen kan man skue nedover torvgaten og ut mot Landegode.



Source: *Avisa Nordland*

⁹⁰ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Fantastisk julekalender - dag 6", *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 06/12/2004.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Wednesday December 8th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 8
 “Today – Drive-in Stormyra” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Drawing attention to the area’s asphalt deserts, Fantastic Norway organised an improvised drive-in cinema on December 8th announcing the idea in the advent calendar the same morning. Although not many cars arrived, the local newspaper gave a full and enthusiastic report of the event, observing that half of the spectators drove a Volvo. “Great for those who smoke”, added an enthusiastic audience, Volvo-owner Reidun Hoseth. The cinema director, who owned a Mitsubishi, was not present, the newspaper reported.

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 8

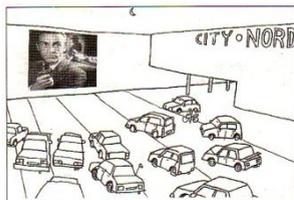
I dag – Drive-in Stormyra

Stormyra har store muligheter i dag har det store området rett utenfor Bodø sentrum, få kvaliteter utover handel og parkering. Til tross for de lite gjestmilde omgivelsene, er området likevel et av de som trekker flest mennesker.

Men etter stengt tid tømmes området fullstendig for folk. Parkeringsplassene mellom kjøpesentrene blir store ødslige asfalterkener, og fremstår tilsynelatende uten kvaliteter.

Vi mener disse tomrommene mellom kjøpesentrene har et potensial. Med enkle grep kan de tomme parkeringsplassene få nytt innhold. Vi foreslår flere «drive-in kinoer» på Stormyra. Her kan man møtes (slik rånerne har gjort det i lange tider) i bil. Man kan kjøre fra film til film, og nyte lærerte i ulike størrelser. Plutselig er Stormyra «by night», en opplevelse i seg selv.

I kveld er alle hjertelig velkommen på snikpremiere på det nye Stormyra, utenfor City Nord klokken 21.00.



Drive In kino City Nord

Source: *Avisa Nordland*

Thursday December 9th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 9
 “Anna Karolina” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Fantastic Norway opposed official plans for how to exhibit the historic boat Anna Karolina. “There are much better ways of honouring the old coast culture than to build a huge glass house over a “jekt” [traditional open boat of Northern Norway]”⁹² Rather than to dismantle its functional relevance, Fantastic Norway suggested demounting the boat physically and letting an artist use the materials to build a tribute to the coastal culture. This was a real provocation. It aroused heated discussions and resulted in 20 gunshots at their caravan from an air rifle during the Christmas holiday. The incident received lot of media attention and general commotion. The architects commented: “We thought it was good to be shot at – it showed people care – even though

⁹² Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Anna Karolina”, *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 09/12/2004.

it was a bit traumatic.”⁹³ In the national newspaper, *Aftenposten*, they commented tersely: “Fantastic Norway is probably the only architectural practice having been shot at.”⁹⁴



Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by. Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bodø Torg.



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Anna Karoline

Bodø er en moderne by, den er fremtidsrettet og unostalgisk. Helt siden vi ankom Bodø har vi undret oss over noe som bryter radikalt med dette bildet: Forholdet til Anna Karoline.

En gammel jekt har sin verdi som et fartøy, men en båt på land er bare trist. Finmarken ser for eksempel særdeles utilpass ut der den står på land i Stokmarknes. I Bodø skal man ikke gjøre samme feilen. Det finnes bedre måter å hedre kystkulturen på enn å bygge et digert glasshus over en gammel jekt.

Kystsamfunn har alltid hatt evnen til å ta innover seg det nye og la det gamle fare. Det beste ville vært å skru Anna Karoline fra hverandre, og la en kunstner bruke materialene til å lage en skulptur for å hedre kystkulturen. På den måten kunne kystkulturens vesen leve videre i ny og spennende drakt.



Source: Avis Nordland

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 10



Når byen i fremtiden vokser videre, må man spørre seg: Hvor skal byen vokse? Ser man for seg en utflytende struktur som til slutt binder sammen Bodø og Fauske? Eller skal man tenke annerledes?

Når politikerne en dag blir grepet av formuett og flytter hele Høyskolen til sentrum, vil dette generere liv og aktivitet i byen. Om skolen blir plassert i Rønnviksleira vil dagens industriområde utvikle seg til en mer «levende» bydel. Byutviklingen vil preges av dette, og utbyggingen av byen skjer som en videreutvikling av dagens sentrum. Etterspørselen av flere boliger, både for studenter og andre, vil bli stor. I så henseende foreslår vi boligbebyggelse på Burøya.

Sentrumsnær industri er fremdeles viktig, men Hjertøya er regulert til industriformål og vil kunne huse de fleste av disse foretakene. Bebyggelse på Burøya vil definere havneområdet og byen tydeligere, samtidig som det understreker kontrasten med landskapet rundt.



Fantastisk julekalender - dag 11

Noe av det mest fantastiske med Bodø, er spenningen mellom det moderne sentrum og den rike naturen som omgir byen. Fjellene rundt blir enda villere, sett sammen med den stramme bebyggelsen i byen. Bebyggelsen i sentrum blir også mer urban, sett i kontrast mot den ville naturen rundt. Vårt andre punkt på listen, ligger i dette spenningsfeltet.

Takket være fortetting og forhøyning, vil flere bodøværinger ha bopel midt i sentrum i årene som kommer. Fremtidens byborgere skal kunne parkere vaffelkaka på kafeen, og spenne på seg skiene midt i byen. På kalde blåsvis-dager og på klisterføre, skal man kunne stake seg fra Solparken, forbi frimurerlosjen, gjennom sykehusområdet, over Rensåsparken, via Stormyra og så strake Rønnvikjordene og til bymarka. Skiløypa går igjennom tettbygde strøk, forbi butikker og kafeer, – og til slutt ut i naturen. Et plast-lag ligger til grunn for løypa, slik at snømangel i sentrum ikke er et hinder. Beplantning gjør løypa til en grønn vene gjennom byen, og blir en herlig kombinasjon mellom byvandring og fjelltur. Slik blir omgivelsene rundt Bodø tilgjengelig fra tetteste sentrum, og kultur og natur smelter sammen.

⁹³ Fantastic Norway by Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Anna Bates, "Fantastic Norway", *Icon Magazine*, 040 (October), 2006.

⁹⁴ Korsvoll, Aasarød, and Haffner, "Unge arkitekter i skuddet".

Friday December 10th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 10 in *Avisa Nordland*. Concrete and explicit suggestions regarding the urban development Bodø and its urban plans.

Saturday December 11th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 11 in *Avisa Nordland*. Ski track from the town centre all the way into the mountains, as described earlier.



Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by.

Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bodø Torg.

Fantastisk julekalender – dag 12

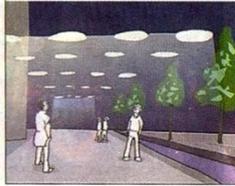
I mørketida kan det være tungt å være ute og vanskelig å møte folk. «Så håpa du heller, at noen banka på», som det heter i sangen. I kjøpesentrene er det likevel lys og varme, og derfor står man heller i køen på Mega med grå ansikt, enn å mates ute. Vi foreslår derfor å bygge et «dagslyssrom» på Hundholmens Plass. Hele byrommet skal bli opplyst av dagslyslamper!

Dagslys gir energi, så man kan ta seg en spasertur, møte folk i dagslyssrommet og komme tilbake med fult og fart i kroppen. Istedenfor å sitte foran en av disse lampene

hjemme, trekker folk ut i mørket for å kjenne dagslyset på kroppen. Slik blir Hundholmens Plass stedet for de som vil møte folk, og samtidig bli kvitt de verste depresjonene.

Byrommene er mulighetenes rom. Her kan alt skje. Et byrom trenger ikke bare være stein, busker og en paviljong – men et spennende og interessant sted å være. Bodø markerer seg på verdenskartet ved å tilby dagslys ute i byen – når sola er borte.

Ved mørketidens inntog ønsker vi Bodøværingene velkommen til dagslyssrommet på Hundholmens Plass.



Monday December 13th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 12
 Fantastic Norway suggested making a public space filled with daylight lamps during polar nights, to have a public space special made to meet in the winter, and to keep people healthy. A few days later, they realised a temporary space on *Hundholmens plass*, borrowing a set of lamps. The stunt was widely published, locally and nationally; in newspapers, on television and radio. As the sun does not arise during day during winter, even less people are outside and depressions is a known phenomenon. The large daylight lamps were to “help people keep their zest of life and give them more energy” while shedding light on the situation of outdoor public spaces in Bodø – their state, use and potential. This intervention was part of discussions on public space in Bodø, to find ways to create inviting and engaging spaces that actually works. As Aasarød puts it: “The free public space is so important, but the free public space in Bodø is so boring.”⁹⁵ In this advent calendar, Haffner and Aasarød wrote: “Urban spaces are the spaces of opportunities. Here, everything may happen. An urban space does not have to be only about stones, bushes and a pavilion – but an exciting and interesting place to be. Bodø distinguish itself at the world map by offering daylight out in town – when the sun is gone.”⁹⁶

Tuesday December 14th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 14
 “Today – Welcoming house” in *Avisa Nordland*.

A house to welcome and include all new citizens and immigrants.

⁹⁵ Aasarød: Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*, p. 25.

⁹⁶ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Fantastisk julekalender - dag 12”, *Avisa Nordland*, Bodø, 06/13/2004.

AVISIA NORDLAND TIRSDAG 14. DESEMBER 2004

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 14



Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bode by. Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bode Torg.

I dag – velkomsthus.

Etter å ha bodd drøye 2 måneder i Bode har vi forstått at vi er blant likemenn. Vi føler oss hjemme og vi føler oss velkommen. Bode er åpen og inviterende. Vi er innvandrere og vi bor i en by av innvandrere.

Folk har klart seg fast på Rodehalvøya helt siden steinalderen. Med gode tider strømmet de til fra land og strand kom de frem-

made helt til havgapet og Bode. Det var mange som fikk forfeste. For å beholde sin sterke tilvæst, er Bode avhengig av nye tilflyttere. Hvis vi ikke skal trenne hele landsdelen, må vi se utover for å rekruttere nye Bodøværingere.

Byens historie gjør det kanskje lettere å ønske befolkningsgrupper fra fiensere strok velkommen. Bode vil tjene stort på om man klarer å dra nytte av de store ressursene et slikt kulturspekter representerer. Her ligger byens sikre fremtid – å bli Norges beste innvandrertby uavhengig av om du er fra Beirut, Belfast eller Beirut.

Begynn med å bygge Norges første velkomsthus på plenen foran Fylkeshuset. Her skal alle innflyttere ønskes velkommen til de finner sin plass i Bode.

ferdig



av følgende bind:

Source: Avisia Nordland

Wednesday December 15th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 15

“Camping in the town centre” in *Avisia Nordland*.

“Tear down the sheds by the Coastal Boat terminal and make a town centre camping where other campers [than Fantastic Norway] may experience Bode from the quay.”⁹⁷

ONSDAG 15. DESEMBER 2004 AVISIA NORDLAND

kultur og underholdning

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Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bode by. Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarød å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bode Torg.

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 15

I dag – camping i sentrum

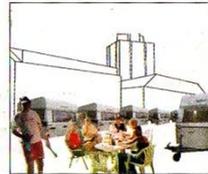
Som erfarne campingentusiaster har vi bodd på mange steder langs vårt langstrakte land, men det er i Bode vi har hatt vårt fineste tilholdssted. Vi ankom en sen kveld og lurte oss til å campere midt i

byen, ved motorota med jakhelln Båt og havet som våre nærmeste naboer.

Tyskerne inntar Bode på ny, men de kommer landevlen. Campingturistene trekker mot nord for å oppleve noe av det mest eksotiske som finnes. Gjestene er kresne og kunnskapsrike, de synes det

er spennende å besøke vakker natur og levende lokalsamfunn. Norge renner over av storlatte naturopplevelser, men det finnes ingen byer med storbycamping.

Riv skurene ved hurtigbåtterminalen og lag en sentrumsampingplass slik at andre campere kan få oppleve Bode fra bryggekannten.



Source: Avisia Nordland

⁹⁷ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, "Fantastisk julekalender - dag 15", *Avisia Nordland*, Bode, 15/12/2004.

Thursday December 16th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 16
 “Today – A captivating suggestion” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Move the college from the “prison” at Mørkved on the outskirts of town to the town centre. The former college will be released to become a prison, which the regional authorities are looking for.

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AVISA NORDLAND TORSDAG 16. DESEMBER 2004



Hver dag frem mot julaften vil arkitektene Håkon og Erlend presentere en ny ide og visjon for Bodø by.

Hver lørdag mellom klokken 12.00 og 15.00 er Erlend Blakstad Haffner og Håkon Matre Aasarud å treffe i sin røde campingvogn på Bode Torg.

Source: Avisa Nordland

Fantastisk julekalender - dag 16

I dag – et fengslende forslag
 Studentene på høyskolen er et sjeldent syn i Bodøs brede gater. Sist lørdag var det allikevel en som forvillet seg til campingvognen. Friskusen hadde tatt den lange veien fra Mørkved.

Den nysvømte studenten var lei av fengselet på Mørkved. Hvorfor kunne ikke høyskolen ligge i sentrum?

Budskapet var klart og tydelig og vi er enige. Høyskolen hører selvfølgelig hjem-

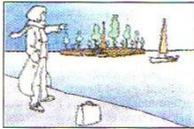
me i sentrum, ikke noen mil fra byen. Høyskolen burde ligget i Rønnviksletra. Men det er vanskelig å drømme om å flytte til sentrum, uten å finne nye brukere til bygningene på Mørkved. Studentens slengbemerkning om fengselet på Mørkved er heller ikke så dum.

De høye herrer planlegger nybygg, fengselet er en streng skole og man skal lete lenge etter mer passende lokaler enn de man finner på høyskolen.



Friday December 17th 2004: Fantastic Advent Calendar – Day 17
 “Today – The island outside” in *Avisa Nordland*.

Fantastisk julekalender – dag 17



I dag – Øya utenfor

Vi kom nylig i prat med en kajakkentusiast på Moloen, han fortalte om gleden ved å være i ett med havet. Han ville gjerne dele denne opplevelsen med flere Bodøværinger.

Vi tok ham på ordet og foreslår en flytende øy. Et stort flytende landskap, dekket med irsk gress (som tåler saltvann) Øya skal stadig forandre karakter ved at kunstnere inviteres ut og gis frie tøyler til å lage installasjoner eller utstillinger. På det nye landskapet skal man oppleve sjøen på ny med havets krefter tett på kroppen.

Øya forankres utenfor Moloen. For å gjøre øya tilgjengelig for offentligheten foreslår vi en lett hånddrevet kabelferje fra Moloen og ut til Øya.

Source: Avisa Nordland

These suggestions – ideas, design solutions, urban programmes, potential projects – are based on an extensive civic mobilisation process and communicate imaginations that may, most of them, gather Bodø’s citizens around possible solutions. However, some of these imaginations have provocative elements, challenging accustomed conceptions. The advent calendar and spatial interventions by Fantastic Norway in Bodø demonstrate

quite concretely how Fantastic Norway communicate with all sorts of people in their projects, coming close to Gandolfi's appeal of "embarking on a search for a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings." Haffner and Asarød share with Gandolfi imaginations of "a more equal society, one that is more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the urban context."⁹⁸

With their advent calendar, presenting fantastic ideas, stories and imaginative projects, they sought to prevent the content of their "knowledge database" to be appropriated or concealed by bureaucracy, politicians or developers, and to bring these ideas out to the public. They wanted discussions to continue – as well as imaginations.

Haffner and Asarød use the fantastic to enter situations marked by fractions and deadlock conflicts. Activities, stories, experiences and opportunities become means to sidestep entrenched opposites, and generate alternative ideas. They ground a fantastic reading of the urban environment on a set of values where public interests and common space come first. They explain and communicate this reading through stories and concrete examples. Thus, Fantastic Norway sought to develop alternatives to the commercial urban spaces, to counteract tendencies of singularity, isolation and boredom. They take a generous and concrete approach, addressing the fantastic to solve local and specific problems in each place. The fantastic may specifically be about actions, interactions and programmes, it may be about sensuous experiences and beauty, and it may be about identity and history.

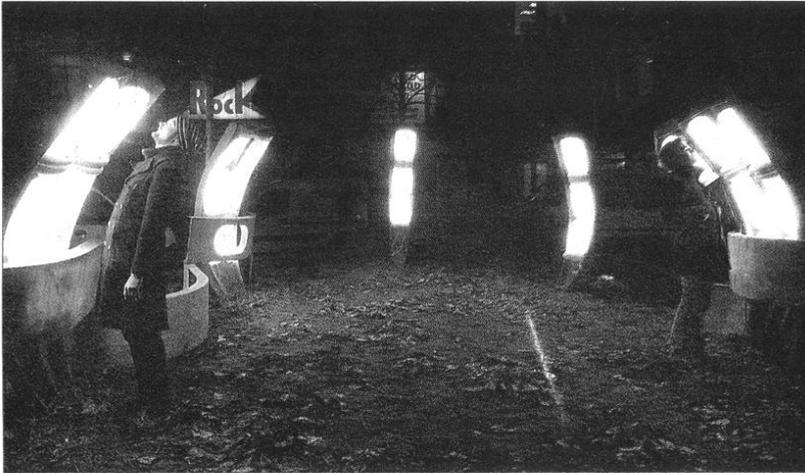
In point 7 of their *Make-It-Fantastic-Method*, Fantastic Norway argues that an actual design process should emerge from the method. In Bodø, the design consisted in a series of sketch projects, more as programmes, and an urban space plan for the town centre, published in the local newspaper, *Avisa Nordland*. At the end of their stay, Fantastic Norway handed a report to the planners of Bodø Council; with plans and strategies for public spaces in the town centre; a connection between the town, Stormyra, and the mountains; as well as imaginative strategies, or visions, for the development of the town and of Stormyra. These results were presented at a meeting with planners, bureaucrats and politicians at the Bodø Council, yet, they were only one part of the actual outcome. By nurturing ideas and visions harboured by local people, Haffner and Asarød worked as enablers as much as architects, mediating and voicing local concerns. Their tour became a mission to raise engagement and initiative, developing shared imaginations rather than realising particular projects.

⁹⁸ Emiliano Gandolfi, "Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building", in 2008 Fondazione La Biennale de Venezia (ed.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, p. 28.

LØRDAG 18. DESEMBER 2004 AVISA NORDLAND

kultur og underholdning

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Nye krefter. Arkitektene Håkon Matre Asarød og Erlend Blakstad Haffner nåt selv sitt dagslyshus i går morges.

Begge foto: Tom Melby

Dagslys i mørketid

Se om ikke Bodø snart får sitt eget lyshus. Folket vil i alle fall ha det.

Hans Trygve Holm 91 53 54 23
HNM@av.no

Hver dag i desember presenterer arkitektene Håkon Matre Asarød og Erlend Blakstad Haffner en ny ide for Bodø by i sin fantastiske julekalender i *Avisa Nordland*.

En av ideene var et dagslyshus. I går og i forgårs realiserte de den ideen på Hundholmens plass. Mottakelsen var overveldende. Eise-mari Iversen var bare en av flere som falt for konseptet.

– Dette trenger Bodø by nå i mørketiden. En helt fabelaktig

start på dagen å stå her i alt dagslyset. Det burde vært slike lys på alle busstopp, fastslo Iversen som stilte opp tidlig i går morges med kollegene Ann-Kristin Nilsen og Gudrun Hagen.

Folkekrav. Trioen var skjønt enige om at dette var noe nordlendinger trenger i mørketiden.

– Jeg oppdaget lysene torsdag kveld og fikk med meg de to andre for å prøve det nå. Absolutt noe som burde vært permanent. Tenk å hatt kaffeservering her i tillegg. Det hadde vært noe for Bodø sentrum, mener Nilsen.

– Håkon og Erlend har hatt mange gode ideer i avisen. Det er fint å se at de lar seg gjennomføre i

praksis også. I denne mørketiden er dagslys noe vi virkelig trenger, fastslo Iversen.

Mye skryt. Arkitektene selv rapporterer om mye fin respons.

– Torsdag kveld sto vi ute blant røykerne utenfor Min Plass. Der hørte vi at det ble sagt mye pent om lyshuset vårt. Det er

bra, konstaterer Matre Asarød og mener et slikt lyshus burde la seg realisere for en rimelig penge.

Bodø trenger et lyshus. Eise-mari Iversen – Det handler om å ta det offentlige rom i bruk til andre ting enn bare blomster. Et lyshus ville blitt et flott møtested i det offentlige rom. Det er vi overbevist om etter vårt forsøk, sier Blakstad Haffner.

Arkitekt med lysende ideer.



Falt pladask. Eise-mari Iversen, Ann-Kristin Nilsen og Gudrun Hagen startet dagen med dagslys i går morges.

Bodø – "Daylight in polar night" in *Avisa Nordland*, December 18, 2004: At *Hundholmens plass*, lamps establish a temporary urban space with daylight. Source: *Avisa Nordland*

3.3 *Kolstad, 2006-2007: the “allmenning”*

Kolstad is a satellite town of 13-14000 inhabitants. Built in the 1970s, it was – and still is – the biggest suburb of the city of Trondheim, which at that time had a population of 127 000. During the 1980s and 90s, Kolstad became increasingly multi-cultural. A major part of Kolstad’s built fabric consists of four storey housing slabs, organised in smaller neighbourhoods around wide green yards. All the housing blocks are white and the area is thereby known as “Kvitbyen” – the “White town”. Like many European satellite towns, Kolstad has changed since the 70s, and is now, as Håkon Matre Aasarød points out in his report, marked by architectural decay, tendencies of ghettoisation, and standards of living well below the Norwegian average.⁹⁹ These conditions, together with a discouraging image built up through media reports over issues such as child care and juvenile delinquency, make it a strained area for people living there.¹⁰⁰ “Why do we not get the same attention when anything positive happens?... Here at Kolstad there are a lot of nice young people. It is always pleasant to take a walk at Kolstad.”¹⁰¹ Kolstad resident Monica Tofte made this complaint to the Trondheim newspaper *Adresseavisen* in June 2006. Quoting Tofte, Aasarød commented how media and in particular *Adresseavisen* had contributed to maintain the negative impression of the area. Despite, or maybe because, of the negative attention, he discerned at Kolstad “a headstrong community feeling”.¹⁰²

In 2006, Fantastic Norway was invited to Kolstad to map the wishes and needs of people, associations, public institutions, private enterprises, and property developers. The aim was to develop alternative development strategies for the Kolstad centre.¹⁰³ The Kolstad centre consists of a small combined community centre and shopping mall (also called the Saupstad Centre), with a neighbouring school, swimming-pool and an adjacent sports field. As in their previous work, Fantastic Norway would also this time go “beyond a purely physical upgrading of the area to include the residents’ pride and engagement in the local environment.”¹⁰⁴ They collaborated with the architectural office Bente Rødahl Arkitekter AS in Trondheim, and were commissioned by the Trondheim Council and three enterprises, Wahl Eiendom, Trondos and Veidekke AS, all stakeholders in the Saupstad Centre.¹⁰⁵ Despite this powerful agglomeration, Fantastic Norway went

⁹⁹ Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰³ Aasarød and Haffner, “Fantasticmetoden: Fantastic Norway AS”.

¹⁰⁴ Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ Aasarød and Haffner, “Fantasticmetoden: Fantastic Norway AS”.

beyond their commission in the mobilisation and planning processes at Kolstad, in order to better serve the local community.



Kolstad – with the Saupstad Centre of brown blocks – all to the left side here.

The Saupstad Centre is a modest place, containing a programme of commercial and public services such as supermarkets, a kiosk, a local public library, public health centre, a well-run youth club, the volunteer bureau, retirement homes, and a rather hidden community café. The most conspicuous urban feature is the large parking area in front of the centre. Out of sight is both the library on the 1st floor and the youth club, which occupies part of the basement. Despite its important and well-attended services, Aasarød observed strikingly little activity and social interaction at the centre. Activity on site consisted of people walking from their car to the grocery shops, and the only thing reminding of social and cultural activities were

“some posters in the corridor where there was before a bakery.”¹⁰⁶ Growing up here, Aasarød remembered how the Saupstad Centre used to be the real centre of Kolstad. However, a new building had been added to the complex in the late 1990s, reducing the public square to a narrow, smelly passage, while disconnecting the centre from its surrounding areas of housing, schools and sports facilities.¹⁰⁷ When Aasarød arrived back in 2006, Trondheim Council planned to sell its ownership in the Saupstad Centre but sought first to establish a good development plan to set the premises for future projects.



The Saupstad Centre: The narrow passage, a wall of posters, its large car park, and now the Fantastic Norway caravan. In the photo, representing Fantastic Norway, we see architect Øystein Ask. Source: Håkon Matre Aasarød, *'Itjånå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, Oslo, 2007

¹⁰⁶ Aasarød, *'Itjånå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

In 2007, Erlend Blakstad Haffner finished his education in London and Håkon Matre Aasarød was therefore in charge of the work at Kolstad, which would also become his diploma project at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. Aasarød moved back into Kolstad and lived there for a few weeks, with the caravan, assisted by architect Øystein Ask and journalist Askild Matre Aasarød. Fantastic Norway researched and mapped the area; physical, social, cultural, and human amenities as well as social and economical challenges; in addition, they charted the quality or lack of quality in public spaces and common arenas. The approach developed during the caravan tour was used at Kolstad; from civic mobilisation through the creation of a shared imagination, to project developments. Trondheim's newspaper, *Adresseavisen*, became a partner in the mobilisation process. Every day for a week, *Adresseavisen* published interviews with Aasarød, illustrated either by his own sketches or by children's drawings. Besides, the newspaper agreed to organise an online forum for reader's letters and comments.¹⁰⁸ The mobilisation process followed roughly the same procedure as in Bodø, although with local variations. In the following, I will focus on the issues particular to Kolstad.

Aasarød used the introductory interview in *Adresseavisen* to highlight positive qualities at Kolstad, announcing the forthcoming residency of Fantastic Norway with their caravan while giving a brief summary of the history of Kolstad.¹⁰⁹ He emphasised its green yards, playgrounds, football team and sports club, introducing Kolstad as a good place to live while pointing as well to problems such as its bad image, and the neglect of public space. Aasarød presented his mission; to start a process of revitalising the satellite-city centre. People at Kolstad were invited to the caravan to contribute with their knowledge and opinions. For once, Aasarød said, they were going to be consulted before, not after the changes. Contributions would be assembled in a report and delivered to the Trondheim Council.¹¹⁰ "No one knows Kolstad as well as those who live there, and that is why they are invited to tell us what they want for the prairie between the Saupstad Centre and Lidl, says the architect Håkon Matre Aasarød... We want to talk to everybody from senior citizens to loutish kids."¹¹¹ "All is permitted" was the catch-phrase in the newspaper explaining the procedure;

Every day we will present an idea or a sketch from the caravan. Architect Håkon Matre Aasarød and Fantastic Norway

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰⁹ Norunn Bergesen and Håkon Matre Aasarød, "- Må få bestemme selv på Kolstad", *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 07/11/2006.

¹¹⁰ The report *Fantastic Kolstad* and the plans are available at: <http://www.trondheim.kommune.no/saupstad/>

¹¹¹ Bergesen and Aasarød, "- Må få bestemme selv på Kolstad".

relatively short but well-organised residencies could work well. “I have rarely experienced such a response in a mobilising process as by the stand at the Saupstad Centre” Aasarød told. “Most days, the four litres of coffee were consumed within the first half-an-hour.”¹¹³ Many ideas and worries were expressed in the caravan, Aasarød recalls, particularly concerning the general image of Kolstad and the persistently negative media-coverage. But people were also talking about Kolstad’s hidden qualities, its after-school activities, the presence of public institutions, the reductions in public budgets, the multi-cultural community, the youth club, maintenance responsibilities, parking, lack of greenery around the centre, the need of an assembly room to let, social meeting places and their visual presence, the scarcity of places to informal social interaction (expressed by senior citizens and youths), and the replacement of the former square with its benches and an occasional market at the Saupstad-centre for a new commercial building. As one of the residents expressed it: “The only place to meet at the Saupstad centre is at the “Prostate-bench” outside Prix. There we sit lined up beside each other when the sun is occasionally present. When it is not, we sit on the newspaper-boxes.”¹¹⁴ Most people who dropped by the caravan had complaints and wishes, yet they were happy at Kolstad.



Source: *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 08/11/2006.

¹¹³ Aasarød, *'Itjnd som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, p. 47.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Apart from the undoubtedly genuine engagement, a reason for the massive response was the first sketch Aasarød presented in *Adresseavisen* at the beginning of his residency week. To gain a short and efficient mobilisation process, he suggested, with text and illustration, to build a mosque next to the Saupstad Centre. They already had a church, Aasarød argued, and there are many Muslims living in the area. “[T]he online forum in *Adresseavisen* received a storm of contributions, outbursts and discussions.”¹¹⁵ Several media covered the incident, national television as well. The discussion consisted mainly of general opinions on the building of mosques – relating less directly to Kolstad.¹¹⁶ “My wish for a quick and strong response made me crack nuts with a sledgehammer [skyte spurv med kanoner]... Several of my later contributions paled into insignificance compared to the mosque.”¹¹⁷ What Aasarød said to have learned was that if you “use a sledgehammer; it has to be to suggest something which provokes enthusiasm. Not to provoke a reaction only... To inspire confidence while challenging is a fine balance”.¹¹⁸ It did not prevent different residents of Kolstad to enter the caravan, on the contrary. However, the heated discussion left Kolstad behind and centred instead about mosques and Muslim practice. In this heated environment, Aasarød worked hard to keep focus on Kolstad and its environment.

The range of visitors in the caravan was actually quite representative for the spectrum of people living at Kolstad, although with a small majority of youths and senior citizens.¹¹⁹ Representatives from most volunteer organisations related to sports, politics, culture, age groups, and religion were present.¹²⁰ Aasarød contacted Huseby Upper Secondary School next to the Saupstad Centre to ensure contributions from youngsters and to gain knowledge about unused and non-programmed areas that this age-group typically knows. He organised workshops with the thirteen-year-olds.¹²¹ The pupils put forward their thoughts and ideas: a paint ball field, indoor skating hall, a gigantic “Kolstad Tower” with a cool clothes-shop, bicycle track, youth café on the roof of the indoor swimming pool, boxing ring on the centre roof top; all ideas included in the final report. *Adresseavisen* reported the workshops and ideas, showing a selection of drawings while Aasarød invited people to come up with more. “As this is the last day with the caravan

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

¹¹⁶ Norunn Bergesen and Håkon Matre Aasarød, “Vil ha moské på Kolstad”, *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 08/11/2006.

¹¹⁷ Aasarød, *’Tjnnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl’*, p. 125.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

It struck Aasarød that young people in the satellite-cities here at Kolstad in Trondheim and Romsås in Oslo were more interested in the development of their neighbourhood than youngsters in the Northern towns.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

at the centre, do like the 8th graders: Come today with the funniest, most peculiar and colourful ideas! The caravan is present outside the Saupstad Centre at 12 to 3.¹²²



Workshops at Huseby Upper Secondary School. Source: Håkon Matre Aasarød, *'Itjå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, Oslo, 2007 and *Adresseavisen*.

“Use dynamite” was the headline on Day 3. Aasarød reported from caravan dialogues on the two previous days while suggesting new ideas for the Saupstad Centre. “All the institutions have their specific space in the centre-buildings but space for the most important ones, the people, seems to have been forgotten. Not many years ago, the heart of Kolstad was the square at the Saupstad Centre. Today, the Kiwi supermarket occupies what was once the place for social interaction, pastime, occasional market days and outdoor concerts... Today the Saupstad Centre acts like a fortress, closing off the rest of the district. The main access to the centre is through a narrow passage or past a hard and cold parking lot. The term “inviting” is not the first that comes to mind... In the caravan, solutions are discussed. What if one quite simply blew away the glass staircase entering the public health centre? We would open the area and gain a nice passage down to *Husebyhallen* (the indoor swimming pool), the schools, and the football field. The forest (“hashish forest” is the popular name) behind the staircase could with some light and a few benches become a great park for Kolstad people of all ages. The youth club “Boxåpner” could have a great entrance and maybe a small outdoor stage. This way, the community can see and experience some of the manifold activities going on in the basement of the centre. And while we are on to it, the public health centre and the library could swap place so that one

¹²² Norunn Bergesen and Håkon Matre Aasarød, “Noe ingen andre har”, *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 11/11/2006.

could bring a cup of coffee and a book out into the park when the sun breaks through once and a while.”¹²³ In this newspaper notice and a simple sketch, Aasarød synthesised wishes, complaints and suggestions made by visitors in the caravan and pupils at school as well as his own observations into a concrete proposal for the Saupstad Centre and its close surroundings.¹²⁴ After Aasarød’s residency and newspaper articles, Kolstads’ residents continued discussions in *Adresseavisen*, both in the paper and at the online forum. They also continued to respond with e-mails and telephone calls to the journalist as well as to Aasarød. People gathered in agreement on the lack of quality in public space, and kept adding suggestions and ideas.



Source: Fantastic Norway

¹²³ Norunn Bergesen and Håkon Matre Aasarød, "- Bruk dynamitt", *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 10/11/2006.

¹²⁴ The suggestions from residents at Kolstad clustered around a set of themes:

The outdoor areas around the centre should have less asphalt and more greenery with more benches and places for social interactions along a main public space.

The wish for a reinstalled central public space as a natural place to meet people as well as an occasional market square was loud and clear.

As both the youth club and the senior citizen café had limited opening hours, these groups wanted open places where to do nothing except meet; a place to hang out and look at life.

Many people wanted a roof over the gut passage leading from the main road to the centre, and a modernised shopping centre.

Families with children wanted spaces for activities: more sports fields and a playground at the centre. Ball cages, go-cart, bowling hall and climbing walls were other suggestions.

Several local organisations and groups wanted an assembly hall.

Residents in the senior citizen apartments neighbouring the centre wanted recreational areas.

Parking by the centre should not be reduced; however, the car park should be more hidden.

The outdoor public space should be prepared for market activities.

Public toilets at the centre.

Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, pp. 51-55.

Kolstad Arena and the “allmenning”

The most important feature in the new plan for the Saupstad-centre was an “allmenning”: a new shared public space. “Allmenning” translates roughly as common land, although it denotes not only land in rural areas for common use but also, historically, common spaces in urban situations. Today, the meaning of “allmenning” comes close to the concept of public space. Because of the particular significance this term has for Haffner and Aasarød, I will use it in Norwegian in the following discussion. When Haffner and Aasarød explain the term, they refer a law dating back to King Magnus VI the Law-mender who in the year of 1276 ratified the “allmenning” to include not only public right to access and use of common land but also common urban spaces in the town of Bergen –afterwards expanding the law to other towns.¹²⁵ In towns, the law regulated the rights of ordinary people to access quays and passages, allowing anyone to trade there.¹²⁶ Typically, an “allmenning” is not centrally organised but form sequences of spaces connecting to infrastructure. The “allmenning” has been an important concept at the Bergen School of Architecture (BAS), where they have emphasised its origin as a usable place as opposed to a representative one, linked to power. This does not prevent the “allmenning” from having formal functions added to it, such as for instance Torvallmenningen in Bergen.

“The main move in revitalising the area around the Saupstad Centre should be to establish an “allmenning” that connects – and exposes the activity in the area.”¹²⁷ Aasarød suggested in his report to remove the glass staircase up to the public health centre, opening for an “allmenning” stretching from the renewed square in front of the Saupstad Centre, along a small future park (the Wood), the schools, the public pool, and to the facilities of the Kolstad Sports Club. The new allmenning would be shaped as a broad pedestrian avenue, connecting and embracing activities, institutions and people. Private enterprises, public services, facilities for volunteer work and groups, would surround this “allmenning” as a place to hang out, to watch life taking place, and to meet. Aasarød argued that opening up and

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Knut Helle, "Magnus 6 Håkonsson Lagabøte",

<http://www.sn.l.no/nbl_biografi/Magnus_6_H%C3%A5konsson_Lagab%C3%B8te/utdypning>, accessed 09/01/2011.

Knut Helle, "Sikret allemannsrett i byen", in Jorunn Haakestad (ed.), *Allmenningen: Det urbane fristed*, Bergen: Bergen byformcenter, 2002.

Justis- og Politidepartementet, "4.3 Statens allmenningsrett", www.regjeringen.no (ed.),

<<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/jd/dok/nouer/2007/nou-2007-14/17/3.html?id=584411>>, accessed 09/01/2010.

The "allmenning" was already more generally defined through Gulatingsloven year 1164, confirmed and revised in Frostatingsloven about year 1220 as well as by Magnus Lawmender's law of land year 1274.

¹²⁶ These passages were also utilised as tools to prevent fire from spreading in this town built of wood. Thus, many of them became wider throughout the Middle-Ages up until the 1800th century.

Helle, "Sikret allemannsrett i byen".

¹²⁷ Aasarød, *Itjånå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, p. 61.

creating an “allmenning” would also strengthen the Saupstad Centre commercially.¹²⁸

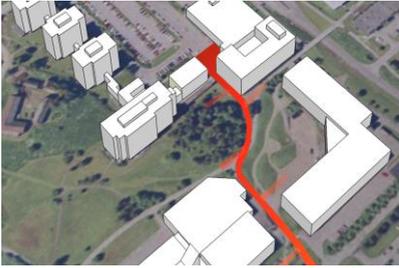


The idea of a new “allmenning” at Kolstad.

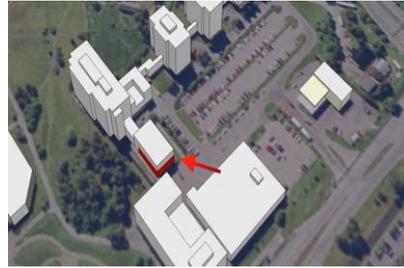
Source: Håkon Matre Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl*, Oslo, 2007

¹²⁸ The commissioners wanted to develop new housing projects around the Saupstad Centre, increasing density. Fantastic Norway made a plan of volumes for new housing and underground parking, seeing an increased density as important for the Saupstad Centre to develop and to nurture a re-established square and the future “allmenning”. Yet, this part of the Kolstad project is not presented here.

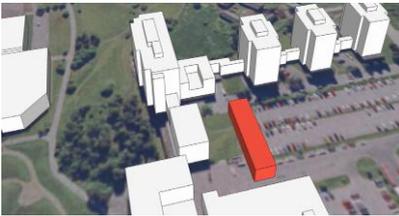
Strategies for the Saupstad Centre suggested by Fantastic Norway:



“A new “allmenning” at Saupstad.”

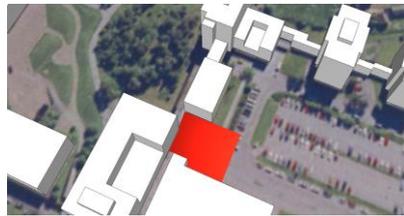


“Move the library.” The library will be easily accessible on ground floor, with café included, facing the market square.



“A volume along the market square.”

An open building will separate between the car park and the market square.

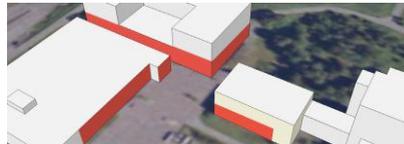


“Upgrade today’s market square.”



“Stage.”

At the “allmenning”, beside the new park (The Wood), is an outdoor stage.



“Upgrading of facades / entrances in today’s centre.” All facades at ground floor, facing public areas, will be transparent.

Source: Håkon Matre Aasarød, *‘Ijnnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl’*, Oslo, 2007

Aasarød describes media’s role, and in particular *Adresseavisen*, as important to retain the focus on the wishes and contributions of Kolstad’s residents throughout the municipal planning process. When the new plan for the Saupstad-centre became ready for political hearing, *Adresseavisen* gave it a thorough presentation, and the plan decided on by the Trondheim Council is largely based on Aasarød’s report. Aasarød was asked by *Adresseavisen*

to evaluate and comment on the plan.¹²⁹ He confirmed in the newspaper that many of the resident's wishes were implemented in the Council's plan, including removing the glass-covered staircase blocking connections to the other public institutions.¹³⁰

Yet, Aasarød thought it unlikely that the Saupstad Centre would regain the same centrifugal force as it had in the 1970s. A public space or an arena bringing people together had been a recurrent theme in the caravan, Aasarød recalled: "For a multi-cultural and diverse community as Kolstad, the value of good public meeting places has maybe become even more important."¹³¹ What kind of place would serve that purpose? Could it be the Saupstad Centre? Through "active investigations and campaigns in the local environment" Aasarød located "human assets, groups and actors holding potentials to change their home town from inside."¹³² From dialogues in the caravan it had become quite clear that the local sports club and its supporter club were important positive forces in the community, involving a diversity of ages and ethnicities. In addition, the club "represented local patriotism and pride, and was as such an important "sealant" in an otherwise fragmented and diverse district."¹³³ The slogan of Kolstad Sports Supporter Club "Vi bryr oss" ("We care") demonstrates a renewed and inclusive community spirit, Aasarød concluded.¹³⁴ "People were proud of their football team and the positive social environment in and around the club."¹³⁵

From dialogues with representatives of the Kolstad Sports Club, Aasarød knew of the plans to build stands for 500 people. He met with the leaders of the club, proposing to expand their stand project with public services and community facilities.¹³⁶ On October 28th 2007, the *Kolstad Arena* project was presented, and was very well received at an open meeting in the Kolstad Sports Club. Håkon Matre Aasarød collaborated with a local and important enthusiast in the sports club, Frank Lidahl, who became its prime mover. "We immediately began to work out a sketch project to visualise the idea in order to enter into dialogues with potential investors and collaborators."¹³⁷ A process of networking and lobbying started. In the process of promoting the project, Aasarød kept in the background, whereas Kolstad Sports Club and Frank Lidahl fronted the project.¹³⁸ Their strategy was first to create interest

¹²⁹ Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*, p. 79.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Håkon Matre Aasarød, "Fantastic Norway er fornøyd", *Adresseavisen*, Trondheim, 2008.

¹³¹ Aasarød, *Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl'*.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

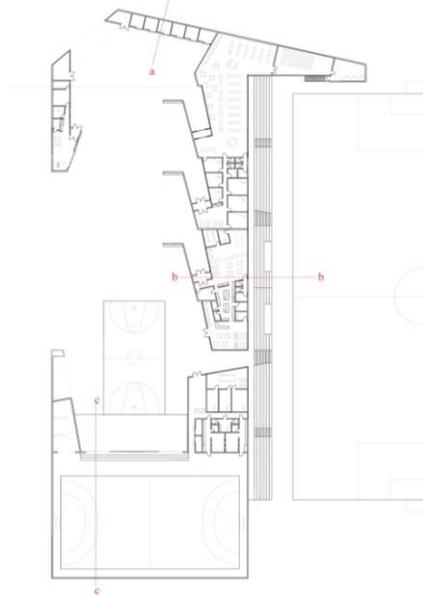
¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ A visionary text by Frank Lidahl and Håkon Matre Aasarød was presented together with drawings and plans for the arena: "Kolstad lacks a heart. A place to meet, a place showing all the activities in the area, a place to hold our identity. In short, a place we can be proud of... it is of no use to embellish the area with

among local groups and employees in public institutions; then approach the politicians. Possible tenants, contributors and funders were contacted and visited during the last months of 2007. The initiators argued that public services would be given a unique exposure in the *Kolstad Arena*, adjacent to other local services and facilities. Local municipal units of the cultural department, the youth services, and the practical-pedagogical child services, were all committed to the project and would work for the *Kolstad Arena*, as did also the volunteer bureau. The local library wanted to relocate to the arena, together with school libraries from two local schools. So did the Boxåpner Youth Club and the community café [bydelskafé]. The Heimdal Upper Secondary School was in need of sports hall, music rooms, and an outdoor sports area, and proposed to share facilities with the sports club and local associations. All three major housing cooperatives at Kolstad supported the project, offering to contribute with a considerable sum. They needed a hall for gatherings – both the cooperatives as well as their inhabitants; a need already revealed in caravan dialogues. Aasarød concluded that, “The proposal to gather the area’s activities at the site of Kolstad Sports Club beside the football field, received a resonance that I had never imagined.”¹³⁹



Kolstad Arena – Ground plan.

Source: Håkon Matre Aasarød, *’Itjnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl’*, Oslo, 2007

benches and small parks if we are not doing something that build identity and have real effects. Our vision is about something more than a football stadium. This is local community development.” Ibid., p. 87.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

However, when promoting the *Kolstad Arena*, Aasarød and Fantastic Norway went beyond their commission, even opposing it in parts. Inevitably, this led to a certain tension between Aasarød and his commissioners, stakeholders and owners in the Saupstad Centre, who wanted to maintain the Saupstad Centre at the core of the project. In Narvik, Brønnøysund, and Bodø, Fantastic Norway was commissioned to carry out processes of civic mobilisation and urban development, using their self-invented methods. In reality, however, they always went beyond, outside, and sometimes – as in Kolstad – against these commissions.

Processes and works by Fantastic Norway at Kolstad may be compared with Crimson's Wimby! project in Hoogvliet. In this project, Crimson abandoned the original shopping mall, seeing no future for it in competition with larger shopping centres. They established instead a different kind of central common space and "community centre" on the outskirts of the area, consisting of a new community park, *Hoogvliet Heerlijkheid* [Loveliness Hoogvliet] where several activities are facilitated and combined with dance hall and cultural community house as called the *Villa*. Crimson was looking for a way to bring people together through common activities, relying on available land as well as local human resources – local enthusiasts who would see the initiatives through and make them run on a daily basis. The choices and arguments by Crimson align with many of the ones by Fantastic Norway at Kolstad, who chose to concentrate on the project of *Kolstad Arena* rather than the Saupstad Centre.

Fantastic Norway quickly developed programme and sketch plans based on contributions from future users and organised it around a large and open yard where there would be space for outdoor activities and sport actions. Spatially, functionally, and conceptually, the *Kolstad Arena* would conclude the "allmenning".¹⁴⁰ Starting by identifying a problem and ending with a totally new program and proposal, *Kolstad Arena* seems as an ideal example of the *Make-It-Fantastic-Method* and its nine bullet points. Bullet point 6 say: "Invade power structures. Find the people who really make things happen. Anchor the project. Find a prime mover, every place has one. This is the key to success."¹⁴¹ The *Kolstad Sports Club* and their local enthusiast Frank Lidahl were the "prime movers" for the *Kolstad Arena*. Aasarød made a preliminary design as set out in point 7, and contributed as in point 8 by using 'power contacts' to support the project economically and politically.¹⁴² With

¹⁴⁰ The "allmenning" as a public space would lead from the *Kolstad Arena*, as a community based centre, to the local commercial centre, and along the way "the allmenning" would connect to schools, swimming hall, and park, with open

¹⁴¹ Aasarød and Haffner, "Make it Fantastic".

¹⁴² Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*, p. 4.

initiators, local enthusiasts, tenants, programme and plans in place, Fantastic Norway and Kolstad Sports Club continued the process to gain political and financial support. A local politician fronted the *Kolstad Arena* in the council. Aasarød intended to give the buildings a sculptural design contrasting the rigidity and regularity of the surrounding housing blocks, exposing the indoor activities through glass walls. Fantastic Norway then pulled back slightly, but remained available to support the project with architectural intelligence and design, enthusiasm, media experience, knowledge about the power networks, and sources of funding.

Torsdag 13. desember 2007 | **Adresseavisen**

DR Dermed er det duket for A-løfterike filmdebut. **Realitas**

Vil gi Kolstad nytt hjerte

Bydelen Kolstad trenger et tun eller torg, mener Kolstad idrettslag som har satt i gang et stort prosjekt for å gi drabantbyen et «hjerter».

– I samarbeid med arkitekt Håkon Matre Aasarød i Fantastic Norway satser vi på å skape et bydelssenter, Kolstad Arena, hvor viktige lokale funksjoner som bibliotek, ungdomsleiligheter og en foreningshall/Idrettsball kan kombineres med et vindstorg, sier Frank Lidahl, prosjektleder i Kolstad II.

Delene behov
Han kutter veik på at mange lokale institusjoner er borte om å definere sine behov, og sammen av dette er medført i en bygningsmasse på 2300 kvadratmeter, hvorav torget utgjør ca. 1500 kvadratmeter.
Prosjektet er kostnadsberegnet til 60 millioner, og Lidahl er optimistisk nok til å snakke om byggestart våren 2009.
Han ser for seg en todelt finansiering:
– Idrettsballen kan utløse stipendier, mens resten kan finansieres med leieinntekter. Biblioteket, Frivillighetssentralen, Barne- og ungdomsforeningen og Kulturhuset holder i dag leie til Saupstadannet.
Hvis disse summen i stedet betales til Kolstad Arena, kunne det bety en større byggeplan, påpeker Lidahl.

Åpen vegg med torg
I tillegg kan idrettsballen med håndballhøllene leies ut til Hemsdal videregående og de andre skoleene i området. Den samme hallen kan med et håndgrip for andre til et kulturhus med åpen vegg mot vindstorg. Der blir det plass både for bydelshuset, kunstutstillinger og foreninger med stand-up-komikere og annen scenekunst.
Etter ti år som frivillig i Kolstad II, er Lidahl fra kvartlett ansatt på arbeid som «lokalsamfunnsutvikler». Dette forteller nye om den veik laget legger på å gi bydelen en mer tilkaltende

Stærkt prosjektet Arkitekt Håkon Matre Aasarøds utforming av Kolstad Arena med vindstorg, angitt av bibliotek, kontor, idrettsball og flere servicefunksjoner.

profil, fremholder han.
Kolstad Arena er heller ikke første prosjekt idrettslaget har gått seg i kast med. De siste fire årene har det skjedd en dobling av klubbhusets areal – i tillegg til at to kunstgallerier er opparbeidet.
– Aasarødet er å sette etille og venter på at noen skal utvikle bydelen for oss. Vi kan klage gjerne som mølla, men til sist er det bare vi selv som kan skape forandring. Derfor har klubben nå gått i gang med bydelutvikling. Med idrettsball som brykketang vil Kolstad for all fremtid få en ny dimensjon, sier Lidahl.
Arkitekt Håkon Matre Aasarød, som selv har vokst opp på Kolstad, sier at revitalisering av drabantbyer er en utfordring som står på dagsorden – ikke bare i Norge, men i hele Europa.

Lokalpatriotisme
– Med dette prosjektet viser Kolstad vei på landsbasis. Iscenesatt skulpturalt står for en sterk lokalpatriotisme og er en viktig «herjomsasse» i et ellers fragmentert og sammenhengsløst landskap. Klubben er seg sitt samfunnsansvar bevisst, og med dette prosjektet vil den gi bydelen et løft, sier Aasarød.

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God plasser (ting) – Her like ved klubbhuset skal Kolstad Arena ligge, sier prosjektleder Frank Lidahl i Kolstad Idrettslag. Foto: PIVN ALSTEDT




”Want to give Kolstad a new heart”: Newspaper article and interview with Frank Lidahl in *Adresseavisen* December 13, 2007, presenting the *Kolstad Arena*. Source: *Adresseavisen*.

Despite all the interest, conflicts in the Kolstad Sports Club led the project to a halt. The result may seem to display a vulnerable point in the *Make-It-Fantastic-Method* and this whole way of working. In my interviews, however, Aasarød emphasised the importance of anchoring a project not just in local enthusiasts but securing a broad local and political support as well as

funding. The process at Kolstad had not been developed far enough to be properly anchored, before the halt.

At Kolstad, the long “allmenning” was introduced as a uniting common and public space, reaching from the Saupstad Centre to the *Kolstad Arena* as an urban field. The “allmenning” would gather local activities, facilities, and institutions, connecting to the surrounding housing communities at Kolstad both visually and by a network of footpaths. If a new or re-established common space in Kolstad was to succeed, it had to be well-planned, Aasarød argued. It had to answer to the wishes and suggestions of the residents: “Only then will the space be filled with life and commotion.”¹⁴³ This is why *Kolstad Arena* became so important; with its programme and partners, it would contribute to gather people across population segments. It was in itself a kind of “allmenning”.

The “allmenning”, both as an idea and as a physical reality, is a core principle in Fantastic Norway’s practice. These are fully public spaces that are not defined by formal and representative properties; rather, they are defined by a public right of use and by how they facilitate activities and interactions. This way, the “allmenning” is a shared space, which through its uses, activities, and interactions builds commonality, community and common identity. In this sense, the “allmenning” indicates a space less finished and more depended on contributions from each and everyone. While the “allmenning” in Brønnøysund had a long and shared history, a modern satellite-town like Kolstad had but a short. That is exactly why the Kolstad Sports Club together with associations, clubs, schools, libraries, and community organisations, was regarded the best partners when establishing the new “allmenning” at Kolstad. To follow a football match or to meet in the library means to build diverse but shared stories.

New Towns like Kolstad have been grounded on values of collectivity in the form of neighbourhood units and community centres, as well as on ideas of efficiency and healthy greenery, Aasarød argues. What happens when a former community centre dissolves, the “allmenning” disappears, and the place becomes empty, boring and neglected? What are the new common arenas shared by the residents? These issues have been a major concern for Fantastic Norway not only at Kolstad but throughout their nomadic practice in Northern Norway. “Our aim in every place is to expand the possibility for people to meet.”¹⁴⁴ Through their tour, campaigns, and works, Fantastic Norway kept focus on the existence, uses, and material qualities of public space – with the caravan and media strategies as (temporary) activators of public space. In my view, their mobilisation processes can be regarded as

¹⁴³ Aasarød, *‘Tjnnå som kjem tå sæ sjøl’*.

¹⁴⁴ Erlend Blakstad Haffner in Tomas Lauri, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Norsk pannkaka”, *Arkitekten*, 10 (oktober), 2007.

contributions to a non-physical “allmenning” – initiating open and common spaces of dialogues and debates. Aasarød has explained how they wish to “create a forum where everyone may forward ideas and discuss urban development.”¹⁴⁵ Wherever they put up their caravan, they contribute to develop the market square as an “allmenning”; an active space for commerce and political activity, interaction and exchange, as well as, in a more abstract sense of space, contribute to public dialogues and debates. These physical and social spaces of exchange and debate reinforce each other –developing a wide “allmenning”.

In their approach, Fantastic Norway may be said to explore how to use their architectural knowledge and to work architectural materiality “in the service of other ends”, as the organisers in Sheffield put it.¹⁴⁶ Haffner and Aasarød asked questions such as; how to develop a shared urban space, open to various contributions, where both initiatives and conflicts have space? At the *Kolstad Arena* project, focus was not firstly on built forms, but on how one might facilitate actions, interactions and initiatives by many different groups of residents. Haffner and Aasarød emphasise that the architect is the designer, but “believe aesthetics too often is too much in focus.”¹⁴⁷ For Fantastic Norway, aesthetics and tectonics is certainly put “in the service of other ends.”¹⁴⁸

3.4 Mediating: The practice of Fantastic Norway

Fantastic Norway explores a mediating approach in their practice. On their tour, they took on a communicative and intermediary role as well as a proactive one. They operated as strategists seeking to catalyse, initiate, transmit, as well as to intercede and intervene. They operated as educators through direct dialogue and through local mass media – lately also through national television. Although we may use many of the same verbs to denote working processes in mediating practices; what they actually work with as well as on vary quite distinctively. Fantastic Norway took on two major roles during their tour; on the one hand, as initiators and strategists, with the ultimate goal of to realise built projects; on the other hand, as communicators and educators, to promote and instigate engagement, equal opportunities, common spaces, and architectural quality.

¹⁴⁵ Holm et al., “Søker det fantastiske”.

¹⁴⁶ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Alternate Currents: Editorial”, *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007, p. 1.

¹⁴⁷ Ravn, Aasarød, and Haffner, “Fantastiske folk”.

¹⁴⁸ Schneider and Till, “Alternate Currents: Editorial”, p. 1.

Haffner and Aasarød take a pragmatic interest in problems as they appear in the specific situation, without a dogmatic or ideological framework. To be sure, they are aware of oppositions such as of global capitalism versus local engagement, but engage in these matters only as they come to fore locally, without highlighting a general dichotomy of the powerless versus the powerful. On their tour, they nurture local resources and initiatives, develop projects and plans for shared and common places, such as extreme sports facilities in Narvik, the playful but non-commercial urban spaces in Bodø, and the *Kolstad Arena* in Trondheim. In these bottom-up endeavours, Fantastic Norway seeks to unite local forces and interests in consensual visions, to engage residents while keeping in close contact with the ones in power. Their pragmatic and down to earth approach does not lead them to pursue least common denominators or engage in horse-trade and compromises. Rather, through the use of humour, playfulness and a certain self-conscious naiveté, they establish a non-conflictual and responsive atmosphere where new ideas can be imagined, appreciated and finally realised without being killed immediately by quarrels about properties, funding, and priorities. Seeking consensus through shared stories and imaginations, they do not shy away from the use of provocations to engage people. Nor do they shy away from conflicts, in order to discuss what really matters. As Aasarød quietly mentioned in my interview, “The mobilisation process at Kolstad led to two written death threats. But first and foremost it resulted in a lot of good response and exiting meetings and challenges.”¹⁴⁹

Approaching serious and conflictual issues with the help of a naive tone and humorous texts is something they share with the contemporary Norwegian writer Erlend Loe, whom they quote on several occasions. Haffner and Aasarød refer to Loe’s book *Naive.Super* on the act of making lists to gain overview and see what matters: “A simple list to have an overview of something complex... Independently, the points on the list may seem insignificant but together they make a whole.”¹⁵⁰ Each single bullet point on each single list made by each single inhabitant, together make up important statements, perhaps staking out the direction towards new plans and possibilities.

Aasarød and Haffner stopped travelling and parked the caravan in 2008, when they established an architectural office in central Oslo. The caravan had gained a lot of attention and had been an important tool in their practice. Yet, at the end “it was nearly impossible to be interviewed or photographed if not

¹⁴⁹ Aasarød, *’Itjnå som kjem tå se sjøl’*, p. 125.

¹⁵⁰ Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Ønskeliste for Narvik”, *Fremover*, Narvik, 01/11/2003; Aasarød and Haffner, “Å legge lista høyt”. Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “En liste for Brønnøysund”, *Brønnøysund Avis*, Brønnøysund, 19/06/2004.

Haffner and Aasarød refer to: Erlend Loe, *Naiv.Super*. Oslo: Cappelen, 1996.

in front of the caravan. Projects we were working on seemed to become overshadowed by the caravan.”¹⁵¹ Aasarød and Haffner had chosen the red caravan for its distinctiveness – easy to spot and to remember. For these same reasons, they have distanced themselves from it, for a period of time. The red caravan is still the logo of Fantastic Norway, though, as a reference to a social responsibility in practice and as a reminder of nomadic origin.¹⁵²

After touring Norway for three years, Haffner and Aasarød had not followed any project through to built completion, except a cottage. They worried that their playful, popular and slightly naive approach worked against their chances to realise built projects. Now, they had finished their educations and wanted more on-site experience. There were also other reasons for why they ended their nomadic practice around 2008. Allowing for family life was one. During 2010 and 2011, Fantastic Norway has focused on acquiring professional knowledge and running an office, yet they continue to discuss how to use participatory processes and unsolicited methods in their work and are ready to combine their diverse experiences and qualifications. In the two years of 2010 and 2011, they produced a television series for the Norwegian Broadcasting, NRK, developing their skills and ideas on popular education and shared imaginations. Under the name Håkon & Haffner, they created an infotainment about architectural questions, using some of the stories from their newspaper columns.¹⁵³ In the series of six programmes the two acted as walking hosts through architectural themes such as public space, housing, and so on, using animation to open for imaginations and fantastic ideas in the built environment. The same proclamation as they made on behalf of their tour, was still relevant for this show:

Through active thrusts and contributions to the communities and together with them, we wish to stimulate reflections on which values the future development of the town should be based on. We wish to give people a vocabulary that prevents the architectural debate from stopping at the ugly/pretty. We communicate in a language people understand, hopefully making people want to learn more about architecture...¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office.*

¹⁵² In periods Haffner and Aasarød also considered the opposite: “A dream would be to have people asking to join us on the tour. Imagine a lot of caravans in bright colours all over the country. Just like a people’s movement.” Ibid.

¹⁵³ Newspaper critiques of the series “Håkon & Haffner byggeklosser” were good. But generally, architects have been critical, in particular and rightly to some inaccurate information, but also to the informal approach.

¹⁵⁴ Korsvoll, Aasarød, and Haffner, “Unge arkitekter i skudet”.

Haffner and Aasarød believe it is possible through communication and discussions to change mindsets: “When people change their mindset, it changes also something in the town. That cannot of course be discerned until much later which for architects easily become like a Sisyphean task.”¹⁵⁵

In the *Experimental Architecture* catalogue of the Venice Biennale 2008, the practice was presented thus: “Fantastic Norway’s ambition is to re-establish the architect as an active participant and a constructor of society, not just as a designer of objects.”¹⁵⁶ This ambition referred to in Venice was still stated on their webpage autumn 2010, however, referred to in the past tense: “The initial ambition was to create an open, including and social aware architectural practice and to re-establish the architect as an active participants and a constructor of society.”¹⁵⁷ During our interviews, it seems that Haffner and Aasarød have not so much changed their mind or their way of thinking, as they have moderated their expressions and their daily practice. The phrase “a constructor of society” is a rather literal translation of the Norwegian word “samfunnsbygger” used by Haffner and Aasarød on many occasions. In its English translation and even in its Norwegian origin, this term is quite powerful. “Samfunnsbygger” denotes a contributor to society, often used of someone who builds up a large enterprise or conducts major political work. Importantly, however, the concept of a “samfunnsbygger” has wider connotations, where authority or power is less dominant, and responsibility in relation to society at large becoming the dominant reading. In this sense, “samfunnsbygger” refers to someone who takes a social or societal responsibility to contribute beyond the limited scope of their professional role or private scope. In this view, a “samfunnsbygger” in architecture look for or seize the opportunities to serve a wider public. In one of my interviews, Aasarød sought to describe what “samfunnsbygger” imply: [I]t has something to do with looking beyond the one who has assigned you the task and see who else this affects. It is also about initiation, where an architect can look at what a place actually needs, and contribute, without necessarily having been given the assignment first. And of course, it is also about actively taking part in the public debate and the public space.”¹⁵⁸

Taking social responsibility as “samfunnsbygger” entails also economical sustainability for the architectural practice. Haffner and Aasarød insist on their role as professional agents – with a decent income to sustain their work and life. Rarely, even during their tour, does Fantastic Norway work entirely for free: “We always wanted our practice to be commercial. It was not our

¹⁵⁵ Harboe and Aasarød, *Interview (03.12.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød at the office of Fantastic Norway*.

¹⁵⁶ 11th International Architecture Exhibition Venice, Aaron Betsky, and Emiliano Gandolfi, *Out there: Architecture beyond Building: Experimental Architecture*, New York: Marsilio, 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Aasarød and Haffner, “Fantastic Norway Architects: Profile”.

¹⁵⁸ Public space is here understood not primarily as physical but as the spatial concept in social sciences. Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office*.

motivation; yet, it was important to us. Many said to us in the beginning: ‘Oh, how pleasant, how nice of you to talk to people; what a super project.’ They all assumed that we did it for free of some strange reason while our point was, on the contrary, to show that it is possible to run a commercial company while at the same time have an ethical base. That is why it was important for us not to work for free.”¹⁵⁹ Haffner and Aasarød wanted to demonstrate the option to combine social responsibility with an economically sustainable architectural practice. It was important, not least to be taken seriously by everyone involved and not to undermine the economical conditions for local architects.¹⁶⁰ In these matters, Fantastic Norway differs from many “mediators” in this study, who acknowledge the importance of an income but who do not aim towards economical sustainability. Fantastic Norway worked for and was thereby paid by public institutions, local councils, and private developers during their tour, but they also managed to receive a few grants. Only at their very start, in Brønnøysund, did they do completely unpaid work. Still, it has to be added that what they earned on their tour was quite moderate compared to the hours they put in.

In his book, *Architecture Depends*, Jeremy Till discusses the complexity of the architect’s role, operating in relation to multiple societal conditions. Instead of attempting to shut out this complex reality, Till argues, the architect should act “as open-minded listener and fleet-footed interpreter” where architecture’s dependency on pragmatic, economical, social and political conditions, “far from being its weakness, becomes its opportunity.”¹⁶¹ The starting point and approach by Fantastic Norway seem to exemplify Till’s argument. The architects actively involved themselves with the complexity of specific societal conditions, seeking to contribute to changes in the aesthetic, tectonic, social, democratic, and cultural constitutions or assemblies of towns in Northern Norway. Haffner and Aasarød worked with town development in a broad sense, relating to economical, social, political, cultural and pragmatic conditions through mediating, planning and designing. Working in towns and satellite towns, they engaged with all kinds of people and parties; local citizens, associations, enterprises, bureaucrats, institution leaders, business managers, politicians, and so on, in order to include all kinds of knowledges while building common projects. Both Haffner and Aasarød strongly oppose professional isolation on the part of architects, embracing instead the multiple agendas existing in these places. They summed up their attitude in an interview: “By focusing on the town’s development [stedsutvikling], by giving precedence to

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Haffner and Aasarød were asked by the Norwegian Architects’ Association not to underprice. As they were students at the time, they could charge a bit less.

¹⁶¹ Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009, p. 164.

local identity, and offering democratic working process more elbowroom, we hope to arrive at new scenarios for architecture and planning.”¹⁶²

Writings by Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner build on a reciprocity between architects and local residents both in content and form where the two students adopt a straight-forward language of common expressions, tropes and stories. The architects openly share their knowledge, eager to receive responses from citizens through dialogues and discussions.¹⁶³ In the continuation of Till’s quote above, he reflects, with what I presume is an ironic twist, on how architects are “collaborating in the realization of other people’s unpolished visions.”¹⁶⁴ The elitist touch in this expression would never be found in Fantastic Norway’s language or conceptions; not even as irony. Yet, Haffner and Aasarød make clear that they do not just reproduce contributions and ideas mimetically, but professionally interpret and develop suggestions and ideas. They exemplify their point with the idea, surfacing in Bodø, to build a museum looking exactly like a boat. Through dialogues and collaborations, they interpreted this proposal as a wish for a special and spectacular building, rather than an exact ship replica. Their vocabulary and practice is grounded on an idea of equality, prompting the architects to contribute with their professional knowledge and insights, and the residents contributing with theirs. Their attitude concurs with viewpoints by Raumlabor, who certainly regards themselves as experts on architecture and urbanism, collaborating with other expert citizens - experts on local conditions and specific circumstances. This position seems common to most architects of this study. Haffner and Aasarød are experts in architecture, and on their tour, they used their expertise to interpret the built landscape, its use and its meanings. However, they do not interpret the individuals living there and their needs – that is left to the people themselves. The term “needs” - used by curators in Rotterdam, Sheffield and Venice – is in fact rarely used by Haffner and Aasarød, who prefer to talk about users’ opinions. They do not analyse the needs of people but rather but ask for their opinions, wishes and suggestions. They create opportunity for people to share their opinions and to contribute with their knowledge, visions, ideas, worries, wishes and suggestions. The use of these terms reflects a conscious attitude to the value of equality.

¹⁶² Harboe, Aasarød, and Haffner, *Interview (20.08.2010) with Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner at their office.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Till, *Architecture Depends*, p. 164.



Brønnøysund – *Brønnøy Art-Base* at Sørbytorvet 2003: Transformation and additions to the old fire station. Source: Fantastic Norway



4 EXYZT



Temporary interventions contradict the conventional notion of architecture as something stable and lasting. The interventions of Exyzt are temporary works, which encompass short-lived material structures as well as some intangible parts. To capture the compounded works by Exyzt, they have to be experienced on site as they happen,

within their very limited timeframes. In my case, hours of on-site visits, participation, and conversations with different players – architects, participants, visitors and volunteers – have been necessary to understand Exyzt’s approaches, works, and ways of working. It was important to capture the unconventional working methods of these architects, not to take anything for granted, but rather to look closely and ask thoroughly how they go about their work. A close-up and rather detailed study was necessary in order to grasp unexpected aspects and new ways of working.

Arriving at the building site of the *City Island* project in Madrid, where I went to see how Exyzt organised their work on site, or at the *Dalston Barn* in London where I interviewed Exyzt member Nicholas Henninger, it seemed unsuitable and impossible to take the role of an observer and interviewer only. Therefore, like all the other people on site, I did small jobs (in my case, simple tasks such as painting walls, sweeping floors, and helping out in the kitchen) while observing the work in progress. The sites buzzed with activities and people, and passers-by dropped in constantly to see what was going on. In between his work at the *Dalston Barn*, which during my visit included constructing, planning, discussing, painting, chatting, and buying more materials, Nicholas Henninger took time to speak to me, describing and explaining through interviews and conversations, the projects, ways of working and ideas by Exyzt.¹

¹ Collective Exyzt – List of works:

Period and dates include the regular opening period though not the construction period of these projects.

Their first work presented here, *L'Architecture du Rab*, constitute their starting point and a point of departure for their way of working, while the second work, the *Southwark Lido*, is included to demonstrate their multidisciplinary approach. The *Southwark Lido* is much published and commented on, and has opened for a few critical discussions in the architectural press. The same goes for the third work, the *Dalston Mill* which, together with its tail-project the *Dalston Barn*, will be the one most thoroughly presented here. This is because this project brings out Exyzt's social concerns in a developed form, and because my own on-site experiences at Dalston provided me with additional insight.

4.1 L'Architecture du Rab, 2003: "freedom of expression and exchange"²

Going against all ideas of designed and controlled public space, the newly-born collective wanted to prove that everybody can bring informal urban spaces back into the city. These spaces, forgotten by urban planning, are the base of a democracy that allows for freedom of expression and exchange.³

The project of *L'Architecture du Rab* in 2003 involved appropriation of an abandoned site in Paris and the construction of a scaffolded structure for a five weeks residency. The project was the joint diploma of five students of architecture at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris la Villette; Nicolas Henninger, François Wunschel, Phillippe Rizzotto, Pier

Evento 2011, Bordeaux, 10/2011

Quartier des Chaux à Saint Jean en Royan, 09/2011

Wereld Van Witte de With, Rotterdam, 09/2011

Unexpected Fountain Occupation, Warsaw, 08-09/2011

Birmingham Fiest Festival, Birmingham 03/2011

City Island, La Noche en Blanco, Madrid, 11/09-26/09/2010

Dalston Barn, Hackney Council, London, June 2010, a two year project

Speranza! University Populaire sur la ville hospitalière, Place des Vosges, Paris 12/03/2010

The Dalston Mill, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 15/07-09/08/2009

Momento, activation of an event building, plans in collaboration with Coloco, São Paulo, Brazil 2008

Southwark Lido, London Festival of Architecture, 20/06-13/07/2008

La Macchina per fare il Morion, Venice, 01-07/06/2009

Momento Momentum, Sao Paulo, 24-25/04/2009

Labichampi (The Mushroom Factory), Karosta in Latvia, 2007

SubCS, Festival les 3 Elephants, Lassay-les-Châteaux, 28/07-29/07/2006

Metaville (Meta-city), French pavilion, La Biennale, Venice 10/09-19/11/2006

Space Station, SET Festival eme 3, Barcelona, 20-23/10/2005

Der Berg, Palatz der Republic, Berlin 07-08/2005

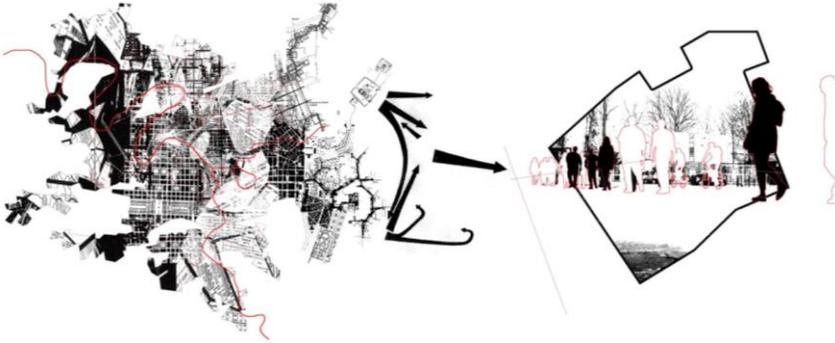
République éphémère, EASA, La Condition Publique, Roubaix 20/07-08/08/2004

L'Architecture Rab, in the neighbourhood of Parc de la Villette, Paris 05/05-12/06/2003

²EXYZT, "L'architecture de Rab, A Hybrid Architectural Approach", <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=32>, accessed 11/06/2009.

³ Ibid.

Schneider and Gilles Burban. This self-initiated, self-organised, and self-constructed project on an abandoned plot of land was planned, designed, financed, organized, and inhabited by these five soon-to-be architects.⁴



L'Architecture du Rab, urban plan.

Source: Exyzt

“We spent some time looking for a site and finally settled unanimously and enthusiastically for a disused urban site on the edge of the Parc de la Villette by the canal de l’Ourcq.”⁵ In an interview with *AMC*, *Moniteur Architecture*, Exyzt members explained how the plot was “strategically located at the crossroads of diverse population flows, at a very interesting social crossroad with an active local community life, at a junction between Paris and the suburbs.”⁶ EPPGHV, *L’Établissement Public du Parc et de la Grande Halle de la Villette*, the publicly funded enterprise running the Parc de la Villette, owned the unused plot of 335 m². The students obtained permission to use it for a period; hence, it was a legal occupation and not a squat.⁷ They carried out an initial occupation of the plot in February 2003, organising a series of actions that “puzzled the local residents” and generated contact with people in the neighbourhood, while clearing the place of leftovers and dirt.⁸ Then they decided “to take up residence on the plot for five weeks”.⁹

⁴ Philippe Rizzotti and Dimitri Messu, “Situation Room”. <http://www.storefrontnews.org/exhib_dete.php?exID=148>, accessed 21/05/2010.

⁵ Maryse Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”, *Moniteur architecture - AMC*, 165, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ _

⁸ Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”.

⁹ EXYZT, “Exyzt”, in Elisabeth Leitner (ed.), *Wonderland Travelogue 2004-2006: 99 European examples and answers regarding a changing architectural practice*, Wien: Springer, 2006, p. 140.



L'Architecture du Rab and its location.

Source: Exyzt / <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157619042999148>

The term *Rab* is an abbreviation of the French “rabiote”, meaning extra food and leftovers after distribution, a term that also used to denote a supplement; to get hold of a bit extra. Based on their first work *L'Architecture du Rab*, Exyzt made a short “manual”, encouraging people to occupy their own RAB while telling the story of how they went about occupying, creating and developing their abandoned site at Villette:

A Hybrid Architectural Approach ...

1. Choose a RAB

EXYZT temporarily occupied a RAB forgotten by the construction of the Parc de la Villette. Situated on the verge of a modest neighbourhood, it was, though its poor state, well situated. The criteria of selection included good sun exposure and visibility. Optionally, you can include the presence of and structure, vegetation and water.

2. Occupy the RAB

Occupying induces opening the enclosure, as to reintroduce the RAB in the public space, cleaning up, and reintroduce it to a human occupation. Such a physical occupation done, human contact with the autochthons should be established as to make the neighbourhood familiar with the RAB.

3. Play games

The five to be architects settled in the site with a Mecanoo like kit, containing a certain amount of scaffolding, textiles and lights. Thus equipped, they constructed a structure that could unfold, extend and generally suffer changes as to answer to either planned or spontaneous events.

4. Public acknowledgement

Such an adventure should ask for an official recognition, as to establish the RAB as part of the urban activities. In this case, Exyzt presented their experimentation as their final school project in front of all of those who took part in this adventure.

5. Transmission of the RAB

We hope our experience will make people want to occupy their own RAB. We left ours, but transmitted it to the Parenthèse association, created for the occasion by people in the neighbourhood. Keep it informal. Keep it joyful.

Blabla.¹⁰

Exyzt made precise drawings for the core scaffolding structure, housing the basic functions of where to stay, work, sleep, and cook.¹¹ They set up a provisional organisation and a preliminary and informal programme for their residency, including a weekly public meal open to everyone. With a small van able to carry a load of one ton, the students drove back and forth for one week to transport the materials and scaffolds.¹² Henninger pointed out the advantages of scaffoldings: “You do not need much money and out of it you can build a proper structure yourself; click, click, click. ... The structural quality is really very good while the structural elements are quite handy and easy to rent for one month.”¹³ A fence around the plot and two large advertisement boards provided facade walls on one side, while a diversity of textiles gave both translucent and opaque partitions in and outside the multi-storey scaffolded structure.¹⁴ The five students were interested to see, during their residency, who would turn up, what impact these meetings might have on the project, and to explore what purposes and uses the structure and the

¹⁰ EXYZT, “L’architecture de Rab, A Hybrid Architectural Approach”.

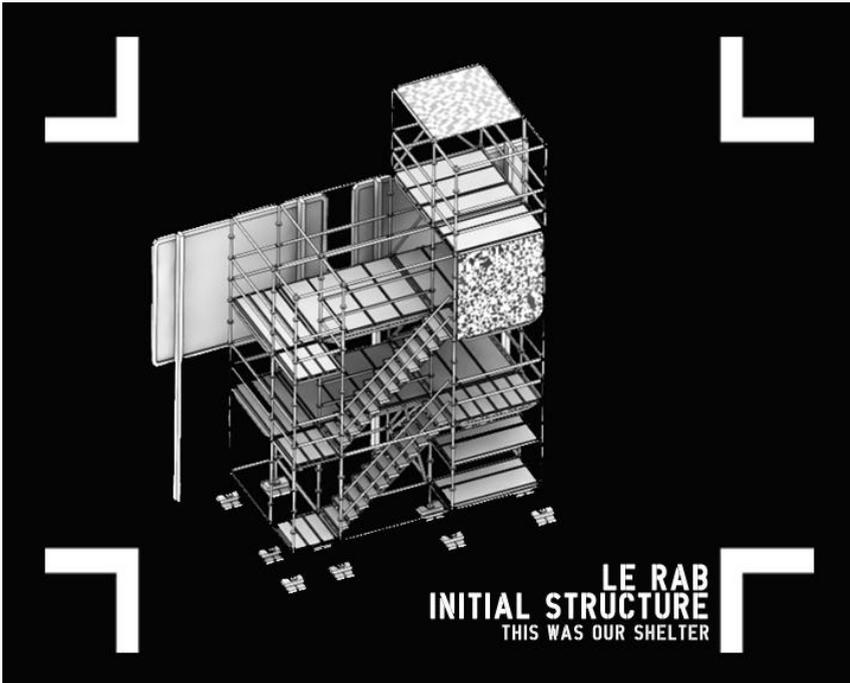
¹¹ The kitchen was on the ground, in the scaffolded core, and the dinner table outside.

¹² Lisbet Harboe and Nicolas Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, Dalston, London, 2010.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”.

space could possibly adapt to. Thus, the *L'Architecture du Rab* was a real 1:1 “architects’ game” where the diploma students imagined that plans would develop, redevelop and change during the five weeks of inhabitation. And they truly did. While the core of the scaffolded structure remained unchanged, “everything else would change, almost daily... according to needs”, Exyzt explained in *AMC*.¹⁵ Thus, the adjustable and flexible nature of scaffoldings was utilised to the full, and the peculiarity of the structure attracted interest.



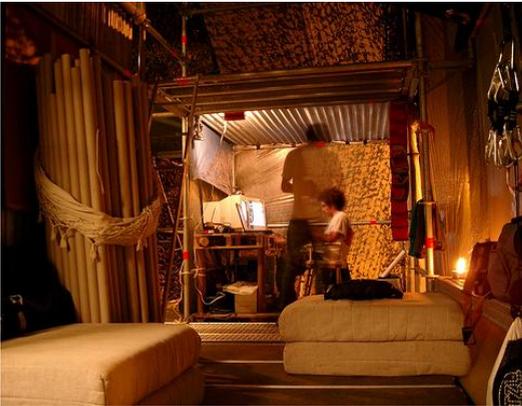
L'Architecture du Rab – Axonometry of the initial structure and core.

Source: Exyzt

The five students had brought along computers, audio systems and technical equipment; to work and to play. While living on site, they wanted “new groups of people, users and friends” to join in and take part in the work.¹⁶ However, Henninger explained, to live on site did pose some challenges. In the beginning, a few people expected the residency to be like a kind of free party, entering and asking – “What’s up?” The Exyzt members answered truly that they did not know what would happen, and organised instead some meetings with the partygoers.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.



L'Architecture du Rab – In use and progress.

Source: Exyzt / <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157619042999148>

Every Thursday, Exyzt made a shared meal, as planned, which offered an opportunity to invite everyone as well as to discuss what they were on to and what to do further. “The weekly dinner became an event shared with neighbours, friends, and other people whom they met on site through their residency.”¹⁷ In addition, a wedding party, a film shoot, a body paint workshop, and several other events took place where this site served as a venue.¹⁸

In this attempt to make a temporary, joyful public space by exploring the re-use of an abandoned piece of the city, the five students not only planned and designed their diploma, but also appropriated a space, built a construction, and lived on site, while continuously developing the place. On June 5th in 2003, the five diploma students staged their final exams on site as a public event similar to a court hearing. Many neighbours attended, watching the students defend their project and complete their exam.

Looking back at the work of *L'Architecture du Rab*, Nicolas Henninger emphasised the impact that this encounter – with both place and people – came to have on their practice.

The biggest experience for me was to land somewhere in the city where I so suddenly got to know the place very well. Our actions were really a reaction to master planning. Master planning is done by people in an office searching for data and looking at maps – to get a specialists’ view on the city. When you suddenly live somewhere, you experience the place in the same way you experience living in your own house – you really get to know the place closely. It is complementary to master planning. You experience the place and you know all the stories; you know the different layers and you can look at all these layers concurrently at different moments.¹⁹

Nicolas Henninger told a few incidences from their residency in La Villette to illustrate how they gained local knowledge while living on site, discovering who actually used the site and area – and for what. In a corner on the plot, stood a sequence of an old wall where people went to pee. Based on maps, Exyzt registered that the wall had been there for about a hundred years. One day a procession of Jewish men came up to the wall – to perform a yearly religious ceremony: “... a little piece of wall relates to different kind

¹⁷ EXYZT, “Exyzt”, p. 140.

¹⁸ EXYZT and Coloco, “Momento”.

<http://66.163.168.225/babelfish/translate_url_content?.intl=us&lp=fr_en&trurl=http%3a%2f%2fwww.momentomonumento.org%2f>, accessed 11/06/2011, 2008.

¹⁹ Nicolas Henninger in Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 42.

of stories”, Henninger recounted.²⁰ Actually, during the period on site, multifarious stories of practices and occupations were revealed and performed. Exyzt met with the homeless resident, Raymond Rebelle, who had earlier been expelled from the site by EPPGHV (L’Établissement Public du Parc et de la Grande Halle de la Villette). The students interviewed him to learn how he had organised the place. They talked to Mr. Universel, a colourfully dressed man with pins all over running his own association, the Paranthèse, of one member only, and they met an Algerian living on a parking lot in his *kheima*, a traditional nomad tent, while searching for a better place to stay. The two latter took over the site for the summer after Exyzt had gone. Exyzt negotiated the permission with EPPGHV.

In the strongest possible contrast to the strategies of master planning, the *L’Architecture du Rab* was a self-initiated project, opening a disused and inaccessible site for public use. It represented a bottom-up approach in the sense that Exyzt – through their meals, meetings and events, invited and interacted with whoever came by and learned to understand their needs and opinions. *L’Architecture du Rab* is perhaps best described as a pocket inside a master plan area, an informal and improvised bottom-up initiative assembling knowledge and information on what cannot be revealed from a distance. As Henninger described, it gave them another viewpoint and a different knowledge of the area. Exyzt, like Raumlabor Berlin, use interventions consciously to reveal and gather essential details, spatial and social practices, and local insight. With *L’Architecture du Rab*, Exyzt steps directly into a given reality, literally situating themselves on the ground, learning to know an area by acting on and in it.

For Exyzt, the experiment was a way to add to democracy in a modest way, by encouraging people to themselves initiate activities in the public domain. These “forgotten” spaces serve as potentials and “the base of a democracy that allows for freedom of expression and exchange”.²¹ Although these are grand words, Exyzt’s celebrations of freedom do not take place at a grand scale but is explored quite concretely on site. They regard their intervention as an example to be copied by others, thus continuing, like *Le Rab*, to expand democracy.

For the work of *L’Architecture du Rab*, the informal character of the structure, the derelict state of the place, and its lack of designated use, were factors contributing to create an anarchistic cavity on the outskirts of Parc de la Villette. The “freedom of exchange” seems to refer to interchanges between people, as well as between peoples and the physical environment – meetings that include bodily, emotional, social and intellectual experiences. There is undoubtedly a Situationist vein of inspiration through their works,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

²¹ EXYZT, “L’architecture de Rab, A Hybrid Architectural Approach”.

which I will get back to in a moment. *L'Architecture du Rab* by Exyzt is a compound work, drawing on urbanism, architecture, building construction, and art, based on the many different skills that these architecture students happened to possess.

Exyzt tested the use of temporary informal and incomplete urban space to make a pocket in the city, hoping in this way to contribute to “a democracy that allows for freedom of expression and exchange”.²² This interest in unused and underused space in the contemporary city is certainly not unique for this group. Berlin has long been like a showcase for spatial appropriation and self-organisation. The research and exploration of informal urban interventions in abandoned or underused sites called *Urban Catalyst* by Philippe Misselwitz, Philipp Oswalt and Klaus Overmeyer provides one example of the interest in spatial appropriations. The project spans between explorations of the spatial potential of specific situations to overriding urban critique, as presented in the book *Urban Pioneers*.²³ Likewise, Supertanker/UTF and Raumlabor Berlin are urban practices who explore the potentials of local interventions as part of urban development. Raumlabor is developing “integrated urban planning” where pioneer spaces and top-down processes collaborate.²⁴

The empirical material of this study also contains several examples of temporary structures built from scaffolding, although usually situated on urban squares in the city centre. As part of the research project, *Hier Ensteht: Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung*, Mathias Heyden and Jesko Fezer organised a temporary two-week project at Rosa-Luxemburg Platz in Berlin during the summer of 2003 together with architecture students at the Universität der Künste Berlin.²⁵ The two-floor scaffolded structure was considered a built experiment, hosting an exhibition and a series of planned events while inviting spontaneous appropriations and unplanned activities.²⁶ At the Wallensteinplatz in Vienna, similarly, a more high-rised scaffolded structure titled *add on.20 höhenmeter* was open to the public for six weeks during the summer of 2005. Architects and organisers were Peter Fattinger, Veronika Orso and Michael Rieper together with students from the TU Vienna. The square was transformed into “a center of urban interaction” where the scaffolded structure served as both “a stage and a place for unexpected encounters”.²⁷ However, in none of these scaffolded

²² Collectif Exyzt, “L'architecture de Rab, A Hybrid Architectural Approach”.

<http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=32>, accessed 11/06/2009.

²³ Studio UC / Klaus Overmeyer (ed.), *Urban Pioneers*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2007.

²⁴ Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*, Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008, pp. 80-81.

²⁵ Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden, *Hier Ensteht. Strategien partizipativer Architektur und Räumlicher Aneignung*, Berlin: b_books Verlag, 2007.

²⁶ Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden, “Hier entsteht / here is being created: Strategies for participative architecture and spatial appropriation”, *Ersatzstadt* (ed.).

<<http://www.etuipop.de/ersatzstadt/engl/veranst/hierent/einl.html>>, accessed 13/08/2010.

²⁷ 11th International Architecture Exhibition Venice, Aaron Betsky, and Emiliano Gandolfi, *Out there: Architecture beyond Building: Experimental Architecture*, New York: Marsilio, 2008.

projects did the architects live on site like Exyzt, who, as we will see, go about such projects in a rather unique way.



Source: Exyzt

At Villette, Exyzt explored occupation and use of urban space as a bottom-up, self-organised initiative. They made the site available by literally opening the gate, using the site as a place to live, work and socialise, while offering a certain freedom of action and interaction to neighbours, friends, anglers, students, and passers-by. In this way, the soon-to-be architects explored ways of working outside commercial architectural practice; ways that might add to life in the city and allow for a more adventurous working life. Exyzt's actions may look rebellious and subversive; however, legal permissions were in order; a mode characteristic for their work.

Although, Exyzt gains permissions from landowners and public authorities to build their works, they take inspiration from the concept of piracy. The concept of piracy denotes a young anarchistic world-wide-web culture, hacking and file sharing, with Pirate Bay as one example and Wikileaks another. These networks operate beyond the law, which is hardly the case for Exyzt, but the group does operate by challenging regulations and formal procedures. Henninger refers in particular to TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) by Hakim Bey. Bey experienced that alternative communities in United States from the 1960s onwards did not last when the initial intensity faded. By the 1980s, he says, "waiting for the revolution for thirty years had gotten a little tiresome."²⁸ The *temporary autonomous zone* was introduced as an answer to this fatigue, imagined as little pockets of anarchy ranging from "a picnic on the riverside to a community that lasts for two years."²⁹ Bey describes TAZ as "an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere / else when, before the State can crush it."³⁰ Escaping institutionalisation, the TAZ resists rules and regulations at all cost. Bey refers to historic pirate communities as well as non-hierarchical forms of communication such as the internet. A revised description of *L'Architecture du Rab* in 2008 puts it this way: "A new era in urbanism opens up. Exyzt takes up a bet on architectural piracy and occupies an abandoned lot of land by the Parc de la Villette."³¹ Exyzt plays with graphics as well as with manifesto-like formats when expressing their ideas and intentions such as the architectural piracy. Their output has always a playful quality to it. By describing their interventions as architectural piracy and expressing this story by the logos, they refer to the term's current ring of anarchic sharing, hinting at pockets of alternatives and a critique against top-down and capitalistic control. In their architectural piracy, "public space is appropriated in order to give it back to the people."³²

²⁸ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In conversation with Hakim Bey", *e-flux*, 21 (12), 2010.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z. The temporary autonomous zone, ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism*, Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1991, p. 101.

³¹ EXYZT and Coloco, "Momento".

³² Collective Exyzt, "Exyzt - Who are we?", <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

L'Architecture du Rab is an example of an exploratory and self-organised work where Exyzt occupies an unused urban space, opens it up to the public, and takes use of it to establish a pocket of other spatial practices. They regard their own action as a bottom-up initiative, presenting their acts in the urban domain as an example of inspiration and feasibility. The Rab-experience provided the Exyzt members with an expanded knowledge on urban space and bottom-up practices.

Founding Exyzt

“The EXYZT collective was formed in Paris 2002 on one simple idea: building and living together.”³³ This is the straightforward account of their origin. The founders (Gilles Burban Nicolas Henninger, Phillipe Rizzotto, Pier Schneider and François Wunschel) had all began their education at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Strasbourg, ENSAS. Wanting to work as a group, they went to Paris-la-Villette where it seemed easier to do so.³⁴ A group of teachers here encouraged them further, “Go out of the school. Find a space outside the school”.³⁵ Professor Xavier Juillot, working with interventions in architecture since the 70s, was one of their advisors.

After the diploma project of *Le Rab*, Exyzt took on new projects related to their first one, including *République éphémère* for EASA in Roubaix 2004. Several new members joined in, Gonzague Lacombe, Dagmar Dudinsky, Raf Salis, Brice Pellishi, and Christophe (Toffee) Goutes. They came from different professions; architecture, graphic design, photography, music, and special effects, contributing with skills in carpentry, plumbing, electricity; and all of them able to do various manual work and live on site during intensive ‘live’ projects. At that time, there were no budgets and no questions about money: “We just did it.”³⁶

After Exyzt expanded from a group of five architects to become a network of professionals, they have also used the name Collectif Exyzt. The list of members in the collective; the range of professions, special skills, and particular knowledge, reveal something about Exyzt’s ambitions and ways of working. They are organised as a flexible network and members change over

³³ EXYZT, “French Team 60 Exyzt (F)”, Wonderland (ed.).

<http://www.wonderland.cx/teams_paris/exyzt.html>, accessed 21/04/2010.

³⁴ Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”. Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

In the interviews, Nicolas Henninger commented: “At that time, when you did your diploma, you could still choose what you wanted to do. Now they impose the subject of the diploma. You have the choice between doing a sports hall, a hospital or a school. Before you had to think for a long time about what you wanted to do. It was quite free. You could appoint and invite any teacher relevant to whatever you would do.”

³⁵ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 41.

³⁶ About EASA 2004 and projects in that period: Ibid.

time. It also varies to what degree different members participate. Exyzt counted these members in 2011:

Christophe Goutes, artistakatoffe, (2004)
 Dagmar Dudinsky, akavandalove, graphic designer, (2004)
 Nicolas Henninger, akanikloos, architect, (2003)
 Alexander Roemer, architect & carpenter (2006), www.construclab.net
 Gonzague Lacombe, akamamadou, graphic designer, (2004)
 Stéphanie Grimard, architect, (2006)
 Brice Pelleschi, photographer, (2004), www.bricepelleschi.com
 Mattia Paco Rizzi, architect, (2010), www.linguamara.com
 Raf Salis, master technician, (2004)
 Manu Macaigne, carpenter, (2010), www.depuis1920.fr
 Fred Keiff, architect & artist (2006)
 Daya Bakker, architect & carpenter, (2007)
 Bruno Persat, artist & cook, (2010)
 Emmanuel Gabily, photographer (2007)
 Philippe Rizzotti, architect, (2003), www.philipperizzotti.et
 Julien Beller, architect, (2005), www.le6b.org
 Hannes Schreckensberger, (2004)

Collaborators: Sara Muzio, Studio-Public, Zoom Architecture, Ewa Rudnicka, Gabi Farage / Bruit du Frigo, Basurama, Raumlabor Berlin, MUF Architecture.³⁷

Organisationally, all members are registered as individual enterprises who gather under the label of Exyzt. Even now, their projects do not pay much, and most members, with few exceptions, have their main source of income outside the collective, treating their projects as an arena for creative research. From the outset, the members of Exyzt have looked at the organisation as an organic entity, constantly developing, growing and changing through events. Two of the founding members, Pier Schneider and François Wunschel, left the group in 2009 to work under their new label 1024. Nicolas Henninger now has a very central role as initiator and organiser of the works, working full time with the works of Exyzt. About every three months, the collective meets for discussions.³⁸

³⁷ EXYZT, "Who is EXYZT?", <<http://www.exyzt.org/exyzt-who/>>, accessed 19/11/20011.

"Special thanks:

Patrick Bouchain (mentor)

Xavier Juillot (mentor)

Gilles Burban, architect (founder) www.supergraphic.fr

Pier Schneider and Franz Wunschel, architects (founders) www.1024architecture.net

Laurent Petit (founder & mentor) www.anpu.fr

Philippe De Angeli (energy & great moment)

Hannes Schreckensberger, (energy & good austrian mood) www.zirup.at"

³⁸ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

A good part of the Exyzt members come to take part in on-site projects, to work and live there, whenever there is one going on. Many of them come now for a week or two but a few live on site the whole period. Each member or associated member on specific projects, supports the work according to their particular skills, meaning that the architect members are usually in charge of an overall layout on site: “We all design, build and inhabit our projects so that project teams can stay flexible, but we do have our specialization.”³⁹



EXYZT – Members and collaborators at *Metavilla* in *La Biennale di Venezia* 2006.

Ph: Julie Guiches / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

On initiative by architect Patrick Bouchain, curator of the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2006, Exyzt was invited to design, build and inhabit the “exhibition”. Exyzt created *Metavilla* and filled large parts of the pavilion’s interior with a scaffolded structure, reaching through the glass ceiling and out on the roof.⁴⁰ The villa hosted accommodations, an open kitchen, a bar, a reading room, workspace, and on the roof: a sauna, showers, and a small pool.⁴¹

During the 3 month event, EXYZT would occupy the French pavilion to turn it into a liveable space. The *Metavilla* is the act of transforming an empty shell into a place full of life, generosity and freedom that echoes the use of the summer villas of Venice. What else is the essence of the act of

³⁹ Collective Exyzt, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

⁴⁰ EXYZT, “Metaville”, <<http://www.exyzt.org>>, accessed 11/06/2009.

⁴¹ Ibid.

architecture than to offer spaces ready to be experienced and appropriated? Other teams are invited to come and occupy the Metaville and turn it into their home.

More than an alternative of “exhibiting” architecture, the Metaville presents a normal everyday life including sleeping, washing, working and resting. The public space of an exhibition can become your home: it is the case in Metaville. Visitors are welcome to take part in the Metaville life: you can sunbathe in the lounge chairs, sip a glass or share a meal, take a sauna or a shower.⁴²



Metaville – EXYZT members working, living, and discussing in La Biennale di Venezia 2006.

Ph: Julie Guiches / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

In Venice, then, Exyzt hosted a place for living, interacting and discussing, demonstrating a conception of architecture that far exceeds form, or even building. In my interviews, Henninger emphasised the critical role of their villa, “The idea in Venice was really not to show a project but to make a project. What could the programme be? The programme was a villa with the set-up and framework for architectural discourse and debate to happen. What you need is basic accommodation, some food, a place to work, a place to host people who then engage in the discussions and bring their questions to the table.”⁴³ Bouchain and Exyzt invited guests, among them Lucien Kroll who came for a week to present his work and take part in debates. During these

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

three months, workshops, seminars, debates and parties were organised in addition to whatever daily life entailed.

For Exyzt, this project became important. It led to publications and to new commissions. Henninger eagerly pointed out what they learned from their collaboration with more experienced colleagues in the field, such as Patrick Bouchain and Lucien Kroll: "It was really Patrice Bouchain who manoeuvred the project; this amazing kind of guy who has political experience and is a very good strategist. We never said we would live in the space. He just said, "We will build ourselves and we will probably have to work late and therefore cook on site and live on site... They had to drive the boat very carefully in meeting with the Biennale services and the French Cultural Institution representing the government."⁴⁴ With *Metavilla* they developed their model of a hosted "public", exploring its potentials and challenges in a balance between the generous hospitality of a home and the atmosphere imparted by a specific social culture.

After the *Metaville* in 2006, Exyzt summed up its history and agenda:

Founded in 2003 at the initiative of five architects, eXYZT has now become a multi-disciplinary creation platform composed of about 20 people, including architects, graphic designers, videographers, photographers, DJs, botanists, and builders. The group's actions are limited both in time and space and very often take the shape of temporary installations.⁴⁵

Exyzt has kept to the idea of building and living together, however, addressing the reality of building:

Even if we refuse to enter the current architectural practice which is under economical and political constraints, we do deal with the reality of construction. We design and build ourselves, live in our constructions and leave freedom for visitors to appropriate our design.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Patrick Bouchain is experienced in designing situations as well as buildings as described on the webpage of *Spatial Agency*. He works as developer, political advisor, site manager, fundraiser and performer. In projects of urban development, Bouchain starts on site by establishing "a network of interested people, collaborators, residents, local government officials, neighbourhood groups etc. Once this network is in place, the site is activated socially, usually through opening a small space that functions as a restaurant, site office and consultation area where passers-by and interested people can find out about the project, give their views, or simply watch a film". This initial phase creates relationships between the architects, builders and local people, and helps to ensure that the final project is appropriate, useful, and grounded on local amenities and resources. Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, and Nishat Awan, "Spatial Agency", <<http://www.spatialagency.net>>

⁴⁵ XYZT and translated by Claire Boucher, "Exyzt - Who are we? Constructed Actions or Constructing Action Platforms", <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

⁴⁶ XYZT, "Exyzt - Who are we?", <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

4.2 *Southwark Lido*, 2008: “where fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy”⁴⁷

“Be utopian. We want to build new worlds where fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy.”⁴⁸



Southwark Lido – Streetview: Entrance at night. Ph: Juliet Guiches / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

A white curved roof construction is rolled out above the fence of 100 Union Street in London. For those with a vivid imagination, it might resemble many a species. The enticing shape had been built of scaffoldings and covered with vinyl. Behind it, rose a scaffolded tower.⁴⁹ The site was enclosed by a railway viaduct of brick arches at the back, on the two sides by gable walls and along the street was a simple wooden fence, allowing glimpses of the activities taking place on the inside. Someone had cut an opening in the fence along Union Street and written above it; *Southwark Lido*, Open.

The area of Southwark and South Bank was one of five key hubs at the London Architecture Festival in 2008, where Architecture Foundation curated a programme of installations and events. Exyzt had been invited to organise an urban intervention, transforming a disused space into an active social hub around a pool.⁵⁰ While *L'Architecture du Rab* was a self-initiated,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.,

Nicolas Henninger and Sara Muzio, "Final Words", in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovà, 2009.

⁴⁹ Due to British building regulations, Exyzt members could not build the scaffolded structure themselves.

⁵⁰ Exyzt members who took part at the *Southwark Lido*:

Nicolas Henninger, Alexander Roemer, Daya Bakker, Fred Keiff, Hannes Schreckensberger, Philippe Deangeli, Studio Public (Julie Guiche + Benoit Lorent), Emmanuel Gabily, Dagmar Dudinsky, Gonzague Lacombe, Brice Pelleschi, Christophe Goutes, Philippe Rizzotti, Pier Schneider + Franz Wunschel.

self-programmed, self-funded and self-organised project, the *Southwark Lido* was a commissioned work, however, self-programmed and self-organised by the now multidisciplinary group. The work of the Lido lasted in total five weeks, which included three weeks of building. Its total cost was 50,000£, including construction, materials, and residency. The first Exyzt members arriving, together with Sara Muzio, started planning by getting to know the area, the neighbourhood, and the place, as well as connecting with a few local groups.⁵¹

During the first day of gathering on site, Exyzt members built a series of beach huts to serve as changing rooms; planned and designed by Alex Römer.⁵² During the weeks of construction, these huts accommodated the members. When the *Southwark Lido* opened to the public, the Exyzt members slept in tents on several floors up in the tower – a bit protected yet very much part of the event. The summit of the tower was one floor above eye level of the train passengers passing by, offering a great opportunity “to greet baffled commuters”.⁵³



Southwark Lido – Constructing beach huts. Source: Exyzt

+ Volunteers:

Thibault Labat (fr), Paloma Gormley + Lettice Drake (uk), Maria Lisogorskaya (uk), Oliver Wainwright (uk).

⁵² Alex Römer designed and built the Southwark Lido Beach Huts and Sauna. He runs his own practice: constructLab. EXYZT and Sara Muzio, "Southwark Lido: constructLab", <<http://southwarklido.wordpress.com/constructlab/>>, accessed 18/05/2010.

⁵³ Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw, "The Lido", in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovà, 2009.



Southwark Lido. Ph: Brice Pelleschi / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

The hosted and temporary urban space was organised around a (paddling) pool. Above the sundeck, next to the pool, a structure of pipes with water nozzles provided mist at certain pulses, looking like a localised version of the ephemeral London fog. Some nights, the sundeck was a dance floor. A sauna was staffed with experienced sauna-users “to guide the hesitant public”, while a large barrel of cold water outside provided cooling.⁵⁴ Open from July 9th to 13th, the *Southwark Lido* provided a space to bathe, contemplate, eat and drink, interact, play, debate, look at films and photos, party some nights, take a sauna, read, and so on.⁵⁵ Under the vinyl roof, at ground level deck,

⁵⁴ Tim Abrahams, “[Exyzt]”, *Blueprint*, 268 (July), 2008.

K@2 Artists came from Karosta, Latvia, with sauna equipment and expertise as experimental sauna-users.

⁵⁵ Opening hours: Wednesday 9 July, launch 7-9pm, Thursday 8 July to Saturday 12 July, 12-9pm, Sunday 13 July, 12-7pm.

London Festival of Architecture 2008, “Southwark Lido”,

<<http://www.lfa2008.org/event.php?id=165&name=Southwark+Lido>>, accessed 23/09/2010.

A daily schedule for the Southwark Lido was presented by the London Festival of Architecture, inviting different age groups to visit:

• Lunchtime Picnics: Take a proper lunch break: bring your lunch to the pool side, have a quick dip, sunbathe and socialise

• After School Club: Activities for children of any age

• An After Work Drink: Come and relax after a hard day’s work: sweat out tensions, have a drink and enjoy informal presentations by artists, musicians, architects, and many others

• Film Club: Evenings are for film screenings in the open air, pool-side cinema”

London Festival of Architecture 2008, “Southwark Lido”.

was the kitchen, dining area, and a bar, whereas opposite, in the back, was a unit that included two toilets and two showers, all built up by members and volunteers.⁵⁶ On the first floor, there was a digital workshop, an outdoor office and a studio, where members and guests worked with architecture, graphics, music, film, and photography, as well as organising the event itself. The group operated an outdoor studio filled with computers and technical equipment. The gable walls on each side were used for projections of visual computer-mediated performances; projected from the tower. The practical fact that a computer may contain and provide an almost complete architectural, graphic or music studio on site, is important. In addition, the Exyzt members brought a t-shirt machine, printers, foil-printers, record players, audio-visual systems, and so on. All they needed to operate professionally was electricity and wireless network access – as well as water pipe and sewer. Moreover, Exyzt holds a fully equipped carpenter mobile workshop, containing tools and equipment they have acquired at their different projects. They keep, store and reuse it, bringing with them electrical cables, plumbing-ware, tents, mattresses, lamps, and much more. During the construction and residency, strong devotion and hard work go along with improvisation and enthusiasm. It is a collective work; yet there is an informal but present leadership to coordinate it. Nicolas Henninger had the role as coordinator at the *Southwark Lido* as in several of their works. Being on site together with Exyzt during the days before the opening of *City Island* in Madrid 2010, I experienced an efficient building site with an enjoyable social side; focused work and long working days, jumps in the pool, good food, cheerful dinners, and social nights.⁵⁷ Exyzt appears to take friendly cooperation to a professional level.⁵⁸ The informality, improvisation, humour, and play on site should not fool anyone; however, serious devotion and discipline is expected and demanded from Exyzt members as well as their associates.

⁵⁶ The east London restaurant *Bistrotheque* ran the bar.

⁵⁷ If I wanted to meet Exyzt-members for longer discussions during these intense days, I had to stay up at night. This did not prevent them from starting to work early in the morning, after a short night in tent or vinyl huts, with a fair walking distance to the temporary but well-built toilets and showers.

⁵⁸ Nicolas Henninger compares their collective work with the situation of helping a friend in the garden and afterwards sharing a good meal.

Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.



Southwark Lido, London 2008 and the *City Island*, Madrid 2010.

Ph. above: Author



Ph: Brice Pelleschi

Source: Exyzt



Ph: Author



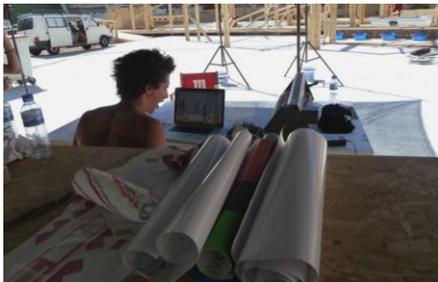


Southwark Lido – Exyzt members and volunteers gathered to organise the work.

Ph. above: Brice Pelleschi / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt



City Island, Madrid 2010. Ph: Author



In order to reuse materials and due to the short construction period, Exyzt had chosen a limited selection of building materials; scaffoldings, planks of one dimension (screwed on), and white vinyl. All materials, buildings parts, and furniture were reused and recycled – as planned. This simplicity of scaffoldings and woodworks had another reason as well, explained by Alex Römer in Exyzt and ConstructLab: “We want to make it look possible for anyone to do... You don’t need to be a specialist.”⁵⁹ Their constructions are often planned specifically to enable unskilled and volunteers to take part in the building process. When they start, stacks of building materials are laid out on the site, ready for use, in such a way that any volunteer may use the sets – like a large box of Mecanoo.⁶⁰ Yet, this simple made, informal and unexpected place, has a material beauty and an authentic poetry, framed by a half-derelict site of brick walls, filled with constructions of scaffoldings, holding forms of vinyl – both familiar and strange ones, and with grounds of gravel and wood. The ambience of the place embraces visitors with tactile, visual and audible sensations, and with social and activating experiences. Exyzt wanted to make an enjoyable place of unpredicted activities, new encounters, and discussions. David Mellis, neighbouring the Lido, proclaimed his enthusiasm: “Everyone I met on our estate liked it. It brought a smile to our faces – something frivolous and fun in such a drab and utilitarian street. Something friendly in a commercial and cynical city. Are you going over to the Lido? What are the French anarchists up to now? Wonderful! I wish it could happen every year.”⁶¹

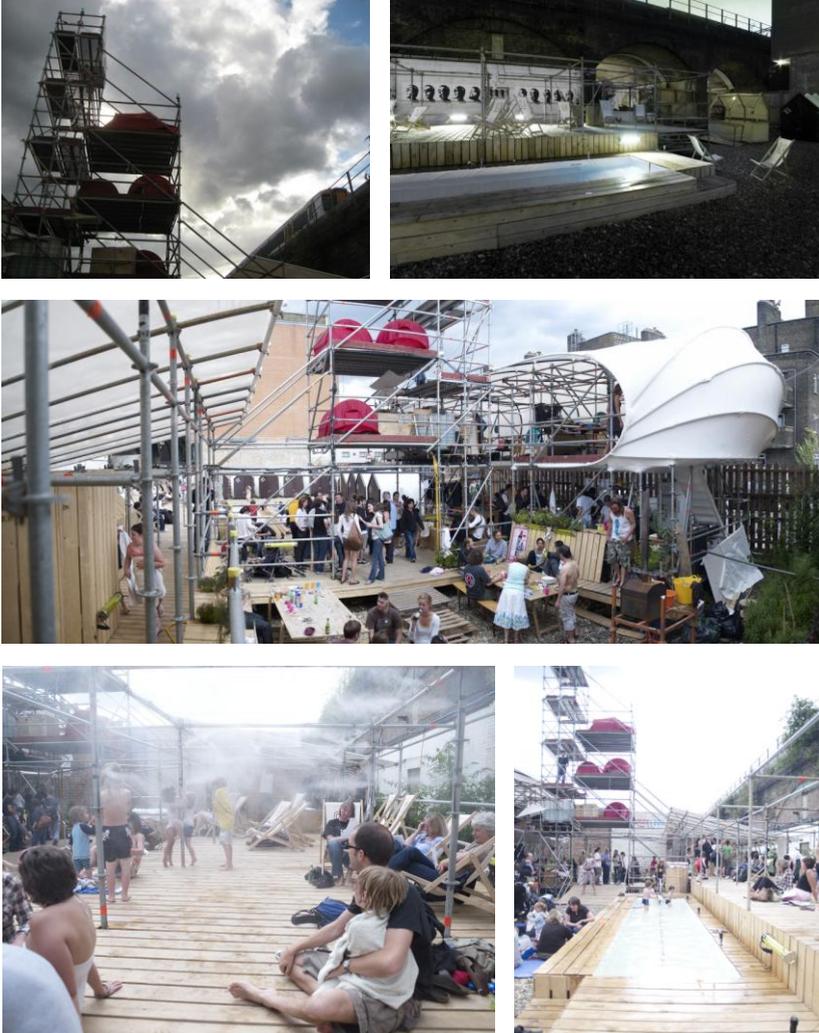
During the day, parents and children frequented the Lido coupled by elderly people who would bring their reading materials to absorb the air on the sun bathing decks. Children in swimming trunks splashed around as their parents chatted. In late afternoons or early evenings, office types would come by for a beer or cocktail at the bar. As Sara Muzio recalls, “Southwark Lido was shared by a wide variety of individuals, without being dominated by a single demographic. We had all sorts of visitors: neighbours from the estate across the road, families with children from the local schools, residents of the St. Mungo’s shelter for homeless people, office workers from the

⁵⁹ Oliver Wainwright, “We brought the fog to London”, *Icon Magazine*, 063 (September), 2008.

⁶⁰ For the EASA meeting in Roubaix 2004, Exyzt actually prepared a set of full-scale construction kits, like Mecanoo kits with instructions. For this occasion, Exyzt had been invited to build accommodating structures inside large warehouses; however, they built only the basic amenities and the students were given construction kits and instructive rules to do the constructions themselves: to build *Republique Ephemere*. Pathways and “sites” were marked out on the floor where groups of three students built their “home” within a cube of 2x2x2 metres. Dagmar Dudinsky and Gonzague Lacombe did the graphic design and floor lining. As Exyzt explained, the project “was based on ideas of reactivity, adaptability and unpredictability... The village changed over time and the initial layout was completely overhauled.” The “violations” of site restrictions became interesting practices in coordination between public and private spaces rewarding the adaptability of the constructor-dwellers. Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”.

⁶¹ David Mellis, “Southwark Lido”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovca, 2009.

neighbouring buildings, people interested in the London Festival of Architecture, and many who just happened to be passing by.”⁶²



Southwark Lido. Ph: Brice Pelleschi / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt.

(Except photo at upper left.)

⁶² Sara Muzio, *Shared Territories: A Playful Approach to the Mediation of Conflict in the City*, 2009. Unpublished work.

Slightly more formalised, the programme also demonstrates mixture of comprising talks, debates, workshops, concerts, and dance performances:⁶³

Wednesday 2nd July: Repair to the Hothouse: dinner and discussion for Climate Camp

Thursday 3rd July: Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) visits with children from Friars Primary School. (BOST, an association largely based on volunteer work working to develop green areas and gardens in the area lent tools and advices to clear the site for the Lido, provided plants, and facilitated a planting day for local schoolchildren.⁶⁴)

Friday 4th July: Friday Session: hosted by public works and Celine Condorelli: dinner and discussions with AOC, EXYZT and Indy Johar / OO Architects

Sunday 6th July: Sunday Roast: a “bring-your-own” BBQ for neighbours and older residents at Blackfriars Settlement

Monday 7th July: Street Genius Workshop: printmaking with Roger Zogolovitch

Tuesday 8th July: Changing the setting, changing politics: hosted by Demos: discussion with Nick Clegg, MP, Ken Worpole, Catherine Fieschi and EXYZT

Thursday 10th July: Solid Space Breakfast
Private view: Opening Party!

Friday 11th July: Impromptu visit from local school children

Saturday 12th July: Performance by SOWF Street Geniuses followed by EXYZT performance: Screening of films by Paula Vélez (SOWF, Some Other Way Forward, runs a project called Street Genius through which they organise creative placements for young people in the area. Three teenagers from Southwark took part in daily life at the Lido and performed a dance show on the last evening.⁶⁵)

Sunday 13rd July: Sunday Roast: a “bring-your-own” BBQ and closing party with Greco Roman.

⁶³ Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovà, 2009, p. 84.

My comments and explanations are added in parenthesis.

⁶⁴ Peter Graal, “Bankside Open Spaces Trust”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovà, 2009.

Exyzt and Muzio had established a contact beforehand with a few local organisations: BOST (Bankside Open Spaces Trust) and SOWF (Some Other Way Forward).

⁶⁵ “SOWF is a project sponsored and supported by the South Bank and Bankside Cultural Quarter which aims to put young people at the heart of the arts as visitors, creators and advocates. The South Bank and Bankside Cultural Quarter is a group of 22 arts organizations based along the South of the river Thames, offering world class creative opportunities to local young people.” “SOWF Some Other Way Forward”,

<<http://www.sowf.co.uk/content/about-us>>, accessed 22/09/2010.

“It is much more challenging to create a temporal space that acts as an ambient forum where ideas are exchanged instead of transmitted. How is it possible to balance the spontaneity of the club environment with that of a free and open environment that is accessible to any age and walk of life? How does one manifest the spectacle without alienating any potential audience in the general public?”⁶⁶ Ilan Katin, a visiting VJ and music gig host, saw that Exyzt succeeded combining different kinds of people in, for many, a different kind of place. For Exyzt, it was essential to contribute to a place that opened up and allowed a variety of people and lifestyles to mingle, as well as for their activities, interactions and ideas to flourish and meet. As Römer, Henninger and Muzio proclaimed in their introduction: “We believe in architecture, not as form or representation, but as a process of making. Architecture as a means of opening up a space for invention, creation, improvisation, encounter, meeting, exchange and enriching human relationships.”⁶⁷ To create this kind of space, their roles as hosts are important. “We are hosts”, stated Henninger at his lecture in Berlin on June 9th 2010: “We have a vision or a will for the use of the city and from that, we develop the programme ourselves.”⁶⁸ The host is regarded as a facilitator; making people feel welcome and showing them ways take active part in the place.

Henninger emphasises the importance of an accessible and inhabited site from the very start of the construction works, all the way from when starting to clear up the site. The start of the on-site construction is for Exyzt the first opportunity to attract curious interest from local residents, the formal inauguration being the second one.⁶⁹ At 100 Union Street, passers-by popped in to see what was going on and were likely to get the story about the place or a guided tour explaining the project. Only during the busiest construction sessions did Exyzt close the gate. These encounters offered opportunities to start dialogues and discussions with neighbours, participators and future users in order to gain knowledge about the area, share ideas, and to introduce and explain the project. “From the first day of construction we lived on site at 100 Union Street: inhabiting the neighbourhood; discovering its rhythms, its qualities and constraints; meeting the neighbours and involving visitors in the life of the Lido.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ At these nightclubs and gigs Ilan Katin comments, the concept of ‘social interaction’ can be summed up by the “screaming in somebody’s ear to ask for their name.”

Ilan Katin, “The Lido”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattacicova, 2009.

Ilan Katin, “Lido Southwark London Report”, Modul 8 (ed.), <<http://www.modul8.us/?tag=london>>, accessed 23/09/2010.

⁶⁷ Messu and Patteeuw, “The Lido”.

⁶⁸ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

⁶⁹ Nicolas Henninger, *EXYZT*, 2010.

Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

⁷⁰ Alex Römer, Nicolas Henninger, and Sara Muzio, “Foreword”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattacicova, 2009. VJ Katin reported from the *Southwark Lido*: “A stranger would occasionally enter with a bewildered gaze and this presence was immediately welcomed by one of the EXYZT crew inviting

Engaging in the use of the city, Exyzt combines public and private by simply bringing inside the public arena the same hospitality as used when hosting friends and family. With this hosted and inhabited urban space, Exyzt blurs the division between the public and the private. Doing that, they make public places more active and activating, allowing many different groups to mingle and meet. In a strange way, Exyzt adds a private aspect to make a public space more public. At 100 Union Street, as well as in other urban spaces by Exyzt, visitors had to pass a literal and atmospheric threshold to enter the space and take part. In my interviews with him, Henninger discussed the disadvantages and advantages of such a threshold: "Of course it prevents lots of people from coming. They say, "What's that?" Obviously, this prevents parts of the people from entering: the ones who are not used to it. They say, "What is that stuff? Am I comfortable to enter here?" And people who are not used to the kind of project might take more time to find the opportunity to cross the threshold."⁷¹ On the other hand, "People have the feeling of passing a threshold. They enter a different space and they behave differently."⁷² Citizens are thus generally aware that they pass a threshold into another kind of space, offering not only a change of place, but also many times, an awareness of another place and a possibly a freedom to do things a bit different.⁷³

The *Southwark Lido* gathered nearly all Exyzt members, just about their full, multidisciplinary crew, uniting to build and develop "situations, actions and installations in the city."⁷⁴ A few of them lived on site for the whole period, but most were there only parts of the five weeks. Architecture, carpentry, electricity, plumbing, cooking, botany, DJ-work, VJ-work,

them to come in accompanied by an explanation and a guided tour of the space. Often visitors needed to be convinced that the site was accessible and not a traditional 'construction site' with hard hats and pouring concrete." Katin, "The Lido".

⁷¹ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ As Messu and Patteeuw put it in their *Southwark Lido* "manifesto":

This place is about encounters. As the Roman bathhouses were once the ideal place for encounters and lively discussion, this place encourages people to meet the other. The encounters at the lido take place on all levels: neighbours, visitors of the festival, passers-by, foreigners and locals, come here to meet, enjoy and discuss.

This place is also about creating the unexpected. Entering this place is leaving behind old habits and being prepared to discover new ones. This is not a standard place. It is a place for the imaginary. We believe unexpected spaces can provide an impetus for unexpected encounters.

This place is also a site of collective memory. Conceived as temporary installation, this place is realised on a real site, provoking possibilities for the future and leaving behind a trace of a real lived experience.

This place is about a constant dynamic. Four weeks ago, the building team arrived and started construction. Even today at the opening, this place is still "under construction" just as it will be tomorrow. Deckchairs are moving constantly, posters are pasted on the walls, another guest is preparing his beach hut for tonight.

This place is first and foremost about the everyday. This is not a static piece of architecture parachuted into Southwark, but a dynamic installation. EXYZT inhabit the Lido throughout its lifetime, becoming temporary Southwark residents. The idea here is not to "consume" the neighbourhood but to contribute to it.

Finally we could define this place as an urban camp. Created as a whole, self-sustaining environment, welcoming the neighbourhood. Within a context where we are more ignoring or avoiding one another, this project puts forward possible encounters. In Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw, "Southwark Lido Impressions", Updated 23/09/2010, <<http://southwarklido.wordpress.com>>, accessed 23/09/2010.

⁷⁴ Römer, Henninger, and Muzio, "Foreword".

photography, and graphic design, were the disciplines present in the project. Exyzt also invited friends and colleagues to work at the Lido, for instance the VJs Ilan Katin and Boris Edelstein who came for a week to develop musical and visual performances in collaboration with some Exyzt members.⁷⁵



The photo exhibition “Subfaces” by Exyzt member Emmanuel Gabily displayed visitors and hosts with goggles. In collaboration with the neighbouring Borough Market, providing food for Exyzt and its extended building team, Exyzt member Julie Guiches and her colleagues in Public Studio, Benoit Lorent and Claudia Hernández photographed a series of full-scale portraits of sellers and workers, displayed one night on the gable walls at the Lido. Exyzt member Julie Guiches and her colleagues in Public Studio, Benoit Lorent and Claudia Hernández, handed out Log Books and disposable cameras to neighbours, who photographed, documented and presented their life in the neighbourhood. Source photos Borough Market portraits and Log Book: Exyzt. Ph. upper right: Ilan Katin. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/decrepicon/2667855460/>

⁷⁵ Other performing guests were Toby Spark, VJ Dr. Moe (aka Mauritius Seeger), musician Anat Ben-David, and Deep Visual (aka Gary Oldknow).

Exyzt regards their multidisciplinary collective works as dissolving the borders of architectural autonomy and disciplinary territoriality. They draw no lines between different disciplines, knowledges and skills on site. The propensity by Exyzt to do unsolicited and self-organised projects must be seen in this light: the client-architect structure does not lend itself easily to the kind of critical scrutiny that Exyzt pursues. Spontaneously organising a dance party is part of their work, just as much as designing the structure in which to dance. "Our projects can result in spatial video games, architectural buildings, musical environments and/or thematic food feasts."⁷⁶ Architecture is regarded a tool or medium, combining a wide range of elements and skills.

The EXYZT collective is committed to the idea that architecture is no longer a simple question of design and construction. We strive to consider architecture as a tool or a media for creation that combines in an organic way all the skills and forms of know-how in a society, in a human community, or in a given situation in order to experience other ways of living and building together.⁷⁷

In all their work as designers, builders, event organisers, and hosts, Exyzt emphasises the importance of leaving space for "informality, spontaneity and the unexpected". We will see what that means in practice when looking at the work of the *Dalston Mill*.⁷⁸ "The city we love is that in which anything is possible, where there is still space for spontaneous social, cultural, and economic games", Römer, Henninger and Muzio wrote in the *Southwark Lido* book. In their own work, they try to contribute to expand the range of possibilities; to allow unexpected things to happen.⁷⁹ The work of the *Southwark Lido* was not regarded as completed at the day of its inauguration. The scaffoldings and the simple woodwork invited continuations, as did the informality of the place, and members and associates continued to alter the place all through the project period. Architecture "not as form or representation but as a process of making" also includes, according to Römer, Henninger and Muzio, to open up a space "for invention, creation, improvisation, encounter, meeting, exchange and enriching human

⁷⁶ Collective Exyzt, "Exyzt - Who are we?".

⁷⁷ Collectif Exyzt, "EXYZT", <http://biennalesaint-etienne.citedudesign.com/en/html/scenic_artists.html>, accessed 11/08/2010.

⁷⁸ Römer, Henninger, and Muzio, "Foreword".

Exyzt follows a multidisciplinary recipe: "Experiment. Architecture can expand into a transdisciplinary field, where new tools can be explored. Our current recipe: marinate construction with video, graphic design, photography and gastronomy, without forgetting to leave space for interaction, freedom, informality and unpredictability." Collective Exyzt, "Exyzt - Who are we?".

⁷⁹ Römer, Henninger, and Muzio, "Foreword".

relationships.” The site is regarded an experimental playground and a place for spontaneous games where everyone on site may take part, to act and to initiate.⁸⁰

Preceding their work *Situation Room* at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York during 2009, Philippe Rizzotti and Dimitri Messu in Exyzt gave a rare and explicit reference to Situationism: “Our team is now a community of people who have chosen to act under the same principle of sharing knowledge and abilities, imagining the environment as the terrain of a participatory game, a site for play and appropriation, creating ‘transient micro ambiances’ as Guy Debord described the constructed situation.”⁸¹ Constructed situations regenerate activity and everyday life, breaking the passive consumption of spectacles: “There can be no freedom apart from activity...”⁸² Exyzt takes several cues from the Situationists and from the architectural-artistic avant-garde of the 1960s. However, while the Situationists focused on edifications of constructed situations, Exyzt, one might say, materialise in their interventions some of the cues and features of these constructed situations. In the *Situationist Internationale* of 1958, a constructed situation was defined as: “A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events...”⁸³ Exyzt’s members work collectively at making urban spaces with an authentic and informal ambience concentrated around playful activities, free of charge. The fact that they actually live in these spaces, reflect a situational theme of Debord: “The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing “public” must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, “livers”, must steadily increase.”⁸⁴ By living on site, hosting active spaces, the Exyzt members seem inspired by these cues, rather than any full-blown ideology.

Exyzt also connects to some of the ideas by Yona Friedman, referred to as an inspiration together with “Archigram, Dada, Fluxus, hybrid architecture of the world (observed on our trips to Vietnam, Japan, Eastern Europe, Africa).”⁸⁵ In his manifesto, *L’Architecture Mobile* from 1958, Yona

⁸⁰ Messu and Patteeuw, “The Lido”.

⁸¹ Rizzotti and Messu, “Situation Room”.

The expression used by Rizzotti and Messu, ‘transient micro ambiances’ is found in “The Amsterdam Declaration” of 10 points: “10. The construction of a situation is the edification of a transient micro-ambiance and of the play of events for a unique moment in lives of several persons. Within unified urbanism, it is inseparable from the construction of a general, relatively more lasting ambience.”

Constant and Guy Debord, “The Amsterdam Declaration”, *Situationist Internationale Online / Internationale Situationniste* 2(December), <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/amsterdam.html>>, accessed 26/05/2010, 1958.

⁸² Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”.

⁸³ Situationist International, “Definitions”, in Iwona Blazwick (ed.), *An Endless Adventure... An Endless Passion... An Endless Banquet: A Situationist Scrapbook*, London: Verso, 1989.

⁸⁴ Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of a Situation”, in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, Cal.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1957/1981, p. 41.

⁸⁵ EXYZT, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

Friedman grounds his mobile structures and new urbanism on ideas about play. Friedman is interested in the unexpected and in human unpredictability, which makes formal planning an illusion. He advocates “[s]elf-planning by the very user”, implemented on a conceptual level in his extensive urban mobile structures, as well as quite concretely through manuals for “self-planning”, which started off as self-initiated, but was later used by both UNESCO and the UN.⁸⁶ Friedman’s ideas and particularly his emphasis on individual freedom, have influenced Exyzt. While Friedman was mainly interested in flexible structures at large scale, however, Exyzt, who can be said to rely more on fictions than statistics, build only tiny pockets in comparison. For their enclosed playgrounds, for instance, they use scaffolded structures in an informal way and not as a framing system.



Manifesto by EXYZT from the booklet by EXYZT and Coloco, *Momento*, 2008.

In Exyzt’s “Manifesto”, they write that “The collective conceive and organize each project as playground where cultural behaviours and shared stories relate, mix and mingle.”⁸⁷ At the same time, they want to “build new worlds where fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy.”⁸⁸ Looking at the *Southwark Lido*, what role does fiction and stories play when

⁸⁶ Yona Friedman, *Pro Domo*, Barcelona: Actar, 2006.

⁸⁷ EXYZT and Coloco, “Momento”.

⁸⁸ EXYZT, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

Exyzt build “new worlds where fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy”?⁸⁹



Southwark Lido. Ph. Brice Pelleschi / Exyzt. Source: Exyzt

Exyzt took the name *Southwark Lido* from a former swimming pool in Southwark Park, which had been closed down in 1989, but was still missed by local residents. The familiar name of the Southward Lido and the new temporary paddling pool with graphics of a swimming pool, linked to the story of a lost lido and tapped into local discussions. The reality of the *Southwark Lido*, its pool, graphics, sauna, beach huts, sundeck, goggle photos, and occasional mist, all contributed to create a fiction of a lido with its play, joy and social interactions. Adding the local history and the memories of the former lido, situated in the nearby Southwark Park, the fiction of this temporary lido took on another richness and complexity; as an issue of conversations, debates, and arguments. Furthermore, playing with the fiction of a lido did not only connect to local experiences and politics, but also to larger stories about public baths: “Following in the tradition of the Roman baths and Turkish hammams, which provided a setting for social gathering, ritual cleansing and uninhibited political discussions, the Southwark Lido will host a variety of activities...”, as the *London Architecture Festival 2008* announced.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Collectif Exyzt, “Exyzt - Who are we?”, <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

⁹⁰ London Festival of Architecture 2008, “Southwark Lido”.

Fictions and stories do play important parts in many works by Exyzt. These fictions and stories are played out as realities on site, easily accessible and widely shared. One example would be the *LabiChampi* project of 2007, rooted in Karosta, a Latvian area of derelict housing slabs where Exyzt organised and built a poetic “mushroom factory” in the ruins of an old mansion. Another example is the *Dalston Mill*, which will be studied in the next subchapter.⁹¹ These fictions add to the ambience of the place, always involving activating elements such as a pool, a “factory”, or a mill cum bakery. These stories also help newcomers in starting conversations, making it easier to engage with the site and with other people. Finally, Exyzt picks specific fictions which, combined with the sites, become starting points for critical discussions on important issues in the area. Any visitor and player can continue to play out the fiction, at any level – like the scaffolded framework, it is neither finished nor fixed. The site as a playground of continuous making and a reality of fictions and playfulness become tool to “form new grounds for democracy”.⁹²

“Be utopian. We want to build new worlds were fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy.”⁹³ The Lido fiction and its playful, activating and social reality become like imaginations for an alternative kind of commonly shared, non-commercial, urban space. The Lido and other sites built and inhabited by Exyzt can be said to explore a concern from the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition in Venice, namely the desire to embark “on a search for a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings ... imagining a more equal society, one that is more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the urban context.”⁹⁴ The playfulness and inclusiveness in the Lido fiction, enriched by both local and global connotations, provide not only for a generous atmosphere and for discussions on conflictual issues, but facilitate a shared ground – broadly and widely shared – from which to “imagine alternatives to our surroundings”.⁹⁵ These alternatives, just like the fictional stories, work on several levels; to imagine changes in society as well as to imagine concrete localities for an active public space in Southwark – such as a another lido. The concern from the Venice Biennale 2008 gets a poignant

⁹¹ In Barcelona, 2004, Exyzt launched a 6 m high projected image of Jean Nouvel’s *Agbar Tower* into the air and outer space, as the take-off for a street party. The event and the inhabited 8-story scaffolded structure; planned, built and managed by Exyzt, were located in the industrial neighbourhood Poble Nou. The site gave a fine view of the real *Agbar Tower* 300 metres away. The work of *S.E.T. Station Extra-Territoriale* was “an architectural, visual and sound performance” as part of the festival *eme3*.

Quinton, Exyzt, and translated by Manuel Malherbe, “Constant Performances / Performances Permanente”. Construction, launching and party can be viewed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O1FkOEyPFE>

⁹² Collectif Exyzt, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Emiliano Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”, in 2008 Fondazione La Biennale de Venezia (ed.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, p. 28.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

answer in the work of Exyzt. Fiction and games at the *Southwark Lido* become means for imaginations, both individually and collectively, forming alternatives on how to develop urban life and common space in the city. Thus, there is a great difference between a fiction and a slogan. Stories open up layers of meaning and nuances, requiring interpretation to come to life. A slogan, on the other hand, closes and prescribes its significance, acting as a one-way communication. Exyzt, needless to say, prefers the story.

Exyzt points out that they do not want to smooth out any conflicts present in the situation but rather establish a generous platform of hospitality, playfulness and inclusion where disagreements can be tested and real discussions take place.⁹⁶ Like Raumlabor, they use fictions as tools to invent and facilitate active and interactive urban spaces while dealing with both conflictual situations and urban life.⁹⁷ These fictions are generally playful, humorous, activating, and easily shared.

From the Lido to the Mill

The *Southwark Lido* was an event in the *London Festival of Architecture 2008* and its presence was announced through the festival's channels. At the same time, however, the work integrated, engaged and participated with people in local Southwark. *London Festival of Architecture* envisioned that for the "run-up to its [the Lido] installation" one would "see the organisers forming links with the local community and specific groups, providing them with a new place to hold events and share their work" was actually and only marginally the case.⁹⁸ This created a tension that will always be present on the sites of Exyzt; on the one hand, cool and creative young people organise an urban space, and on the other, the same young people act as hosts, inviting everyone inside. Oliver Wainwright reported for *Icon Magazine*, describing Exyzt as "the mischievous guerrilla team" who had "transformed a gritty corner of Southwark into a surreal urban bathing oasis... From after-school gardening workshops to a pensioners' barbeque, the Lido played host to numerous events, becoming one of the most lively and socially engaged projects of the festival."⁹⁹ From his viewpoint, Exyzt had succeeded. David Matchett, manager at the Borough Market, emphasised the significance of the Lido in the local environment. Southwark and South Bank have several large

⁹⁶ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

⁹⁷ In the introduction to the workshop of "fiction + action", Markus Bader of Raumlabor simply emphasised explorations of fiction as starting point for actions. The workshop Action+Fiction was organised by Markus Bader in Berlin, as part of *The Knot*, "a mobile unit for artistic production" – "linking the existing with the imaginary". In addition to Bader, Nicolas Henninger from Exyzt, Jakub Szczesny from Centrala (Warsaw), Mister Miguel Rodriguez Cruz from Basurama (Madrid) were involved.

⁹⁸ London Festival of Architecture 2008, "Southwark Lido".

⁹⁹ Wainwright, "We brought the fog to London".

and influential cultural institutions offering art and culture to the whole of London and indeed the whole world. For Matchett, the *Southwark Lido* provided something completely different: “Tate Modern, the Design Museum, The Globe, the Mayor’s office and the Southbank Centre are important historical and cultural sites, but sometimes the residential community is overlooked. What made the Lido so important and a privilege to be part of was that it was for local people.”¹⁰⁰ The *Southwark Lido* book referred mostly the happy voices. Guest and VJ Ilan Katin “was continually amazed at the wide swath of generations that the Lido appealed to”; however, on blogs, critical voices were to be found.¹⁰¹ The local newspaper *London-SE1* has a blog called the *London SE1 Forum* where many comments appeared, in particular after a debate, organised by Demos, on participation where Nick Clegg, leader of Liberal Democrats, took part.¹⁰² Clegg focused on local participation and community integration as an antidote to the loss of faith people has in their ability to influence the world around them. Sitting in a deckchair at the *Southwark Lido*, he emphasised the importance of giving people “the tools not only to influence but to shape the physical space around them”.¹⁰³ Therefore, professionals should not just bring forward an idea and ask communities if they like it, rather, they should “actually engage them at an early stage to develop the whole concept of what is to be built, and how it will work.”¹⁰⁴ Bloggers, on the other hand, wrote that “... at no point were we invited to participate in creating it” whereas architect and blogger “Peter G” commented on the use of public money spent to entertain certain social segments: “This project has been paid for with public and charitable funds – it cost a small fortune and is nothing but a folly for the same upper middle class people who like to drink the £30 per bottle champagne for sale at their bar while congratulating their friends on their latest über-lightweight theory

¹⁰⁰ David Matchett, “Borough Market”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaciovca, 2009, p. 56.

¹⁰¹ Katin, “The Lido”.

¹⁰² On July 8th, the Lido was home to a public discussion organised by Demos and titled “Changing the setting, changing politics”. Participants were; Nick Clegg, leader of Liberal Democrats; Ken Worpole, professor in Cities Institute at London Metropolitan University; Catherine Fieschi, director of Demos, and members of the Exyzt. Demos announced the debate to be “addressing the need for politicians to seek new platforms for engaging with citizens” where “public spaces of the city may be arenas for political conversations”. Demos stated that the *Southwark Lido* was “a perfect place to debate these questions in an open, informal and investigative atmosphere.” Catherine Fieschi from Demos followed up, starting with the question: “Do unexpected places create an impetus for unexpected encounters?” enquiring whether these encounters could lead to new interpretations of concepts such as “the public” and new ways of engaging in relationships. London SE1, “Nick Clegg at Southwark Lido for poolside debate”, London SE1 community website (ed.), <<http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3393>>, accessed 23/09/2010.

Demos, “Changing the Settings, Changing Politics: Demos Events, 8th July 2008, Southwark Lido”, <<http://www.demos.co.uk/events/changingthesettingschangingpolitics>>, accessed 23/09/2010.

Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw, “Southwark Lido: Changing the Settings, Changing Politics”, <<http://southwarklido.wordpress.com/changing-the-settings-changing-politics/>>, accessed 18/05/2010, 2008.

Demos presents themselves as “a think-tank focused on power and politics. Our unique approach challenges the traditional, ‘ivory tower’ model of policymaking by giving a voice to people and communities, and involving them closely in our research.” <http://www.demos.co.uk/> Access date 04/10/2010.

¹⁰³ London SE1, “Nick Clegg at Southwark Lido for poolside debate”.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

on 'cities as scaffolding' and 'the border between entry and no entry via a space in the wall' (otherwise called a door or gate!) (both overheard!).¹⁰⁵

Statements by both *London Festival of Architecture* and Nick Clegg seemed to be referring to participating processes, as we know them, processes that Exyzt only marginally provided for at the Lido. Exyzt did not engage much with the local community in Southwark during the run-up to the installation.¹⁰⁶ They were in contact with a few organisations and a few neighbours, but most of what can be labelled participation, happened on site during their residency, helped by their work as hosts. Through their collective work, Exyzt sought to "form new grounds for democracy" through informal and playful bottom-up approaches rather than exploring participatory tools in a more conventional or representative sense.¹⁰⁷ Different opinions on what diversity of citizens the Lido actually attracted as well as to what degree different people felt welcome and included by the hosts and the social environment, have been presented here; even very opposite experiences. Arriving at crowded nights would possibly be less welcoming for a newcomer than the more relaxed daytime hours. However, quite a bit of hosting is required in the more quiet hours to avoid visitors simply looking at organisers enjoying the place.

Nicolas Henninger recognised that only at the end of their stay at 100 Union Street did the message really reach the whole neighbourhood so that local people crowded the place. In their "Final Words" of the Lido book, Henninger and Muzio wrote: "When the Lido project came to an end, many people asked us to stay longer, to keep it open over the whole summer. Unfortunately, this was not possible in the case of the Lido, but we want to explore the possibility of longer-term projects in the future."¹⁰⁸

Experiences from the *Southwark Lido* site were important to Nicolas Henninger and Exyzt, informing their project in London the year after, namely the *Dalston Mill*. Questions on how to include local people and integrate their work into the surrounding neighbourhoods, as well as how to challenge, rather than fortify, processes of gentrification, were explored.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Beowulf at London SE1, "London SE1 Forum: Nick Clegg at the Lido", <<http://www.london-se1.co.uk/forum/read/1/91256/91363>>, accessed 27/09/2010.
Rose Etherington, "Southwark Lido by EXYZT and Sara Muzio", *Dezeen Magazine*, <<http://www.dezeen.com/2008/07/18/southwark-lido-by-exyzt-and-sara-muzio>>, accessed 23/09/2010, 2008. The blogger "froggy" wrote: "I went to the Lido and thought it was great fun (the kids liked it) although I suspect that the trendy chaps who are running it (and live on site apparently) are having the best time of all..."
London SE1, "London SE1 Forum: Nick Clegg at the Lido".
Jane Brodie wrote in the *Southwark Lido* book: "You are welcomed into the EXYZT family as soon as you step on site, whether you're a volunteer, artist, local or visitor; no-one is a stranger to anyone under their polythene roof." Jane Brodie, "Construction", in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattacivova, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ London Festival of Architecture 2008, "Southwark Lido".

¹⁰⁷ EXYZT, "Exyzt - Who are we?".

¹⁰⁸ Henninger and Muzio, "Final Words".

¹⁰⁹ When presented by the *London Festival of Architecture 2008*, Exyzt was cited in support, not only of community participation, but also of contributing to processes of urban renewal in the already quite cleaned and gentrified area of Southwark and the South Bank. "This project explores the potential of using a site in

4.3 *Dalston Mill*, 2009: “platform of action and exchange”¹¹⁰

Exyzt concluded their text “about us” in the *Wonderland Travelogue 2004-2006* with the following list:

EXYZT explores:

Research on experimental practices and situations.

Elaboration of scenarios and strategies for collective building.

The integration of interactive and flexible tools in urban and architectural production.

A trans-disciplinary and multicultural platform of action and exchange.¹¹¹



The *Dalston Mill* – Entrance from the street and the Peace Mural Place. Source: Exyzt

transition from empty lot to new residential and office buildings, generously lent by Solid Space, to create a vibrant point of community and cultural engagement during its transformation.” London Festival of Architecture 2008, “Southwark Lido”.

Solid Space Development Ltd. is the company led and owned by architect Roger Zogolovitch and his son. They own the site and have plans for residential and office buildings on this site. Solid Space and the Lake Estates, both owned and ran by Roger and Gus Zogolovitch, have offered the site at 100 Union Street to temporary projects. These Lido partners, Solid Space in particular, but also the members of the Architecture Foundation, are parts in the economical side to Southwark’s urban renewal. These conditions concerning the *Southwark Lido* appear as problematic. Exyzt was part of an urban renewal process in an already quite gentrified part of London, adding to these processes while not able to attract visitors from as many different population segments in the local areas as wanted to do.

¹¹⁰ EXYZT, “French Team 60 Exyzt (F)”.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Walking down the Dalston Lane, passing the Peace Mural Place opposite the new Dalston Kingsland station, you would notice a newly painted, large letters on the wooden wall: DALSTON MILL.¹¹² Above the wall arose the same large trees as always, but in addition, something new and unexpected appeared; a scaffolded tower with a windmill, sporting spoon-shaped rotators on top. In the wall, beside the letters announcing *Dalston Mill*, a door had been cut out and was now open every day from two o'clock in the early afternoon until ten at night. Walking through the doorway, leaving the street, another kind of place appeared.



Dalston Mill – At night. Source: Exyzt. Ph: Brice Pellischi.

The *Dalston Mill* project encompassed a wheatfield, a mill, a kitchen hut, bread ovens, toilets, a small stage and a multiuse space for workshops. The place was in use for four weeks with a pre-planned programme of activities, performances, café, workshops, and summer feasts, as well as a number of unplanned initiatives and activities taking place. This work was planned, programmed, designed, built, organised and hosted by Exyzt. The cost was 60,000£ all included except the wheatfield and some specific parts of the programme organised by Barbican Art Gallery.

The prehistory of the project deserves to be mentioned. Barbican Art Gallery invited EXYZT to participate in an exhibition for the summer of 2009: *Radical Nature – Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-*

¹¹² “Peace Mural Place, as we are calling it for the purpose of this report, is an important space close to Dalston Junction adjacent to the activity of Ashwin Street and the hidden assets of the eastern curve and a release space for the busy bus stop on Dalston Lane. It has the potential to unlock routes in North South and North East and South West.” muf architecture|art and J&L Gibbons LLP, “Making Space in Dalston”, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_1.pdf, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_2.pdf, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_3.pdf>, accessed 18/08/2010, 2009.

2009.¹¹³ They commissioned the collective to do an offsite project of Exyzt's own choice in North East London while responding to the theme of the exhibition at the Barbican gallery. The project started with the search for a good site. Nicolas Henninger looked for a local guide, "someone who already knows the place and who can take us around to see if there are opportunities like left-over spaces, empty places, or corners in the city where we can interact and propose a little development."¹¹⁴ Barbican put them in contact with Muf Architecture/Art who at the time was working on a self-initiated mapping and planning project of Dalston under the heading, *Making Space in Dalston*, demonstrating the variety existing qualities and assets in the area.¹¹⁵ In March 2009, Exyzt met with Liza Fior from Muf for a trip around the Hackney Borough to look at potential places. A site next to the Dalston Lane, an abandoned railroad track of the former Eastern Curve, attracted Henninger. The place had an immediate character of tranquillity surrounded of material authenticity and heterogeneity where the backyard buildings formed something of an urban collage while the site continued into a long and overgrown garden, secluded and informal, contrasting the intensity of the streets.¹¹⁶ The space had, according to Henninger, "an existing hospitality" and not much had to be done "to make things happen."¹¹⁷ He knew the Dalston streets as lively places with shops, cafés, markets, a population of different generations and variegated ethnicity, and was interested in "it's very mixed landscape... its history and vibrancy."¹¹⁸ Interviewed by the local paper, *Hackney Citizen*, at the opening of the Mill a few months later, Henninger gave other and diverse reasons for the choice of site; the wide range of people in the area, the rapidity of change experienced by the neighbourhood and the proximity to shops where to purchase necessities such as food and screws.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Barbican's ambitions for the exhibition *Radical Nature – Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* was to bring together key figures of several generations in art and architecture who made or were making utopian works and inspiring solutions of Land Art, environmental activism, experimental architecture and utopianism.

¹¹⁴ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹¹⁵ muf architecture/art and J&L Gibbons LLP, "Making Space in Dalston".

Hackney Council and Design for London, part of London Development Agency, funded the participatory mapping and planning project of *Making Space in Dalston*.

Earlier, Muf Architecture/Art reacted on top-down plans of public authorities of new cultural institutions for the area of Dalston, an urban district so filled with cultural initiatives and artistic practices. Muf initiated a mapping of the assets in the area, be it physical, cultural and social ones. In collaboration with landscape architects J&L Gibbons LLP, Muf wanted to display what existed already of public spaces, small enterprises serving the public, potential public gardens, art associations and ateliers, volunteer organisations, and so on.

¹¹⁶ The site has several owners: The backyard has a public owner, Hackney Homes, organised under the London Borough of Hackney, leasing out spaces for housing, artist studios, gallery, and shops in the houses enclosing the yard. There are a few private houses as well. The lower and green end of the site belongs to the neighbouring Kingsland Shopping Centre.

¹¹⁷ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹¹⁸ Crystal Bennes, "French funster EXYZT brings radical, rural idyll to London's East End with its windmill and wheatfield", *Architectural Review*, 226 (September), 2009.

¹¹⁹ "The Art of Farming at the Dalston Mill", *The Hackney Citizen*, London, 10/07/2009.



The site for the *Dalston Mill*. Source: Exyzt

Exyzt quickly launched their idea to the client: “... we met with the Barbican Art Gallery and said, “There is a space we want to show you – a place. We don’t have a programme yet for the installation. We don’t know what it’s going to be. We want to plan how we can use the space, inhabit it, and invite the public to come in.”¹²⁰ In their gallery space, the Barbican planned to display photos of the work *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* by Agnes Denes, and therefore, they wanted to create her work in situ – to plant an actual wheatfield.¹²¹ Henninger suggested; “Make the site here. Bring the installation here. We should have a dialogue on this.”¹²² With the wheatfield as point of departure, the main idea and the fiction for this site came through: “Okay, if we live here, we will do a windmill.”¹²³

The small wheatfield became part of a garden and an active urban space – with the windmill as its focal point. Agnes Denes’ description of her art practice has much common ground with the one of Exyzt: “The issues touched on in my work range between individual creation and social consciousness. ... Making art today is synonymous with assuming responsibilities for our fellow humans,” she states.¹²⁴ Exyzt explores a similar range between social consciousness and creation, however, covering a span from concrete social interactions in the local neighbourhood to larger societal questions.

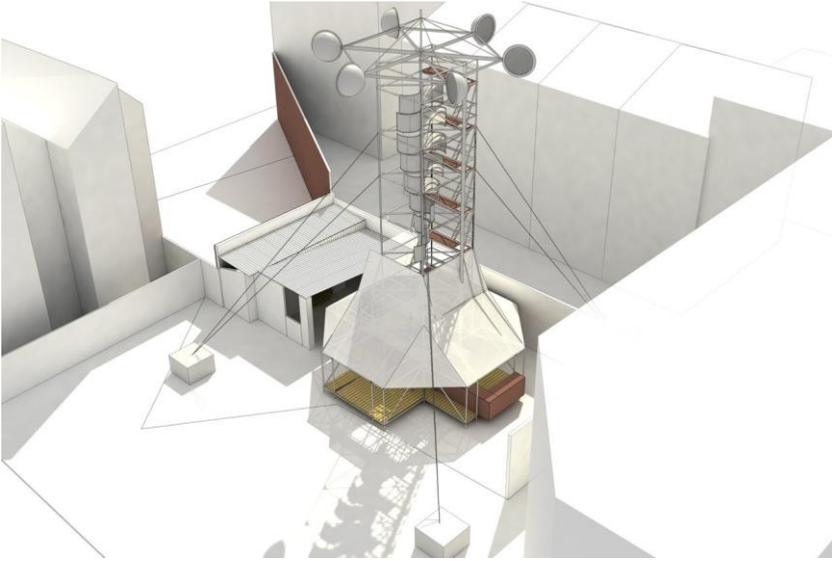
¹²⁰ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 2.

¹²¹ In 1982, Agnes Denes planted and harvested 2 acres of wheat on the derelict Battery Park Landfill, Manhattan, two blocks away from Wall Street and the World Trade Centre.

¹²² Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 2.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Baile Oakes, *Sculpting with the Environment: A Natural Dialogue*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1995, p. 166.



Dalston Mill – Above: Axonometry by EXYZT. Below: The grain grinder. Source: Exyzt



For Exyzt, the windmill offered possibilities as well as challenges, and the planning period was extremely short. While public authorities processed the applications prepared by Muf, based on Exyzt's preliminary drawings, a few collective members went on to develop the temporary mill.¹²⁵ The windmill was estimated to turn 60 tours per minute at a wind of 1 metre per second; the rotation transmitted through a vertical axle down to the kitchen, driving a grinder as well as a turbine that would produce electric power for low-volt lamps. Rotations of the windmill had to be multiplied to at least 1500 tours per minute, in order to run the turbine. Through the internet, Exyzt ordered a grinder – "... a diminutive domestic grain grinder."¹²⁶ In the kitchen were also baking ovens, heated by wood fire.



Dalston Mill. Source: Exyzt

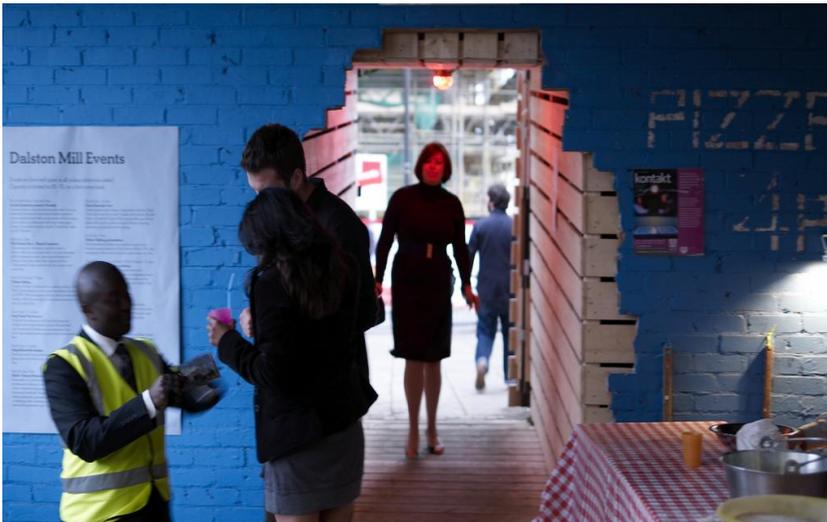
In collaboration with Muf, Exyzt obtained the four-week planning permission to transform this abandoned site, next to the Dalston Lane, into a mill, a bakery, a café, and a multi-use space, meaning a roof, for tables, workshops, and other events.¹²⁷ The *Dalston Mill* had an informal appearance and atmosphere that certainly did not reveal the intense and meticulous

¹²⁵ EXYZT was assisted by Elioth + Encore Heureux, a Paris-based engineering and architectural collective who had devised a concept named Wind-it. A windmill with horizontal rotators works efficiently in dense situations of shifting winds.

¹²⁶ Oliver Wainwright, "The Smell of Freshly Baked Bread", *Icon Magazine*, 076 (October), <http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/020/lacaton_text.htm>, accessed 19/01/2006, 2009.

¹²⁷ EXYZT ran the café. Most activities at the Dalston Mill were for free, but not the drinks at the café.

planning necessary to make the place. The planning and organisation of the work also had, as for most works by Exyzt, to take into account intense and short construction processes and varieties of unskilled labour.¹²⁸ During construction, improvisation is both needed and encouraged. It makes it possible to handle obstacles and opportunities on site and to include spontaneous engagement from people who turn up. Connections to water, electricity, and internet were all improvised and organised on site. Exyzt hooked up with some of the neighbours; from one they got water, and from another the extra electricity needed. They built two water closets and a shower on site; most challenging was of course the sewage. Luckily, they discovered a sewage pipe on the site. Henninger pointed it out to me: “You see that pipe sticking up and out of the wall there – that was where we plugged in.”¹²⁹ Through previous projects, Exyzt had developed knowledge on how and what to plan, and what to leave. They left gaps of unplanned time and space allowing for a series of spontaneous events and activities, whereas the stage, the roof, the kitchen, and the mill served and supported these activities.



Dalston Mill. Source: Exyzt / <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157621684404595/>

¹²⁸ Exyzt members present at the *Dalston Mill* were:

Nicolas Henninger, Alexander Roemer, Daya Bakker, Fred Keiff, Hannes Schreckensberger, Thibault Labat, Philippe Deangeli, Dagmar Dudinsky, Gonzague Lacombe, Brice Pelleschi, Christophe Goutes, Philippe Rizzotti, Pier Schneider, Laurent Petit (did an urban psychoanalyse www.anpu.fr), and Shirley Hottier.

¹²⁹ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 3.

“Entering via a timber tunnel, visitors are treated to a surreal oasis ...”¹³⁰ Icon Magazine reporter Oliver Wainwright, as all other visitors, arrived through the kitchen wherefrom they would overlook the café and bar, the wheatfield, as well as the whole of the green site curving down towards a small stage. A scaffolded roof, covered with vinyl, protected the kitchen and cafe space, where from the windmill tower rose. The Exyzt hosts slept on a mezzanine of simple boards under this roof. Materials were few, simple and inexpensive – all of them to be reused. The steel bars of the scaffoldings were joined with brackets, leaving ends free and pointing. This way of joining offers a freedom of construction along with a strangely beautiful and archaic character that resembles Asian bamboo structures. A few wooden steps in the small hill established a stand overlooking a simple platform stage.¹³¹ The green wheatfield, or ochre when the wheat ripened, was enclosed on two sides by rough brick facades in a variety of traditional gable forms – slightly more distant were the facades of the recent warehouses. Exyzt removed garbage but did not change or tidy up the place up, rough or derelict details were not fixed or smoothed out. The original atmosphere of the place was still there, only being added to. The beauty and tactile sensuality of the place was surprisingly present.



Dalston Mill. Source: Exyzt. Source: <http://flickr.com/photos/jaypeg/3767531929>. Ph: Jay Peg.

¹³⁰ Wainwright, "The Smell of Freshly Baked Bread".

¹³¹ Exyzt members usually mount and build the scaffolded structures themselves but due to laws and regulations concerning authorisation in Great Britain, Exyzt members had to leave this work to the rental company. In Great Britain, Exyzt met more regulations concerning cafés, bars and food sale as well, though applying only for temporary permissions made it possible to see through.



The *Dalston Mill* – View from the site to the new developments above the Dalston Junction Station. Ph: Author

The London areas of Dalston and Hackney are subject to gentrification processes. Urban regeneration towards the Olympic Games 2012 has accelerated these processes. The regeneration plans for the whole of North-East London, developed in a top-down manner, includes infrastructure, housing projects, and cultural institutions, one of these being the new Dalston Junction station development that opened in 2010.¹³² During the *Dalston Mill* project, the 14-storey housing development of the Dalston Square comprising expensive high-end apartments, was about to be completed above the Dalston Junction station, just opposite the entrance of the Mill.¹³³ Dalston Theatre had been demolished – after massive local protests – to make space for this development. In the basement of the Dalston Theatre, the Four Aces Club, which had kept going for thirty years as a leading music hall for black music, had to close down. One of the initiators, the legendary DJ and manager Newman Dunbar, explained what happened: “The Council, as it is their rights, managed to compulsory purchase the building.”¹³⁴ With the work of the *Dalston Mill*, Exyzt wished to address top-down planning and the consequences of gentrification, looking for ways to resist the growing separation between different social and economic segments. From early on in the process, they were in contact with neighbours, local groups, and small

¹³² Muf Architecture/Art and J&L Gibbons LLP, "Making Space in Dalston".

¹³³ Developer: Barratt Homes.

¹³⁴ undercurrentspaulo, "4 Aces Club", <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5Jzmon4kyI>>, accessed 24/08/2010.

enterprises in Hackney, inviting them to take part in and initiate events and activities at the *Dalston Mill*. These processes came in addition to their few weeks of construction with the gate open. Architects from Muf Architecture/Art, the cultural coordinator at the Hackney Council, and the neighbours, contributed with knowledge on the physical, cultural and social makeup of the area, helping Exyzt with a network of local contacts.¹³⁵ “Everyone turned up here, you know, of different reasons,” Henninger told me, and added, “We activated Barbican on that side [planting out the wheatfield], and organised a workshop with local groups of people.”¹³⁶

Exyzt drew up a pre-planned programme with contributors from inside and outside the borough, including talks, performances, and activities like workshops, concerts, and debates. It was announced through the Barbican Art Gallery as well as in local papers and newsletters – together with opening hours.¹³⁷ Barbican Art Gallery wrote, “Exyzt have been working closely with

¹³⁵ Cultural coordinator at the Hackney Council was Lucy McMenemy.

¹³⁶ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹³⁷ http://www.hscf.org.uk/index.php?page=38&event=74#news_4272 Access date: 20/05/2010



Newsletter

Title: HSCF Newsletter 17th July

Consisting of news articles from 10th July 2009 to 16th July 2009

Local Events

Barbican Takes Radical Nature to Hackney

Part of Barbican Art Gallery's current exhibition *Radical Nature – Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009*, the experimental architectural collective EXYZT has created *The Dalston Mill*, turning a disused railway line and waste ground in Dalston into a vibrant rural retreat for the people of the area and beyond.

The fully-functioning, 16 metre mill is accompanied by a 20 metre long wheat field, a restaging of environmental artist Agnes Denes' original 1982 pioneering piece.

Come and participate in one of the events or workshops, from theatre performances and bread-making to pedal-powered music and tea-time talks with artists.

DALSTON MILL EVENTS

Events are free and open to all unless otherwise stated

Capacity is limited to 20–30, on a first come basis

Thu 16–Sat 18 July / 7pm and 8pm

Arcola Academy present: Kontakt

A series of one to one performances between 12 young actors and 12 audience members. Kontakt presents a unique opportunity to have an encounter with someone you've never met before and will never meet again. Tickets £5 available from the Arcola Theatre box office on 020 7503 1646.

Sat 18 July / 3pm

The Dalston Slice – Bread Currency

Come along and bake local currency made of bread, which you can spend only in a small selection of local restaurants, cafes, cinemas and theatres in Dalston. Join artisan baker Dan Lepard and the Collaborator's Guide collective for this unique local event.

Free

Sun 19–Fri 24 July / 3–8pm

Dalton Talking

A series of Urban Psychoanalysis sessions, using a Talking Mill, by the emergency urban psychoanalysis commando unit, UPIA. This investigation into the urban unconscious of Dalston will be the first step in an extensive analysis of the city of London.

Free

Sun 19 July / 3–4.30pm

Feral Trade Tea Service

A talk and tea afternoon with Kate Rich featuring delights such as hand-traded tea from Bangladesh and sweets from Montenegro, accompanied by a travel report tracking these products from their source.

Free

local communities in Hackney to turn a disused site in Dalston into a functioning windmill with which to produce low-voltage electricity and to create flour and bake bread. With a resident baker and a weekend bar, there is also a vibrant programme of events.”¹³⁸ Situated in a densely populated area with crowded streets, people would drop by to relax, interact or to see what

Sun 19 July / 5–10pm

Magnificent Revolution

Pedal-powered music performance by Barbora Patkova. Bring your own iPod to eco-share your favourite tunes.
Free

Mon 20 July / 7pm

Elioth + Encore Heureux

Presentation by the Paris-based engineers and architectural collective who devised Wind-it, a project in which vertical wind generators are used in place of large horizontal windmills. Wind-it presents two solutions: either grafting the generators on to the electrical network or setting up new electricity pylons integrated with a renewable production unit.
Free

Thu 23 July / 2–5pm

Gahu Dramatic Arts

Dalston-based artists, Gahu, in association with the Trinity Centre Summer School and Tenants of the nearby Rhodes Estate, will use the Dalston Mill to create delicious African dishes followed by performances of African dancing, drumming, acrobatics and fire eating.
Free

Fri 24 July / 9pm

Dalton Talking presentation

A lecture about London's unconscious based on the results of recent sessions at The Dalston Mill by UPIA, the emergency urban psychoanalysis commando unit.
Free

Tue 28–Thu 30 July and Mon 3–Wed 5 August / 2–5pm

Hackney Young Careers workshop

A series of creative workshops and events with members of Hackney Young Carers investigating issues surrounding sustainability, the natural world and the *Radical Nature* exhibition at Barbican Art Gallery. The event is closed to the general public.

Sat 1 August / 3pm

Full Dinner Design

Participants in this workshop by Alexander Brenner (www.aalex.info) will be able to design everything from the cutlery to the baking trays which will then be used at a dinner cooked and served that evening.
Free

Sun 2 August / 3–5pm

Cake Decorating workshop

Jagdish Patel from the shop 'Party Party' on Ridley Road will lead a cake decoration masterclass. Participants need to bring their own cake.
Free

Sun 2 August / 6.30pm

EXYZT in Conversation

Nicolas Henninger (EXYZT) and architect/artist Celine Condorelli will discuss 'pirate architecture' as the practice of occupying a site, and how the inhabitation of space is a response to existing conditions.
Free

Thu 6 August / 5pm

muf architecture/art

Value what's there, nurture the possible, define what's missing. What is the role of public space in Dalston's cultural life? An evening of celebration and debate.
Free

Part of Radical Nature: Outdoor commissions

Part of Radical Nature: Schools and families

Part of Radical Nature - Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009

The Dalston Mill

Entrance by the Peace Mural on Dalston Lane, between Ashwin Street and Hartwell Street, E8

Bus: 30, 38, 56, 67, 76, 149, 236, 242, 243, 277

Rail: Dalston Kingsland

[click here for map](#)

¹³⁸ Barbican Art Gallery, "Barbican takes Radical Nature to Hackney, The Dalston Mill, EXYZT & Agnes Denes", <http://barbican.org.uk/radical_nature/exhibition>, accessed 26/05/2010.

was going on. The unexpected 16-metre high windmill announced the place. Occasionally, Exyzt invited people in directly from the street.¹³⁹ The group invited several institutions, associations, and school classes especially, while also offering the space and its facilities to local groups who needed a venue. Children and grown-ups would come back bringing friends, family and neighbours – after two weeks of residency the place was buzzing.



Dalston Mill. Ph. bottom right: Martin Deutsch: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/teflon/3774564781/>

Source: Upper and bottom left: Exyzt /

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157621806933145/>

¹³⁹ Henninger told several stories on how they invited people in: “At the site, there were lots of workers around in this area and they usually sat on a couple of benches on the square outside having a sandwich in their lunch break. So, I told them, “We are opening. Come in and have your lunch break inside. There are some seats.” *Harboe and Henninger, Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger.* The Exyzt members also presented activities to grown-ups or children on the benches outside, “Come, come, we can bake some pizza.” Some kids would come in where they could also make some pizza on their own.” *Harboe and Henninger, Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger.*



Dalston Mill.

Ph. upper right: © Fergus Walker.

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ferguswalker/3842556682/>

Source: upper left and below: Exyzt /

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/svets/72157621806933145/>





Dalston Mill. Source: Exyzt and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157621806933145/>



Nicolas Henninger argued that the four weeks period of residency at *Dalston Mill* in comparison with the *Southwark Lido* that kept open for less than two weeks, seemed very important in order to reach a wider public. During the first period at the *Dalston Mill*, the audience from the art world – artists, architects and the likes – constituted the main group of visitors. Then came other people. Every day, between 400 and 1500 people spent their time here, about 13 500 people through the whole period – most of them from the area. Henninger reported to the *Architectural Review*: “We’ve had so much local support. When I look at the postcodes of the visitors who signed our mailing list, they’re mostly E2 and E8, which I think means that our project has been a success within the local community. We’re interested in creating an interaction between the people and the architecture, in providing amenities on a local level, so it’s fantastic that the people of Dalston have responded to what we’ve done.”¹⁴⁰ Although a temporary project, the Mill seemed grounded in the neighbourhood and the area. This time, Exyzt started earlier and went wider to connect with and engage residents, associations, groups, and enterprises within the local communities. Their collaboration with Muf, holding vast and detailed knowledge on local recourses, assets and needs as well as an extensive network, was very important. Exyzt wanted to reach different segments of the population in the Dalston Ward and the Hackney Borough, and to see them mix at the *Dalston Mill*. As Exyzt hosts their urban spaces, they can invite and involve a diversity of citizens while still maintaining a sense of security for all. This way, they can include a real plurality of people and “promote social cohesion – to mix people”.¹⁴¹ Exyzt consciously uses simple activities of a generic kind, such as grinding, baking and eating, to mention the most basic ones, for different people to meet and interact, seeking to create a really shared space. The activities – often simple acts such as cooking and eating – are thus part of real everyday life that we all share independently of social class. The *Dalston Mill* is constructed and organised as “a multicultural platform of action and exchange, bringing people together across social and cultural separations.”¹⁴² In this sense, the work by Exyzt includes what they designed and built as well as their residency and their work as hosts. All serve as ends to bring people together across social and cultural boundaries, to form a cohesive social atmosphere. It seems that Exyzt and Nicolas Henninger regard their installations and the physical ambience “in the service of other ends”, like Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till concluded for the symposium in Sheffield.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Bennes, “French funster EXYZT brings radical, rural idyll to London’s East End with its windmill and wheatfield.”

¹⁴¹ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁴² Collective Exyzt, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

¹⁴³ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Alternate Currents: An introduction”, *arq - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008.

“The windmill creates a moment of fiction”, Henninger pointed out, conceiving the windmill as a symbolic, historic, and functional structure like the fiction of the Lido on Union Street. The machinery on display initiated conversations, often starting with comments like, “Look here, you can see the gear-box!”¹⁴⁴ The windmill offered opportunities for activities while at the same time serving as a landmark, a fiction, and a piece of conversation. It also opened up discussions on energy supplies and sustainability. “We felt right away that with a windmill you can do things; you can bake and make bread.” Henninger emphasised the importance of the windmill as a “generator” of social relations. “You have a simple activity as a starting point that really makes it possible to engage the community at different levels; to address young people, elderly people, and various types in the community who all have a relationship to baking or just making food.”¹⁴⁵ The windmill, the work as hosts, the design, and the atmosphere of the site were important parts of the *Dalston Mill* as “[a] trans-disciplinary and multicultural platform of action and exchange” demonstrating the “dynamic process based on interaction between people and their environment” which Exyzt earlier stated as the most important part of their projects.¹⁴⁶ Their physical installations make platforms or interfaces where constructions, materials and site create an atmosphere of a *real* place. Although activities and social interactions are highlighted here, it is important to note the emphasis that Exyzt gives to the experience of a physical ambience.

The atmosphere is facilitated organisationally and socially through their particular hosting practice. At the Mill, people met while making pizza in the kitchen, looking at how the graining machine and the windmill were working, or debating the future life in Dalston. From the *Dalston Mill*, Silvia Politio reported, “Yesterday the atmosphere in the Dalston Mill was similar to being in a Sunday countryside party, with a lot of cakes coming out from the bakery, a BBQ, deckchairs, children running through the wheat field and a Brazilian guy playing the Berimabao.”¹⁴⁷ Crystal Bennes from the *Architectural Review* reported from same Sunday that “a local cake-decoration club had taken over the bar area, a cycle repair shop had popped up outside”.¹⁴⁸ Neighbours and local residents initiated events, workshops and activities, and invited others to come and join. DJ and 72-year old Newton Dunbar, leader of the former Four Aces Club, organised music nights and engaged his network of friends at the *Dalston Mill*. When it was

¹⁴⁴ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Collectif Exyzt and translated by Claire Boucher, “Exyzt - Who are we? Constructed Actions or Constructing Action Platforms”, <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

¹⁴⁷ Silvia Politio, “The Dalston Mill - A Windmill Appeared in London”.

<<http://spaceformwords.wordpress.com/category/events/>>, accessed 20/05/2010.

¹⁴⁸ Bennes, “French funster EXYZT brings radical, rural idyll to London’s East End with its windmill and wheatfield.”

time to cut the wheat, local expertise came forward. “Our Kurdish neighbour popped by, very excited,” Henninger explained, “He said his mother knows how to harvest wheat.”¹⁴⁹ Exyzt did have their own cook and baker in the kitchen but during the last couple of weeks, a Dalston woman just took over the kitchen, cooking and baking, while inviting people to join in.

The Dalston area has a mixed population with regard to income, age, ethnicity, and education.¹⁵⁰ Gentrifications and raising property prices contribute to a loss of diversity in the local population as well as in the variety of small institutions, shops, and enterprises. While some residents benefit from the process, it creates major problems for the less affluent, who risk being pushed out. Exyzt and Nicholas Henninger wanted the *Dalston Mill* to provide a platform for addressing these conflictual issues.

It was interesting to see if we could host these different constituencies creating a kind of space where people have a chance to interact. You see in the area the different shops where there are locally grounded people and now these new fancy bars. The new bars are not places where these different groups can interact. They have no points of connection. This kind of abandoned empty site [the *Dalston Mill*] offered an opportunity to start from ‘scratch’, developing it in a certain way so that it is not attached too much to a specific type or range of the population.¹⁵¹

Creating an atmosphere of generosity rather than hostility, Exyzt wanted to make it possible for people of different social and cultural segments to debate these difficult issues, addressing conflicts and problems in an open manner. The next-door 14 floor generic and expensive housing development naturally set an agenda for informal discussions and organised debates, as did the presence of the windmill and its natural power.

To use simple activities, such as cooking and eating, to facilitate social interaction, is a strategy also explored by Raumlabor. As Matthias Rick puts it: “These days, people are more inclined to consider themselves acted upon than active” – a tendency which both Raumlabor and Exyzt seek to counteract.¹⁵² Raumlabor’s prototype *Küchenmonument*, displayed on photos in Chapter two, offers a pneumatic and temporary collective space with a particular ambience as a tool to bring people together and activate urban

¹⁴⁹ Wainwright, “The Smell of Freshly Baked Bread”.

¹⁵⁰ Muf Architecture/Art and J&L Gibbons LLP, “Making Space in Dalston”. As Muf points out, “Dalston follows the *prof-pov* relationship, one of the definitions of a ‘natural cultural district’ where a higher than average proportion of the population has a higher degree and likewise there is a higher than average proportion of the people with no qualifications at all.”

¹⁵¹ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁵² Matthias Rick in Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*, p. 11.

life.¹⁵³ “As an inexpensive “urban generator”, Raumlabor explains, this space immediately produces “city life” anywhere it is placed.”¹⁵⁴ However, while Exyzt works mainly with local interventions, Raumlabor’s practice includes also urban planning projects. For their project in Neustadt Halle, a typical East German satellite town outside the old city of Halle, Raumlabor tested the combination of urban planning and intervention. In this satellite city, the population had shrunk by two-thirds, leaving apartments and buildings empty. Raumlabor suggested a bottom-up strategy of planning, answering to the problem of shrinkage. They introduced a matrix where the monotonous district was split in smaller planning units as a way to develop diversity, naming it the Kolorado Plan.¹⁵⁵ In collaboration with Thalia Theater Halle and the local public authorities, they staged an intervention – a theatre festival. They instigated, planned, designed, and co-built a four-week temporary hotel of 92 beds with an espresso bar on the ground floor in one of the empty slabs, housing much of the festival as well.¹⁵⁶ 100 young people of Halle-Neustadt, many of them unemployed, participated together with artists and actors from all over. The intervention was instigated as an activity node in Halle-Neustadt. “An activity node is a consciously created situation of high activity and intensity bundled in one place for a limited of time. The activity node gathers the actions of various individuals together to create an experience-rich added value. An activity node serves as a laboratory and its temporary transformation of the place of activity is tremendous.”¹⁵⁷ If we use this definition, the *Dalston Mill* is an activity node exemplary situated within the micro-projects plan for Dalston, managed by Muf Architecture|Art. With their intervention, Exyzt contributed precisely what Muf was seeking to develop, namely an intervention that could “inform and enhance the public realm as shared spaces for both residents and visitors”.

Raumlabor’s notion of the activity node provides an argument for short-term interventions such as the *Dalston Mill*. “We like to host and have discussions on site. We have done that since we started building. We like to have discussions where people can see the process and discuss about the future of the space.”¹⁵⁸ Liza Fior from Muf points to the relevance of demonstrating a potential in one to one: “The action allowed for people to picture what the site would be like. We had done few architectural

¹⁵³ At the next Venice Biennale in 2010, titled *People meet in architecture*, Raumlabor was present in the Giardini garden with their *Kitchen Monument*.

¹⁵⁴ Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁵ Their Kolorado Plan for the Halle-Neustadt broke the area down into smaller fields where each could be discussed and developed independently, forwarding a diversification process and opening the planning process for residents. “Kolorado shifts the focus from designing a master plan to a decision-making process; it describes a potential system of communication. Each field of actions is therefore a space of negotiation for the actors.” *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵⁶ Thalia Theater Halle et al. (eds.), *Hotel Neustadt*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2004.

¹⁵⁷ Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*.

¹⁵⁸ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

illustrations but this was a way of making it visible.”¹⁵⁹ Local planners from Hackney came along to have some beers and saw for themselves how such a different approach may develop. Henninger pointed out that planners were often surprisingly open to bottom-up approaches, but they were unaware of what tools could be used and how successful alternative processes might actually be. In this sense, the *Dalston Mill* was a test case. “Here the politicians and planners could see and experience the reaction of the public. They could see who was there, and meet them. These experiences facilitated the debate.”¹⁶⁰ In order for a project to function in this way, their short lifespan is an asset. This way temporality becomes a tool. “The place actually worked as a kind of try out; to see how people really and lively reacted to the space.”¹⁶¹ In their “Making Space in Dalston”, Muf did not only map the area but suggested a series of smaller and very small projects. The *Dalston Mill* supported this plan of projects and interventions as both a test case and an activity node.

More than designing buildings, Exyzt organises situations with particular atmospheres. They build on qualities already present in the local situation, cultivating places, memories and events in the area. They invite local initiatives and encourage activities aiming at creating a playful place where a mix of different groups and individuals come together. Individuals who visit their spaces might sense in them “a different world”, as Henninger describes it, discovering “different rules that people are building up together by inhabiting the space.” The newcomer has to “read the rules: What are we doing here? What is happening here?” It requires the visitor “to commit to the space; to start being part of it. As host, we can facilitate it, when people ask questions or we see people just being there.”¹⁶² Here, Exyzt intends to bridge gaps between people, amending some of the social exclusion and isolation that characterises modern society as well as the diversity and conflicts of Dalston. If anything provokes Henninger, it is the media-created fear for the person next door. Their hosting-strategy is meant to counteract this fear, creating a certain kind of safety, as a sanctuary, where it is possible to engage to some degree with what is unfamiliar, foreign or disturbing. Katin writes: “I find that what Exyzt does is create an environment where anticipation is perpetually interfered by all of the extraordinary moments that constitute living with one another.”¹⁶³

When the *Dalston Mill* closed off after six weeks presence on site, neighbours and visitors regretted the closure, asking for a continuation. So

¹⁵⁹ Lisbet Harboe and Liza Fior, *Interview (07.01.2011) with Liza Fior*, Rotterdam, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

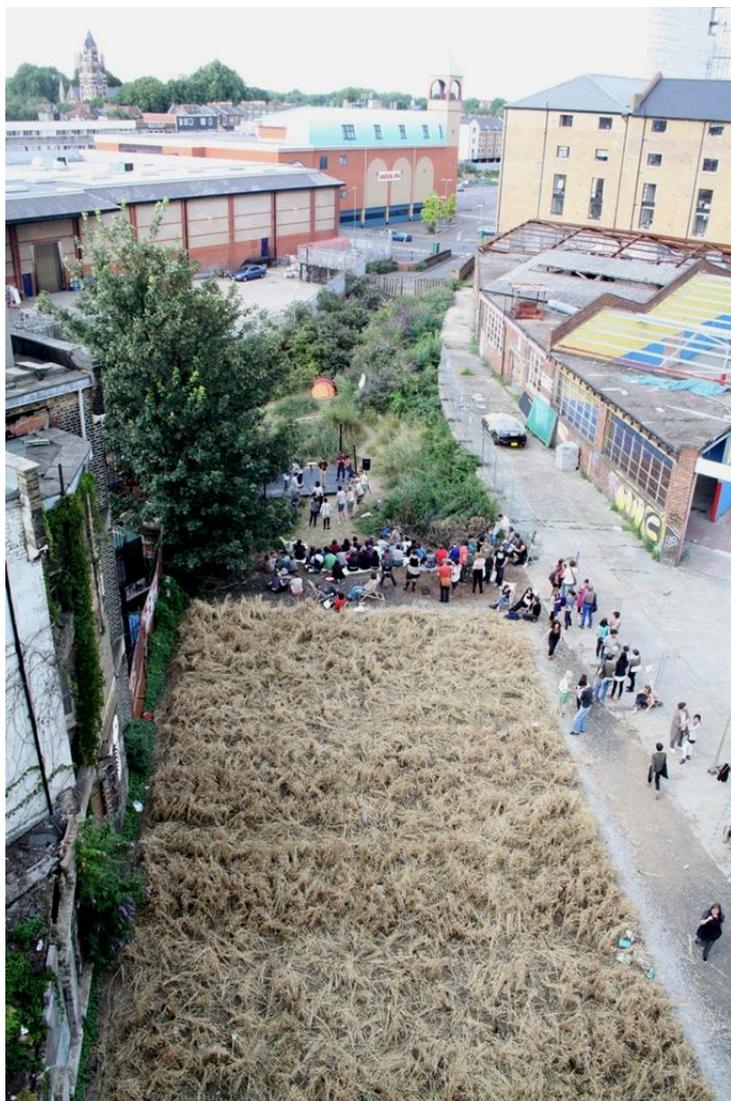
“There was a comment book with about 300 comments. Some people even wrote ‘This is the most amazing project Hackney Council has done so far’. They could see the political feedback coming in.”

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Katin, “The Lido”.

many people from the area had dropped by, used the place, and engaged in actions and interactions. Prompted by this support, Liza Fior from Muf succeeded in locating funding for a follow-up project as a further development of their micro-projects for Dalston.¹⁶⁴



Dalston Mill.

Source: Exyzt / <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157621806933145/>

¹⁶⁴ Muf Architecture/Art and J&L Gibbons LLP, "Making Space in Dalston", p. 17.

Dalston Barn, 2010

The new project at the same site a year after was primarily a common garden for Dalston and Hackney, planned and designed by J&L Gibbons in collaboration with local groups.¹⁶⁵ To work out a built structure in the garden, Muf engaged Nicolas Henninger who defined it as “a kind of add-on to the garden” intending to widen the variety of activities: “If we want to make this space as open as we can for various types of activities to take place, then we need a roof.”¹⁶⁶ The budget was £60,000.¹⁶⁷ This project, *Eastern Curve Garden* and the *Dalston Barn* was planned as a two years project. Henninger planned, designed and guided the construction work at the *Dalston Barn*, without the collective this time, collaborating instead with Thomas Lindner, architect and carpenter.¹⁶⁸ The two organised a residency of three weeks from the opening on the 5th of July 2010. A local steering group would be responsible for its continuation – to take care of the garden, keep the place open for the public, and organise a timetable for the use of the place.

Five gabled roofs on a solid construction of pillars and trusses make up the roof structure of five singular wooden sheds: the *Dalston Barn*. With ten rows of pillars of solid dimensions, the structure is a bit oversized; however, it offers some specific qualities, both during construction, in use, and in its after-life. In terms of use, the idea is for the row of columns to create filters or boundaries. Boundaries making it easier for different groups of people to coexist under the same roof, and for different activities to take place simultaneously. At the same time, these subdivisions retain the openness necessary for larger groups. The solid dimensions can easily carry enclosing materials of transparent, opaque or solid character, and the wood allows for shelves or enclosures to be attached. The construction is bolted together and can easily be demounted so that in the after-life of the *Dalston Barn*, the five sheds can be remounted and reused in different places. Of the five roofs in a row, some are translucent and some opaque. The ground is covered with tarmac except in one bay, containing a wooden floor. Films and projections will be possible under the opaque roof when curtains are installed. In addition, a few small rooms were built along the brick wall by the entrance door to contain a toilet and a little kitchen.

¹⁶⁵ The steering group assembles representatives from local groups, Arcola Theatre, the Open Dalston, the Boot Strap, HCD (Hackney Co-operative Development) and V22 art collective.

¹⁶⁶ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁶⁷ The garden and the barn (£60 000) are funded by Design for London under London Development Agency (LDA) for small projects of redevelopment and embellishment. Funding was directed through the Hackney Council.

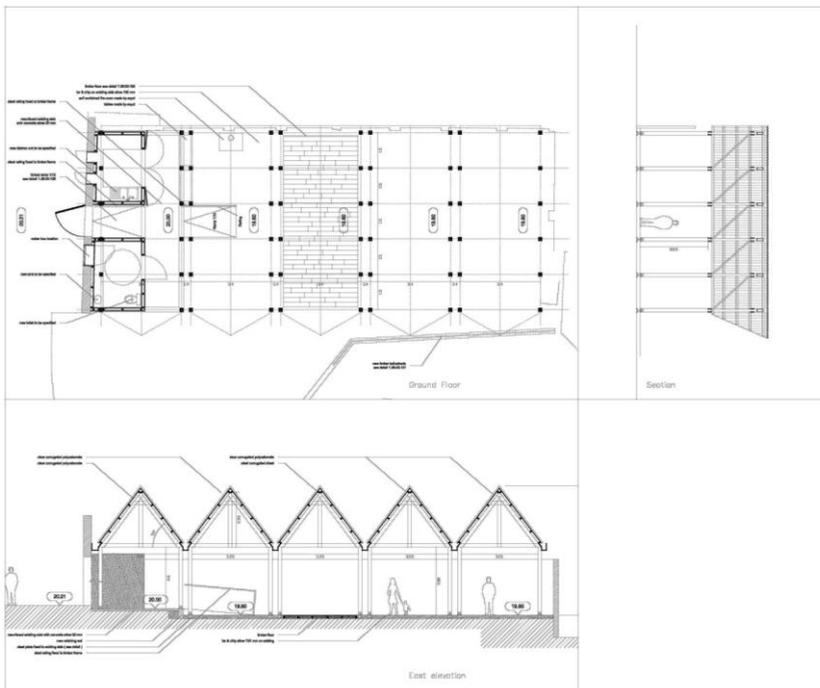
¹⁶⁸ Thomas Lindner run the architectural practice The kindest, <http://www.thekindest.org/>



Dalston Barn. Ph: Author

In their first work, *L'Architecture du Rab*, Exyzt experimented with the flexibility of the scaffolded structure – building and rebuilding. The structure was like a one to one model where ideas and solutions could be tested. Although the *Dalston Barn* was to last longer than most of Exyzt's projects, Heninger drew on the experience and insight gained from the Rab and other

works where members lived on site. At the Barn, possibilities for appropriations, adaptations and additions were built into the structure, allowing the rough beauty of the structure to stand out. These architectural ideas of facilitating appropriation, flexibility and adaptability are not all new; however, Henninger entered the commission from an original angle, using his experience from temporary structures. By living and working on site, Exyzt members have gained much insight – from being users themselves among the other users – from spending much time together with citizens of all kinds while developing the works. “We experience how people respond to it, how it works, and how to adjust in order to get to know the space that we are to be living in.”¹⁶⁹



Dalston Barn – Plan and sections. Source: Exyzt

The initial design of the roof structure was more experimental and did not hold the generic rural resemblance of a barn. However, deciding to include unskilled young men in the construction process, Nicolas Henninger simplified the structure. Six young men from the Forest Road Youth Club with no skills in carpentry were recruited as carpenter apprentices in order to gain work experience. They were divided into two shifts.¹⁷⁰ Henninger was in

¹⁶⁹ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁷⁰ The apprentices were paid well, £8 an hour.

charge of the construction work, collaborating with Lindner and a senior citizen volunteer. In my interviews, Henninger explained the process: “Through their mapping, Muf heard different stories and met different organisations. One of them was the Forest Road Youth Club; a club that deals with young people who are mostly in gangs – most of them are in the Holy Street Gang here. The challenge and the experience this time, I never did it before, was to involve them and to offer them job opportunities and apprentices.”¹⁷¹



Dalston Barn – Apprentices and volunteers at work. Ph. below: Author

Source upper: Exyzt / <http://www.flickr.com/photos/exyzt/sets/72157624606994492/>

¹⁷¹ Nicolas Henninger: “The company building the large new estate above the Dalston Junction Station had promised this youth club work opportunities. That did not happen...” Henninger further explained: “We said we will do it. Okay. We will face this experience. The design idea was to prefabricate the trusses so that people who are not skilled in carpentry, can do the work... The guys could learn from one truss; to see how to build one and then to repeat the movements. This way they became more independent in their work. When foundations were ready, we came to the site and erected the trusses.”¹⁷¹ The apprentices were introduced to traditional building methods and to a construction process easy to read and comprehend. After completing their apprenticeship, they received a final and formal diploma issued by the Hackney Community College. Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

In addition, a few young people came from the Off Centre, a therapeutic youth centre. Their job was to choose colours and paint the smaller rooms. All the volunteers took part in building processes to gain experience, skills, competence and social relations. In this sense, they constituted a particular kind of users, occupying the place ahead of any built completion. To use the construction process as an educational tool was part of both planning and design of the *Dalston Barn*; not so much as processes of participation, but rather work training. This time, as always, the use of the place actually begins from the moment Exyzt enters the site to start construction work. Engaging local youths in such a project may contribute to embed the project in a wider community and give a sense of belonging and ownership – protecting the place from vandalism.

At the construction site of the *Dalston Barn*, it was amazing to see the constant stream of people entering when the door to the street was open. I spent a few days there during the completion of the barn, experiencing the atmosphere of generosity and informality. Some people looked inside for the first time – very often leading to a conversation about the place and the plans. Some came back to chat or to take part in work on site. Henninger and Lindner answered questions and invited people to the opening on June 5th as well as to the weeks of their residency. Those who represented a club, association or institution were asked to explain if and how they might use the place. Henninger or Lindner wrote down names, telephone numbers, wishes and potential activities. The Age Well Program in Hackney, for instance, wanted to use the place for their tai-chi classes. These various groups and organisations represented people of all ages, with or without specific problems. As Henninger added, “There are lots of people with so many ideas. It is amazing... The other day we met someone who is composing with worms. The worms fart and produce a gas. The gas can convert into electricity. That is something! That is crazy.”¹⁷² During Henninger and Lindner’s three-week residency following the opening of the *Dalston Barn*, more people came, presenting their ideas and their wishes for the use of the Barn.¹⁷³ Henninger saw the roof structure as an opportunity to widen the range of activities and uses, imagining the *Dalston Barn* as a playful and active meeting point – a social conjunction, just like the Mill, while facilitating a variety of grassroot groups and fostering an entrepreneurial spirit in Dalston.

The commission of the *Dalston Barn* was not as *Dalston Mill* created on the basis of an art commission. Rather, it was a work of architecture, with all its real constraints. Henninger comments on this change, “When you work on

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Liza Fior from Muf had included a residency in the brief and budget for the barn: “a phase called transition which is before it is handed over.” Harboe and Fior, *Interview (07.01.2011) with Liza Fior*.

an art commission there is nearly no framework; there is a freedom to work in as an artist. In the second phase, with the Barn, it was necessary to deal with a lot of players, clients and contractors.”¹⁷⁴ The work of the *Dalston Barn* was classified as a lasting work of architecture, implying a whole set of laws and regulations, many of which Exyzt had managed to avoid earlier since their works were defined as artworks or short-term works.

At the *Dalston Mill* and the *Dalston Barn*, Exyzt and Nicolas Henninger developed the site, the constructions, the built elements, the programme, and their residency to be “a multicultural platform of action and exchange, bringing people together across social and cultural separations.”¹⁷⁵ In this sense, they certainly see architecture as acting in the service of society, as the Sheffield organisers promoted. Yet looking carefully at Exyzt’s work, it becomes clear that they care deeply about the ambience of their sites, about material authenticity, sensuality, and beauty.¹⁷⁶ While Exyzt certainly follows Schneider and Till’s appeal to address “the social, economic, environmental and political issues of the day”, they pay more attention to aesthetics and tectonics than their Sheffield colleagues.¹⁷⁷ Their informally designed and hosted urban spaces, scaffoldings and board walls inserted into derelict urban contexts may not immediately appear as particularly designed. Tim Abrahams in *Blueprint* even presented Exyzt as a group with “apparently little interest in the aesthetics of the completed structure.”¹⁷⁸ I disagree. They may not be interested in creating finished structures with no room for improvisation, but in their architectural design, built construction, visual performances, graphic design, photos, films, and lightning effects; they are explicitly concerned with how things look and feel.¹⁷⁹ They challenge architectural conventions by integrating various forms of popular culture into their work, yet material beauty and the ambience of place remains essential. Even if their collective and improvised ways of achieving such beauty is rather puzzling, they do not for a second underestimate its importance. Their works and sites offer tactile and bodily experiences involving all senses, while remaining open for continuations.

¹⁷⁴ Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*.

¹⁷⁵ Collective Exyzt, “Exyzt - Who are we?”.

¹⁷⁶ Schneider and Till, “Alternate Currents: An introduction”.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Abrahams, “[Exyzt]”.

¹⁷⁹ Photos and films by Exyzt are distributed on YouTube and Flickr.

4.4 Intervening: The practice of EXYZT

It may be useful to compare Exyzt's interventionist work with the mediating strategies of Fantastic Norway. The collective invites people to enter into an enclosed little world; a different environment and atmosphere. Fantastic Norway, on the contrary, remains within the impurity of the real urban landscape, mostly in low-key post-war towns and unglamorous satellite towns. While Fantastic Norway seeks to encourage and assist enthusiasts in establishing local arenas, Exyzt actually builds and hosts such arenas, taking full multidisciplinary responsibility on site as a way to connect across social groups and encourage further initiatives. These distinctions are emblematic for the difference between mediating and intervening working methods as they are understood in this study.

Looking at Exyzt's interventions, from their diploma project to Dalston Barn, it is interesting to observe how they increasingly take on greater responsibility – albeit in their playful and informal way. Their collaboration with Muf seems to be of particular importance in this process. By intervening, they make the site into what they call a “platform of action and exchange”, like an oasis or a zone of activities and encounters that may reach across cultural differences and population segments.¹⁸⁰ However, intervening in Dalston, Exyzt clearly transgresses the intervention zone in order to connect with surrounding neighbourhoods, searching ways to deal with social challenges in the area. In this way, their work combines intervention with mediation, as well as making.

In works by Exyzt, as by Raumlabor, Feld 72, International Festival and other examples from Berlin and Vienna, temporary interventions become a tool to introduce to people something different and unexpected. Thereby, temporality becomes a way to break free of conventional rules and behavioural patterns. These interventions construct an alternative little world of positive differences, adding to life in the city; however, still intended to interact with the surrounding environment – socially, politically and physically. Exyzt thus hopes that their temporary sites will have longer and more lasting impact on place and people. Tangible and intangible impacts may come out of the works in Dalston, particularly as these works enter into the plan of 78 micro-projects, by Muf Architecture|Art, for the future of Dalston.

Explicating the *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord argues that “[s]pectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very centre that maintains their isolation from one another.”¹⁸¹ The society of the spectacle is one where exchanges are limited to buying and selling, leading to a

¹⁸⁰ EXYZT, “French Team 60 Exyzt (F)”.

¹⁸¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1995, p. 22.

marginalisation of any collectivity. During interviews in the garden of the *Dalston Barn*, Henninger explains that “[t]he cohesion where people can talk to each other and exchange; that is for me relevant to address from the very beginning. I read the city as a consumer society – the society of buying goods and offering services – which is not a collective form. This society addresses the single; everyone is separated from each other.”¹⁸² The collective life, played out on their building sites, where working, living and leisure is not separated, it is in itself a stance against separation. On the other hand, their architecture does not represent a strict and stringent position, such as for instance “ecological”, or “anti-capitalistic”. In Henninger’s view, activism carried out under a regime of ideological purity, is too restricting. It might prevent one from doing anything at all, because nothing passes the test of total correctness.¹⁸³ His insists on a generosity that embraces and includes a wide population, far beyond the crowd of idealistic artists and architects. An ecological and quiet neighbourhood garden may even strengthen, rather than reduce, social separations. Henninger and Exyzt are interested in issues of sustainability, reuse and ecology, but seek to balance these issues with the wish to welcome a people from different segments, not only well-educated, oppositional, idealistic minds.¹⁸⁴ Exyzt combines an idealistic view with a pragmatic approach – guided by their aim to reach a wide range of people. They seek to construct alternative situations that are good, though not – from the perspective of a unified overarching theory – perfect.

Exyzt and Nicolas Henninger want to continue to work on temporary interventions; to build islands or “new worlds” as alternatives to a city characterised by consumerism, representation and separation. “I am still quite interested in doing what we are doing now but I am not sure it is sustainable for us in the future; to always act.”¹⁸⁵ However, many weeks on site away from home have become more challenging as members grow older and establish families. Nicolas Henninger and Exyzt look for ways to continue their line of work without adhering to a lifestyle of nomads. How can they develop a professional future while continue their explorations in making and develop further their special kind of informal and shared urban spaces where people are brought into proximity with one another and the place? How can they further develop the complexity of their work?

¹⁸² Harboe and Henninger, *Interviews (16.06, 18.06, and 19.06.2010) with Nicolas Henninger*, p. 21.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ In Henninger’s view, Exyzt have done works that go more in the direction of spectacles such as the *Space Station S.E.T.* at the *eme 3* festival in Barcelona 2005 and the *Metaville* at the French Pavilion during the Venice Biennale 2006. However, these projects still had a lot to offer, Henninger argues, and when Exyzt lives on site they can modulate the more spectacular aspects and use them as means to activate. The balance of idealism against the threat of making a spectacle is part of the discussions in Exyzt. Henninger refers how somebody might argue, “Oh, come on! I don’t agree with that idea – it is too much of a spectacle.”

Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

We are working for ourselves. We are the architects and the clients at the same time. In a way, we define the programme. Working for arts institutions, architectural events, and cultural institutions, we play a double role. In the end when we deliver the project, we live in it; we host the public, making the project alive. To make it more sustainable in the future we would like to share the vision. Like for example ... to first find or identify a group of people or an association of individuals who wants to embody a vision, to work with some needs of the city, or develop a programme.¹⁸⁶

Henninger want to test out interventions that last longer and are more embedded in the local area. Locating enthusiasts and groups to ally with is an option where a group of local people host the public. These changes would not only root the project locally but also create less travel for the Exyzt members. It may also be a way of securing a steady income for Nicolas Henninger and the other full-time members of the collective.

Next, and along the same line, Henninger would like to access funds for urban planning and public space rather than depending on festivals and art funds. In 2011, Exyzt entered for the first time a competition. *Meanwhile London*, organised by Mayor of London and Newham Council, asked for a temporary programme starting in 2011 and lasting through 2012. Exyzt joined forces with a range of partners and local groups to suggest social space developments and employment opportunities, choosing an area by the Canning Town station. They won the competition.¹⁸⁷ This large 2 years intervention contains a broad programme of public spaces, events, workshops, incubations of small local businesses, and so on, developed in collaboration with the neighbourhood. In such a project, Exyzt will not live on site all through, making it easier to combine with other commitments. The project, then, seems to offer one way of developing a sustainable practice in practical and economical terms. The competition also demonstrates how temporary urban projects gradually become part of general urban planning, not regarded just activist projects and artsy alternatives.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ The groups collaborating on the project is: "EXYZT & Sara Muzio /// Space Makers /// Ash Sakula /// The Kindest Group /// Community Links /// Just Add Tea /// Technology Will Save Us /// Wayward Plant Registry /// Atmos Studio /// A Way Of Life /// David Barrie Associates".

5 Lacaton & Vassal Architectes

Lacaton & Vassal Architectes are included in this study, not due to any grand proclamations of social or political engagement, but because they have displayed a persistent if implicit social concern through their architectural works and ideas. Another obvious reason for the inclusion of Lacaton & Vassal is their contribution at the exhibition in Venice 2008 of a self-initiated argumentation on social housing policies: *+Plus*.

5.1 *Latapie House, 1992-1993, and the Houses in Mulhouse, 2001-2005: “reality and the extraordinary... must be worked on in parallel”*¹

In the autumn of 2009 Anne Lacaton taught at a studio course at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design. The studio crits offered valuable opportunities to understand Lacaton & Vassal’s ideas and ways of working. Concluding the last student review, Lacaton encouraged the students, as I interpreted her, to always aim at combining reality with the extraordinary. When I afterwards asked her to comment and elaborate on this statement, Lacaton corrected me:

It’s not a question of combining reality and the extraordinary. This is a question that must be worked on in parallel. It means that reality is not a principle of security, of minimum risk, or reducing the intentions and ambitions. ... The extraordinary is an ambition that has to do with wellbeing, with pleasure, with the functioning, with everything that you expect from the quality of space or an urban organisation. So it means that the higher your ambitions are, the more you have to be realistic in

¹ Lisbet Harboe and Anne Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*, Oslo, 2009.

the way you develop the idea. Because if you set your ambitions very high, it means that you have to solve more problems and more difficult questions. If you don't take care to solve these questions properly, your idea will not be accepted. This is what it entails to work in parallel.²

The main principles guiding the architectural works of Lacaton & Vassal can be said to have been developed through the planning and building of *Latapie House* in 1992 and 1993. The request from the client was a spacious house for a family of four at the outskirts of Bordeaux within a very limited budget. Their ambition was not to create a little bit more space, but a lot more – as much as possible – the double! And in fact, the double of the floor space normally achieved for the available sum, was realised without adding to the budget. In order to make an extraordinary place to live within a modest budget, the architects' strategy was one of strict and meticulous realism.

Latapie House in Floirac, Bordeaux, France
 Surface area: 185m²
 Cost: €55,275 excl. tax
 Built: 1993
 Design team: Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with
 Sylvia Menaud³

A more just distribution of architectural qualities and comfortable housing are overriding concerns for Lacaton & Vassal. They often take on commissions with minimal budgets, and pursue these concerns throughout the planning and construction process. Their main idea for the *Latapie House* was to develop a house consisting of two components. The primary volume comprises a two storey house along the street and includes the programmatic necessities for a single family house; bedrooms, bath, kitchen and living room. This part is insulated and heated. The second volume is made up by one large space all covered with corrugated polycarbonate like a greenhouse. The two storey house opens onto the polycarbonate conservatory, which again opens onto the garden. In a street of simple single-family houses, the *Latapie House* has a modest expression with its two floors of corrugated fibre-cement sheeting, appearing behind greeneries along the street. The shutters of fibre-cement cover a sheeting of plywood on the first volume of a two storey house, appearing as if it is made of wood with a distinct materiality that adds firmness and a warm glow, contrasting the sheets of polycarbonate. The simple and high ceiled conservatory makes up a space at

² Ibid.

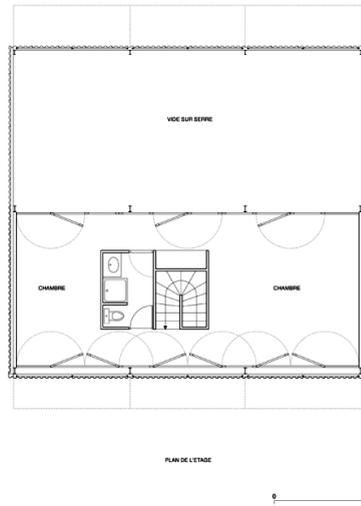
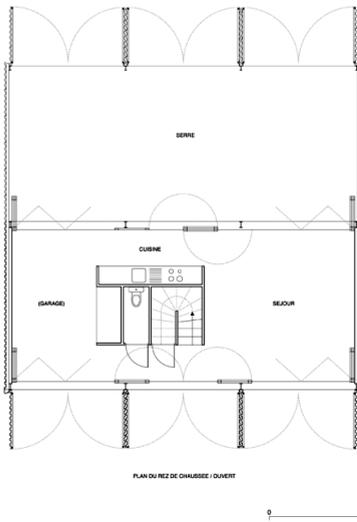
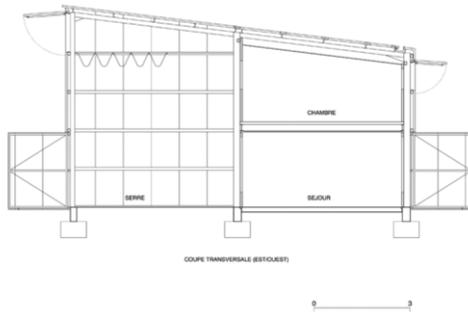
³ Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. Barcelona: G. Gili, 2007, p. 27.

the same time enclosed and open to the outside. The light inside offers a white sparkling radiation like an open ocean landscape on a half cloudy day. Considering the cheapness of the conservatory; a simple steel construction covered by polycarbonate, with ordinary concrete tiles on the ground, I was struck by its spatial qualities – the light and the liveliness, the way it was filled with things of everyday life.⁴



Latapie House. Ph: Lacaton & Vassal. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com.

⁴ Dietmar Steiner, "Lacaton & Vassal: 6 Months - Two days - Two Years", *Architektur.Aktuell*, 230-231, 1999, p. 61.



Latapie House: Section, plans and facades. Ph: Philippe Ruault. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com

The conservatory was planned as a winter garden but the architects report that the space is in full use ten months of the year. Even in the winter months, this conservatory is used on sunny days.⁵ It provides additional space as well as qualities; abundances of daylight and a space with no specific functions designated. “The house’s living space can vary according to the seasons, from the smallest (living room – bedrooms) to the largest when it includes the greenhouse and the whole garden in the summer depending on the temperature, the sun and the rain.”⁶ Generosity of space, a favourite expression by Lacaton & Vassal, is not only a question of double space but about the added richness and complexity of spatial qualities and sensations, and about offering an undesignated space where a range of actions may take place. Freedom of choice is emphasised; the house may “evolve from completely closed to wide open according to needs and desires for light, transparency, privacy, protection and ventilation.”⁷ For *Latapie House* the objective was clear: “a maximum of space had to be provided for the greatest freedom of use, and this through a rationality, an efficiency and a simplicity managed with imagination, precision and obstinacy.”⁸

Lacaton & Vassal present the planning process as a story on how to reduce costs. Their challenge was to find out “how to provide the largest space possible (not 10% more but double or triple). To succeed, we had to radically discard every point of reference and fight against the rules, norms, systems.”⁹ Achieving the minimum budget was worked on in parallel with achieving extraordinary spatial qualities, looking at everything several times, scrutinizing every choice and step in the process. The project went through several stages of simplification; however, as Lacaton & Vassal tell the story, the costs still exceeded the client’s budget, and the structural engineer was consulted again. The solution came by challenging ingrained notions of aesthetic purity: “Why use the same H profile everywhere? The solution: don’t think of Mies van der Rohe any longer and use the most logical element for each room, without any aesthetic concerns.”¹⁰ By using the optimal profiles for each part of the construction, the weight of the structural frame went from 13 to 8 tons which meant, given the steel price at the time, saving 50,000 francs, bringing the project within the budget.¹¹ Seeking to save cost, then, the architects let go of any preconceived aesthetic coherence in the structure. Uniform Mies’ian H-profiles were substituted with steel girders of

⁵ This information was confirmed by the owner.

⁶ Anne Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, ed. Cité de l’architecture & patrimoine / Institut français d’architecture, Orléans: Éditions HXX, 2009, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

various profiles. Pursuing cost-efficiency on minimal budgets, details become unavoidably very important whereas all aspects have to be inspected and evaluated. We look for good details, says Anne Lacaton, using the term good, not aesthetic or beautiful. For their detailing, they emphasise several aspects, such as practical conditions on the construction site, costs, durability, maintenance, ability to accommodate changes, the look of the detail, and its importance in the whole. These aspects are treated in an integrated manner.¹² By and through their planning of the *Latapie House*, Lacaton & Vassal developed “the principle of a double space, [both] classic and non-assigned, which provides for maximum freedom of usage.”¹³ As they say, the *Latapie House* “opened the way” and became the starting point for their explorations of how to work in parallel with the realistic and the extraordinary: how to pursue both dimension through built work.¹⁴

Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal state that their architectural practice develops through the production of specific projects and concrete works of which the *Latapie House* marks an outset. The two both graduated with diplomas from l’Ecole d’architecture de Bordeaux in 1980.¹⁵ Jean-Philippe Vassal worked as architect and urbanist in Niger from 1980 till 1985, and Lacaton visited. She gained a post-graduate master in urbanism (DESS d’urbanisme 1984), collaborated with Arc-en-Rêve Centre d’architecture in Bordeaux and worked with Jacques Hondelatte at his office in Bordeaux. The hut which Jean-Philippe Vassal built for himself in Niger, *House in Niamey*, and the *Cotlenka House* from the office of Jacques Hondelatte, were on the project list of Lacaton and Vassal at their exhibition in Cité de l’architecture & patrimoine in Paris 2009.¹⁶ I will not go into these early projects, but instead analyse their first social housing project, the *Houses in Mulhouse*.

¹² Lisbet Harboe and Anne Lacaton, *Interview (14.09.2007) with Anne Lacaton in Trondheim*, Trondheim, 2007.

¹³ Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Anne Lacaton is born 1955 in France and Jean-Philippe 1954 in Casablanca, Morocco.

¹⁶ *House in Niamey*, Niger, 1984.

Cotlenka House, Bordeaux, 1988-1990. Architects: Jacques Hondelatte, Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal.

Houses in Mulhouse, 2001-2005

The *Houses of Mulhouse* is part of a social housing development in the city of Mulhouse, organised by the housing cooperation SOMCO. Lacaton & Vassal Architectes were one of five teams on this site and was commissioned to build 14 of total of 61 rental units. Four of the themes were suggested by the fifth, Jean Nouvel, who prepared the overall plan.

Houses in Mulhouse, Îlot Schoette, Mulhouse, France.

Client: SOMCO, Mulhouse. Surface area: 2,262 excl. tax

Cost: €1.05M

Designed: 2001-2002

Built: 2002-2005

Design team: Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with David Pradel, David Duchein

Surface area by type of apartment: T5 (195 m²), T4 (175 m²), T3 (128 m²), T2 (102 m²)¹⁷

The Mulhouse commissionaire wanted suggestions on how good quality dwellings could be constructed within social housing budgets. The architects were free to choose typology, volume, internal layout, and materials, but the distribution of different apartment types according to the norm of T2, T3, T4 and T5, an official French norm precisely defining number of rooms and square metres, was preordained. The commission still gave Lacaton & Vassal an opportunity to continue on ideas and principles which they had explored in their single family houses, first in the *Latapie House*.¹⁸ They looked for the most efficient combination of different constructions and materials to optimise qualities in these living environments, making “an open-plan floor space and maximum volume that have contrasting, complementary and surprising spatial qualities”, while at the same time keeping within strict budgets.¹⁹ Lacaton & Vassal continued to explore what it meant to work with the extraordinary in parallel with real conditions – to develop abundances of spatial qualities within social housing budgets. In order to keep the cost down, they chose to use prefabricated industrial greenhouses. Constituent parts of the greenhouses could not be altered, and as a consequence, the greenhouses were placed on the first floor. The two floors were thus built by different construction systems and materials. The ground floor was

¹⁷ Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 48.

¹⁸ *S/S House* in Coutras, Gironda, France, consists of two adjacent greenhouses, one greenhouse which is insulated and one to be used as a winter garden. Surface area: 290 m² Cost: €64,800 excl. tax. Built: 2000 Design team: Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with Emmanuelle Delage, Christophe Hutin, Sylvain Menaud.

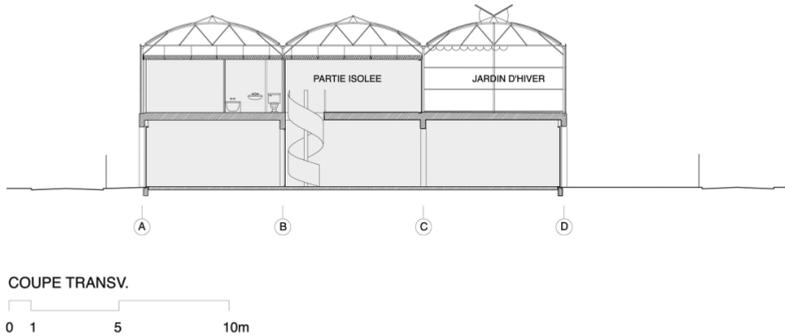
¹⁹ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 99.

constructed of prefabricated, reinforced concrete with façades of sliding glass panels. The greenhouse constructions are in galvanized steel covered with transparent polycarbonate. Two-third of the greenhouse is insulated and heated, while one-third serves as winter gardens or conservatories like the one at *Latapie House*. Sliding sheets open to the outside and sliding windows connect to the insulated interior. In the *Houses of Mulhouse*, the architects not only doubled the space within the original budget but expanded greatly the richness and complexity of spatial qualities. The building is divided into 14 duplexes, including in each dwelling the qualities from both floors. In these plans, living rooms were to be no less than six metres wide; other rooms would have a minimum width of three metres. Each garage was planned and built so that it could later on be integrated into the dwelling. The average cost per square metre floor area (without taxes) for each dwelling was €475, including winter garden and two bathrooms.²⁰



Houses in Mulhouse – Plans: Ground floor and first floor. The area of one colour show the floor area of one apartment. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com

²⁰ Dominique Boudet, "'Cité Manifeste', Social Housing Project in Mulhouse, France", *Architektur.Aktuell*, 3, 2006.



Houses in Mulhouse – Cross section. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com

With Mulhouse, Lacaton & Vassal not only faced a reality of small budgets, but also a set of detailed laws, regulations and prescriptions. The project offered an opportunity to challenge standards of French social housing, starting with the strict definitions of apartments' number of rooms and square metres. An official T2 has a standard size of 45 m² apartment and includes a living room and a bedroom. Lacaton & Vassal expanded the T2 to 62 m² regular square metres, growing to 102 m² when including winter garden and garage. A normal T3 includes a living room and two bedrooms at a standard size of 65 m². The T3s of Lacaton & Vassal were 150 m², winter garden and garage included; 103 m² without. For a T4 the standard is 80m², while the architects here built the T4 to be 187 m² with all spaces included, and 127 m² of insulated square metres.

In Lacaton & Vassal's work, sustainability is also treated in an integrated manner considering built, human and social aspects combined - in which insulation and climatic indoor conditions become negotiable entities. Thus their planning easily leads to solutions outside specific building regulations. "We regard sustainability as something that has to do with the quality of life, not just with figures. Should the north face of a building be kept closed, for example, if there's a wonderful view on that side?"²¹ Adhering to intentions of energy saving and human comfort rather than to specific building regulations, Lacaton & Vassal aim to take all dimensions into consideration at the same time. The architects use winter gardens as sun heat collector and apply manually operated thermal curtains as additional insulation. The depth of these apartments contributes to their coolness in the summer, and the industrial thermal systems for greenhouses allow for efficient temperature control and adjustments – both automatic and manual. The duplexes comprise a richness of spaces and sensations, changing with the weather, the

²¹ Dietmar Steiner, "6 Monate - zwei tage - zwei Jahre", *Architektur.Aktuell*, Vol 230-231, 1999, p. 316.

time of day and the season, and with the opening and closing of curtains and façade elements. The priority given to individual choice is certainly not included in building regulations, but is a quality strongly emphasised by Lacaton & Vassal. The inhabitants quickly learnt, the architects said, to make use of the climatic functioning of the house, profiting fully from the green house's capacity to collect heat.²² However, prescriptive building regulations make these integrations very difficult to implement, thereby requiring persistence, Lacaton & Vassal point out, forcing them to provide documentation and arguments that can challenge norms and conventions. This is yet another example how these architects explore optimal combinations, working in parallel with reality and the extraordinary. To constantly challenge the regulations has become part of Lacaton & Vassal's work: "It should be possible to help formulate building regulations."²³



Houses in Mulhouse. Ph: Philippe Ruault. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes

Speaking about their work, Lacaton & Vassal use terms such as comfort, pleasure, and luxury: "The optimization of high-performance construction systems is the key to the efficiency to succeed in producing generous spaces offering the greatest use capacity. The idea of luxury is therefore redefined in terms of generosity, freedom of use and pleasure."²⁴ Luxury, here, is certainly

²² Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 138.

²³ Steiner, "6 Monate - zwei tage - zwei Jahre", p. 316.

²⁴ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 20.

not understood as marble, ivory or elaborated aesthetic details. Rather, it relates to qualities in regard to comfort, sensations, appropriations, and freedom of actions which enrich and expand the quality of life. In dialogue with students in Oslo, Anne Lacaton emphasised the importance of looking firstly for the qualities of life when exploring the programme of their projects. Not only profound ones but also superficial ones, simple pleasures, as Lacaton spoke about in my interview.²⁵ Lacaton & Vassal's concepts of comfort, pleasure, luxury, and freedom of use, emphasise qualities of life where concrete architectural works may contribute.

Lacaton & Vassal have developed a precise and accurate vocabulary based on everyday language rather the specialist jargon. This vocabulary helps them to keep track of their aspirations and avoid conventions embedded in professional parlance. "The way we go out of the conventional words is the same route as we took some years ago to go out of the conventional architecture."²⁶ Their unconventional approach also applies to the notion of beauty, which they give a very particular significance: "Buildings are beautiful when people feel good in them, when light is beautiful in them, and the air pleasant, when exchange with the outside seems easy and gentle, when life is simple in them, uses and sensations unexpected."²⁷ All these different qualities within the built are regarded from the viewpoint of everyday users, looking at the life qualities offered by buildings and always adding the generosity of something extraordinary. The extraordinary, is often, in their works, about abundances and unexpected qualities. "Building double" is such a strategy, to create unexpected abundances of spatial richness, light and floor areas. The architects play with abundance and the unexpected in many ways, such as the rose-covered facades of the *University Centre of Management Sciences* in Bordeaux, the pine trees growing through the *D/D House* in Lége-Cap-Ferret, or the giant sculptured woman in bikini penetrating all floors in the competition entry for the Architecture Foundation in London. The parallel reality is achieved in constant negotiation with limited budgets, laws and regulations, and conventions.

The works of Lacaton & Vassal challenge ideals of minimum solutions. As social housing project, the *Houses in Mulhouse* is a particularly relevant example. Lacaton & Vassal state that social housing projects most often consist of a minutely prescriptions of rooms and plans restricted by a rigid framework of minimum floor spaces. The regulations perpetuate a traditional housing model based on the concept of minimum housing. Lacaton & Vassal oppose this way of thinking vehemently. "Our approach is based on a

²⁵ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Lacaton & Vassal do not define the terms they use but rely on or take advantage of their meaning in common use.

²⁷ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 96.

constant concern for the quality of inhabiting and the certainty that new living spaces that are more open and spacious must be invented, as the standard type and the minimum surface, a half century old and still in use, absolutely do not meet contemporary needs and lifestyles any longer.”²⁸ Even with a minimum budget, they have proved that minimum housing is not the only option. “Our objective is to produce quality housing that is, at equal cost, much larger than the usual dwellings that follow the norms.”²⁹ Lacaton & Vassal add to this statement that “cost-effectiveness isn’t the principle of less, of minimum and of reduction, rather it contributes to clarify what to maximise ...”³⁰

The idea of the minimum invites some historical comments. At the CIAM Congress in Frankfurt 1929 Ernst May, visionary head of the department of housing and city planning in Frankfurt from 1925, introduced a new theme as the principle one for the congress as an aim to build cheap but decent dwellings: *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*. In the publication of *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*, May accentuated the importance of constructing minimal dwellings for the poorest wage-earners to solve extensive housing problems. He and his associates in Frankfurt tried to prevent economic requirements from being the determining factor, looking to develop a minimum dwelling based on “biological” rather than economical requirements to satisfy “the material and mental needs of their occupants at a bearable rent.”³¹ These “biological” conditions in the planning of minimum dwellings, based on projections regarding the potential residents, were held high at the 1929 CIAM Congress. In talks given by Siegfried Giedion and Le Corbusier, however, the focus shifted slightly, with more attention given to the tectonic and visual strategies for modern architecture.³² Eric Mumford argues in *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* that Giedion’s perspective became the prevailing one as architectural modernism evolved. The English translation of Gropius’ paper “Die soziologischen Grundlagen der Minimalwohnung für die Städtische Bevölkerung” provides an insight into CIAMs ideals of the minimum dwelling:

²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

³⁰ Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 130.

³¹ Ernst May, “The Dwelling for the Living Income Earner”, *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum auf Grund der Ergebnisse des 2. Internationalen Kongresses für neues Bauen, sowie der vom Städtischen Hochbauamt in Frankfurt am Main veranstalteten Wander-Ausstellung* 3. Aufl. edn., Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann Verlag, 1933, p. 7. In addition to lectures, discussions, and tours to visit the new Frankfurt housing settlements during the CIAM meeting, the hosts in Frankfurt, Ernst May and his associates, prepared the exhibition *The Minimum Dwelling Unit*. The exhibition displaying same-scale plans from twenty-six European cities and the United States. These plans of dwelling units were presented together with the costs of the units given in relation to local wage levels. Names of architects were not stated. Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000.

³² Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, p. 34.

... the program for a minimum dwelling can naturally not be solved by simply reducing the conventional, larger apartment in number of rooms and effective area. An entirely new formulation is required, based on a knowledge of the natural and sociological minimum requirements, unobscured by the veil of traditionally imagined historical needs. ... Von Drigalski, Paul Vogler and other hygienists observe that, given good conditions of ventilation and sunlight, man's requirements of living space from the biological viewpoint are very small, particularly if the space is correctly organized for efficiency; ... Just as it was formerly customary to overestimate the value of food calories in comparison with that of vitamins, many people nowadays erroneously regard larger rooms and larger apartments as the desirable aim in dwelling design.³³

In this context, the task for experts and architects was to find the natural and biological minimum requirements to be implemented in the dwelling, thereby developing a dwelling based on a rational and efficient ideal. In Frankfurt, under Ernst May, on the contrary, the minimum dwelling was supplemented from outside, with common facilities and collective solutions. In the Siedlungen, May placed great emphasis on outdoor areas, public spaces and common amenities.

Social conditions, ways of living, and material standards have radically changed since 1929, yet the concept of minimum housing remains a prevailing idea whenever low-income groups are to be housed. In modernist and contemporary social housing, the principle of the minimum does not include May's emphasis on common facilities but is rather turned into a reductive logic, perpetuating a functional and spatial minimum as much as an economic one. Lacaton & Vassal may be said to have much in common with Ernst May, not least his viewpoint on the user and his emphasis on "satisfying material and mental needs of their occupants at a bearable rent". What they do not share, however, is the one-sided emphasis of rationality and reduction. Criticism of minimum housing is not new. An early opposition against *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* came from the Team 10 members. In his manifesto "Architecture's Public", Giancarlo de Carlo, for instance, strongly resented the ideal of the minimum, suggesting a different approach which would include participation from users and residents. He did not, however, specify how these radical changes would come about in detail.³⁴ Lacaton & Vassal's critique has nothing manifesto-like to it, but is

³³ Walter Gropius, *Scope of Total Architecture*, New York: Collier, 1962, p. 98.

³⁴ Giancarlo de Carlo, "Architecture's Public", *Parametro*, 1971.

rather a meticulous and concrete attempt at maximizing rather than minimizing architectural space and its qualities.

One could argue that the strategy of cost-reduction used by Lacaton & Vassal to maximise spatial qualities, could equally well be used to produce even more minimum dwellings, just as *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* was interlinked with an emphasis and development of common qualities, which did not, in the end, attract the same attention and future influence. There is always some risk that the principle of double space by Lacaton & Vassal could follow the pattern of the principle for minimum dwellings by Ernst May and his companions. If housing associations and developers were to reduce their budgets according to the square metre price offered by Lacaton & Vassal, leaving out the additional and extraordinary qualities that these architects include in their architecture, housing conditions would deteriorate even more. Lacaton & Vassal have received critique in France on this count. Cost reductions by Lacaton & Vassal benefit residents, but the danger is, if badly copied, that the surplus would fall to developers or housing authorities. The critique illustrates the double edge of architectural inventions and the risks involved in demonstrating where money can be saved within the framework of laws and regulations. While not blind to these challenges, Lacaton & Vassal head in a different direction, pursuing a knock-on effect and seeking to create double space, comfort and luxury.

“To work in parallel with reality and the extraordinary” is a phrase which equally well could have been used by the “fresh conservatives” as Roemer van Toorn has named them. To achieve extraordinary qualities within ordinary budgets demands meticulous and realistic planning, an approach Lacaton & Vassal share with the inventive super-pragmatism of contemporary Dutch architecture. Yet while the “fresh conservatives” take a relativistic position towards a more just distribution of architectural qualities, the radical realism of Lacaton & Vassal is informed by a distinct social stand where they deliberately seek to explore minimal budgets in order to make space for something extra. They never refer to any of the Dutch practices or to Rem Koolhaas, but rather to African self-building, demanding inventiveness and a make-do attitude while using whatever is at hand. Anne Lacaton describes this African inspiration:

There’s a very modern quality in the attitude of people. First of all, because history doesn’t weigh down on them, and doesn’t dictate to them that what’s in keeping should or shouldn’t be done, what’s good and bad. Secondly, due to this way of taking what’s required from wherever, of thereby bringing together, for example, extremely rudimentary materials (a tent made of old scraps of cloth) and objects from the latest technology,

such as the newest Japanese beatbox. They have an enormous capacity for organization, and corresponding lack of bias.³⁵

The five years Jean-Philippe Vassal spent working in Niger on a development scheme, he experienced a highly inventive pragmatism with respect to efficiency and recycling, providing the architects with important knowledge. Comparing with their Dutch contemporaries, Andreas and Ilke Ruby point out that Lacaton & Vassal are not interested in the formal, conceptual or structural provocations – so present in for instance OMA's Bordeaux villa – not far from the *Latapie House*. Instead of courting star engineers such as Cecil Balmont or Ove Arup, Lacaton & Vassal treat their constructions with a strict and pragmatic cost-efficiency, most often reusing structural systems from project after project, such as early demonstrated in the *Houses of Mulhouse*. Here, cost-efficiency is not only a guiding principle in the choice of materials and constructions, but also a planning method. Speaking of pragmatism in connection with Lacaton & Vassal, therefore, it should be taken in a highly practical sense.

Lacaton & Vassal recycle solutions from project to project and from case to case, using plans, structural systems, building elements, and technical research, over again. In 2010 and 2011, they reused the structural and spatial solutions from Mulhouse in the French town of Trignac, building two similar houses there. While they start from scratch in approaching the specific situation, their accumulated bank of elements also contributes to economise their working hours. Three structural systems can be recognised in several of their works: the prefabricated concrete structure, the lightweight steel structure, and the greenhouse structure. In some projects you may find all three. The very same construction system is used to establish highly different environments and sensations such as the sleek, prefabricated concrete structure at the *Nantes Architecture School*, which as storerooms for the *Serralves Foundation* in Portugal is planned to be completely overgrown, lush and green.³⁶ Not only do they repeat their own elements, they also borrow from other architects, such as the apartments plan for *Lake Shore Drive Apartments* in Chicago by Mies van der Rohe (1948) and the interiors of the *Case Study Houses* in United States (1945-1966).

Lacaton & Vassal's pursuit of abundance, generosity, and the extraordinary is not limited to housing, but their dwellings constitute important testing grounds. This is where "a maximum of space had to be provided for the greatest freedom of use, and this through a rationality, an efficiency and a simplicity managed with imagination, precision and

³⁵ Anna Lacaton: Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. p. 133.

³⁶ Competition entry for *Storerooms of the Serralves Foundation*, Matosinhos, Portugal, 2009.

obstinacy” says Lacaton.³⁷ They always aim for the extraordinary in the form of abundances of space and light, far beyond what could be expected within a limited budget. They also pursue unexpected qualities that can be shared by all – such as flowers along the exterior walls of an office building. What they imagine is freedom of use and luxury, not defined by expensive materials, but by the qualities that are the most wanted and appreciated. To realise this, “reality and the extraordinary... must be worked in parallel”.³⁸

Reality and imagination is precisely what Emiliano Gandolfi caught on to in his essay for the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition in Venice 2008, reviewing the architectural practices at the exhibition: utopia and the imagination of alternatives emerge out of reality. With Lacaton & Vassal’s thorough explorations of minimal budgets, managing to make something extraordinary out of them, the architects do, in an overall sense, contribute to a more equal society. They are not challenging economic or societal order; budgets are accepted as given, but they research what can be provided within the given, economic frames, pushing the reality of housing regulations and conventions. In the *Houses of Mulhouse* and the *Latapie house*, Lacaton & Vassal give priority to those qualities which most directly affect people in their everyday life, at the expense of architectural and aesthetic conventions. Doing that, they maximise qualities within very minimal budgets and contribute to a more just distribution of architectural qualities.

We have already seen that Lacaton & Vassal are as economical and hard-prioritising in the built as they are in their working methods. They value the dream and the building, Vassal has said, while models and drawings – much fetishised in contemporary architectural culture – are systematically downplayed in their production.³⁹ No models are used in the office studio of Lacaton & Vassal. “In this way,” Jean-Pierre Vassal concluded in a conversation published in *Oase*, “I hope to avoid the creation of a self-existing, ‘sculptural’ piece of art and I want to establish an architectural disposition that will support domestic space and daily life. In this dispositive an artistic approach is absolutely not absent”.⁴⁰ This position is demonstrated by their choice of material when they present their projects. They show photos of the buildings in use, and photomontages of the physical frameworks with people in activity for the projects not yet built. In addition, they show only simple plans and sections of buildings. The Cité de l’architecture & patrimoine in Paris is a place where objects from architectural production, models and drawings, are the centre of attention. At

³⁷ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 22.

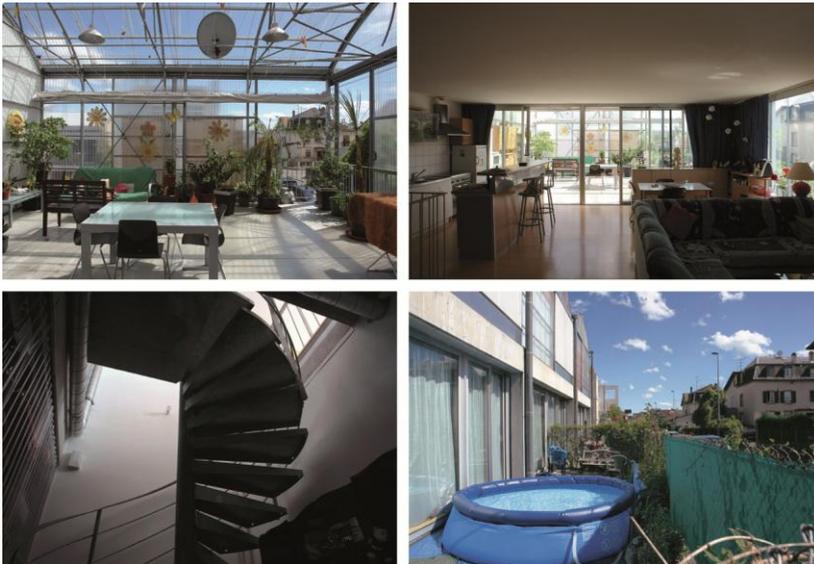
³⁸ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

³⁹ Orléans International Architectural Conference, “LACATON & VASSAL (F)”,

<<http://www.archilab.org/public/1999/artistes/laca01en.htm>>, accessed 16/01/2006, 1999.

⁴⁰ Tom Avermaete, Monique Eleb, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, “The Spaces of the Everyday. A Dialogue Between Monique Eleb and Jean-Philippe Vassal”, *OASE tijdschrift voor architectuur*, 69, 2006.

their exhibition in the Cité of 2009, however, Lacaton & Vassal displayed their works solely as projections. The exhibition contained nothing tangible but there were new photos of both the *Latapie House* and the *Houses of Mulhouse*, demonstrating and visualising the uses of these homes. Interiors, winter gardens, and gardens were at display, filled with the mess of daily activities and lived life. These continuing additions and changes are regarded as part of the architecture; continuations outside the control of the architect. Thus, imagination proliferates in these spaces, as residents continue the architectural imaginations in their own ways.



Houses of Mulhouse – Apartment 01. Ph: Lacaton & Vassal. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes



Houses in Mulhouse – Above: Apartment 02. Below: Apartment 09. Ph: Lacaton & Vassal.
Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes



5.2 *Nantes Architecture School, 2003-2008: “freedom of use”*⁴¹

The commission for the *Nantes Architecture School* started as a competition entry in 2003. Lacaton & Vassal Architectes planned and built twice the space stipulated in the competition brief and budget. Three main strategies directed their planning. Firstly, the main structure of the building is highly flexible, so that rooms can be build and rebuild inside. Secondly, with the principle of double space, the architects offered double the programmed space to students and teachers of architecture, both functionally assigned and non-assigned spaces. Thirdly, the building may be opened to the outside on all sides and at all levels, and is widely accessible. The building is organised so that large parts of it are public and open to citizens of Nantes.

Nantes Architecture School, Nantes, France.

Client: Ministère de la Culture / DRAC des Pays de Loire⁴²

Design years: 2003 (competition)

Construction years: 2006-2008

Surface area: 26 000 m²

Cost: €13.6M excl. tax

Design team: Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with Florian de Pous, Julien Callot, Lisa Schmidt-Colinet, Isidora Meier⁴³

The school is constructed of prefabricated pre-stressed concrete where only joints between pillars and beams are casted on site. This is the same constructions as for the platform of the *Houses in Mulhouse*, except that the pre-stressed concrete slab floors at the *Nantes Architecture School* can take much more load. The height from ground floor at street level up to first floor is 9m. The second floor is at 16m and the third deck at 23m. The height between these floors allows for the addition of one or two levels more, built up by light-weight steel structures. Large amounts of extra space, in the form of double height winter gardens with polycarbonate covering their outer facades, are located next to rooms of specific programme, separated from the outside by glass windows. The assigned areas encompass 12.500 m², the extra unassigned spaces counts 5.500 m², and in addition external terraces provide 8.000 m². The initial competition brief asked for about 10 000 m².

⁴¹ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 96.

⁴² Philippe Bataille was head of school through the planning and building processes. Lecture at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, AHO, 27/10/2009. Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteuw, "Space for us", *Mark: Another Architecture*, 20 (June), 2009.

⁴³ Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 61.



Nantes Architecture School – Sections where programmed space is coloured olive green and functionally non-assigned space light blue. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com



Nantes Architecture School – The main entrance and where the ramp starts. Ph: Author



Nantes Architecture School – Plans: starting from ground floor up to the roof. Programmed space is coloured olive green, functionally non-assigned floors light blue, and outdoor floors are white. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com

From the *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris, completed in 2001, Lacaton & Vassal brought with them to Nantes cost-efficiency in regard to technical installations, reducing technical infrastructure to the bare minimum, while keeping it all exposed in a rough manner.⁴⁴ On the facades at all sides, glass sliding doors or polycarbonate panels can be opened; towards the river, the city, the local square, and certainly onto the terraces and the ramp.⁴⁵

Devoid of functional definitions, the large extra spaces are built to be multipurpose. A minimum heating regulates the winter temperature to 12°C, making the spaces usable year round but not that comfortable on the coldest winter days.⁴⁶ These large spaces are quite striking with their spaciousness, large concrete floors, the daylight filtered through polycarbonate and the grand views that reveal themselves when the sliding sheets are pulled aside. It is like being part of the city. Beautiful when empty, these spaces seem nevertheless to invite continuation, to be developed and changed through actions, appropriations, interactions and rearrangements. “On the initiative of the students, teachers and visitors, these spaces become the locus of possible appropriations, events and programming. At any moment, the adaption of the school to new interventions, and its reconversion, are possible.”⁴⁷ The *Nantes Architecture School* and its unassigned spaces are open to a range of possible actions and interactions, such as the ones illustrated on renderings by Lacaton & Vassal; yet, they also retain an openness towards what cannot be foreseen. These floors are planned to host the unassigned and, paradoxically, the unexpected. Lacaton & Vassal has prepared for “freedom of use.”⁴⁸

The question of freedom is totally developed through the concept of double space. Very often programmes are restricted, already constrained, and the only way to try to give air and freedom to these programmes, is to add space. This is something that we developed in the first project, the *House Latapie*, and in many projects including *Nantes Architecture School*. They provide this kind of double space. It is in the combination [between both assigned space and unassigned space] that the user finds his own appropriation.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Client: Ministère de la Culture et de al Communication (Délégation aux Arts Plastiques) / EMOC (Établissement public de maîtrise d’ouvrage des travaux culturels) Design years: 1999-2001 Built: 2001 Surface area: 7,800 m² Cost: €3,080M. Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*, p. 101.

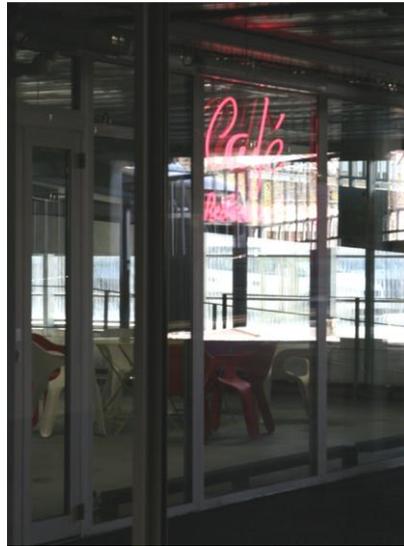
⁴⁵ Openings to terraces and to the ramp generate security issues. One security guard has to check all openings every night.

⁴⁶ The insulated programmed spaces are to have a temperature of 19°C. The closed rooms and the auditorium have ordinary though rather simple ventilation systems. Functionally non-assigned spaces are manually ventilated by opening doors and sliding doors.

⁴⁷ *Lacaton & Vassal, (2G Books)*, Barcelona: G. Gilí, 2007, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 96.

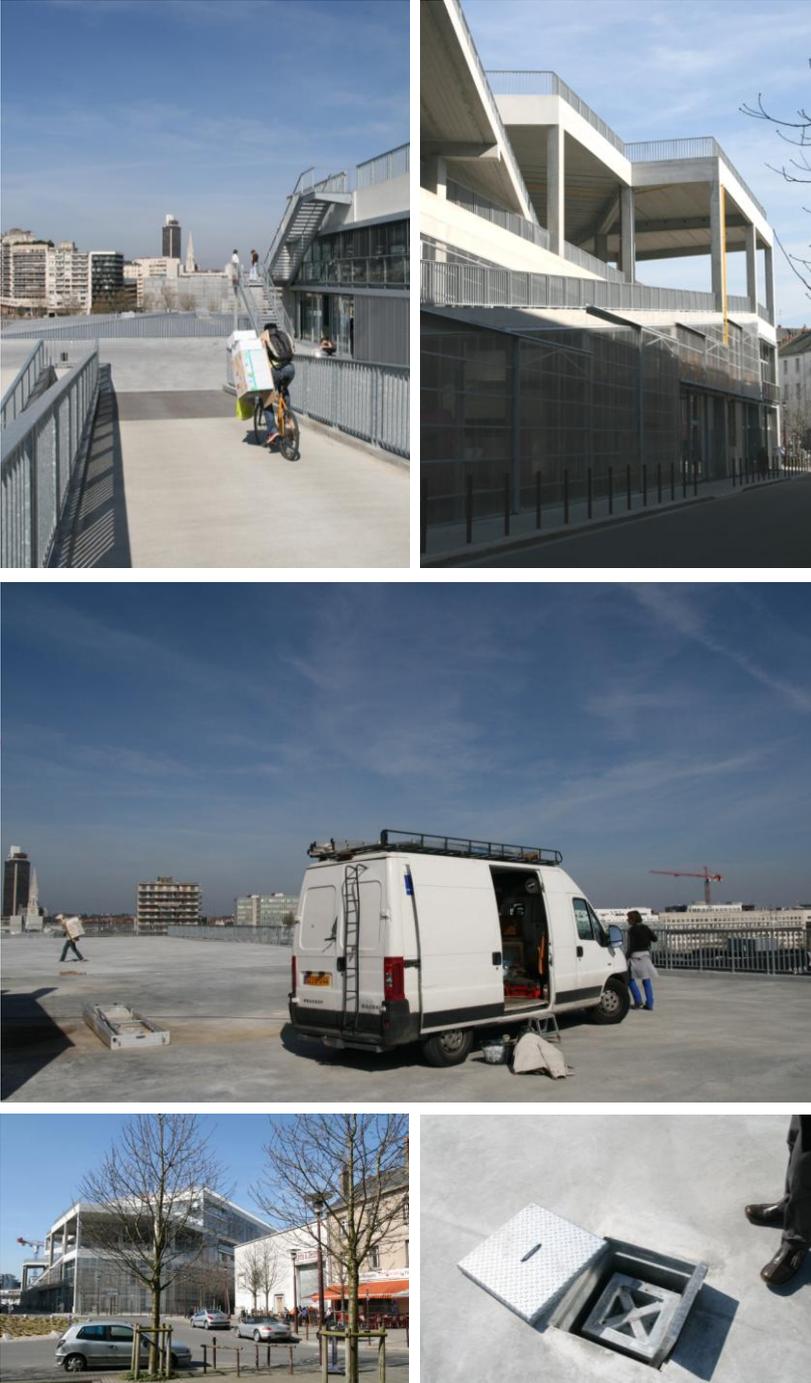
⁴⁹ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*. “This additional space solves also a lot of technical matters, for example nowadays; the question of the disabled. We prefer to think how we can



Nantes Architecture School – Top: Functional unassigned space on first floor.

Above: Café at the ground (asphalt) floor. Ph: Author

approach this new constraint and make something better for everybody. If you take an apartment and just try to apply the regulation it becomes awful, but if you offer more space, then immediately, this issue is no more an issue. The space becomes more generous and including, and for a disabled with a wheelchair it works very well. Sometimes additional space also solves technical matters such as saving energy because you create intermediate space. Double space or generosity of space has a lot of advantages. It is an interesting way to solve different issues: give more space and you solve a lot – with elegance – in a lot of projects.²⁹



Nantes Architecture School – Ramps and roof + Anchorage point on the roof. Ph: Author



Nantes Architecture School – Sliding doors to the large auditorium. Ph: Author

Nantes Architecture School, *Houses of Mulhouse* and *Palais de Tokyo* are all projects that “speak of architecture as a mechanism to offer more freedom” Lacaton & Vassal make this statement in the catalogue for their exhibition at the Cité de l’architecture & patrimoine.⁵⁰ This freedom expand beyond the notion of use, however, Lacaton & Vassal give prominence to the “freedom of use”, conceptualised in the *Nantes Architecture School* as “the maximum extension of ground surfaces” and concretised as solid concrete floors and an outdoor ramp, all with generous load bearing capacities.⁵¹ The large outside ramp starts beside the main school entrance and proceed around the building

⁵⁰ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*.

⁵¹ Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. p. 147.

all the way up to the roof where one can easily walk, bicycle, and skateboard. Adjacent to the ramp are terraces. A car or a small truck can drive up the ramp on to all the concrete floors, and even all the way up to the roof. The load bearing capacity of these concrete floors and the roof is 1 ton/m². With their load bearing capacity and public accessibility, the two concrete floors and the roof multiply the ground floor by three. Casted in the roof are several anchorage points, ready for structures and tents to be attached. Inside, the unassigned spaces opening to the public include the café, the large auditorium, and the library. These public functions are provided with neon signs. The inside ground floor is asphalted and not all flat, following instead along the minimal slope of the streets and pavements outside.⁵² On several levels do the architects and the school provide public access, opening for shared use. Students and citizens are comfortably seated in the big auditorium which works for lectures, public debates and cinema. Large sliding doors behind the podium can be opened for a grand view of the city, adding the opportunity to walk in and out, providing facilities for the city and a common arena for exchange and discussions. The next door workshop area on ground floor can also be used for concerts, as the space can take over 600 persons. Standing on the roof, the whole city of Nantes reveals itself, imagined as a pedagogic viewing platform, a public outlook, and a square.

The unassigned floors provide both flexibility and adaptability, according to the way these concepts are defined by Steven Groak.⁵³ Adaptability in architecture is to be “capable of different social uses”, according to Groak, whereas flexibility is being “capable of different physical arrangement”.⁵⁴ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till introduce another set of distinctions by adding “soft” and “hard” related to flexibility in both use and physical form. “Soft refers to tactics which allow a certain indeterminacy, whereas hard refers to elements that more specifically determine the way that design may be used... Soft use allows the user to adapt the plan according to their needs, the designer effectively working in the background. With hard use, the designer works in the foreground, determining how spaces can be used over time.”⁵⁵ In addition they distinguish between soft and hard form. Hard form is often materialised through structural systems organised by the architect, while soft form facilitates built changes.

Adaptability and soft use may be used to characterise the unassigned spaces and the *Nantes Architecture School*. According to these categories, Lacaton & Vassal work with soft tactics which allow “a certain

⁵² Lacaton & Vassal prescribed asphalt on ground floor. After a period of disagreement with the commissioner, they arrived at a solution with asphalt on the ground in the common and unassigned areas, while concrete on the ground floors in rooms for teaching.

⁵³ Steven Groak, *The Idea of Building: Thought and Action in the Design and Production of Buildings*, London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1992.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Flexible housing*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007, p. 7.

indeterminacy". Or rather, not just "a certain", but rather a lot of indeterminacy. The robust concrete floors invite soft use, and in the long term they represent soft form also. A third term relevant here is open form. As we saw in Chapter 3, Oscar and Zofia Hansen promoted open form as a way to include the clients' initiative into architecture – treating it as an "organic, and inseparable component element."⁵⁶ This ambition is certainly shared by Lacaton & Vassal, whose works always leave room for the users' contributions. When the concept of open form is not part of Lacaton & Vassal's vocabulary; it is perhaps because its abstract connotations and ideological baggage is alien to their way of thinking.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the Nantes school with its inclusive planning process, its large, light and open spaces, great load bearing capacity and easy access, is an apt example of open form, if in a slightly modified version.⁵⁸ In the *Nantes Architecture School*, there is no dialectical opposition between open and closed form, as Hansen outlined, instead the architects explore interrelations between closed and open form, by placing functionally unassigned spaces next to function-specific rooms. In reading works by Lacaton & Vassal, therefore, a concrete conception of closed versus open form is relevant, but not necessarily the ideological background from which it emerges. Vassal comes close to articulating this connection himself: "I think there are architects of the solid, who believe the architecture is an absolute value in itself, and architects of the void, for whom the value of architecture lies in what architecture allows to happen through and beyond its own material body. We (Anne Lacaton and myself) tend to be members of the latter species."⁵⁹

"In the very center of Nantes, we hope that the architecture school will also be a place of exchange, of knowledge, of discussions, of many events; a square, an open platform for the city" writes Lacaton & Vassal, resembling similar statements by Exyzt.⁶⁰ Lacaton & Vassal think of the school as a common space and open platform for the city; a place to exchange, discuss and organise events. This conceptualisation of the building and the particular freedom it connects to the work of Collectif Exyzt, who seeks to make temporary "platforms of action and exchange". Unlike Exyzt, however, Lacaton & Vassal maintain a distinction between the physical matter of architecture and the life of the users. Also, their "voids" or "platforms" are

⁵⁶ Oskar Hansen and Zofia Hansen, "The Open Form in Architecture", in Oscar Newman and Arbeitsgruppe für die Gestaltung soziologischer und visueller Zusammenhänge (eds.), *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Documents of modern Architecture 1*, London: Alec Tiranti, 1961, p. 190.

⁵⁷ Anne Lacaton was not familiar with the term open form.

Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (14.09.2007) with Anne Lacaton in Trondheim*.

⁵⁸ In their competition entry, Lacaton & Vassal opened for the users of the school to redesign the plan: its steel structures and insulated rooms on the extended ground surfaces. The school, however, preferred the layout and sections as they were. Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

⁵⁹ Andreas Ruby, Ilka Ruby, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, "Tabula Non Rasa: Toward a performative contextualism", in Andreas Ruby and Ilka Ruby (eds.), *Urban Trans Formations*, Berlin: Ruby Press, 2008.

⁶⁰ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 96.

made for an open-ended spectrum of uses, and are neither hosted nor overseen. In the *Nantes Architecture School*, Lacaton & Vassal Architects explore how both programme and its “extended ground surfaces” may benefit citizens, integrating the building and school into the city. Interchanges take place in numerous ways; in the way the building relates to its surroundings – the city and the river on one side and the local square on the other; through its public indoor spaces and its outdoor ramp, terraces and roof of panoramic views; through its numerous accesses, as well as through services open to the public. In an interview with Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw, Anne Lacaton again confirms how this building is meant to integrate in the city: “The building is first and foremost a chunk in the city, a chunk that encloses a school of architecture.”⁶¹

Lacaton & Vassal state that “In the large spaces of these buildings-as-tools, anything is possible” referring to the *Houses in Mulhouse*, *Palais de Tokyo* and the *Nantes Architecture School* under the heading of “Freedom”.⁶² These buildings are “tools” and they are “platforms in the city”, demonstrating how buildings “can offer more freedom”.⁶³ This freedom pertains largely to the use of the buildings; they are expected to offer opportunities for unrestricted uses, allowing unexpected and unplanned things to take place.⁶⁴ Thus, by making “buildings-as-tools”, Lacaton & Vassal seem to share, to a large degree, the concern from the *Alternate Currents* symposium, not dismissing aesthetics and tectonics, : but seeing them “in the service of other ends.”⁶⁵

Speaking on behalf of Lacaton and himself, Jean-Pierre Vassal says that they do not regard the solid of architecture as an absolute value in itself. Rather, they see themselves as architects of the void “for whom the value of architecture lies in what architecture allows to happen through and beyond its own material body.”⁶⁶ Programmes, uses and appropriations make up the value of architecture, which is why it is so important for them to maximize the floor area. Nevertheless, the architectural quality in Lacaton & Vassal’s doubled, unassigned spaces is striking. Their beauty is not created through materials or surfaces, but through the generous spatial conditions, the floods of natural light sparkling through the polycarbonate, the grand views. Lacaton & Vassal offer an architecture that is highly abstract, where materiality, meanings, and references are to be provided by users. This is probably why Anne Lacaton insists on speaking about their work as *planning*, rather than design. There can be no doubt, however, that they also

⁶¹ Messu and Patteeuw, “Space for us”.

⁶² Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*. “Freedom” in the English translation, “Liberté” in French.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶⁴ *Lacaton & Vassal*, p. 61.

⁶⁵ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Alternate Currents: An introduction”, *arq - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008, p. 111.

⁶⁶ Ruby, Ruby, and Vassal, “Tabula Non Rasa: Toward a performative contextualism”.

design, in the sense that they shape their buildings in a very conscious way. In the *Nantes Architecture School*, for example, the joints between the precast concrete pillars and beams are cast on site, providing the large concrete grid facades a smooth and unified expression. The same care is found in most of their work, which is always thoroughly prepared for and designed. Even if they do not elaborate on form as such, they have an uncanny ability to integrate formal considerations into the planning of spatial solutions.⁶⁷

Lacaton & Vassal's works have been labelled minimalist. That may be so, but only until the users enter.⁶⁸ The interiors of the *Houses in Mulhouse*, more than the *Nantes Architecture School*, demonstrate how their spaces are completed only after people move in, appropriating and using the places. Lacaton & Vassal Architectes always present their works in use – always with people and things. For their exhibition at the Cité de l'architecture & du patrimoine in 2009, the architects had photographed about every room in every apartment of the *Houses in Mulhouse* again, showing how life takes place in them, celebrating the users' additions and interventions, such as the flower decorations. Filled with the messy details of everyday life, these photos clearly have an aesthetic quality to them, as photos in Chapter 2 demonstrate. It is equally clear, however, that they are opposing conventional aesthetic rules in architecture, where sleek and untouched minimalism still prevails. In this sense, the photos have more in comment with recent realist approaches in art photography than with conventional architectural photography. That is also why Jaques Tati's classical critique of modernist abstraction and rationality does not apply to this highly abstract architecture of concrete, steel and glass. For Lacaton & Vassal, it is not a question of order and hygiene, but on the contrary, of creating a framework for appropriation and improvisation.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Anne Lacaton at students reviews in The Oslo School of Architecture, AHO, during the autumn of 2009.

⁶⁸ Steiner, "Lacaton & Vassal: 6 Months - Two days - Two Years", p. 61.

Ilka Ruby et al., *Minimal Architecture*, (*Architecture in Focus*), Munich: Prestel, 2003.

⁶⁹ As Ilka and Andreas Ruby see it, Lacaton & Vassal attempt "to restore to modernism precisely that authenticity and historic sustainability which Tati polemically denied it, and which, in films such as *Mon Uncle*, he could find in the old city." Andreas Ruby and Ilka Ruby, "Reclaiming modernism", in Frédéric Druot et al. (eds.), + plus, Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, SL, 2007, p. 25.



Nantes Architecture School – Renderings: Lacaton & Vassal. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com





Nantes Architecture School – Renderings: Lacaton & Vassal. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com



The poetry of architecture is not all created by the architect, neither is beauty. Lacaton & Vassal see beauty and poetry in the practical and pragmatic ways people intervene, organise, act and interact in their environments. Their stay in Africa seems to be a great source of influence, also with regards to aesthetics.

Niger: a flat landscape, nothing on the horizon and then suddenly, as if by magic, people and buildings appear, the latter always improvised. Before, there was nothing, and then all of a sudden there's somebody. The means are minimal and yet you have to build your house, What's great is that finally something always gets built, something very poetic, very light and extremely touching, something that elicits a lot of emotion due to its fragility, its elegance and its poetry.⁷⁰

Lacaton & Vassal's aesthetics of restraint is clearly shown in their presentation techniques. For the *Nantes Architecture School*, for instance, the renderings showing potential activities and future use are the only three-dimensional projections. The renderings show workshops, students at work, social interactions and public use, focusing especially on the unassigned spaces. The renderings not only show how the architects imagine their work to be, but guide and suggest possible uses. Lacaton & Vassal collaborated with the leaders and users of the architecture school throughout the planning process. The renderings helped to express and build shared visions of extraordinary uses, demonstrating potentials and possibilities. These renderings are tools for the architects to share their imaginations and ideas, thus "embarking on a shared way to imagine alternatives", as Gandolfi put it.⁷¹ Applying Gandolfi's utopia-evoking proclamation to Lacaton & Vassal's very concrete output may seem a rather wilful thing to do. Looking at the Nantes renderings, however, I realised that they were precisely imagining alternatives: helping us to imagine a place "more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the urban context."⁷² Gandolfi's vision of a "shared way to imagine alternatives is present as a way of guiding and suggesting future use. On my question as to what the degree they imagined or tried to direct the future use of their buildings, Anne Lacaton answered:

⁷⁰ Jean-Philippe Vassal, Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. p. 133.

⁷¹ Emiliano Gandolfi, "Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building", in 2008 Fondazione La Biennale de Venezia (ed.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, p. 28.

⁷² Ibid.

Of course we sometimes imagine what may happen in the buildings in the future, but we are continually surprised by all that happens. It's more diverse. It may be very different from what we had in mind, but it's not a problem. I think that there is a difference between our work and the architecture. Our work is finished at one moment because we have finished our mission to make a project; to build it and give it to the users. If considering the architecture, we can consider it not completed because it continues based on what the inhabitants are doing with it.⁷³

Lacaton's optimism notwithstanding, I have been struck by how empty the unassigned spaces at Nantes seem. On my two visits to the school, the classrooms (with glass walls opening to the unassigned spaces) as well as the generous and unassigned spaces have all been vacant of both people, activities, and traces. Other reports indicate that my impressions are not coincidental. After visiting the *Nantes Architecture School*, Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw questioned whether the building really present a better environment; was it the genuine gift of generosity that it was made out to be?⁷⁴ Lacaton & Vassal put the user in an active position, offering a freedom that comes with a responsibility. To be sure, the large and unassigned spaces are beautiful even as empty, and the spaces are being used for events and occasional parties. However, in order to afford such abundances of space, the architects used the cheapest materials possible to build inner class rooms and the teachers' offices. These walls and rooms are very plain, with plaster board walls, standard sized inner doors, and wooden skirting boards, all painted white. In the lower ceilings, one finds the cheapest tile ceiling systems. These built-in rooms and their white-painted surfaces are rather sad places when not filled with posters, people, drawings, activities, traces and graffiti. If it is not actually used, it is difficult to defend the increased maintenance of this huge building – for instance the cost of the night guard who checks if all openings to the outside is locked. Opposed to Mulhouse, where the gift of double space was enthusiastically received and

⁷³ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

⁷⁴ Messu and Patteeuw, "Space for us".

Xavier Gonzalez, "Review: School of architecture, Nantes", *A10: New European Architecture*, 9, 2010: "In use since March, the school now accommodates 500 students; the place is therefore a living one and yet it gives an impression of emptiness, of slightly oversized clothes, of an envelope too large for its content. The 'unallocated' areas are not being put to any real use and the 60 by 80 metre depth of the decks prevents natural light from infiltrating sufficiently, particularly into the workshops. What's more, the teaching areas are vast spaces that create acoustic problems whenever several lecturers are talking at the same time. And despite a desire to keep the students in the school, they are not able to advertise the place or make it their own. The free space intended to be 'open for use by all', including the general public, has been totally taken over by the administration, depriving the different levels of any true spontaneity."

used, the freedom provided by the “extended ground surfaces” at Nantes has not yet been appropriated.



Nantes Architecture School. Above: Ph: Author. Below: Ph: Lacaton & Vassal.



5.3 + *PLUS*, 2004-....: “from inside to outside”⁷⁵

In collaboration with Frédéric Druot, Lacaton & Vassal entered a French public debate in 2004. The three architects turned their attention to the post-war housing developments in the French suburbs, and argued against the extensive state programme for urban renewal with its ambition to demolish high-rise housing estates built in the 1960s and 70s. This programme promoted demolition through economic incentives – rather than looking at preservation, maintenance or transformation based on a stipulation of “demolition/ reconstruction on a one-to-one basis”.⁷⁶ The population in these *villes nouvelles* are mostly from lower income groups and a large proportion are North-African immigrants. The social and ethnic segregation have resulted in high unemployment levels and criminality, whereas social tensions have given the *banlieues* a notoriously bad image that politicians urgently want to improve. The large-scale housing block complexes represent a visual image of the failure of French integration policy and this demolition programme aims at solving the image problem rather than housing problems. These complexes are, as Jean-Pierre states, “poised to disappear”. The French state is actually planning the demolition of 250,000 apartments when there is an unfilled demand for housing of between 600,000 and 800,000 units. For Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton Jean-Philippe Vassal, what is most important, is that all these housing blocks and apartments planned for demolition are actually inhabited. Arguing from economic, sustainable and human viewpoints, the architects used these facts as their point of departure. “We were already shocked in 2001 by the demolition of *Cité Lumineuse* in Bordeaux on the banks of the Garonne. Mostly ideological, it seemed to be. Frédéric Druot, with whom we work today on these problems, had just studied how to transform them and so we knew it was possible.”⁷⁷ Druot, Lacaton and Vassal asked what the individual people living in the flats of these housing blocks actually wanted. Anne Lacaton argues that most people living in actual blocks do not see the reasons for demolishing the apartment where they live. Many of them have lived in their flats for a long time and they “don’t have such a disastrous image of their own neighbourhood.”⁷⁸ Instead, they hold a strong sense of belonging. This is ignored in governmental demolition plans, which “reduce the life of those who live

⁷⁵ Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, + *plus*, (GG), Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007, p. 83.

⁷⁶ Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, "lacaton & vassal", <<http://www.lacatonvassal.com>>, accessed 09/10/2009.

⁷⁷ Anne Lacaton: Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. p. 149.

⁷⁸ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 93.

there to nothing by moving them here or there.”⁷⁹ Demolitions force the inhabitants to break off the connections and relations they have with the place and inhabitants – forcing them to start anew.

The work of *+plus* started as a self-organised initiative. Druot, Lacaton and Vassal presented their arguments through actual projects on housing blocks listed on demolition plans. The architects demonstrated how the quality of the large scale housing complexes and big apartment blocks may be substantially and qualitatively improved, while at the same time saving large amounts of resources and money. The architects argued through projects and visualisations; drawings, photomontages, diagrams, calculations, and additional text. Based on their first production of documentation and plans, Druot, Lacaton & Vassal were granted some financial support by the *Ministère de la culture et de la communication, Direction de l'architecture et du patrimoine*.⁸⁰ However, when they had completed their documentation project in 2004, a new minister was in charge. The project was neither discussed in the ministry nor published. The three architects tried to get in dialogue with relevant public authorities without succeeding.⁸¹ Instead the work was published by GG in 2007 as *+plus*.⁸²

The guiding principle is the same here as in all Lacaton & Vassal's work: “One always has to work by addition.”⁸³ Demolition, in their mind, is a deviant solution; to add is the norm. Armed with the strategy to add rather than subtract, the architects proposed to transform large apartment-block estates by addition, making *+plus* into an appropriate name for the project.⁸⁴ Adding as opposed to the subtraction, transformation and extensions instead of demolitions, is justified by Lacaton & Vassal through economic, sustainable and human arguments. Transformation and adding represented a considerable cost-saving on all those counts: “Making use of the fabric of a high- or low-rise block means saving almost 40% of the construction price, so it's a real opportunity.”⁸⁵ Each example in *+plus* is accompanied by calculations of cost per housing unit as well as for the total project, complete with a comparison with the cost of demolishing and re-erecting the housing units. The comparison demonstrates the economic benefits of adding in a convincing way. In terms of sustainability, adding also makes obvious sense. Perhaps the most important gain, however, is in terms of quality – quality of life, as well as of architecture. The architects propose to add space in order to

⁷⁹ Lacaton & Vassal, p. 150.

⁸⁰ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*.

⁸³ Lacaton & Vassal, p. 151.

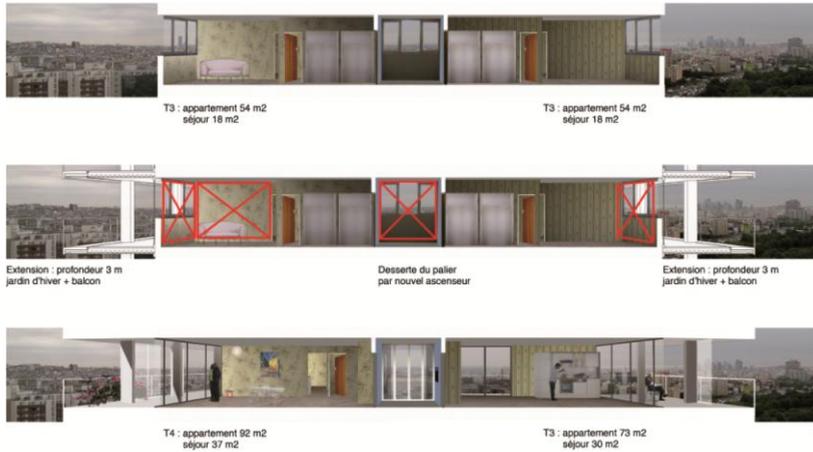
⁸⁴ Contributors to *+ plus*: Architects: Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton & Jean Philippe Vassal. Architects collaborators: Cécile Graindorge, Alexandre de Mercey, David Pradel. Graphic designer: Cédric Rossoni.

⁸⁵ Anne Lacaton in Puente and Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. p. 150.

radically improve the spatial qualities of the housing units as well as the communal areas.



+Plus – The *Certé* quarter in Trignac: BEFORE and AFTER. Ph. and rendering: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com



+ *Plus-Bois-le-Prêtre Tower*: Explanatory section:

BEFORE at the top – CUTS in the middle – AFTER at the below.

Rendering: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes

These housing blocks provide solid structures, great views, and some spatial potential. In addition to the economic and sustainable, and spatial arguments for keeping them, they also offer the added advantage of allowing to bypass restrictive building regulations and official standards for social housing, of the kind faced in Mulhouse. “Right now”, says Anne Lacaton, “the construction of new housing is incapable of providing an opportunity like this, from both the economic and cultural point of view.”⁸⁶ Their proposal make it possible “[t]o offer flats that have twice the surface area and are bathed in natural light, to offer diversified, non-standard typologies, service and usage facilities, and to consider the quality of the interiors and the communal spaces ...”⁸⁷ The architects used their experience of double space, efficient construction systems, and winter gardens to develop *+plus*. Moving case by case, seeking the particular potential in each situation and trying to maintain existing qualities inside and outside, Lacaton & Vassal plan and design efficient and pleasurable additions to these run-down estate blocks.

Druot, Lacaton & Vassal criticised public authorities for being too preoccupied with change of image and appearance rather than with substantial change. This is revealed not least by the government’s plans to relocate the inhabitants in single-family houses. Singular houses provides, as Ilka and Andreas Ruby point out, “the greatest possible contrast to the historically loaded typology of the modernist residential tower block.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*, p. 61.

⁸⁷ Lacaton and Vassal, “lacaton & vassal”.

⁸⁸ Ruby and Ruby, “Reclaiming modernism”, p. 17.

Anne Lacaton argued against such short-cuts, noting that “For a politician, a town-planner, sometimes an architect (this isn’t our case), it’s more worthwhile to do something new to change the image of a place.”⁸⁹ Druot, Lacaton & Vassal, whereas aligned with Crimson Architectural Historians and Wouter Vanstiphout, who argues repeatedly that the equation between the erasing of high rise housing and the erasing of social problems is an entirely fictitious one. The housing complexes in question hold not only structural, ecological and spatial potentials, but contain a social environment with a history of social interactions, connections and relations.⁹⁰ Lacaton explains that “If you look hard enough, you’ll find those little things that can form the conceptual basis of a project. In a suburban block, even if the environment is poor and the lifts no longer work, a strong bond often exists between the families and the place where they live. Things like that are very valuable, and you can build on them.”⁹¹ Like Crimson in Hoogvliet or Stalker with the Corviale in Rome, Druot, Lacaton & Vassal were faced with a problem of bad reputation.

The architects rebelled against Tabula Rasa planning principles of the post-war era, asking instead, “why not reinforce the fragile balance of a neighbourhood rather than raze it to the ground?”⁹² Lacaton & Vassal’s notion of *patrimoine* is relevant here. The French term may be translated to heritage or architectural heritage, or more directly with the English word patrimony. However, *patrimoine* should not encompass historic and aesthetical values only, Anne Lacaton argues, but instead include use values as well as social values.⁹³ “Big apartment-block complexes constitute a social patrimony” Druot states, “that we must respect and examine in an integral way.”⁹⁴ While the historical heritage of architecture – the *patrimoine* – is well protected by legislation and public watchdogs, the social heritage enjoys no such protection. “It seems vital to us”, Anne Lacaton states, “to examine the patrimony in relation to its use value, above all.”⁹⁵ The example is typical of the way Lacaton & Vassal work. Social connections are not specifically addressed but studied and explored through programmes of use – assigned as well as unassigned spaces – private as well as communal areas. For Lacaton & Vassal, social heritage is constituted by the use of common spaces, each of which contains a web of social interactions, connections and histories built up over time. This web needs to be protected, even in run-down areas where qualities are not so obvious. Jean-Pierre Vassal situates the

⁸⁹ Anne Lacaton in *Lacaton & Vassal*, p. 151.

⁹⁰ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (14.09.2007) with Anne Lacaton in Trondheim*.

⁹¹ Andreas Gabriel, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, “Architecture Should Arouse Emotions - An Interview with Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal”, *Detail*, 47 (4), 2007, p. 316.

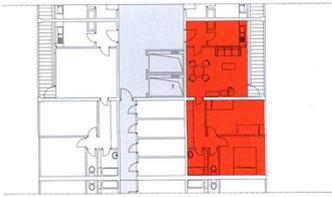
⁹² Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 243.

⁹³ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (14.09.2007) with Anne Lacaton in Trondheim*.

⁹⁴ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 67.

⁹⁵ Anne Lacaton in: *Ibid.*

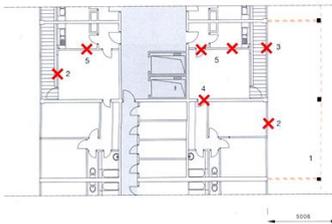
cultural legacy inside these apartments while summing up their approach: [W]e should start from what is positive – people, every individual, and their interiors. No longer looking at things from 500 metres away, but from inside, we begin with each room, each bathroom and each living room to see what can be improved in each apartment. We speak to every resident. That is where the real cultural legacy is to be found”⁹⁶



+ *Plus*

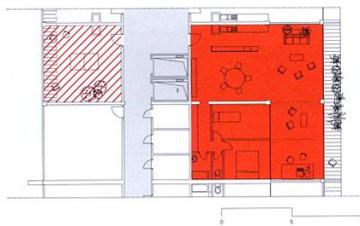
The example of one apartment for Réservoir Tower, Caucriauville, Le Havre.

BEFORE



CHANGES

Crosses mark walls that will be dismantled.



AFTER additions and transformations.

The red colour shows one extended apartment.

The hatch shows a new common space.

Source:

Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 148.

Approaching the specific cases of large scale housing complexes, the architects consistently began their work inside the flats. Typical proposals included extending floor space by merging and adding rooms, replacing walls with glass, adding glass sliding doors, winter gardens and terraces. The result is more space, much more daylight, grand views – profiting from the locations – and a new spatial richness, including different climatic and sensory zones. Starting inside the apartments, the architects continued into

⁹⁶ Avermaete, Eleb, and Vassal, "The Spaces of the Everyday. A Dialogue Between Monique Eleb and Jean-Philippe Vassal", p. 68.

common spaces of corridors and hallways to improve architectural quality and accessibility. They generally expanded entrances and hallways by tearing down walls and opening views to the outside. The architects were inspired by the simplicity and generosity of social housing projects from the 1920s and 30s or ,from the early 1960s, the *Samson le Point du Jour* by architect Fernand Pouillon in the Western Paris suburb of Boulogne Billancourt.



Samson le Point du Jour by Fernand Pouillon, Boulogne Billancourt, Paris 1959-1963.

Ph: Author

These blocks contrast the social housing block complexes of 1960s and 70s in the suburbs. Referring to the example above “it’s easy to see that people were taken into account” Vassal says, “when these blocks were conceived. At a certain moment someone thought of the need for all these people to feel comfortable in their flats.”⁹⁷ In Druot, Lacaton & Vassal’s view, this project demonstrates how parameters of comfort and pleasure have been directly translated into specific physical and practical qualities. “It’s something you appreciate in the details: a slope towards a private car park, the presence of a caretaker, a spacious, well-lit hallway, creating transparencies with what’s behind it. Upstairs are the apartments, sunny and with a balcony; and even higher up we find another place of interest: the roof.”⁹⁸ Their list of physical elements presents modest and carefully considered changes to improve the houses, increasing comfort and pleasure. The architects’ focus is on improving the physical surroundings, looking for the potential pleasures offered by the building itself, its spaces, light, and views. Architectural quality is not to be neglected, even when working in tough social settings and with restricted budgets.

⁹⁷ Jean-Pierre Vassal in Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Jean-Pierre Vassal in *Ibid*.



+Plus – Rendered suggestions and imaginations for common spaces in the housing blocks.
 Rendering: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: www.lacatonvassal.com

In the communal spaces, Druot, Lacaton & Vassal focused on specific, everyday needs; security and maintenance were particularly important. “It is necessary to tackle the problem of lack of security in each location by means of a precise and realistic diagnosis and not in general, alarmist terms.”⁹⁹ Main entrances and areas at the foot of stairwells are particularly critical places. The architects suggested to enlarge these spaces, increasing transparency

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 261.

towards the outside as well as towards adjacent spaces. Druot, Lacaton & Vassal criticised planners and architects for overlooking these simple measures when large scale visions are to be realised. Good maintenance is essential for the comfort of the residents and the architects suggested in some places to bring back the care-taker on site. The catalogue of improvements presented in *+plus* includes a list of illustrations showing facilities, services and collective activities taking place in communal spaces. These suggestions are not specified for each of the projects in *+plus*, but form a bank of ideas to be used in the redevelopment.

The three architects also see potentials in the vast communal spaces surrounding the housing blocks on these estates. They are particularly interested in the informality or emptiness of these outdoor green spaces. These are functionally unassigned outdoor spaces, characteristics the architects do not want to change. Well maintained, the architects argue, these spaces provide a valuable freedom of use. “It’s certain that some of these “spots” escape any traditional classification of public space... These are spontaneous urban spaces arising out of a geographical and a social concordance, uses and needs.”¹⁰⁰ However, they want to use some of these unassigned outdoor areas for densifications.¹⁰¹ Adding new housing blocks in the areas increases the concentration of people and makes grounds for improvements or additions of communal, public and commercial services – services that often completely lacking.

The book *+plus* is organised as a catalogue of additions and transformation elements for existing dwelling units and housing blocks. Druot, Lacaton & Vassal show which elements can be implemented in which location. They present plans and sections for apartments, blocks and complexes, before and after; complete with calculations and costs. These concrete and precise suggestions of adding and transforming make up an argument which is relevant outside their specific context. In the following, I will briefly present the project of *Quartier Certé* in Trignac of Western France, along with more thoroughly the *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower* in Paris, rebuilt during 2011 and 2012.

Quartier Certé is situated at the outskirts of Trignac, a town of less than 10,000 inhabitants in the Pays de la Loire. In the beginning of this Chapter 5.3 is a photo and a rendering of the project. The existing plan for the Certé neighborhood, based on the plans of *Opération de Renouveau Urbain (ORU)* was to build 427 new dwellings of which 145 should qualify as social

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Philippe Vassal in *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰¹ Jean-Philippe Vassal in *Ibid.*

housing.¹⁰² To build 47 single-family houses and a multi-family building of 20 flats, demanded the demolition of two high-rise blocks holding in total 216 flats. By local planners, the high-rises were regarded as stigmatising for the neighbourhood and disturbing the landscape. In the flats, rooms as well as windows were very small, with no balconies, while the open central cores lacked quality and were underused. Druot, Lacaton & Vassal proposed to merge apartments, going from 216 to 208 flats, but most importantly adding terraces, glass facades and glass sliding doors. In addition, their project included lifts reaching all floors and service rooms at ground level as well as extended common spaces. According to their budget, the amount of money saved while offering more space and dwelling units of radically higher quality was estimated to €3,700,000.

Le Petit Maroc in Saint-Nazaire and the *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower* in Paris are two separate competition projects by Lacaton & Vassal presented in *+plus*. Including these projects allowed the architects to fully demonstrate their contextual approach: “Before any intervention, the two projects seek, through meticulous observation, to reveal the good side of each situation before denouncing to its bad... Through a meticulous diagnosis of the pre-existing, they are enriched by the particular constraints and contexts of each of the sites, revealing their contextual qualities and the contributions of the residents.”¹⁰³ The *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower* was constructed in the 1960s as part of a complex of high-rise buildings next to the Paris ring road in the north of the city. The building, planned and designed by architect Raymond Lopez, had originally 15 floors, standing on piloti with an open ground floor. After a renovation in the 1980s, leaving the interiors quite untouched, the façade was transformed; adding insulation, decreasing the size of the windows, whereas the outside gained colourful façade sheets. The tower now contains 96 flats on 16 floors, owned and managed by *Offices Publics de l’Aménagement et de la Construction (OPAC)*. According to Lacaton & Vassal, the building has a solid structure, good floor heights, and fantastic views. In 2005, Lacaton & Vassal Architectes won the competition for renovating and transforming the building. Their proposal is as radical as it is interesting. On the outside of the two front facades, new floor slabs are constructed to extend the apartments with winter gardens and terraces while on the other two, extensions offer additional rooms on each floor. These extensions constitute an entirely separate construction to the main building. With this solution, only minor works are necessary on the inside, mainly concerning the infrastructure for water and electricity. Inhabitants can stay and live in the building during the

¹⁰² The urban plan was forwarded by *Communaute d’Agglomération de la Région Nazarinne et de l’Estuaire (CARENNE)*.

¹⁰³ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*, p. 193.

building process. Existing walls with small windows will be replaced by large glass facades of sliding double-glazed windows, radically expanding the views. The living rooms and bedrooms open up to a terrace in summer time by sliding glass doors as a first layer on to a summer terrace and winter garden created by sliding walls of polycarbonate. This leaves a continuous balcony furthers out. “These extensions offer the possibility, as in a house, of living outside while being at home.”¹⁰⁴ All these measures add square metres, spatial qualities, grand views, spatial variation, and outdoor life, expanding simple life qualities at home.

The renovation is planned to reduce energy consumption with 50%. One important element is the passive energy input through glass walls and winter gardens. The winter gardens “... act as a buffer space and a double skin that is thermally and acoustically efficient, but they are above all pleasant spaces that can be used most of the year.”¹⁰⁵



Bois-le-Prêtre Tower – BEFORE and AFTER. Rendering by Lacaton & Vassal Architectes.

Ph. and rendering: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes

¹⁰⁴ Lacaton et al., *LACATON & VASSAL*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*



Bois-le-Prêtre Tower: Apartment interiors photographed and registered by Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. Interiors could be kept unchanged while winter gardens and terraces were added.



Bois-le-Prêtre Tower – Installing a prototype: BEFORE and AFTER

Ph: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes and www.lacatonvassal.com



Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, entrance and hallway – BEFORE and AFTER.

Ph. and rendering: Druot, Lacaton & Vassal. Source: Lacaton & Vassal Architectes



The planning process was accompanied by dialogues with the inhabitants in the form of meetings and workshops concerning the general transformations of the building, and individually with each family concerning specific transformations of their apartments.¹⁰⁶ From the first meetings it became clear that most families did not want to move out of the building; many of them wanted also to stay in the same apartment. Anne Lacaton explained in my interview how the dialogues and the coordination with inhabitants took place:

The first one [meeting] was very difficult because the inhabitants had seen the [all competition] projects and they didn't choose our. I don't know why. Maybe they didn't understand it very well – they just had the A3 sheets – and they believed that everyone would have to leave the building. In the competition, we hesitated to strictly follow the programme of the client when they wanted to introduce a larger variety of typologies... I think that they initially saw the project as a great transformation of the place and of the people inside. So [the inhabitants] were not so happy with it. In fact the atmosphere at the first meeting was a little nervous. The inhabitants stood against the client who is a very big company of social housing. I suppose that this relationship is not always very peaceful. We were in between as architects but still totally considered a part of the client. After 20 minutes of presentation, we took the floor and we explained who we were; that we were not there to bring constraints but to bring much more quality. 10 minutes later the atmosphere was very quiet and we started a very useful and very interesting work with the inhabitants. The contact with the inhabitants lasted nearly six months... During these six months we first visited every apartment so that we could have contact with each family and look at the apartment to make a precise list: of what was not working and of what they wanted to change or to keep. This was the first observation. ... In parallel, we went on with general meetings, maybe one meeting every three weeks. At these meetings, we invited everybody in the block. The meetings were organised around some main topics, for example the apartments; what we would bring to the apartments – such as the question of the

¹⁰⁶ Paraphrasing: *Ibid.*, p. 175.

extensions and the functioning of the extensions as winter gardens. Another topic was the common space; what we would add in terms of lifts, ground floor entrances and so on. Another topic was the technical aspects. We explained clearly what we would change – the shafts, the water system, the heating, and so on...¹⁰⁷

Lacaton & Vassal Architectes made a prototype of a full scale extension, installed in front of one apartment. In this way, they offered the residents an opportunity to visit and experience the changes and the extensions, the terrace and the winter garden.

Because the inhabitants were organised in an association, they had to vote for the project – for all aspects of the project. This is why we did the prototype; to show the inhabitants how the apartment could be improved. At that moment, we knew that some people, they said it also during the meetings; some of them had remade the inside of their apartments totally, with painting and floors, and it was new and clean. They said they would like to keep it. Because nearly all of them were very forthcoming, they said, ‘Okay, we agree on the project but if possible we would like to keep the living room and the bedrooms. You can change the bathroom...’¹⁰⁸

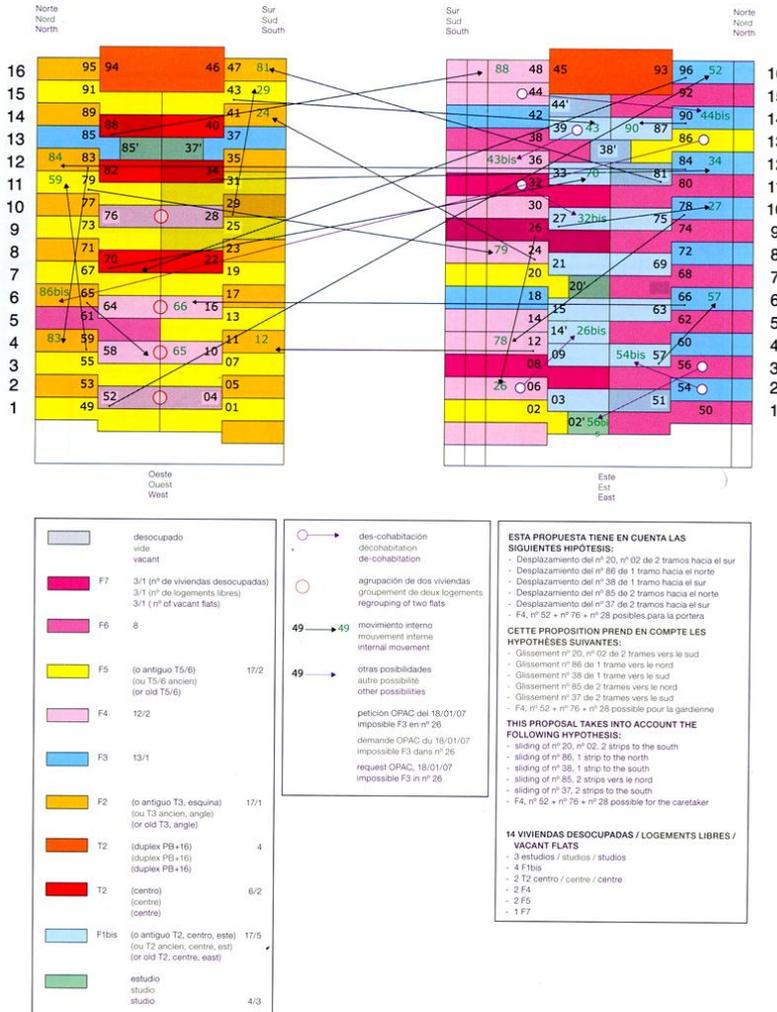
Other actions took place in parallel organised by the client which we did not take part in... They made a questionnaire. They met each family in a private meeting where they asked if they would like to stay in their apartment or if they would like to change, and; if they wanted to change, what kind of apartment they would like. They asked how much income they had – to see if they were able to pay for a large apartment, for instance, and finally; what they would like to keep or to change if they stayed in the same apartment... It was important, especially for those who wanted to change to a larger apartment, to calculate the new rent, and to make sure that it would work with the income... They calculated very precisely what all inhabitants had to pay in the new situation. We did not take part in these meetings and in this work, because we were not, of course, involved in these questions. However, I think it was really properly made, and finally, everybody was able stay. I think there were only 2 or 3 families that could not really

¹⁰⁷ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

afford to change the apartment. For some families of more than 15 persons, they found a solution with three apartments. So I think that it was quite properly done.¹⁰⁹

Although very few residents wanted to leave the block, many residents would like to move internally, to bigger or smaller flats.



Bois-le-Prêtre Tower – Different types of apartments are differentiated by colour.

Arrows show from where to where families plan to move within the building.

Source: Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + plus, p. 227.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

For the common areas, Lacaton & Vassal planned an extended hallway without thresholds, an additional set of elevators, and glass facades on both sides. This upgraded and transparent hallway was the single suggestion that caused most resistance from the social housing clients. The architects also suggested communal facilities and activities in rooms adjacent to the hallway. These rooms were to be used by public associations for services like home work assistance for school children in the area. The client refused to make any communal rooms and facilities for the inhabitants of the kind suggested in the *+plus* catalogue.

Planning the *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower*, Lacaton & Vassal established processes which could well have been named participatory. Their most substantial contribution in the matter of participation is probably their principle of adding, leaving interiors nearly untouched so that residents could choose to stay in the building and keep their interior as before – if they wanted. Although Lacaton & Vassal’s work focuses on the physical material of architecture, and although they never speak about participation as such, they met with every family in the building and contributed in a series of meetings with the residents to explain and discuss the transformations. These processes were necessary to make sure that the physical changes were in accordance with the wishes of each family inhabiting the housing block.

The term participation is never used in *+plus*. The architects speak instead of coordination and dialogue: “Many interesting initiatives exist in the associative fabric of local neighbourhoods, in the practice and experience of the bodies managing rented social housing, initiatives that must be developed. Some experimental approaches to coordination are intelligent, inventive and generous.”¹¹⁰ The statement implies that some are not. Based on these reflections, I asked Anne Lacaton how they regarded participation and whether they would work more particularly with participatory tools:

We don’t have a lot of experience with that [participation], but we see very often, in some parts of the city, precisely in the parts of the city which need to be renovated, that decisions very often come from outside – the projects comes from outside. Inhabitants are not really involved in the process, or they are just involved in some kinds of meetings and discussions... These approaches could take more into account the potential of people organising themselves; to do something together, through associations, or in other ways. Maybe it would be interesting, sometimes, if the situation is not too degraded, to organise or facilitate an organisation of inhabitants which has

¹¹⁰ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*, p. 259.

already started, or does exist, in order to give the inhabitants more possibilities and opportunities to decide... We can see that in many parts of the city it would be possible to imagine that they could become responsible for some things. Though, this is not something that we have experimented with.¹¹¹

Approaching participation, Lacaton & Vassal are interested in what already exists of residents' initiatives. They do not try to initiate engagement and participation from the residents; rather, they want to continue the initiatives generated by the inhabitants and their associations. This comes close to the bottom-up approaches discussed at NAI in Rotterdam. Lacaton is interested in appropriation and local initiatives, but less so in participatory tools organised by the architect. In general terms, the Lacaton & Vassal's approach seems fundamentally founded on appreciations of individual choices, needs and initiatives. Instead of referring to more collective processes of participation, Vassal proclaims that "... every individual who lives in one of these big apartment-block complexes must enjoy the same consideration that any client who commissions the design of a private villa from us would enjoy."¹¹² If the statement is taken literally, the architect renovating a huge housing block has to enter into dialogue with every family or inhabitant in the block – as if each one were the client of a single family house. That is obviously difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Yet, it is precisely what they do in *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower*: speaking with each family to know how they want their apartment.

Lacaton & Vassal also want to create the possibility for change: "When we compare high- and low-rise apartment blocks with suburban detached houses, one difference leaps out at us. Detached houses change. It's astonishing to see the residents transform and enlarge their houses. They add a room, then a second one, then a lean-to in the garden. This is completely taboo in high- and low-rise apartment blocks."¹¹³ To create a similar freedom in the high rises, Lacaton & Vassal propose to add undesignated space as insulated indoor space and winter gardens (turning into large balconies when the sliding panels are withdrawn) allowing for residents to fill them and use them in whatever way they like. These ideas on buildings-as-tools to make spaces for freedom of use and appropriation can be regarded as contributions to favour bottom-up initiatives. The high-rise apartment building in Poitiers, what Lacaton & Vassal called *Apartment Building-Houses* planned during 2006 but unrealised, is an interesting example of this approach in a new

¹¹¹ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

¹¹² Jean-Philippe Vassal: Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 47.

¹¹³ Jean-Philippe Vassal: *Lacaton & Vassal*, p. 149.

housing block, combining the *Houses in Mulhouse* and the *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower*.

The whole *+Plus* project is based on a bottom, fighting against top-down plans for demolitions of housing blocks and neighbourhoods. Reviewing the planning process of *Bois-le-Prêtre*, Lacaton emphasises the importance of visiting each and every household to find out how their dwelling unit should be treated. This approach is defined chiefly through its focus on the single units of accommodation and the individual families or inhabitants, going from inside to outside. Throughout the presentation of *+plus* projects, Druot, Lacaton & Vassal consistently start from inside; with visualisations of interiors and plans, for each flat. The strategy of moving from inside to outside sets off an accumulative process.¹¹⁴ "In order to put one's finger on the concrete problems and the concrete solutions they need, it is best to stage the trajectory of a person who lives in the flat, goes out the front door, goes down the stairs or takes the lift, meets other people, crosses the hall, goes to look for their car (or not), traverses public space, and so on until getting to the RER or the bus."¹¹⁵ Frédéric Druot explains this as a procedure offering insight into the way residents and citizens experience their everyday environment. In Oslo, too, Anne Lacaton encouraged the students to work from inside. I asked her how she would explain this approach and its importance:

I think the inside means that – it's not a question of inside and outside. Rather, it means that space – small or very large – is all the time perceived by persons. You don't make architecture for the clouds or for the birds; you make it for the human life... You provide conditions for personal life, but also for social life and community life... It means that you always consider the space from the mind and from the eye of somebody; of a group of people who are doing something at the same time, at the same moment, in the same space. So, inside means that space is created to human perception and for human life.¹¹⁶

To start from the inside entails to take the viewpoint and the eye of the human individuals who live, work, walk, act and interact in these specific material and spatial environments – individual life, social life and community life. This particular version of the bottom-up approach is not in any way new, but Lacaton & Vassal have an interesting take on it, remaining specifically situational while integrating a complex array of aspects and contingencies.

¹¹⁴ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*, p. 83.

¹¹⁵ Frédéric Druot: *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹⁶ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

And making beautiful architecture. The inside-to-outside approach fulfils three concerns in Lacaton & Vassal's work. Firstly, it secures a human, individual perspective in the planning process. Secondly, it provides a concrete procedure of transformation by which individual units become the point of departure for larger additions. Thirdly, the approach offers a way to conceptualise how a city and its urban life are actually built – bit by bit. When Lacaton & Vassal go from inside to outside, this conception not only encompasses the single building, but is regarded a model of urban development.

The *Plus* city as an accumulation, evolving through “the interior towards the exterior, from the rooms to the bus shelter, taking in the lounge, the staircase, the communal entrance hall, the path through the flower bed, the asphalt of the public thoroughfares, little by little, case by case, with the sole aim of giving more to each favourable moment of a situation, the best and the most. This bizarre practice of current urbanism, avoids the words axis, composition, planning, enclosing, remodelling, axial route, zone, proximity, mixing, grand, demolition, and concentrates on others: case, situation, attention, evolution, transformation. This practice avoids generic debates and takes shelter from their imprudent needs.”¹¹⁷

The procedure forms a critique of master planning and the *Tabula Rasa* approach – of planners working from a distance and from a bird's-eye perspective. The critique is directed against the planning ideals of the 1960s and 70s, but also against the same tendency in contemporary architecture. They criticise also the discipline of urbanism for repeating the visions of *Plan Voisin*, only with “bio” (or “eco”) added to the name.¹¹⁸

Opposing *Tabula Rasa* planning of any kind, Lacaton & Vassal have affinities with for instance Crimson Architectural Historians in their work with the Wimby! project. Both groups take the trajectories of individual residents as their point of departure, abandoning the diagrammatic bird-eye view for a more collaborative survey on the ground in order to locate the resources, shortages and problem on site. However, while Lacaton & Vassal work with physical structures, Crimson Architectural Historians contribute mainly with analyses and organisational work at all levels, commissioning architects and designers to do the physical planning and design. In this sense, Lacaton & Vassal and Crimson represent two distinct ways of working, in this study labelled making versus mediating. Furthermore, the two practices

¹¹⁷ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 243.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

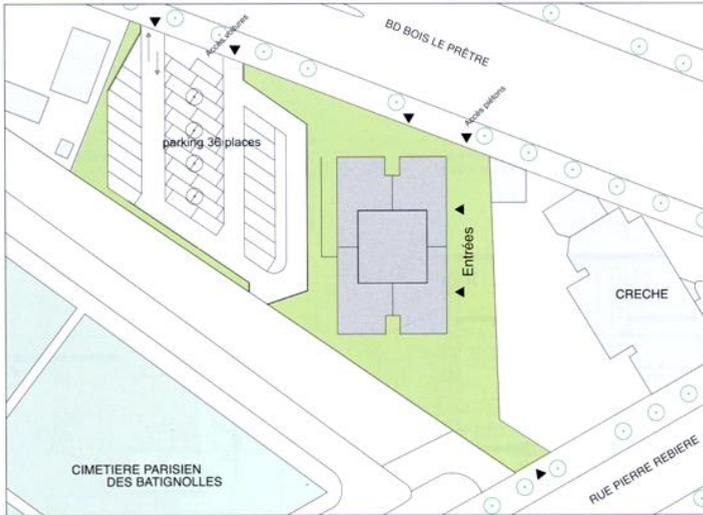
are separated by their different formal or aesthetic preferences. Crimson cultivated expressive architectural appearances, in the Wimby! project, seeking to generate intensities and excitement in environments most often characterised by rational planning and repetitive housing blocks. They were interested in the language of the “decorated shed” as performed by FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste) of London. Lacaton & Vassal on the other hand, insist on planning *voids*, also with regards to formal communicative expressions. Rather than building expressive form, they imagine and photograph their projects filled and decorated by the expressions and activities of its inhabitants and users.

In their practice Lacaton & Vassal cultivate a strong emphasis on the individual – the individual household and the individual initiative. They argue that urban renewal too often ignore these issues by focussing solely on the appearance of public spaces and buildings. The individual flats as well as hallways, stairs and corridors, are important daily environments for each and every one, requiring careful consideration. To ignore them is to ignore the lives and everyday reality of the inhabitants. They do not start with top-down planning procedures from the outside but imagine their contributions more as bottom-up changes that might inspire others and spread bit-by-by.

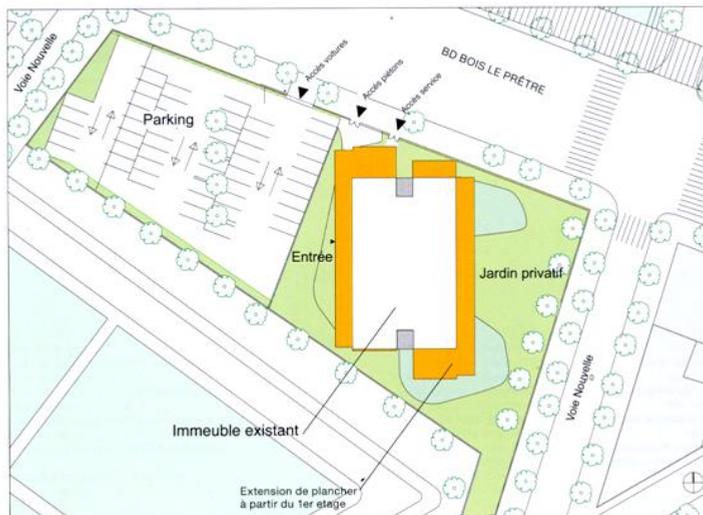
By applying our strategy of from inside to outside, by proposing flats that are good, practically made to measure, by providing services and facilities right where they’re needed, comparisons are going to arise with the tower block next door. Our way of proceeding is accumulative and associative. And it’s like this that a city is constructed, bit by bit. We do it for one, for two, for four, for twenty, fifty, a hundred ... That’s what creating a city means.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + *plus*, p. 83.

Planta general previa a la transformación
 Plan masse avant transformation
 General plan prior to conversion



Planta general antes de la transformación
 Plan masse avant transformation
 General plan prior to conversion



Planta general después de la transformación
 Plan masse après transformation
 General plan after conversion

Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, outdoor plans – BEFORE and AFTER

Source: Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, + plus, p. 234.

3.4 Making: The practice of Lacaton & Vassal Architectes

Lacaton & Vassal Architectes work by making. They explore and create physical solutions. Although they are interested in the “void”, this notion should not be understood as emptiness or an empty container, but as spaces consciously and thoroughly elaborated to create beautiful and spacious surroundings. These are surroundings which contain comfort, pleasure and luxury, allowing a freedom of use and inviting activities, appropriations and initiatives. Following this ethos, Lacaton & Vassal approach each situation individually. Their work is precise and pragmatic, seeking concrete and physical solutions, while at the same time extending beyond the conventional to generate better environments. The architecture of the “void” is often efficient and orderly as a cost-reductive measure; however, that is not the final goal. The photos exhibited in Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine of the *Latapie House*, *Palais du Tokyo*, *Houses in Mulhouse* and the *Nantes Architecture School* demonstrate Lacaton & Vassal’s interest in architecture as a facilitator. These architects seek to establish generous environments, although not by appearances or formal elaborations. Instead, they cultivate the quality of the “voids” where spatial dimensions, light and materials are important and integrated parts and where the extraordinary is present in the form of abundances of space and unexpected elements, for example flowering walls.

The unsolicited work of *+Plus*, the partly paid planning process for the *Latapie House*, and their thorough explorations in *Houses of Mulhouse* on modest budgets, give evidence to Lacaton Vassal’s social concerns and political agendas. In these works, they seek ways to improve spatial qualities and to provide architectural facilities for people who have less. They argue against the concept of minimum standard and the way it has been implemented in social housing. As Vassal argues: “The minimum standard is only applied for a certain social strata – the poor – while more privileged social strata are eligible to enjoy more generous spaces. But we think everybody should be eligible for such spatial generosity; and, hence, we have always tried to question the very concept of a standard by pushing the envelope.”¹²⁰ There is a basic idea of human equality and an equal distribution of architectural qualities informing their work. Lacaton & Vassal do not challenge the budgets for social housing but rather the regulations and prescriptions based on minimum standards. Despite this obvious engagement, however, Lacaton & Vassal hardly ever use social and political arguments; instead, they speak about their work in simple, almost naive, phrases. This

¹²⁰ Ruby, Ruby, and Vassal, “Tabula Non Rasa: Toward a performative contextualism”, p. 260.

could be a way of branding their work in architectural media, of course, but through my studies and interviews I have come to realise that this stripped-down language contains an implicit but profound criticism of prevailing architectural culture. In fact, their criticism is rarely explicit – Lacaton & Vassal systematically emphasise what they try to achieve rather than what they are against. They address specific problems experience by real people, here and now. When I met Anne Lacaton for an interview I had a chance to ask whether it would be right to say that their work was informed by a social engagement.

Yes, in a way, yes. But I think it is a social engagement that rather works together with architecture, because architecture is not a part of social life. I believe architecture provides conditions for social life. There is an engagement but we don't feel that it's an over-engagement... If you place social engagement in a category, it means that somebody will say, ok, you have a social engagement but you are not into other parts of architecture as quality or more superficial things such as decorations and aesthetic pleasure. These are not separated. Even in social engagement – generosity and pleasure are totally part of it. It's not separated. It's the same with the extraordinary and pragmatism. It's the same. This why it's not a category of architects who are socially engaged: Because it's not a category; it's part of what an architect should be... And social involvement doesn't mean that it's just for poor people. Social involvement is for the life of everybody.¹²¹

Lacaton's answer demonstrates the integrated way of thinking and working that characterises their practice. This does not mean that they retreat from public debate; the *+Plus* project is a good example of how they engage. I will let a snippet from my interview with Anne Lacaton end this section, summing up their social concerns by means of a specific example. She compares their Cap Ferret project, where pine trees and vegetation blocked the views to the ocean, with the planned demolition of housing blocks in Parisian suburbs:

This is related to the question of position or attitude by an architect. It's a position that is established when facing important questions posed by architecture or urban planning.

¹²¹ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*. The transformation of Bois le Prêtre Tower was at display in the MOMA exhibition, *Small Change Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, 2010.

This is why we face the question of what to do with the contemporary heritage of social housing. When you see that the decision is to demolish many of them; the situation is not normal at all for an architect. This situation and position lead you to propose alternative solutions. But in fact, in Cap Ferret we were facing a situation of a fantastic landscape, which is also a position, though it's not a political one and it's not a social one. However, these positions are connected. They are not far away from each other.¹²²

Question: That means that you don't withdraw in any of these positions; you go straight on to solve or to suggest?

Yes. Why would we eliminate something that has qualities even if it's not perfect, even if the situation is bad? If you look at it positively there are a lot of possibilities and a lot of potential that you can use positively in a project. In a way, this is social, but it's also very pragmatic.¹²³



D/D House, Lege-Cap-Ferret 1996-1998

Ph: Author

¹²² Maison D/D House at Lège-Cap-Ferret, 1996-1998. To preserve the quality of the site; the dune, the vegetation, the trees as well as to include the view, Lacaton & Vassal lifted the house above the ground and the bushes. The trees are kept both in front of the house and going through it.

¹²³ Harboe and Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*.

6 Social concerns in contemporary architecture

In this chapter, I want to pursue further each of the three concerns identified previously – the interest in bottom-up approaches, the desire to put architecture in the service of other ends, and the need for a shared imagination. Previous chapters have displayed how these concerns are integrated in the work of Fantastic Norway, Exyz, and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. In this last chapter I will take a step back, looking at both theoretical reflections on, and practical responses to these concerns

6.1 Bottom-up

The three case study practices introduce and demonstrate an alternative to conventional top-down planning, looking for situations where their knowledge and competence are needed and actively seeking social, economic, cultural and architectural challenges. Bottom-up approaches come to the fore in numerous ways in the practices of Exyz, Fantastic Norway and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. As discussed in Chapter 2, the word bottom-up is used not only as referring to grassroots initiatives of non-professionals or to participatory processes in planning where “ordinary” residents, citizens and users have influence, but include a larger variety of approaches where architects include the residents’ viewpoint, or where he/she maps or explores resources important to residents. Bottom-up also comprises attempts to make room for and facilitate actions, interactions, initiatives and appropriations – and to make space for improvisation and the unexpected. In the following, we will look at three aspects of the bottom-up approach: bottom-up knowledge production, bottom-up as participation, and bottom-up as a way to trigger local initiatives.

Fantastic Norway chose a red caravan as their mobile office, using it as a tool to reach a variety of people. Their newspaper articles and columns worked as extensions of the caravan, inviting even more people into the

process. They situated themselves literally in the centre of things – at the main square – using stories and straight-forward language to raise enthusiasm and engagement. With considerable inventiveness, the two students gathered local knowledges and initiatives from many different viewpoints, which together with their own mapping, provided a “local knowledge database”.

Interventions by Exyzt can also be regarded as testing grounds and playful laboratories. They invite everyone in the area to come and contribute in the making of an active and common space, using the temporary platform, which they build and host, to explore potential activities in the urban environment and facilitate meetings across social and cultural separations. Each Exyzt member and each visitor contribute to this bottom-up knowledge production. Every issue is explored locally, bringing forth new information and conceptions on local conditions and potentials. Local politicians, planners, and other professionals may take part, as they did at the *Dalston Mill*, in this bottom-up and – literally – situated knowledge production. Exyzt relies on local collaborators as a way to gain access to knowledge about the local situation – resources as well as problems. In Dalston, they relied on Muf Architecture|Art’s extensive participatory mapping of the local district, identifying and celebrating existing social, cultural and physical assets of the area. At the same time, the *Dalston Mill* explored and developed a part of their plan for Dalston.¹

Lacaton & Vassal take the viewpoints of residents, starting from inside the private housing unit. This approach is opposed to the top-down approach demonstrated by official demolition plans, but it also counters the most common approach in urban renewal, where one tends to start with communal areas, facades, and public squares. Lacaton & Vassal, on the contrary, seek the standpoint of the individual resident to gain accurate information about the situation at large, thus following a trajectory from inside to outside. The added structure attached to the *Bois-le-Prêtre Tower* in Paris, for instance, made it possible for people to keep their interiors unchanged if they wanted to, while at the same time offering new qualities both to the flats and the area at large. This solution provided the inhabitants with a real choice to keep their own personal environments while upgrading the house and expanding the living areas.

In all these examples, the bottom-up approach is used as way of gaining knowledge – a kind of knowledge which is considered more grounded and relevant than the one offered by conventional mapping tools. When describing this approach, I am not distinguishing strictly between citizens’

¹ muf architecture|art and J&L Gibbons LLP, “Making Space in Dalston”, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_1.pdf, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_2.pdf, www.designforlondon.gov.uk/.../Making_Space_in_Dalston_3.pdf, accessed 18/08/2010, 2009, pp. 5 and 15.

initiatives, direct participation of residents, and the architects adopting users' viewpoints. Bottom-up knowledge production takes a variety of ways and forms, often informal ones, and their significance for the architectural practices in this study, make the concept of "situated knowledges" an interesting reference. With this concept, Donna Haraway sought to reconcile the position of objectivity and empiricism with the radical post-structuralist equation of science and rhetorical practice. In the view of Haraway, (post-modern) relativism and (modern) universalism promise the "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" and this "'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry".² Thus, relativism in architecture is used as an explanation for withdrawing from social responsibility and universalism; the precondition for any Tabula Rasa and top-down expert knowledge. In *Spatial Agency*, Nishan Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till observe how "situated knowledges" in a plural form represent a multiplicity of voices and contributions of non-experts, breaking away from specialist knowledge to make way for shared knowledge.

"Situated knowledges" is an interesting concept to import in order to reflect on these architects' opposition to top-down plans and Tabula Rasa developments, but certainly also to look at the nuances of bottom-up approaches in architecture. Donna Haraway argues that "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility."³ The architects in this study, although practitioners rather than scientists, seem to adhere to the same situatedness, facilitating and building "situated knowledges" that can form the ground of situated visions and shared imaginations. No claims are made for universal truths or momentous changes. Rather, these visions aim at small-scale change and the realisation of local potential.

Although she highlights the importance of situated knowledge(s), Haraway points out that to "see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic..." She considers the viewpoint of the subjugated as a relevant point of departure, but warns against a romanticised view of the subjugated and the considerable challenges involved in pursuing these viewpoints.⁴ Haraway does not want to fix these viewpoints, arguing that we are "bound to seek perspective from points of view which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination."⁵ This latter point is elaborated by Isabelle Doucet, who in a book review of BAVO's *Too*

² Donna Haraway, "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 1988, p. 584.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 584.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 585.

Active to Act, suggests that “by letting go of the margin as an already established and recognised ‘other’, and by avoiding an overly enthusiastic embracing of those established margins, one could allow that which is the ‘other’, not yet defined or describable, to emerge, to take shape.”⁶ Doucet emphasises this point even more than Haraway, but shares the latter’s idea of openness as a way to avoid locked dichotomies. This is interesting also with regards to the top-down versus bottom-up discussion, pointing to the relevance of a more nuanced approach. Haraway seeks “a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy.”⁷ She points out that “a dichotomous chart misrepresents in a critical way the positions of embodied objectivity that I am trying to sketch. The primary distortion is the illusion of symmetry in the chart’s dichotomy, making any position appear, first, simply alternative and, second, mutually exclusive.”⁸ However, she adds that, “A map of tensions and resonances between the fixed ends of a charged dichotomy better represents the potent politics and epistemologies of embodied, therefore, accountable, objectivity.”⁹ One of the things that interests me, in this last chapter, is how the selected practices can be said to operate between such dichotomies.

The information gathering pursued by Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes relies on the architects’ own situated viewpoints as well as on contributions from a multiplicity of “local experts”, to build situated knowledges. In these cases, knowledge pertains mainly to local conditions, and the question of whose viewpoints are included is formed by the actual situation. Characteristic for these practices is not only how the viewpoints shift, but how these shifts lead to expanded knowledge about people, places, problems and possibilities. These bottom-up approaches have a double effect. On the one hand, they lead to more democratic processes, allowing local and tacit knowledge to play part. On the other hand, they contribute to make better environments, by making it possible to address real problems and tap into unused resources.

Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout from Crimson have repeatedly emphasised the importance of gathering extensive local knowledge from within. Vanstiphout considers this an important countermove against top-down plans, whether market-driven or politically initiated. In-depth local knowledge has been a key factor in Crimson’s way of working, allowing them to “rediscover Hoogvliet’s hidden qualities as an

⁶ Isabelle Doucet, “If We Are, Indeed, All ‘Embedded’ Then What to Do Next? A Review of BAVO’s *To Active to Act*”, *Footprint: Delft School of Design Journal*, 8 (Spring), 2011, p. 93.

⁷ Haraway, “Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective”, p. 588.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

unloved, but captivating urban entity with its own peculiarities.”¹⁰ Crimson’s way of working has interesting similarities with that of Fantastic Norway, even though the Dutch practice work on a very different scale, in terms of size, time, and budgets. Like Vanstiphout, Haffner and Aasarød gather information about “everything”, relying on local initiatives, groups and organisations. This approach makes it possible to maintain social intentions but still avoid the mistakes of large scale developments in the 1960s and 70s. An example of this is Fantastic Norway’s work at the Saupstad-centre. During numerous dialogues, it became clear that many residents at Kolstad, in particular the younger and the older, missed shared public spaces. Contrary to the “official” truths about the disinterest in suburban public space, the propositions for common spaces at Kolstad demonstrated a real interest in ways to meet across different social groups, not only as a vague ideal, but as concrete and realisable solutions. Collaborating closely with residents and residents groups, “hidden” information was revealed, enabling new knowledge and new solutions.

This particular mode of knowledge production is characterised by a bottom-up approach and an idea of situated knowledges. Strict dichotomies are challenged –the distinction between the architectural expert and the ordinary resident, for instance, but even the one between bottom-up and top-down. Markus Bader sums up the approach of Raumlabor in this way: “We always work in conjunction with a given situation and try to formulate a specific question for ourselves within the social, spatial and economic context... We often collaborate with experts. We consider many people experts, not just academics; people who have gathered experience of a place and who have knowledge of milieus and micro structures.”¹¹ This way of working comes close to Isabelle Doucet’s notion of “fluid planning”. Her description summarises several aspects of our discussion:

‘Fluid planning’ no longer fights for more participation, but for more adaptive knowledge production: in common thought but therefore not necessarily with all actors at any stage of the process. ‘Fluid planning’ can break down the too rigid actor categories: in contemporary cities actors constantly change, mutate, disappear, while new actors, too, enter the urban stage. ‘Fluid planning’ most significantly allows re-thinking of planning’s rational, rigid knowledge production and it being

¹⁰ Michelle Provoost, “Happy Hoogvliet”, <http://www.thenewtown.nl/article.php?id_article=15>, accessed 04/09/2009, 2004. “Our focal point was the existing substance of Hoogvliet, both physically (the buildings and public space) and socially (the people). We declined to focus on the negative qualifications and the obvious problems, but set out to rediscover Hoogvliet’s hidden qualities as an unloved, but captivating urban entity with its own peculiarities.”

¹¹ Raumlabor Berlin et al., *Acting in Public*, Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008, p. 15.

opened up to more subjective concerns. It questions how subjective, concerned knowledge production can be incorporated into the rational production of facts. As such it counters the ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ debate by moving the focus of research away from the distinction between knowledge produced either on or in the city, towards research addressing knowledge production by the city: both types of knowledge but particularly the translations taking place between them.¹²

Although “fluid planning” seems to share similarities with approaches found in the case studies, practices in this study have not abandoned participation all together. On the contrary; social responsibility and ideals of justice on which participation grounds have proven to be very present.

Bottom up and participation

At the *A Better World* debates in Rotterdam 2007, bottom-up was the chosen concept. At the *Alternate Currents* symposium in Sheffield the same year and the *Experimental Architecture* exhibition in Venice the year after, however, the concept of participation was included. Neither Exyzt nor Lacaton & Vassal speak about participation directly, yet, they relate to the notion in several different ways. In *+Plus*, Druot, Lacaton & Vassal write about “coordination” by which they primarily refer to dialogues and meetings with residents and residents’ groups.¹³ Without calling it participation, Lacaton & Vassal states that every resident of a housing block must have access to the same kind of dialogue with the architect as clients of a single family house. Their “freedom of use” principle, by which large floor spaces are left in a kind of uncompleted state for residents and users to complete, may be thought of as a form of participation, linking back to Oscar Hansen’s concept of open form. On my question whether they are interested in participation, it became clear that for Anne Lacaton, participation is understood as something procedural, referring to planning processes where residents are heard.¹⁴ If Lacaton & Vassal were to use participation, it would have to rely on existing initiatives and collaboration with active groups in the neighbourhood. These individual and local initiatives are important when Lacaton & Vassal conceptualise the development of a neighbourhood as well as the city.

¹² Isabelle Doucet, “[Centrality] and/or Cent[erality]: A matter of placing the boundaries”, in Giovanni Maciocco (ed.), *Urban Landscape and Perspectives*, pp. 93-121, 2008, pp. 113-114.

¹³ Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, *+ plus*, (GG), Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007, p. 259.

¹⁴ Lisbet Harboe and Anne Lacaton, *Interview (09.12.2009) with Anne Lacaton*, Oslo, 2009.

Nicolas Henninger accepts the notion of participation and can see how it is integrated in their work. However, Exyzt prefers to call it “freedom of expression and exchange” in which they open for members, volunteers and visitors to contribute on site through actions, interactions, and initiatives. For the *Dalston Barn* project, Nicolas Henninger integrated local unemployed youths as apprentices in the construction works. This looks like participatory processes but can also be regarded simply as a different kind of use – offering work experience.¹⁵ For Fantastic Norway, participation forms an integrated part of their practice, and they speak about it readily in relation to the dialogues and meetings in the caravan. But even for them, participation is not an objective in itself, but defines rather specific actions and tools.

At the *Alternate Currents* symposium in Sheffield, participation was more present in the presentations, used by for instance Mathias Heyden, Bureau Design Research (BDR), Public Works, and Supertanker/UTF. Several architectural practices working on commission for public authorities on urban planning, housing, or public buildings, rely on participatory processes and try to develop better participatory tools. Particularly Supertanker/UTF, BDR and AOC (Agents of Change) seek to develop better participatory tools and strategies in processes of mainly programming and planning. Supertanker/UTF, for instance, has invented several participatory planning tools particularly geared towards urban conflicts, presenting them under the banner “playful participation”. AOC and BDR, similarly, have developed playful inventions to engage residents and users in participatory processes.¹⁶ Also some of the more informally working groups engage in playful participation of various kinds, such as Public Works and Raumlabor Berlin.

In most European countries, residents’ right to participate in urban planning and renewal processes is regulated by law. Such legislation rarely secures real participatory processes, however. Completed plans are presented for consultation or hearing, often barely complying with the minimum legal requirement for participation. Public bodies worry about the seeming lack of interest from the public, seeing it either as a challenge or as an impending doom. Numerous examples of fake or inefficient participatory procedures contribute to veil conflicts by projecting images of consensus. This may be why the practitioners in this study either avoid the word participation, or seek to playfully and radically reinvent its content. Nevertheless, there has been renewed interest in the history of participation and American community design, and a few historical key texts have republished. An example of this is the text “Architecture’s Public” by Team 10 member Giancarlo de Carlo. The

¹⁵ EXYZT, translated by Claire Boucher, “Exyzt - Who are we? Constructed Actions or Constructing Action Platforms”, <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

¹⁶ Jens Brandt, Martin Frandsen, and Jan Lilliendahl Larsen, “Supertanker: In Search of Urbanity”, *arg - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008.

text is based on a speech from 1969, originally published in 1971, but reprinted in 2005 by Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till in the anthology *Architecture and Participation*.¹⁷ “Architecture’s Public” is an ideological manifesto, elaborated as a vision for architectural, emancipatory, and political potentials of participation on both a human and a societal level. De Carlo demanded a just distribution of influence and housing conditions, addressing architects’ social responsibility. Architects had adjusted to the values of the ruling power, de Carlo argued, insisting on planning not ‘for’ the users on behalf of the ruling power, but ‘with’ the users. He argues that architecture is a public act that can only be legitimated by its users.¹⁸ He constructs a dichotomy between the abstract and universal user of traditional planners, and the individualised user of participatory planning processes. In “Architecture’s Public”, Giancarlo de Carlo sketches both a vision and a method. Cyclical and participatory processes form for him a systematic scientific method where the goal is, as he states, to achieve a balanced consensus and a high quality result. These cyclical processes are not only preconditions for good architecture, but for an architecture open to appropriation and adaptation through use. In these processes prescribed by de Carlo, architects are still the ones “transforming aspirations into images” – the architects are the ones actually designing the architectural body.¹⁹ Participation adds to the richness of the environment while at the same time creating conditions for architectural works to reach their “fullness”. However, not only will architecture develop through use, users will also develop through relations with the built environment, demonstrating an emancipatory potential in architecture and the architectural processes.

A real metamorphosis is necessary to develop new characteristics in the practice of architecture and new behavior patterns in its authors: therefore all barriers between builders and users must be abolished, so that building and using could

¹⁷ Editor’s note in Giancarlo de Carlo, “Architecture’s public”, in Jeremy Till, Doina Petrescu, and Peter Blundell Jones (eds.), *Architecture and Participation*, London: Spon Press, 2005/1971, p. 3: “This milestone in architectural history began life as a lecture given at a conference in Liège in 1969, and was published in extended form with an English translation the following year in the Italian periodical *Parametro*. It carries both the optimistic and egalitarian spirit of 1968 and the anger of a younger modernist generation discovering that the social ideals of the Modern Movement had been lost or betrayed. Its strongly political tone recalls a time when the impact of global capitalism was beginning to be felt, and the political implications of the aesthetic were being exposed. Thirty-four years on, much remains relevant, and many of the problems identified are still with us: the tendency for academic architecture to isolate itself in its own discourse, for example, has increased. This remains a key text for anyone concerned with participation.”

¹⁸ “[W]e need to question architecture’s ‘credibility’, i.e. its capacity to have a ‘public’. And therefore we must start by addressing a fundamental question: what is architecture’s public? The architects themselves? The clients who commission the buildings? The people – all the people who use architecture? If the third hypothesis is true – that all the people who use architecture are its public, and today this seems hard to resist – then the presence and the work of the Modern Movement and its heroes must emerge in a different perspective from that allowed by its own publicity machine.” *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

become two different parts of the same planning process. Therefore the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence.²⁰

The practices in this study explore processes where buildings and use are fully or partly integrated. Giancarlo de Carlo's notion of the users and their individuality, and his vision of an architecture open to appropriation and adaptation through use, more equal distributions of housing qualities, and not least, the architect's responsibility towards the public, have been influential, and the practices in this study share many of these ideals. Yet, de Carlo's explicitly ideological framework is not part of the social engagement of architectural practitioners today. Even Exyzt, who surely work to abolish "barriers between builders and users" and who produce manifestoes against architectural autonomy and top down planning, never evoke overriding ideologies and retain a playful and humorous tone in all their writing. Contemporary practitioners are less ideological and more pragmatic than their predecessors, relying mostly on conditions and contingencies in the specificities of the situations. Comparing de Carlo's ideas from 1969 with the ones by the three contemporary practices, some aspects have been left behind: a clear-cut ideology, the belief in radical changes, and the blanket faith in the emancipatory power of architecture.

Giancarlo de Carlo has revised his ideological conception of participation and his extensive processes of user inclusions in programming and planning. In a recent interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, de Carlo says that he regard participation as a politically instrumentalised and often degraded strategy. He sums up this change of heart by talking about his own work:

I had made two projects: one was a housing complex in Terni, and the other one was the urban plan for the new centre of Rimini, both based on participation. Then after that moment a more bureaucratic period began, when participation became something very formalistic and stupid.²¹

De Carlo consequently left formal participation, concentrating instead on how to develop an architecture that could be appropriated and developed by the user. His agenda is thus

²⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Preface: Participation Last Forever", in Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar (eds.), *Did Someone Say Participate?: An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, p. 18. This change of view was also articulated in a conversation between Ole Bouman, Roemer van Toorn and Giancarlo de Carlo during 1987, republished in: Ole Bouman, Roemer van Toorn, and Giancarlo de Carlo, "Architecture is too important to leave to the architects: A conversation with Giancarlo de Carlo by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn", *Volume*, 2, 2005.

to make an architecture which can intrinsically be participated, and this becomes a question of language. How can the language be such that it favours and pushes participation?... So the process in my opinion takes a lot longer to form. Participation is something that you should start – and this something that you should not forget – it lasts forever.²²

De Carlo pinpoints the way hopes and expectations on behalf of participation was thwarted during the 1970s and early 1980s, as people seemed neither as committed nor as playful as the architects anticipated.

While Giancarlo de Carlo drew up an ideological concept of participation for the architectural design process, the American planner Sherry R. Arnstein introduced in 1969 “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”. The article and participation ladder by Arnstein was republished in *Hunch* No. 13 of 2009. Ever since its first publication, Arnstein’s ladder has been used to evaluate participation procedures in planning, housing developments, and urban renewal in regard to political and democratic results. The ladder addresses the “real” content of participation as an issue of power. As Arnstein states; “citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power” and only its upper part concerns real redistribution of power.²³ Arnstein published her ladder as director of Community Development Studies for The Commons, a non-profit research institute in Washington DC and Chicago, and the article addresses issues and alternatives in American planning. Nevertheless, the ladder was widely distributed as a tool to check the “reality” of participation as a vehicle for the redistribution of power, and not just a tranquillising tool.

In this contemporary study, two groups stand out as defenders of participation, seeking to reinvigorate and reinvent participation in contemporary practice. They rely on a history of participation shaped by people such as de Carlo and Arnstein, forming a more or less continuous tradition from the 1970s until today. In their anthology *Architecture & Participation*, Blundell Jones, Petrescu and Till applaud a visionary and extensive participation, presenting both historical and recent examples. Till identifies how participation today is understood merely procedural and bureaucratic, looking to reinvigorate and reveal its transformative potentials, and as such, its political force. Likewise, Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden (Fezer is on the editorial board of *An Architektur*, Heyden has collaborated with *An Architektur* on specific projects) appreciate, revise and extend the

²² Obrist, “Preface: Participation Last Forever”, p. 18.

²³ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 4, 1969, p. 216. A facsimile of the article was published in *Hunch*: Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”, *Hunch: the Berlage Institute report*, 13, 2009.

concept and practice of participation in order for it to cover contemporary realities. By using the term participation, or more correctly *Strategies of Participatory Architecture and Spatial Production*, they seek to demonstrate a continuity of participatory processes and works. Their aim is to renew and expand participation so that “new planning tools can be compiled in relation to historic participative architecture and theories.”²⁴ In their explanations, participation encompasses participatory processes in planning, a focus on everyday life including the self-organised and “vernacular”, flexibility in the built environment providing more open and less prearranged spaces, as well as works where architects take a role as “initiator, moderator, supporter, and executer of claims.”²⁵ Fezer & Heyden’s book, *Hier Entsteht: Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung* constitutes one part of their project, whereas the scaffolded structure on Rosa-Luxembourg-Platz, presented in Chapter 4, constitutes the other.²⁶ These architects in Berlin and Sheffield, discussing and expanding the concept of participation and participatory praxis, are all mindful of the political, transformative potentials of participation.²⁷

The misuses of participatory procedures to cover conflictual situations or uneven power-relations with a veil of consensus have been criticised, not least in the Netherlands. A recurrent theme, both at the debates and talks in

²⁴ Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden, “Hier Entsteht - Under Construction: Strategies of Participative Architecture and Spatial Appropriation - Introduction”, <<http://www.metrozones.info/metrobuecher/ensteht/vorw01.html>>, accessed 13/08/2010, 2007.

²⁵ Ibid. Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden list issues and themes included in the strategies for contemporary participative architecture: “Participative architects searches for new alliances, working methods and methods for spatial organization, for approaches that accommodate multifaceted and changing life-styles / make living in the plural possible / take up different ideas of the use of space // reveal economic conditions for self-determination / call into question real estate property / bring into discussion a collective understanding of ownership // accept the dynamics of self-organization / use the potential of self-building // design in an interdisciplinary / develop spaces that are not fixed to a final state / able to react to future demands / contemplate parametric architectures / program changeable rule sets / structure diversity with variants // demand social interaction / open structures of decision-making / extend the temporal and personal spaces of negotiation / assume an unlimited multiplicity of participants / assemble communication techniques for non-professionals / make relevant information available / initiate public debates on the built environment // understand planning as processes as making things possible / offer technical support / initiate negotiation processes through provocation / question adjustments and competence relations / lend inspiration for possible developments by outlining scenarios / evaluate possible consequences / offer use-neutral spaces / take into account possible misuses and temporary appropriations // look for tasks that users offer / think of a building on demand / offer planning competence to economically excluded people / look for contact to the culturally discriminated / stimulate the spatial production of social structures / invent collective planning tools / accept failings and compromises / promote self-generated aesthetics / overcome fixation on images / use the communication tools of information technology / apply flexible constructions / test production methods of mass-customisation / integrate flexible parameters in built structures.” Fezer and Heyden, “Hier Entsteht - Under Construction: Strategies of Participative Architecture and Spatial Appropriation - Introduction”,

²⁶ Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden, *Hier Entsteht. Strategien partizipativer Architektur und Räumlicher Aneignung*, Berlin: b_books Verlag, 2007.

²⁷ Jeremy Till expresses scepticism concerning limited participatory processes where residents are offered only well-adjusted portions to decide on. Even participatory schemes such as the ones developed by Henry Sanoff in his community design projects in the United States, serve only adjusted portions, Till argues. Sanoff presented his practice in Berlin at a debate hosted by *An Architektur* in 2008, in company with Leslie Kanes Weisman (another nestor in American community design and key note speaker at the AHRA Agency conference in Sheffield, 2009). He argued for tightly planned participatory processes in order to produce results within a limited period of time.

Rotterdam and Sheffield, either addressing bottom-up approaches or participation, has been how conflicts and conflicting issues should be included rather than denied or covered up. Participatory practices such as BDR (Bureau Design Research) and Supertanker/UTF seek to develop playful tools to deal with real conflicts and conflictual issues. Supertanker/UTF has acted as mediators in larger territorial conflicts of urban development in Copenhagen, using tools such as their “Free Trial” as mentioned in Chapter 2. Exyzt wants to use the specific shift in ambience when visitors enter from the streets of the city into their temporary, active, playful urban spaces, to raise awareness and consciousness. Within a generous atmosphere, where people from different sides may actually meet, conflictual and political issues can be approached and discussed through informal encounters and organised debates. Also Fantastic Norway use humour and generosity as means to address conflictual issues and move beyond dead-locks. However, in the environments where Haffner and Aasarød work, urban plans and built projects depend on a certain agreement among residents, politicians, and funders. Malkit Shoshan and FAST, as well as Santiago Cirugeda, clearly rise against top-down plans, rules and systems, standing in continuously conflicting situations or revealing these conflicts. FAST aims for agreements with Israeli authorities over certain aspects, yet illegal tactics are part of their work. What characterise all these practices, is a will to reach solutions, not necessarily consensus. Conflict is part of their modus operandi, most clearly for FAST, Supertanker/UTF and Cirugeda but also Fantastic Norway and Exyzt. Participatory processes or bottom-up tactics are ways to unlock and utilise conflict as a productive force.

Markus Miessen represents a voice explicitly “against” participation. In the anthology and exhibition of *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice* Miessen, together with Shuman Basar, redirect participation away from its consensual inclinations, as they say, trying instead to assemble “practitioners and theorists who actively trespass – or “participate” – in neighbouring or alien knowledge-spaces.”²⁸ They are interested in a conflictual aspect of participation, opposing what they regard as the “culture of consensus” and the “ethos of compromise”.²⁹ However, these discussions are not developed on the basis of local experiences in the urban diversity of European cities, but rely more on societal-political discussions pursued through curatorial works.³⁰ In this way, Miessen’s definition of participation

²⁸ Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, “Introduction: Did we mean participation or did we mean something else?”, in Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar (eds.), *Did Someone Say Participate?: An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, p. 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Miessen has pursued the theme of participation in the exhibition project *Violent Participation* of 2007, and *Nightmare of Participation* from 2010. In his article “The Violence of Participation”, Miessen sees participation as conflict, exploring how one might use participation “without catering to pre-established needs or tasks, or – from the point of view of the traditional architect – how it is possible to participate in, for

stands out as a relativistic and universalising contribution, very much contrary to the emphasis on participation as situated knowledge. Miessen shares views with Hans Ulrich Obrist, who claims that “At the beginning, participation was very “authentic” (according to architects Yona Friedman, and Giancarlo de Carlo).”³¹ By now, however, “the fraught legacy of consensus” has taken over participation.³²

The consensual participation used by housing associations and urban developers prompted more radical forces to abandon the concept all together, preferring instead to speak about bottom-up. By definition as well as by tradition, participation presupposes a certain compliance by the people taking part. Bottom-up is interesting as it is defined by its element of opposition, or resistance against top-down, including the power hierarchy of traditional participation. The dichotomy of top-down versus bottom-up necessarily involves oppositions, conflicts and alternatives. In a historical perspective, however, participation has demonstrated an oppositional potential and political force, confirmed here by de Carlo and Arnstein. Participation in architecture has an ideological, emancipatory, and political history, while recently, the term has been criticised as bureaucratic and outdated. What this short review demonstrates, however, are contemporary voices and practices seeking to revive, expand and redefine participation, as well as to repoliticise it. Participation can take on a meaning similar to that of bottom-up; an affinity we have seen in several practices. Whether they speak of participation or of bottom-up; what matters to these practices is to discuss what actually takes place in the particular situation in which they work, understanding the interests of and contributions by citizens, users and residents.

Bottom-up and local initiative

Fantastic Norway’s Christmas story in *Narvik* used the simple example of choral singing to highlight the significance of local initiatives and resources. Their story carried aspirations, not only for a richer urban life, but for more democratic town development. By paying attention to initiatives, self-organisation and actions by particular residents or groups, Haffner and Aasarød may be said to look for power taken rather than given, to paraphrase Gloria Steinem. “Power can be taken, not given. The process of taking is

example, urban micro-politics by inserting friction and asking questions rather than doing local community work...” Markus Miessen, “The Violence of Participation”, *Eurozine*, <<http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2007-08-01-miessen-en.pdf>>, accessed 09/03/2010, 2007. Markus Miessen (ed.), *The Violence of Participation*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2007.

³¹ Obrist, “Preface: Participation Last Forever”, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*

empowerment itself” Steinem writes; a statement that goes to the heart of the bottom-up movement.³³ Just as much as wanting to democratise town developments, Fantastic Norway wants to contribute to a more fantastic and enjoyable environment – less boring and more filled with life. In the deindustrialised areas where they usually work, this vision dovetails a new economic structure based on small service-enterprises rather than large industries. The bottom-up approaches of Fantastic Norway display a duality of empowerment and entrepreneurship that will be important in the following discussion.

Fantastic Norway attends to and assists bottom-up initiatives. To do so, they firstly engage in public education with newspaper articles, caravan dialogues, and television series. Secondly, they assist local projects, encouraging and facilitating initiatives by local people. These approaches, and this is a third point, include architects making, mediating and intervening, providing space – platforms, voids, or common spaces that can facilitate and nurture local initiatives. Contrary to what the word suggests, then, bottom-up approaches in this study are not always one way. Exyzt, for instance, consider themselves part of the “bottom”, and considers their own interventions as bottom-up actions. The same is the case when FAST in Palestine and Santiago Cirugeda in Seville ally with residents and citizens against the authorities, engaging in a clear opposition against top down planning. In participation as envisioned by de Carlo and critically discussed by Arnstein on the other hand, the position of the architect is fixed as an authoritative expert.

In this study we see an intermingling of initiatives, actions, interactions and results to which architects, citizens, residents, and users all contribute. Here, positions are not at all fixed; architects build on local initiatives, citizens build on spatial facilities provided by architects, users initiate events for the neighbourhood, and so it goes – not necessarily in a happy circle. Raumlabor combined interventions with urban planning in their *Kolorado Plan* of Neustadt Halle in ways that could be seen as bottom-up and top down intertwined, combinations also pursued by Fantastic Norway and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, in their own ways. Doina Petrescu who is partner in Atelier Architecture Autogéré, reflects on these combinations when speaking about their *ECObOX* project: “This is not as much a bottom-up approach, but one ‘in the middle’, as Deleuze would say. It is an approach that places the

³³ Gloria Steinem, quoted in Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Beyond Discourse: Notes on Spatial Agency”, *Footprint: Delft School of Design Journal*, 4, 2009. “Empowerment is thus not about the transfer of decision-making power from ‘influential’ sectors to those previously disadvantaged or ‘other’ sections of society, but about these ‘others’ taking control and initiating different or ‘alternative’ spatial processes including, but not restricted to, the making of buildings.” Schneider and Till, “Beyond Discourse: Notes on Spatial Agency”, p. 100.

architect and the user in the middle of a creative architectural process.”³⁴ Here, users and architects share a middle position – a place actively sought by many of the practices in this study. This brings us back to dilemmas regarding the dichotomy bottom-up versus top down. As Petrescu hints, this dichotomy can easily be misused to fixate social hierarchies – in particular “the bottom” – while also narrowing the scope of actions and imaginations. In the case study practices, however, bottom-up versus top-down is a tool to conceptualise hierarchies of power and influence within specific, local situations, accessing the viewpoints of local citizens, users and residents. These hierarchies are not stable, and is treated in each case as provisional constructs, much like Donna Haraway recommended on behalf of “situated knowledges”.

As Fantastic Norway states in point 6 of the *Make-it-Fantastic-Method*: “Invade power structures. Find the people who really make things happen. Anchor the project. Find a prime mover. Every place has one. This is the key to success.” The key, then, is the local enthusiast; someone who, assisted by the architects, can permeate bureaucratic indecision and political deadlock, gathering economic, political and popular support for a project. This reliance and valuation of individual actors and local human resources is an important part of Fantastic Norway’s bottom-up approach, making dialogue their most important tool. Instead of organising public meetings, public debates, or hearings, Haffner and Asarød speak with individual people.

The individualised approach of Fantastic Norway is present also in the work of Lacaton & Vassal. Directing their attention towards individual flats and families, the *+Plus*, dialogues become a model in this respect. Lacaton & Vassal claim the right for all residents to be clients, collaborating with the architects in planning their home. As for Fantastic Norway, the core of the civic mobilisation process is dialogue. In the case of Lacaton & Vassal, this dialogue took place on site, for Fantastic Norway it happened mainly in the caravan – with waffles. These meetings – unlike public gatherings or questionnaires – would allow everyone to share their knowledge, opinions, stories and ideas. Also at the hosted sites of Exyzt, dialogues are central, starting with giving visitors an individual welcome and continuing into explanations and discussions on what the place is and what it means. Neither Fantastic Norway nor Exyzt are able to treat every visitor in exactly the same way – it depends on the particular circumstances. Informality and flexibility in dialogues are important, as they allow adjustments and freedom in meeting

³⁴ Doina Petrescu, “Losing control, keeping desire”, in Jeremy Till, Doina Petrescu, and Peter Blundell Jones (eds.), *Architecture and Participation*, London: Spon Press, 2005, p. 56. Petrescu continues, “In many ways, this is a location in the middle, this ‘middle’ which, for Deleuze, is the place where lines and politics acquire speed.” Atelier Architecture Autogéré (aaa) is non-profit interdisciplinary network organised by Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou. The architects have developed participatory garden projects in their own neighbourhood of Paris, first the *ECObox* and subsequently *project 56*. These are projects have gradually developed, thus to be managed by residents and users.

with different kinds of people, incidents, or propositions. By approaching each person individually, they engage people who would neither speak in public nor answer a questionnaire.

Crimson Architectural Historians have developed a particular way to speak about this multidirectional approach, describing how, in Hoogvliet, they gathered information and dealt with the “hardware” – physical environments – “software” – social, cultural and human environments – and “orgware”. They define the latter in this way: “(organisation-ware) means the complex of institutions, enterprises and other bodies”, public, private/public and private ones in and around the area from the local to the national which include their policy intentions, statutes, budgets and rules as well as the web of official regulations and policy.”³⁵ Only by addressing all of these levels, they argue, can they realise plans and projects for a better future in Hoogvliet. These levels rely on the shift from government to governance with its decentralisation of central public authority.³⁶ While the system of governance does not prevent top-down implementations in urban planning and renewal, governance structures provide more complicated webs of developers, ruling agents and formal institutions. Fantastic Norway has developed extensive knowledge of these structures and possibilities in Northern Norway, using the media as a way of navigating them. Exyzt, for their part, allies with a knowledgeable “local guide” in order to identify possibilities and challenges. Intervening in London and England, Exyzt operate in a reality of fragmented governance, defined by even further fragmentations of public services and institutions. As Patsy Healey describes, there follows a plethora of organisations, partnerships, quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) and voluntary group initiatives in the wake of this process.³⁷ The *Dalston Mill* and *Dalston Barn* were set in such an environment, providing a venue for many these groups.

These discussions sketch a landscape of bottom-up approaches stretching between oppositional-political manoeuvres and neo-liberal tendencies, making bottom-up a compound term. Based on the practices explored in this study, bottom-up approaches stretch from a notion of social entrepreneurship to the concept of tactics as defined by Michel de Certeau. Let us look at these notions more carefully. Social entrepreneur is a term widely used in social and economic disciplines as well as in corresponding sectors, but is rarely present in the architectural debate.³⁸ The term entrepreneurial originates from

³⁵ Michelle Provoost (ed.), *WIMBY! Hoogvliet: Future, Past and Present of a New Town: or The Big WIMBY Book*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007, p. 24. The authors borrow the term from Valéry Didelon, “(The conspiracy of the real) La Conspiration du réel”, *Le Visiteur*, 7, 2001.

³⁶ On governance, see Erik Swyngedouw, “Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State”, *Urban studies*, 42 (11), 2005.

³⁷ Patsy Healey, “Consensus-building across Difficult Divisions: new approaches to collaborative strategy making”, *Planning Practice and Research*, 11 (2), 1996.

³⁸ Social entrepreneur was not a term in use at the exhibitions, conferences and practices of this study.

the entrepreneur-innovator concept of economist Joseph Schumpeter who in 1935 defined the entrepreneur as someone capable of overcoming a series of obstacles by means of innovation.³⁹ Schumpeter discussed the role of the entrepreneur as an *agent of change* in economic organisations. In its contemporary use, social entrepreneur denotes, on the one hand, volunteer initiatives and self-organisation, and on the other, a mix of profit and non-profit organisations. J. Gregory Dees defines the latter as “not-for-profit organizations starting for-profit or earned-income ventures”, explaining that “In addition to innovative not-for-profit ventures, social entrepreneurship can include social purpose business ventures, such as for-profit community development banks, and hybrid organizations mixing not-for-profit and for-profit elements, such as homeless shelters that start businesses to train and employ their residents.”⁴⁰ Social entrepreneurship in this sense may well be used to describe the works by Fantastic Norway, capturing their way of working and the way they collaborate with local enthusiasts to develop ideas and projects. Exyzt, on the other hand, refers more readily to socially engaged artists and processual art, than to anything like social entrepreneurs, both in theory and practice. Yet, in their “islands” of spatial opposition, they collaborate with both social workers and social entrepreneurs.

The authors of *Hier Entsteht* warn against an entrepreneurial emphasis. They argue, as described earlier, for an expanded form of participation. At the same time they are cautious about the participatory approach, maintaining that “hope for less hierarchical social structures through participation is often couched with promises of efficiency and better ‘active citizens’ to take their fate into their own hands. The resulting internalization of constraints and self-discipline shifts form of control, repression, exploitation and exclusion onto the subjects themselves...”⁴¹ This is an interesting argument against entrepreneurial bottom-up initiatives, focusing instead on societal structures and governmental responsibilities. In Fezer and Heyden’s view, bottom-up approaches may very well veil and hide social problems rather than contribute to solve them, as these approaches reduce structural explanations and shift the responsibility on to individuals – on to the active citizen. Fantastic Norway and Crimson Architectural Historians, on the other hand,

³⁹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung: eine Untersuchung über Unternehmergewinn, Kapital, Kredit, Zins und den Konjunkturzyklus*, München: Duncker & Humblot, 1935. Jean-Marc Fontan, Juan-Luis Klein, and Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, "Innovation and Society: Broadening the Analysis of the Territorial Effects of Innovation", *Canada Research Chair on the Socio-Organizational Challenges of the Knowledge Economy*, <<http://www.teleunivsite.ca/chaireecosavoir/pdf/NRC04-07A.pdf>>, 2004. Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, "La dynamique économique des processus d'innovation", (Université de Paris 1, 1989).

⁴⁰ J. Gregory Dees, "The Meaning of "Social Entrepreneurship"", <<http://www.fntc.info/files/documents/The%20meaning%20of%20Social%20Entrepreneurship.pdf>>, accessed 20/06/2011, 1998. J. Gregory Dees, "The Meaning of "Social Entrepreneurship" [Abstract]", <<http://csi.gsb.stanford.edu/the-meaning-social-entrepreneurship%20>>, accessed 02/11/2011.

⁴¹ Fezer and Heyden, "Hier Entsteht - Under Construction: Strategies of Partipative Architecture and Spatial Appropriation - Introduction",

are examples of practices who actively assist active citizens, hoping through them to build better environments both physically, socially, and culturally. These improvements may in turn benefit also the “weaker” segments of society.

A second relevant framework when summarising the bottom up approach, is Michel de Certeau’s notion of tactic versus strategy. Certeau defines strategy as “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment.’”⁴² Strategies thus have mainly to do with top-down relationships.⁴³ A tactic, on the other hand, “is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of tactic is the space of the other. ... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow.”⁴⁴ Certeau describes tactics as small and microbe-like operations that proliferate within technocratic structures, without possibilities to “stockpile its winnings, build up its position, and plan raids.”⁴⁵ Everyday life is saturated by a multitude of tactics, helping to deflect the functioning of structures and strategies.⁴⁶ Among his examples, Certeau includes not only pure tactics but also practices that are tactical in character. Architectural works which take part in the strategies operated by planning departments, developers, the building industry, and the property market at large, could be coined strategic. In this study, on the other hand, we have looked at works that could be called tactical – both due to their own tactical resistance, and their ability to open for tactical manoeuvres by others. Doina Petrescu refers to their mobile furniture modules (a kitchen, a library, a cinema, etc.) designed for the *ECObOX* collective garden as enabling a *tactical practice*, testifying to Certeau’s dichotomy.⁴⁷ Although conceived within a traditional Marxist dialectic, Certeau’s distinction nevertheless captures another aspect of the bottom up approach, pinpointing its focus on everyday practices and singular initiatives, going against or undermining top-heavy strategies of official or commercial planning regimes.

Although a bottom-up approach can be defined as a Certeau’ian tactic, it is more likely, as the practices here demonstrate, to include a variety of ways, tactics, and positions, forming rather untidy complexes. Instead of the binary dichotomy of bottom-up versus top down, Isabelle Doucet advocates the concept of agency as a way to see and explore these complexities.

⁴² Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984, p. xix.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁴⁷ At the debates organised by NAI in Rotterdam, however, the word strategy was used as a neutral term, without any reference to Certeau. Tactics, as such, were not discussed.

“Through agency we can finally look at architecture’s being-in-the-world in a much more complex manner than possible through the simplifications offered by binary pairs (e.g. bottom-up versus top-down, software vs. hardware, use vs. design).”⁴⁸ The concept of agency has been introduced, on the one side, to better describe the complexity of actors in an architecture field, but also to describe a transformative drive towards social change. The latter conception has been referred to as spatial agency, and will be approached again in Chapter 6.3.

Contemporary advocates of bottom-up warn against a fixed dichotomous structure and rigid definitions of the “other”. Advocates of a more social responsible concept of participation, on the other hand, warn against what they see as an over-emphasis on the “active citizen”. These discussions add two compound characteristics to our discussion of bottom-up approaches. Only such a compound conception may reflect the complexity and – sometimes – ambiguity that exist in the works of Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. At the debate in Rotterdam, “Le Corbusier’s orphans”, debaters argued for ways to improve and expand the bottom-up approaches, while at the same time warning against the rigid dichotomy of bottom-up versus top-down. The practitioners maintained the right to work in all directions, using many kinds of tools and tactics. These architects have chosen to deal with the complexity of the bottom-up approach, not as a matter of theoretical deliberation but through the way they approach each situation. All the three practices are intensely occupied with creating results of one kind or other, designing pleasurable and fantastic environments that can act as platforms, voids or “allmenning”(s) for actions and interactions. Trying to find a conceptual model that can encompass the complexity of this approach as we have encountered it in practice, I wonder if it would be possible to lay Arnstein’s participatory ladder down on its side – as a grounded ladder – instead of reaching into the sky. This is not to reduce the demand for justice and equality in the planning process, but rather to have all steps and agents working in parallel, searching for good solutions in local situations. This should not deter critical discussion on gentrification, democratic practices, power, diversity, or deprivation, but state the need for detailed and many-faceted insight into the complexity of the local situation.

⁴⁸ Isabelle Doucet, “Problematizing the Question”, *Conditions: Magazine for Architecture & Urbanism*, 9, 2010, p. 29.

6.2 In the service of other ends

In their report from the *Alternate Currents* symposium, Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider concluded that the papers and presentations showed ways to operate “beyond the limited value system of mainstream architectural culture. This is not to dismiss aesthetics and tectonics *tout court*, but to see them always in the service of other ends. In particular there is a need, as these papers often argue, to address the social, economic, environmental and political issues of the day.”⁴⁹ In the previous chapters, works and ways of working by Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal have been described and reviewed to see how these architects address social, economic, and political issues. These works and ways of working are regarded in the service other ends. A question, however, is whether these works must be regarded “*always* in the service of other ends” as stated by Schneider and Till. Always, here, indicates a hierarchy where social, economic, environmental and political issues have a general priority over aesthetics and tectonics. In the following, I want to discuss whether this priority is present in and pertinent to the work of my three selected practices.⁵⁰

At first glance, the three practices seem to follow Till and Schneider’s edict. They deal with issues of equality, opportunities, and social space – with enabling local residents, providing spatial and social opportunities, and tapping into forgotten or neglected resources in any given place. None of them speak about aesthetics and tectonics *tout court*, emphasising instead their non-formalist approach. “[A]esthetics is too often too much in focus”, state Haffner and Aasarød.⁵¹ Instead, they engage in civic mobilisation processes and educational projects, where they seek to ensure the citizens’ influence over their own environment. They advocate non-commercial urban spaces where activities and interactions are at the centre of focus, aiming to develop more open and inclusive social environments. Lacaton & Vassal contribute to a more equal distribution of spatial qualities, countering economical inequalities and housing regulations with their “freedom of use”. Exyzt, with their hosted common spaces, share similar ideals, seeking for a limited period to facilitate coexistence across social, economic, and cultural divisions in the city. The collective announce their work as an alternative to consumerism and formalism, but address these overriding issues as they come to the fore in a specific situation. Like the other two practices, they

⁴⁹ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Alternate Currents: Editorial”, *Field: Alternate Currents*, 2 (1), 2007, p. 111.

⁵⁰ The terms aesthetics and tectonics is used here as they are used in architectural discussions to describe visual and physical elements of buildings and cities. Theoretical definitions of aesthetics in art theory are not relevant to this discussion.

⁵¹ Linn Karen Ravn, Håkon Matre Aasarød, and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, “Fantastiske folk”, *Putsj*, 04/05 (September), 2005.

work to facilitate actions, interactions, and appropriations while paying attention to individual experience. In this sense, these practices may be seen as part of a general shift, described by Isabelle Doucet and Kenneth Cupers in *Footprint*: “The recent infatuation with performance in architecture can be understood as an attempt to move away resolutely from meaning as it was espoused in architecture theory, and to think instead through the Deleuzian concepts of *immanence* and *affect*.”⁵² Doucet and Cupers conclude that current approaches in architecture tend to be guided less by what architecture *means* or *intends*, than by how it *works*, and what it *does*, not “casting architecture in terms of either societal relevance or aesthetic quality”.⁵³ The strong performative ambitions of works such as the *Nantes Architecture School*, the *Dalston Mill* and the *Kolstad Arena* bear witness to such a shift. These are environments, whether imagined or realised, that explore ways to facilitate activities and initiatives, creating a more interactive and accessible form of public space. These architects are interested in mobilisation rather than representation, putting less emphasis, it seems, on design and architectural expression. And yet, is the material presence of architecture less important in these works? Fantastic Norway and Exyzt talk about the extraordinary, fantastic and playful while Lacaton & Vassal speak also about comfort and pleasure. These concepts refer both to uses and experiences. Are aesthetics and tectonics set aside when spatial experiences and active opportunities are emphasised, for instance in the “platform”, “allmenning” and “void”? Or, is material expression still a vital part of what these practices are trying to achieve? I believe it is, only in somewhat different ways than in more formally oriented practices. In this section I will try to show how.

Fantastic Norway’s notion of the fantastic is a good illustration of how social and architectural concerns merge in the practices I have studied. With their calls for the fantastic, Haffner and Aasarød hail architectural qualities that have been overlooked, looking at appearance along with activities and use. Their fantastic suggestions, as presented in their advent calendar for Bodø, for instance, describe uses and activities along with bodily and social experiences through simple but imaginative design proposals. These proposals are meant to trigger public discussion, but are also aimed to help people imagine alternatives to the present situation. As the *Make-it-Fantastic-Method* made evident, Haffner and Aasarød consider making – the making of cities and buildings – an important and enjoyable part of their practice during their Northern tour. Through their newspaper columns, they want to share their joy and appreciations, seeking to educate people to see all the fantastic qualities, experiences and activities in the urban. However, as

⁵² Isabelle Doucet and Kenny Cupers, “Agency in Architecture: Rethinking Criticality in Theory and Practice”, *Footprint, Delft School of Design Journal*, 4, 2009, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

ugly vs pretty often become a deadlock discussion in the media, they avoid it, as well as any direct references to aesthetics, using other words instead to articulate these qualities. Despite their unwillingness to *speak* of aesthetics, their processual approach and their declared social responsibility, they do not seem to be setting aesthetics and tectonics second. Rather, they see social performance and physical presence as inseparable dimensions of their projects, neither subordinated to the other.

Even more than the other practices, Exyzt aims to integrate rather than separate the many aspects and arenas of urban life. In their temporary installations, they achieve this by a multidisciplinary and collective living, working and playing together while including any visitor into this integrated reality. Exyzt provides architectural structures and usable elements along with materials, graphics, photographs, fictions, activities, residents on site, hosts, interactions, and so on, making spaces with a characteristic ambience and a strong physical presence.⁵⁴ The ambience invites play and interaction while concurrently appealing to the all senses and emotions as something rather beautiful. This is hardly coincidental. The members of Exyzt share a great interest in making; in collectively making things playful and beautiful. Their structural design, their scaffolding systems, their ad-hoc infrastructure, and their improvised event spaces, are all crafted and shaped with great care. To be sure, these structures challenge conventional conceptions of beauty, but are actually designed with great considerations, also in the way they look. Exyzt's interventions have a strong material presence, not as perfected objects but as a beauty of the real. If there is a dominant characteristic to these urban islands which Exyzt creates, it is that no aspect is dominant. Rather, all aspects and elements of the particular situation are integrated – not firstly in the service of social concerns or as a political argument. There is an emancipatory aspect in their works which is based on the integration of many different life arenas and qualities of life. Material presence and architectural expressions are part of this. Exyzt's sites elicit a visceral bodily experience where all senses are triggered, not only the eyes. Although the temporary constructions are very informal in their character, and although the material expressions are radically opposed to a finished and complete aesthetic product, I will argue that aesthetic and tectonic decisions are not subordinated or neglected. Instead, aesthetics and tectonics are of a radically different kind, and the space worked on is both physical and social. In this integrated, situational approach, conventional borders between form and content are not an issue. Exyzt makes no distinctions between designing, building, living and

⁵⁴ EXYZT and Coloco, "Momento", <http://66.163.168.225/babelfish/translate_url_content?.intl=us&lp=fr_en&trurl=http%3a%2f%2fwww.momentomonumento.org%2f>, accessed 11/06/2011, 2008. EXYZT, "Exyzt - Who are we?", <http://www.exyzt.org/?page_id=2>, accessed 11/06/2009.

acting on site, neither for themselves nor for their visitors. They challenge architectural autonomy, defending a multidisciplinary which includes architecture, graphic design, video and botany, music, photography, gastronomy. Thus their “projects can result in spatial video games, architectural buildings, musical environments and/or thematic food feasts.”⁵⁵ They live on site, using simple acts such as cooking and eating as well as building and bathing as ways of bringing people together. These often unplanned and unplannable events constitute both the programme and the content of their work.

As for Lacaton & Vassal, they are obviously the most “traditional” practice, and buildings and plans constituting most of their output. Yet, neither Lacaton & Vassal speak about aesthetics per se. Their focus is on uses and on individual experiences of spatial qualities. Their vocabulary consists of words such as comfort and pleasure, which refer to human experiences rather than to qualities in the physical environments. Does this focus mean that aesthetics and tectonics have second priority in their work? I believe not. For all its processual qualities, Lacaton & Vassal’s work consists of concrete plans, structures and forms, and their exploration of social, economic, environmental and political issues takes place through carefully crafted architectural solutions. Even when they eschew architectural convention and avoid trendy form, their work displays a deep concern for beauty. An anecdote about the skirting boards at the *University of Arts and Social Sciences* illustrates their attitude nicely. As Lacaton recounts: “It’s really bizarre, skirting boards are something architects have a horror of and they try and avoid them at any price. Us too! For the first phase in Grenoble, we started out with the idea of using skirting boards in aluminium to hide the approximate joint there always is between floor and wall, and we were forever on the case of the worker who was installing them to make sure they’d be impeccable. And then we said to ourselves that this was daft. We’d done everything so that it would all be simple and efficient, so why reject wooden skirting boards if this was easier to install? We painted these skirting boards the color of the wall! Why does one fixate on things that have so little importance?”⁵⁶ This relaxed irreverence for architectural purity is typical of Lacaton & Vassal. That does not mean that they put aesthetics and tectonics always in the service of other ends, but that they try to maximise usability and beauty simultaneously. When budgets are low and the aesthetic or material choices run counter to aesthetic conventions, it may look as if cost-efficiency is given priority over aesthetics. While the choice between, say, marble or

⁵⁵ EXYZT, “Exyzt - Who are we?”, EXYZT, “Metaville”, <<http://www.exyzt.org>>, accessed 11/06/2009. EXYZT and Coloco, “Momento”.

⁵⁶ Anne Lacaton: Moisés Puente and Anna Puyuelo (eds.), *Lacaton & Vassal 2G Books*. Barcelona: G. Gili, 2007, p. 143.

granite is usually understood as an aesthetic choice, the choice between aluminium skirting boards or painted wooden ones is commonly regarded an economical choice. However, that is not an obvious conclusion in the works of Lacaton & Vassal Architectes. Instead, their choices and priorities are always geared towards maximising something by eliminating something else – for instance achieving an abundance of space and light by removing conventional elements like skirting boards. This is not to downplay the role of beauty, but on the contrary, to use all means to achieve a beautiful – or fantastic, as Haffner and Aasarød would call it – result.

The three studied practices share some important social concerns, pursuing them through concrete and situation-specific interventions, whether physical or ephemeral. Aesthetics and tectonics are meticulously considered, and are certainly not always put in the service of other ends. Rather we could say that beauty, generosity, and the fantastic are integral parts of their social concerns. In their book *Spatial Agency* published in 2011, Schneider and Till, together with Nishat Awan, explain further how they regard the role of aesthetics and tectonics in architecture: “To argue that there is not a direct, causal, link between beauty and happiness, or at a wider level between aesthetics and ethics, is not to argue for the dismissal of the role of aesthetics and tectonics, but to more realistically understand the role they play in the context of the much wider set of social conditions where architecture contributes.”⁵⁷ The architects in this study would probably agree to this, but may be less persuaded by Till and Schneider’s conclusion: “By all means craft the building, compose the elevation, worry over the detail, but at the same time see these as just some tasks in service to another.”⁵⁸ For the practices in this study, the building, the elevation and the detail are far more than “just some task in service to another”. Till and Schneider state that too much attention on the aesthetic and the technological will inevitably lead to a commodification of architecture, making it “too easy to turn one’s attention away from the social and political aspects of architectural production and occupation.”⁵⁹ It seems to me that the practices in this study have showed a different way, one in which aesthetics and tectonics are integral to the social performance of architecture. Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes have found ways to combine social responsibility with the interest in the making of material-architectural environments. These architects neither give priority to aesthetic and tectonic considerations, nor do they devalue them. They take all these issues on board in each local situation, refusing to create a hierarchy.

⁵⁷ Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*: Routledge, 2011, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, “Alternate Currents: An introduction”, *arq - Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2), 2008.

6.3 Shared imaginations

Helped by their red caravan, Fantastic Norway assembles networks of stories and personal experiences of the people they meet. The stories offer extensive knowledge of the places in which they work, both historical and contemporary. Haffner and Aasarød include their own experiences of physical environment and urban life into these stories. They always look for the fantastic, and are particularly interested in locating fantastic solutions to local problems, thus taking the debate out of its ordinary pattern. The wind is regarded enemy of urban life in Bodø, making its streets and urban squares desolate and empty. Consequently, the stories published in Bodø make the wind a key component of a more active and open space. Haffner and Aasarød told stories about how people meet at the pier on stormy days, and presented the tale about the easterly wind that brought home fishermen and loads of cod. The architects juxtapose stories and present imaginations for the future of the town; not generalising reflections on community issues, but concrete stories about particular issues at a specific place. Haffner and Aasarød's call to "make it fantastic" is a call for shared imaginations. Not by projecting visionary images of the future, but by telling stories about possible activities, uses and programmes, communicated through sketches and stories that are easily accessed and shared. These stories are presented to trigger dialogues and discussions, always relating to local language and narrative practices. They also contain the beginnings of a critical awareness, addressing the fantastic in order to point at and solve the problematic. In this sense, the fantastic ideas mediated and forwarded by Fantastic Norway operate on several levels, triggering a shared imagination and allowing the discussion to reach beyond accustomed understandings.

Fiction plays a part in all the works of Exyzt. Their particular fictions – a lido, a mushroom factory, or a mill – translate into architectural forms such as beach huts and sun decks, into functions such as a windmill, and into graphic design such as the image of a real swimming pool. The lido and the mill are, however, not only fictions; they form (temporary) realities. In Dalston, the collective built a windmill with a grain grinder and a baking oven for the *Dalston Mill* while in Southwark they made a pool for the *Southwark Lido*. These fictions comprise many simple activities, together creating activating places. Like Fantastic Norway's stories, and the renderings by Lacaton & Vassal, the fictions by Exyzt concern programmes and uses. Yet, they play a role beyond the planned activities, providing for informal encounters and meeting. They also play a role beyond the site itself, allowing people to imagine new kinds of urban spaces and thus raising awareness – positively and critically. These fictions form part of the playful approaches developing throughout Exyzt's on-site stay, and are highly

efficient in building a collective story-line or plot. These 1:1 imaginations may also point to alternative futures, to the possibility of resisting consumerism and segregation and explore new ways of being together in the city – “forming new grounds for democracy”. The most important thing, however, both for Exyzt and Fantastic Norway, is how fictions and stories make it possible to involve a broad spectrum of people in such shared imaginations, thus expanding the space of imagined possibilities.

Lacaton & Vassal do not specifically work to develop shared imaginations in the public realm. Rather, they start with individual stories, and their projects may be seen as a continuous step-by-step process where the architect’s imaginations are continued and transformed by residents and users. Photos of interiors in *Houses of Mulhouse* demonstrate these continuations and transformations – highly appreciated by the architects and included back into their project presentations. *+Plus* contains concrete and realisable visions intended to reach governmental offices, demonstrating and calculating how social, cultural and physical environments of housing blocks can be developed in a sustainable and economical way. In time, Lacaton & Vassal hope that these concrete transformations will be continued by the residents, and that bit by bit, apartment by apartment, block by block, new spatial qualities and “freedom of use” will emerge.

In *+plus*, the architects seem to align themselves with the overall concerns formulated in Venice. Their imaginations certainly “start from reality”, envisioning a more equal distribution of spatial qualities and working towards environments “more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the urban context.”⁶⁰ These stories, fictions and imaginations integrate physical, cultural and social aspects. The idea of shared imaginations as it is used here, originates in the concept of imagination by Arjun Appadurai, an important reference for Emiliano Gandolfi. Appadurai is interested in the potential of imaginations as a collective tool to explore alternatives to the given realities:

imagination as something other than a kind of individual faculty, and something other than a mechanism for escaping the real. It’s actually a collective tool for the transformation of the real, for the creation of multiple horizons of possibility.⁶¹

I have discussed shared imaginations as collective tools based on the practices of Fantastic Norway and Exyzt in particular, but also in Lacaton &

⁶⁰ Emiliano Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”, in 2008 Fondazione La Biennale de Venezia (ed.), *Experimental Architecture, Out There, Architecture Beyond Building, Volume 3*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2008, p. 28.

⁶¹ Arjun Appadurai, “The Right to Participate in the Work of the Imagination”, in Arjen Mulder, Joke Brouwer, and Laura Martz (eds.), *TransUrbanism*, Rotterdam: V2 Publ./NAi Publishers, 2002.

Vassal. Two important aspects have to be emphasised. Firstly, these imaginations are embedded in, grow from, and address specific realities. Secondly, while situated in local realities, these imaginations create potential and realisable transformations of the given, while also, particularly apparent in works by Exyzt, evoking “multiple horizons of possibility”. In square opposition to Tafuri who pessimistically declared that it is “useless to struggle when one is trapped inside a capsule with no exit”, these architects use their architectural imagination to address difficult social conditions, hoping that their work might contribute to gradual change.⁶²

In his article, “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology”, Tafuri dismantled the modern avant-garde’s dream of social change. He regarded any attempt at escaping capitalism and its all-encompassing commodification as counterproductive, inevitably escalating the consequences and contradictions of capitalism itself. Tafuri was “systematically shutting off one aesthetic possibility after another” and ended up, according to Frederic Jameson, “conveying a paralyzing and asphyxiating sense of the futility of any kind of architectural or urbanistic innovation on this side of that equally inconceivable watershed, a total social revolution.”⁶³ Tafuri accepted no compromises, and when the avant-garde proved unable to realise its utopian ideological prospects, Tafuri abandoned it all-together, concentrating instead on critical historical studies. Lacaton & Vassal, Exyzt and Fantastic Norway, on the contrary, have decided to stay in the capsule, insisting on the possibility of making things better, one little step at the time. They reject Tafuri’s uncompromising utopia-or-nothing attitude, believing instead in small, bit-by-bit changes. They believe in doing what they can within existing restrictions, but also to use humour, wit, imagination and knowledge to challenge and circumvent those very restrictions.

I have used the expression shared imaginations to capture one aspect of contemporary architectural practice, a concern that was articulated very clearly at the 2008 Venice Biennale. An interesting thing about this event, however, was that despite the cautious incrementalism promoted by organisers and exhibitors alike, the concept of utopia was actually revoked and used. Utopia was not seen as the ultimate result of revolutionary upheaval, but proposed rather as a hope, an idea, or a vision, in full knowledge of the fact that perfect or total solutions are unattainable. Exyzt says it right out: “Be utopian. We want to build new worlds where fiction is reality and games form new grounds for democracy.”⁶⁴ Fiction and

⁶² Manfredo Tafuri, “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology”, in K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture theory since 1968*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1969/2000, p. 32.

⁶³ Frederic Jameson, “Architecture and the Critique of Ideology”, in Joan Ockman (ed.), *Architecture, criticism, ideology*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985, p. 58.

⁶⁴ EXYZT, “Exyzt - Who are we?”, Nicolas Henninger and Sara Muzio, “Final Words”, in Sara Muzio (ed.), *Southwark Lido*, Great Britain: Gattaticova, 2009.

imagination, then, become a way of escaping restrictions and attaining something better. Lacaton & Vassal, similarly, refer to “dreams” or to “freedom”, linking it directly to a very particular notion of utopia. As Vassal stated in *+Plus*: “I believe that the modern utopia begins today, in point of fact. It begins with the idea of recycling spaces, which allows of strategies of union, hybridisation and conversion; strategies that generate complexities one was unable to arrive at by obliterating the pre-existing.”⁶⁵ In this sense, utopia is certainly not a perfect, final solution, but rather a striving towards creating richer and more complex everyday environments. Fantastic Norway shares the same hope, although they never speak of utopia but rather of the fantastic. Using stories and fictions, the three practices articulate dreams of the fantastic and extraordinary, occasionally referring to utopia as a transformative notion.

Imagining and imaginations are important concepts not only for my three case study practices, but also for the whole pool of architects I have looked at in this study. Stalker emphasises the importance of collective imagination as a way to facilitate and make change, and AOC have developed board games and similar tools for users and stakeholders to express their imaginations. Feld72, *add-on*, and Raumlabor can all be said to use spatial interventions as 1:1 experiments, making it possible to imagine alternatives to existing city life and social interactions. Raumlabor is very conscious in their use of “situative narratives”, using stories as playful tools to explore and trigger shared imaginations. These stories work together with interventions and concrete materialisations, and although stories do not change anything in themselves, they reveal positive alternatives to the existing situation and may act as a means of transgression – a way to imagine something better. That may be why so many of the practices in this study seem, with Gandolfi, to be “embarking on a search for a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings.”⁶⁶

Writing on participation, Jeremy Till discusses storytelling as an equitable mode; something that is shared on equal terms.⁶⁷ Stories become powerful tools “to project new spatial visions” argues Till.⁶⁸ While “hope” is too often associated with unachievable utopias and “participation” is founded on idealistic notion of consensus, “stories avoid such delusions whilst at the same time not shutting down possibilities and opportunities.”⁶⁹ Till touches here on some important aspects of how Fantastic Norway and Exyzt use fictions and stories as collective tools. As Doina Petrescu concludes in her

⁶⁵ Jean-Pierre Vassal: Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal, *+ plus*.

⁶⁶ Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Till, “The Negotiation of Hope”, in Jeremy Till, Doina Petrescu, and Peter Blundell Jones (eds.), *Architecture and Participation*, London: Spon Press, 2005. Till quotes Kristin Ross, “Introduction”, in Jacques Rancière (eds), *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

reflections on the participatory practice Atelier Architecture Autogéré: “the imaginary is the most accessible category of a participation process, anybody of any age and from any place in the world could contribute to it.”⁷⁰

In her essay of 2009, “Dreaming: The World that Might still Come”, Lara Schrijver reflects on the potential of fictions:

In looking forward, fictions can speculate on how our futures might unfold, depending on certain choices and contingencies. Focusing on the present, fictions can magnify our own moment in time, revealing small details that are nevertheless significant in the choices we have collectively made. By magnifying the important issues, these stories allow us to transcend the everyday muddle of the present.⁷¹

Schrijver includes various means of imaginations, both verbal and visual ones. While she recognises the utopian potential in these imaginations, she warns against the inherent violence of utopian thinking. Referring to Hans Achterhuis, she distinguishes between a totalitarian utopia and utopia as something to be aspired to.

While the modernist utopia harboured its own aesthetic and socio-political presuppositions, the concept in its current use seems to contain a more complex and less totalising meaning. Hilde Heynen adds to and argues for this latter conception.⁷² “Utopia today cannot be about a singular, well defined, and straightforward concept for a future society. Utopia inevitably rests upon paradoxes and contradictions, and we have to work through them in order to transform the present into a future that might be somewhat better.”⁷³ She refers to the concept of “embodied utopias” by Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach, describing the imagination of tangible alternatives as a “social transformation in the making – the effort to work through the possibilities of fragmentary change and incomplete, unfinished projects that harbour the desire for a better world.”⁷⁴ Utopia, here, is regarded a way to imagine solutions and alternatives beyond conventions or oppositional pairs. The totalising distance inherent in the old political utopia is challenged.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Petrescu, “Losing control, keeping desire”, p. 61.

⁷¹ Lara Schrijver, “Dreaming: The World that Might still Come”, *Beyond: Scenarios and Speculations*, 1, 2009.

⁷² Hilde Heynen, “A Critical Position for Architecture”, in Jane Rendell (ed.), *Critical Architecture*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 52.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Donna Haraway writes in her essay on situated knowledges that “The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history.” Haraway, “Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective”, p. 586.

Recognising the return of utopia in contemporary architectural culture, a few questions seem to beg answers. Is the idea of utopia really meaningful without some concept of totality? Even though the term is now understood and used in a less totalising meaning than before, is utopia freed from its connections to the modernist *Tabula Rasa*? I want to let Emiliano Gandolfi answer these questions, in his summing up of the Venice 2008 contributions: “The utopia of these proposals emerges from the reality that surrounds us, and is proposed as the limit to which experimental architecture tends, embarking on a shared way to imagine alternatives to our surroundings. It is imagining a more equal society, one that is more permeable to different influences and constantly shaped by a creative definition of the way we use the urban context.”⁷⁶ Gandolfi here defines utopia as a hope, and imaginations as a way of seeing possibilities. Both are pressing concerns in contemporary architectural practice, not least the three practices I have chosen for this study. Lacaton & Vassal, Exyzt, and Fantastic Norway, all work with multiplying layers of stories, fictions, and imaginations, aiming to make the fantastic, the extraordinary, and the playful. Doing that, they ascribe to Appadurai’s notion of fiction as “a collective tool for the transformation of the real, for the creation of multiple horizons of possibility.”⁷⁷

Generosity

The practices encountered in the close readings are characterised by a situational approach, where different concerns and aspects are integrated in a non-hierarchical manner. They approach each task in a fundamentally positive manner, looking for possibilities rather than problems, and using unconventional means to tap into existing potentials. This positivity is not a product of unknowing naiveté, but is rather a conscious resistance - a tactic, in Certeau’s sense of the word. One could call it a tactic of generosity.

In order to address such a tactic of generosity, it is necessary to discuss briefly a different positive strategy in contemporary architectural discourse, namely what has been called projective architecture. The rift between projective and critical architecture has been declared bridged, and the discussion outdated. The opposition between “criticality” and “performance” in projective practice is dismissed by for instance Hal Foster, who states that “implicit in post-critical discourse is a wilful opposition between “critique”

⁷⁶ Gandolfi, “Think Different, Act Different - Architecture Beyond Building”.

⁷⁷ Appadurai, “The Right to Participate in the Work of the Imagination”.

and “invention”, as if the two were really opposed.⁷⁸ Still, the projective versus critical debate contain some interesting points, some of which I will look at in the following. I am particularly interested in thinkers or practitioners who have pursued this discussion into more fundamental themes, regarding what architectural practice may and may not include.

With their article “Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism”, Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting wrote a veritable manifesto for the post-critical era in architecture. Projective, as they describes it, carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the act of making something new, as in design, and on the other, it means to forecast something, envisioning the future on the basis of present information. The latter is conceived in opposition to a critically oriented architecture that bases itself on modes of resistance. “Rather than singular autonomy, the Doppler focuses upon the effects and exchanges of architecture’s inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics, etc.”⁷⁹ In projective processes, material and urban conditions are handled simultaneously – used as means to look ahead. Only real conditions form part of the projective process, claim Somol and Whiting: dreams or anticipations of a better world have no place. These anticipations are based on critical interpretations of the present, i.e. looking backwards, interfering with the direct and undisturbed projections of “inherent multiplicities” into innovative solutions for the future.⁸⁰

For an architectural discipline adamant to keep away from value judgements, Somol and Whiting seemed to sum up the alternatives. Yet their dismissal of criticality has led to discussions, and many are wary of the close connection between neo-liberal economics and this nihilistic and relativistic architectural tendency. Hilde Heynen, for instance, argued for a renewed criticality in architecture based on critical theory of the Frankfurt school, regarding the force of utopian thinking as possibly “the most important legacy of the Modern Movement, for it harbours the capacity to criticise the status quo, the courage to imagine a better world and the audacity to start building it.”⁸¹ One of the most essential aspects of critical theory, Heynen argues, is “its claim to assess discourses and facts from the point of view of their relation to social reality.”⁸² Yet, in her reading, “projective architecture” and “commitment” are not mutually exclusive. She sees architectural creation

⁷⁸ Hal Foster in Stan Allen, Hal Foster, and Kenneth Frampton, “Stocktaking 2004: Questions about the present and future of design”, in William S. Saunders (ed.), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, A Harvard Design Magazine Reader, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 132.

⁷⁹ Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, “Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism”, *Perspecta*, *The Yale Architectural Journal*, 33, 2002, p. 75.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Heynen, “A Critical Position for Architecture”, p. 54. In her book *Architecture and Modernity*, Hilde Heynen discusses the early architectural modernism and the pre-war avant-garde from the perspective of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

as a moment of critical reflection, capable of transcending the limitations imposed by programme, context, or economy.⁸³ Her emphasis on the social dimension is interesting. She states that “in every built work of architecture, social interests are also at stake. A critical treatment of social reality therefore inevitably operates at various levels simultaneously...”⁸⁴ Rather than referring to a political-aesthetic avant-garde, Heynen promotes a critical approach to current social reality. From this viewpoint, there are reasons to question the degree to which the three practices studied here reflect critically upon social, economical, democratic and cultural conditions. While there is a critical awareness in their work, their defence of the fantastic and extraordinary makes their work inherently positive. However, the list of multiplicities included in their work, is clearly beyond the list of the “inherent multiplicities” encompassed by Somol & Whiting’s projective theory. Instead of projections into the future, my case study practices use imagination as their most important tool. In order to capture the approach of the three practices here, we need to move beyond the critical versus projective discussion and return to the tactic of generosity.

The favourite word of Jean-Pierre Vassal, as Anne Lacaton explained it in my interviews, is the French term “gentillesse” which translates as kindness, humbleness and generosity. Their work as a whole can be said to be marked by “gentillesse”, and by respect for each individual. Generosity is a recurrent term in their talks, combined in expressions such as spatial generosity and “gentillesse”. They work by additions, adding floor space as well as comfort and pleasures. In my interviews, Lacaton tells me that they always take a position in their projects, for instance to maintain existing tower blocks or to protect the trees on site. Such positions could well be seen as critical, if by this one means something not exclusively negative. In the examples above, they decide to protect what already exists, not taking anything away but only add. This kind of positive-critical attitude helps them to see and reveal the resources, qualities and potentials that exist in the situations which they face, rather than to echo existing critical conceptions of well-known problems. Based on this approach, Lacaton & Vassal together with Druot make a critical argument against public housing authorities in order to protect existing qualities and add more. Similarly, when exploring how to develop maximum space on minimum budgets, the architects adopt an implicitly critical position, working for a more equal distribution of architectural qualities. This critical mode is rarely described outright by Lacaton & Vassal. They prefer to talk about their persistent effort to provide spatial generosity and pleasure. Lacaton even refused to talk about their competition entry for the new *Architecture Foundation* in London as a critical statement. While the

⁸³ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

commissioners in London asked for a “brand building”, displaying its content through spectacular appearance, Lacaton & Vassal provided the simplest possible exterior. Inside, they placed a gigantic human sculpture – going through all floors.⁸⁵ In interviews, Lacaton steadfastly repeated that their work was based generosity and not on criticality.

Fantastic Norway also emphasises generosity. As their bullet point number 7 describes, it is by addressing the fantastic that they solve problems, not by criticising whatever is wrong. As we saw in Chapter 3, Haffner and Aasarød operate within given political and economical conditions, mostly in shrinking towns where every job opportunity counts. While listening to people’s frustrations and ideas, assembling a knowledge databank, and immersing themselves in the local situation, they map out problems and challenges. In this sense, they reflect critically upon the specific social, economical, democratic and cultural conditions arising from the local urban environment. However, the critique does not make up the end result. They do not follow a tactics of resistance; rather, by emphasising the fantastic in the existing, they establish a positive, optimistic and generous atmosphere capable of triggering engagement and initiative – looking for solutions. They allow real problems to be confronted and discussed, not in a defeatist manner, but with a sense of direction. Thus, their humorous, disarming approach and their seemingly happy-go-lucky attitude should not be misunderstood. While critical to the power of global enterprises and economical forces on these local arenas, their local analyses always aim to contribute with concrete and partial solutions, forwarding specific fantastic imaginations.

Exyzt also shares the emphasis on generosity, attempting to “transform an empty shell into a place full of life, generosity and freedom”.⁸⁶ They, too, engage in collective generosity rather than critical investigations, yet their work certainly does not capitulate to current urban, democratic and social conditions, neither do they remain indifferent. Their interventions establish islands of temporary urban spaces as generous additions to the city, while at the same time forming a built critique of prevailing conditions. The temporary active urban space is in addition a form of resistance. Helped by fictions and by the local knowledge of their local partners, Exyzt integrate and address critical issues in the places they work. Their playful and active urban spaces become places where people meet across social divisions, making space for new responses to the issues at stake.

The architects in this study focus on resources rather than problems and look for potentials in the existing situation rather than criticising it. Implicit in this approach is the realisation that critique often perpetuates what it

⁸⁵ Competition renderings by Lacaton & Vassal Architectes showed the body of a French model of North-African origin.

⁸⁶ EXYZT, “Metaville”.

criticises, contributing to deactivate rather than activate local potential. A sharp observer of this mechanism was Grethe Skarsfjord in Narvik, defending Fantastic Norway against Indregard's critique. Skarsfjord's point was that the students, by doing something rather than just criticising, had changed the perception of Narvik, and thus expanded the scope of possible actions. This observation is relevant to the practices as a whole. By integrating, as Heynen promoted, a critical and social awareness with a projective and pragmatic optimism, they manage to make concrete and positive contributions that actually improve local conditions. Their differences notwithstanding, this optimistic and pragmatic approach, lack of interest in theoretical and utopian purity, and shunning of strong political statements or social theories, are defining characteristics for the three practices.

"Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture?" Lara Schrijver asks, correcting our conception of the projective as entirely uncritical.⁸⁷ The opposition against critical theory in architecture, she argues, stems from the idea that critical theory forces the practitioner to justify interventions "through a critical discourse ... tailored to an analytical approach" rather than through experimental and prescriptive practice.⁸⁸ For Schrijver, the question is rather how to understand, explore and include a critical awareness in architectural practice: "following Marxism and the Frankfurt School, the 'critical' of critical theory has come to be identified with resistance and negation, while the recent debate suggests less focus on resistance and more on critique 'from within'."⁸⁹ Critique from within may be relevant to the approaches described above, with their concrete and generous contributions.

Jane Rendell defends a reintroduction of critical theory, calling for resistance and a more explicit criticality towards "the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism."⁹⁰ Rendell's "critical spatial practice" is developed from a curatorial art-architecture practice where the keywords are critical thinking and desire for social change, referring to Lefebvre's spatial distinctions. Irit Rogoff, on the other hand, wants to leave behind criticism as in critical theory, which is about finding faults. She seeks instead a concurrent integration of complex conditions in the specific situation. Practice, in her view, brings together critical viewpoints, knowledge, and imaginations. Her articles on cultural theory and "embodied criticality"

⁸⁷ Lara Schrijver, "Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture? Rethinking the Expertise of the Architect", *Footprint: Delft School of Design Journal*, 4, 2009, p. 124.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁹⁰ Jane Rendell, "Critical Spatial Practice", <<http://www.janerendell.co.uk/art-incorporated>>, 2008. Rendell points out that there exists "a myriad of different ways offering self-reflective modes of thought seeking to change the world, or at least the world in which the inequalities of market capitalism, as well as patriarchal and colonial (or post-colonial) interests, continue to dominate."

defend action on the basis of an unknown ground.⁹¹ Criticality, she says, “is taking shape through an emphasis on the present, of living out a situation, of understanding culture as a series of effects rather than causes, of the possibilities of actualising some of its potential rather than revealing its faults.”⁹² Her model may contribute to discern and extract what are bundled together in the tactic of generosity, but is nevertheless simplifying in its abstract approach.

Of particular interest in this context, is Latour’s notion of critical proximity as opposed to critical distance. With his broad approach, Latour has been a main critic of preconceived criticism, challenging predefined causes, critical distance and iconoclasm. His argues for a move from matters of fact to matters of concern.⁹³ Instead of a critic who debunks, Latour promotes one who assembles.⁹⁴

With respect to the Total, there is nothing to do except to genuflect before it, or worse, to dream of occupying the place of complete power. I think it would be much safer to claim that action is possible only in a territory that has been opened up, flattened down, and cut down to size in a place where formats, structures, globalization, and totalities circulate inside tiny conduits, and where for each of their applications they need to rely on masses of hidden potentialities. If this is not possible, then there is no politics. No battle has ever been won without resorting to new combinations and surprising events. One’s own action ‘make a difference’ only *in a world made of difference*... Critical proximity, not critical distance, is what we should aim for.⁹⁵

Latour’s concept of critical proximity contributes to describe how architectural practices do not separate but rather integrate concerns, actions, potentials and critical awareness in their projects. They do not debunk, but listen, assemble, and map to understand each particular situation. This may be the reason why expressions such as “users’ needs” are rarely used by these

⁹¹ Irit Rogoff, “Om det kritiska”, *Paletten*, 68 (2), 2008. Irit Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality”, *eicpcp: european institute for progressive cultural politics*, <<http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>>, accessed 31/05/2011, 2003. Irit Rogoff, “Smuggling’ - An Embodied Criticality”, *eicpcp: european institute for progressive cultural politics*, <<http://eicpcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling>>, accessed 31/05/2011, 2006.

⁹² Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality”.

⁹³ It should be noted that Latour’s conception of the adjective ‘social’ does not fully align with the popular use of the term which this study rely on. As Latour writes: “The adjective ‘social’ designates two entirely different phenomena: it’s once a substance, a kind of stuff, and also a movement between non-social elements. In both cases, social vanishes”. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 159.

⁹⁴ Bruno Latour, “Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Winter), 2004, p. 246.

⁹⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p. 252.

architects. They do not consider themselves scientists dissecting a social organism, but as experts working alongside many other kinds of experts, for instance resident experts, specialists on local practice and history. Fantastic Norway, for instance, never “analyse” the needs of people, instead, they ask for peoples’ opinions and ideas.

Approaching an area with a given budget but without a specific site, programme, or brief, Exyzt’s investigations of potentials and conflictual issues do not take place separately but are integrated in the development of the work. Exyzt, Fantastic Norway and Lacaton & Vassal Architectes promote architecture and architectural processes that allow real and important qualities to reach a wide public, independent of class, economic resources or education. Their wish for a broad appeal means that they rarely engage in the most idealistic-critical projects. In an interview in 1987, Giancarlo de Carlo attacked what he regarded as the “finalistic” aspirations of Manfredo Tafuri, both in architecture and politics. Architecture in its ‘pluriverse’ would necessarily include value judgements, he stated – judgments that would “of course be more complicated” than previously.⁹⁶ The architects in this study share de Carlo’s distrust in finalistic aspirations. They turn against such aspirations, be it in the form of political dogmas, social determinism, master plans, or buildings by an aesthetic-tectonic avant-garde. At the same time, social concerns are present in their profession as architects. What I have identified in these contemporary practices, is a social responsibility which appears not primarily as a critique or opposition, but as a concern, pursued through generous gestures. The architects neither evade nor fear low budgets, organisational complexity, lack of aesthetic control, or intractable problems integrated in the circumstances of each situation. Appreciating the complexity of each situation, facing a diversity of conditions beyond aesthetics and tectonics, they search for shared imaginations on many levels: as actual buildings, as ways of bringing people together across social borders, and as ways to generate more human and just environments. In their view, the extraordinary and the fantastic, playfulness and fictions, are important parts of their work.

One way of conceptualising this approach is through the concept of agency. This concept was explored in *Footprint: The Delft School of Design Journal #4*, edited by Isabelle Doucet and Kenny Cupers. They emphasised agency as the way to conceptualise “the creation or imagination of alternative worlds”, seeking something “above the here and now of the real”.⁹⁷ For Doucet and Cupers, the notion of agency allows architecture to be critical while being at the same time “the very vehicle of such *drive* or intention to

⁹⁶ Bouman, Toorn, and Carlo, “Architecture is too important to leave to the architects: A conversation with Giancarlo de Carlo by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn”, pp. 24–25.

⁹⁷ Doucet and Cupers, “Agency in Architecture: Rethinking Criticality in Theory and Practice”, p. 5.

create alternative worlds.”⁹⁸ An explicit focus on agency in architecture, thus, can contribute to transcend current dichotomies between performativity, projection, and criticality. As Doucet and Cupers write: “Theorizing agency, and making it more explicit as a category of contemporary thinking in architecture, this issue aims to transcend the engrained dichotomies of the current debate – such as that of critical, progressive social change versus the allegedly uncritical performance of the architectural object – and to trace novel connections between such seemingly disparate concerns.”⁹⁹ Doucet argues for agency as a concept referring to actions and interventions of individuals, thus also to architects, producing effect or performing a commission. It encompasses, in other words, the complex workings of architecture and its messy engagement with the world.¹⁰⁰

It allows for studying architecture according to its numerous stakes, to study it as something highly controversial, a discipline and profession that cannot get rid of its contingency and messiness of practice and decision-making that easily. Looking at architecture through agency is, therefore, a plea to stop reducing the complexity of architecture. It is a plea for no longer evaluating architecture’s value-adding through a priori ideologies, theoretical constructs pursuing the decoding of architecture’s ‘meaning’, oppositional pairs between which one has to choose, or through the reduction of architecture’s complexity to only a few stakes and stakeholders. It is what has been called (from the viewpoint of the Social Studies of Science) the study of ‘quasi-objects’, of ‘hybrids’ or ‘matters of concern’, and in specific relation to architecture, ‘object-in-flight’, the ‘mapping of controversies’, or the ‘anthropology of architecture’.¹⁰¹

Agency explains the complexity of drives that are part of architecture, analysed for instance by Latour and Yaneva. The 2009 AHRA conference in Sheffield discussed agency as a way to address societal responsibilities in the field of architecture. Focussing particularly on its architectural significance, the organisers defined spatial agency as “architecture’s capacity for transformative action and, even more importantly, how the role of the

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 2. “These dichotomies have been fed with arguments from several ‘schools’; the neo-Marxist derivatives of old school critical theory asserting architecture’s socio-economic role, the American interpretation of criticality in architecture promoting its autonomy, and the opposition against any criticality by defenders of post-critical or projective strategies.”

¹⁰⁰ Isabelle Doucet, “Problematising the Question”, *Conditions: Magazine for Architecture & Urbanism*, 9, 2010.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

architect can be extended to take into account the consequences of architecture as much as the objects of architecture.”¹⁰² Till, Schneider and Awan have assembled an index of practices associated with spatial agency. This concept encompasses Lefebvre’s notion of (social) space, as well as Anthony Giddens’ notion of agency; defined as to be “able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” including not only single acts but also “visions and solutions onto an uncertain future.”¹⁰³ However, Till and Schneider’s notion of agency deviates somewhat from Giddens’ because spatial agency includes a clear intent and purpose as well as an explicit ethical content. Awan, Schneider and Till sum up the difference:

The combination of visions and solutions introduces a complexity to the idea of spatial agency that one does not get in traditional theories on agency. In the latter, agents intervene directly in the world through their actions. In spatial agency, their agency is effected both through actions and visions, but also through the resulting spatial solutions. It resides in both the human and the non-human, and spatial agents have to be responsible for all aspects of their actions, from their initial relationship with others to enabling the production of physical relations and social structures, because all are means of playing out their intent.¹⁰⁴

This notion of spatial agency as a combination of visions and solutions resembles the way imagination is brought into the works by Fantastic Norway, Exyzt and Lacaton & Vassal. To enter the *Spatial Agency* index, the agents are measured by three criteria; spatial judgement, mutual knowledge and critical awareness. “Spatial judgment refers to the ability to exercise spatial decisions” where the researchers look more at “empowering social relations” initiated than at “formal sophistication.”¹⁰⁵ Mutual knowledge concerns the sharing of knowledge and the respect of others’ knowledge. Critical awareness encompasses an evaluative criticality of the given context as well as “the need to be self-critical.”¹⁰⁶ The selected practices have to meet at least two of these criteria, and be seen to prioritise “values outside the

¹⁰² Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, and Nishat Awan, “Spatial Agency”, <<http://www.spatialagency.net>>

¹⁰³ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984, p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency*: Routledge, 2011, p. 31. The authors emphasise the spatial agent as “one who effects change through the *empowerment* of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as result of reconfigured social space.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32. Both Lacaton & Vassal Architectes and Exyzt are included in the Spatial Agency index. Fantastic Norway, however, is not.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

normal terms of reference to the economic market, namely those of social, environmental and ethical justice.”¹⁰⁷

In this study, I have chosen to stay close to the practitioner’s way of speaking and thinking. While spatial agency provides valuable insight into contemporary practice, this study try to look closely at the architects’ own starting point, their concerns, knowledge, and interests as it comes to expression in their built as well as processual work. In the works I have studied, aesthetics and tectonics are not merely regarded in the service of other ends. Nevertheless, all the case study practices share ideals and values related to social, environmental and ethical justice, and these values clearly influence their work.¹⁰⁸ Spatial judgment, mutual knowledge and critical awareness are part of their approaches, and are expressed in a number of different ways. Spatial agency can be seen as an operative and visionary conceptualisation of social responsibility, where the role of the architect is extended to take into account the consequences of architecture as much as the objects of architecture.

6.4 Social concerns

In the introduction to this study, Margaret Crawford posed the question “Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?” The short answer must be a conditional yes. This study has looked at a number of young architects who “reconnect to social and economical questions” and who are “focusing on social concerns”, precisely, as Crawford recommended, by “opening up new rooms” in architectural practice and discourse.¹⁰⁹ Although the architects in this study do not necessarily target the weakest groups in society, they contribute to open or reopen rooms to which the architectural profession has paid little attention in recent years. Driven by social concerns, these architects address situations not well served by either the market nor by public administrations. Nonetheless, Crawford’s question can only be given a *conditional* yes, because what she asks for is not whether one or two architects can show social responsibility, but whether, as a profession, architects can take on wider responsibilities. The answer to the latter question is not necessarily affirmative. The professional architectural identity is fundamentally rooted in the client-architect relationship, making it possible to realise large-scale commissions and to handle considerable budgets. Giancarlo de Carlo’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Margaret Crawford, “Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?”, in Diane Ghirardo (ed.), *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1991, p. 44.

ideologically based challenge to architects to serve all users, not only themselves and their clients, is still relevant.¹¹⁰ That is exactly why Margaret Crawford called for architects to open new rooms. New rooms, different means of funding, and new ways of working, may contribute to expand the architectural discipline and to reformulate professional identity. Crawford challenges architects to find ways to deal with the conditions under which they are working. Her final ambition is for architects to accept “the challenge of reshaping society and the built environment” without “repeating the well-intentioned but mistaken strategies used by modernist reformers and sixties radicals.”¹¹¹ Do the practitioners in this study fall prey to these mistakes? Opposed to their idealistic predecessors from the 1960s and -70s, contemporary architects put little stake in ideological consistency or political program. They address the specificities of the singular situations, holding most often no more than the hope that a small local change will lead to the next one, and the next one. In their way of working, social concerns are explored through small, pragmatic, and incremental steps, often geared at circumventing or adding to conventional decision making processes. Even though these are singular and small attempts, they expand beyond their local boundaries, outlining new contours of the architectural discipline.

One aspect which has particularly interested me during this study has to do with funding. As Crawford hinted, engagement and social concerns are not enough; money is also necessary in order to act on this engagement. In this study I have chosen to look at practitioners who work full time in the field, not least to see how they deal with financial issues. To find out how these partially self-initiated and self-programmed processes are financed is not so easy; the funding structure is often complex, like a patchwork. These practices take on commissions as well as self-initiated work, and even their commissioned work may, at least in parts, be self-programmed and self-organised. Ole Bouman’s concept of *unsolicited architecture* is interesting in this respect. Bouman introduced the concept in *Volume* in 2005, challenging the idea that architecture only “come into existence if there is a site, a client, a budget and a pre-selected technology.”¹¹² Bouman asked if we cannot “go beyond this pattern and anticipate architecture before it becomes a request? Can architecture exceed its own procedural and conceptual scriptedness, and invent scripts for time, space, and the production of meaning beyond the project?”¹¹³ Can architecture find new definitions and mandates for itself? In other words, can architecture be an unsolicited act? In *Volume* 2007, Bouman announced a manifesto calling for “action, rather than re-action” launching

¹¹⁰ Carlo, “Architecture’s public”, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Crawford, “Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?”, p. 43.

¹¹² Ole Bouman, “Unsolicited Architecture: An account of RSVP Events”, *Volume*, 1, 2005.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

the “Office of Unsolicited Architecture.” The practice of unsolicited architecture was proposed as “a new form of practice that pro-actively seeks out new territories for intervention, addresses pressing social needs and takes advantage of emerging opportunities for architecture.”¹¹⁴ An unsolicited practice is thus described as a practice that transgresses the accepted domain of architecture with regards to clients, programme, sites, and budgets. Such a practice, Bouman argued, may address social needs as well as cultural and pragmatic ones, adding to the works of non-profit organisations, avant-garde projects, and experimental industrial production. The notion of unsolicited practice, inventing new mandates for itself, is consistent with Crawford’s call for new rooms for architectural practice. Yet, while Crawford focuses on social, environmental and economical concerns, Bouman’s unsolicited practice covers all sorts of pro-active work in architecture, including work driven mainly by aesthetic and tectonic considerations.

Fantastic Norway’s tour through Northern Norway was a wholly self-initiated project. When they started off in Brønnøysund, they worked unpaid, without commissions or sponsors, only – presumably – a student loan from the Norwegian state educational loan fund. However, they took a pro-active approach from the very start, contacting local authorities or private enterprises. Along the way they obtained local commissions that would secure funding and give their work some form of legitimacy. Most of their income and works were based on commissions, although they would possibly work a lot more hours than what was paid for. In addition, they applied for grants from national foundations related to architecture, free speech and business innovation – their first one funded the caravan. Another, and equally important part of the work, was their effort to assist their clients in applying for funding. Fantastic Norway’s unsolicited practice was driven, as they say, by a sense of social responsibility – a desire to open up new rooms of architectural practice. Their ways of obtaining work as well as their working methods, expand the architect’s professional role from a designer into a mobiliser, a mediator, and a fund raiser. Fantastic Norway wanted to demonstrate that being socially responsible was not incompatible with earning a decent living; it just requires a somewhat wider understanding of what practice includes.

Exyzt started off with a self-initiated student project, *L’Architecture du Rab*. Although their later work has been mostly commissioned, the actual content is largely self-programmed and self-organised both in terms of planning, building and hosting. Commissioners have most often been

¹¹⁴ Ole Bouman et al., “Office for Unsolicited Architecture”, *Volume*, 4, 2007. “All of this is motivated by a desire to fight interpassivity, self-doubt and perceived (or real) marginalization of architects while hunting for an architecture that is interesting, innovative, subversive, creative, transgressive, reflective, sustainable, attainable, idealistic, profitable and above all forever unsolicited.”

festivals and events in the field of art or architecture. Utilising the fact that their temporary interventions may be regarded as art works, they found a niche in the market and used it with great skill. With Crawford, one might say that they – quite literally – opened a new room for architectural practice, a financial one in this case. Recently, Exyzt’s work has moved from being funded by art funds and festivals, to be included into urban planning budgets, such as their most recent work in London. To my mind, this demonstrates an expansion within urban development, and a willingness to include new kind of processes into urban planning. This is, of course, not due to contributions from Exyzt in particular, they are only marginal in these processes. Yet the fact that their work is funded through planning budgets, demonstrates how the work of urban pioneers and catalysts is starting to infiltrate official planning procedures, like Margaret Crawford hoped for.

Lacaton & Vassal Architectes work generally on commissions. The self-initiated *+Plus* project is an exception in this respect, financed partially by the office itself, partially by grants from Ministry of Culture (*Ministère de la culture et de la communication*). Lacaton & Vassal demonstrate how social concerns can be integrated into the actual making of architecture, informing formal, spatial and constructive solutions and making it possible to achieve a more just distribution of architectural qualities. Many of their projects contain unpaid and unsolicited parts, but in general, they expect to be properly paid and try to avoid unpaid working hours – as does Fantastic Norway. In order to maximise their hourly output, they have developed a fierce project efficiency, often recycling solutions, details, or construction principles from one project to the next. In this way they can use their working hours to create that added extra – pursuing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The three practices of this study are not alone in pursuing unsolicited work. Quite a number of the practices in this field run part-time practices, many of them working in schools of architecture. These alternative sources of funding, from art grants, festivals, and academic positions, make unsolicited work possible, thus contributing to expand architectural practice and the profession at large. Yet Liza Fior in Muf Architecture|Art has some interesting reflections on the role of unsolicited work. Muf, she says, take the role of double, or event triple agents when they serve the public beyond what is prescribed by the commission, adding an unsolicited element to their commissioned work.¹¹⁵ Muf’s role in planning and designing the *Barking Town Square* in London is a good example. This commission was funded by a private developer due to a public clause in the sales contract of the land for housing development. The commissioner wanted to develop a new gentrified

¹¹⁵ Notes from talks by Liza Fior from Muf and Sam Jacob from FAT, January 6th, 2011. These talks were part of a lecture series on Social Cohesion at the NAI in Rotterdam and this specific debate had been titled “Taste and Pleasure”.

square in the midst of a deprived neighbourhood. While working for the developer, Muf collaborated, and as Fior says, even conspired, with groups in the local community to make a public space that would serve all residents equally well. The architects took a role as double agents. However, as the developer later used the new square to promote the sale of apartments, Fior realised that they were actually triple agents. To locate ways or rooms within a commission in order to serve the public and to pursue social concerns, is explored much used tactic by Muf Architecture|Art. Operating as a double agent and doing parts of unsolicited work within a commission is an important method to open new rooms for architectural practice while contributing to expand the architectural profession.

The practices in this study contribute to explore new rooms in architectural practice by expanding their strategies, ways of working and tools. This means that the focus expands from the making of architecture to explorations of mediation and intervention. I have studied architects who make, mediate and intervene in order to see how social concerns are pursued in architectural practice. I have looked at these concerns specifically as they appear in contemporary practice, without referring to general discussions on social issues in relation to architecture. There are several reasons for this choice. The focus captures a relatively recent shift in the architectural profession, and offers an opportunity to look at a diversity practice forms explored by young European architects today. Furthermore, it offers an interesting connection to architectural history. When social engagement and social concerns are discussed in contemporary architecture, there usually follow warnings not to repeat the failures of 1960s or the 1970s. In this study, we have heard such warnings from Margaret Crawford, Wouter Vanstiphout, Hans Ibelings and Jeremy Till, to mention but a few. Given the striking continuity between post-war concerns and contemporary ones (encountered in this study as e.g. bottom-up, open form, flexibility, etc), these warnings should be explored further. What is it that is not to be repeated?

In the introduction to their comprehensive anthology on Team 10, Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada concludes by saying that Team 10 explored “the connection between design and social ideals”.¹¹⁶ This is not far from the topic of this study, yet with an essential difference concerning the degree to which one envisions this connection to be effectuated and controlled. The practice of Candilis-Josic-Woods can serve as an example. Operating in France and North-Africa, Candilis-Josic-Woods took part in large scale post-war developments. In his monograph, Tom Avermaete highlights their interest in everyday environments and informal

¹¹⁶ Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada, "Introduction - Looking into the mirror of Team 10", in Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada (eds.), *Team 10 1953-81: In Search of a Utopia of the Present*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005, p. 13.

developments, particularly the way they studied connections between social and spatial practices, and dwelling patterns. Avermaete refers to this connection under the label of *sémiologie* and explains its content in a footnote:

For *sémiologie*, any social phenomenon was made up of *langue* and *parole*. The difference between these two categories is understood in three ways. In the first of three senses *langue* is the collective aspect of the phenomenon, and *parole* the individual aspect. Thus *sémiologie* incorporates the basic social insight that human experience, in so far that it is social, is simultaneously collective and individual. In the second of the three senses, *sémiologie* sees the *langue* as the unconscious aspect of a social phenomenon, and the *parole* as the conscious aspect. In the last sense of the distinction, the *langue* of a social phenomenon is considered to be its ‘code’, and the *parole* its message. All three understandings can be found in the work of Candilis-Josic-Woods.¹¹⁷

These understandings can be found also in the works of other structuralist architects and Team 10 members. Based on the relationship between social and spatial practices on one side, and the built forms of the everyday environment on the other, essences of *langue* were reinterpreted by the architects into new forms, to serve and develop a modern social environment while also facilitating certain behavioral and social practices. Avermaete concludes that “This understanding of the built environment through the notion of social praxis, through an idea of collectively held signifying practices, is the essence of the epistemological transition that Team 10 caused within CIAM.”¹¹⁸ Team 10 members faced the challenges of the post-war period; the great deficiency of housing and the explorations of a new building industry. They were active participators and highly influential in developing European social democracies. Not least Candilis-Josic-Woods, who took on serious social responsibility while fulfilling ambitious building projects. *Langue* played an underlying and organising notion in their plans and design, translated into concepts such as the *stem* and the *web*. The satellite city of

¹¹⁷ Tom Avermaete, *Another Modern: The Post-War Architecture and Urbanism of Candilis-Josic-Woods*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005, p. 394 ft. 390.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87. “In the 1950s and 1960s the concepts of *praxis* and *pratique* were key terms within the French intellectual discourse. See: Descomtes, Vincent, *Le même et l’autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française* (1933-1978) (Paris, Minuit, 1979), 28-30. The concept of *praxis* was appropriated in two intellectual traditions: it appeared in the work of modern Marxists-existentialists (Jean-Paul Satre, Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams) and in that of some contemporary philosophers who adhered to an Aristotelian concept of *praxis/phronesis* (Hans-Georg Gadamer and Alisdair MacIntyre).” Avermaete, *Another Modern: The Post-War Architecture and Urbanism of Candilis-Josic-Woods*, pp. 393, ft. 381.

Toulouse Le Mirail, containing 100 000 inhabitants, was planned by Candilis-Josic-Woods and developed between 1961 and 1971 with the *stem* was a guiding principle. The *stem* extracts the essences of the street, serving the mobility of future generations while facilitating new spatial and social practices. These solutions did not, however, provide the kind of social and spatial practices the architect had imagined. Despite its theoretical and ideological consistency, the project came across as yet another monolithic housing project, fully within a modernist tradition.

Toulouse Le Mirail is but one of many possible examples of the failed attempts at coordinating design and social ideals, warned against by so many contemporary critics. It is also a useful illustration of the difference between the social concerns of the 1960s and those of today. While practices such as Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, Exyzt, and Fantastic Norway share Candilis-Josic-Wood's interest in everyday structures, they do not pretend to be able to decipher or reinterpret these structures in a systematic way in their projects. This does not mean that they are without social ambitions on behalf of their works, only that they do not believe these ambitions can be generalised, theorised, and "applied".

"Maakbaarheid" is explained by Wouter Vanstiphout and Michelle Provoost as an enigmatic Dutch term usually referring to a period in Dutch society between 1960s and 70s when "government policies were explicitly aimed at spreading wealth, knowledge and power through massive bottom-up emancipation policies."¹¹⁹ "Maakbaarheid" aimed at urban planning as well as the whole of society. There have been recent discussions on the issue of "maakbaarheid"; a concept which literally translates to *makeability* but can be translated as social engineering.¹²⁰ Both terms have been out of use for the last decades of neo-liberalistic development, but are now being revoked in debates about the role of public planning.¹²¹ Some, like ZUS and Lieven de Caeter, have argued for the return of a "limited" or a "relative" social engineering.¹²² Debating "maakbaarheid" in relation to contemporary demolitions and renewals of New Towns, Vanstiphout refers to French banlieues and Dutch suburbs, highlighting examples such as the *Toulouse Le Mirail* and the *Bijlmermeer* in Amsterdam. Architects should not regard these late modernist plans as failures, simply to be replaced by new architectural

¹¹⁹ Wouter Vanstiphout and Michelle Provoost, "Maakbaarheid", *Architectural Review*, 226 (1350), 2009.

¹²⁰ In the Netherlands, "maakbaarheid" does not awake the same associations to totalitarianism and control as the English term social engineering.

¹²¹ At the 4th Architecture Biennale Rotterdam in 2010, one of the sub-exhibitions was curated by Crimson Architectural Historians. It included a series of urban projects for Rotterdam under the label of "Maakbaarheid". Wouter Vanstiphout is now Professor of Design and Politics at TU Delft.

¹²² ZUS (Zones Urbaines Sensibles), Elma van Boxel, and Kristian Koreman, "Bazar curieux: The city museum as a public structure", *Open: Social Engineering: Can Society Be Engineered in the Twenty-First Century?*, 15, 2008. Pascal Gielen et al., "Parallel reality: A conversation with Michiel Dehaene, Lieven de Caeter and Rudi Laermans", *Open: Social Engineering: Can Society Be Engineered in the Twenty-First Century?*, 15, 2008.

solutions, Vanstiphout warns, but to see how socioeconomic conditions in post-war society actually affected their development. Far from a failed architectural experiment, these places became “more layered, more complex, more organic and more flexible than in the [architects’] wildest dreams.”¹²³ These New Towns, realised through top-down plans and charged with strong ideology and social ambitions, did not turn out as the architects expected, yet in time, they have developed into communities in their own right. Instead of recognising and appreciating the complexity that has developed, contemporary architects tend to dismiss both the architecture and the ideology of these places, wishing to exchange it for a new architectural vocabulary. Vanstiphout rages against these recent *Tabula Rasa* solutions. The risk is, he says, that mistakes of the 1960s will be repeated through new demolitions and the constructions of new totalities, this time based on market ideologies – with an architecture of even poorer quality and of lesser social ambitions. Vanstiphout argues further that architects mistakenly align certain forms of architecture with social engineering while overlooking others.¹²⁴

[A]rchitects are confusing the shaping of new icons for one political ideal or the other (‘Creative City’, ‘Gem Area’, ‘Organic City’, Sustainable) with the actual realization of a societal effect. If we defined social engineering as ‘realizability’, architects could then apply their inventiveness and tenacity and idealism to the development of instruments that, based on a very specific professionalism, can resolve particular problems and demonstrate new possibilities that no one else could have come up with. This would also mean that they would not see society as ‘engineerable’, in the sense of ‘constructable’, but would accept that it is an unruly reality, far more complex than anything socially engineered could ever be. The role of the architects could be to supply this unengineerable palimpsest with new elements, impulses, lines and places, and thereby make it even more complex, better and richer.¹²⁵

Opposed to Vanstiphout and Provoost, who address social engineering and makeability at a large scale, this study has focused on singular works and

¹²³ Wouter Vanstiphout, “Social Engineering of the City and Urban Design: Ideology as an Achilles Heel”, *Open: Social Engineering: Can Society Be Engineered in the Twenty-First Century?*, 15, 2008, p. 83.

¹²⁴ In his opinion, the most controlling social engineering in the Netherlands took place in the urban renewal of central Amsterdam, where even Aldo van Eyck had a role.

¹²⁵ Vanstiphout, “Social Engineering of the City and Urban Design: Ideology as an Achilles Heel”, p. 85.

“One of the fundamental values of urban development which has a hard time getting through to government officials and designers, but is prevalent among sociologists, social geographers and historians, is that the city is fundamentally unpredictable.” Wouter Vanstiphout, “It’s the architect’s fault!”, *Volume*, 26, 2011.

projects by particular architects. What unites the two discussions, however, is a shared appreciation for the complexity and unruliness of the contemporary city. The architects of this study seem to share a notion of the city as an inevitably unpredictable domain, seeing this unpredictability as a potential rather than a threat. Their resolve to start from specific situations instead of theoretical or ideological models, their emphasis on local resources, problems, and their commitment to bottom-up approaches, are characteristic features of this generation.

The pool of architectural and spatial practices presented in this study all share some particular social concerns, and explore them through practice. In this concluding chapter I have tried to show what these concerns encompass, and propose different ways one might reflect on them. Bottom-up and participation, criticality and projectivity, spatial agency and social engineering, are all terms and concepts that are relevant in this respect. The one approach that seems to unite all the practices in this study, however, is their dedication to a situational approach. Damon Rich from CUP summed up the latter point in Rotterdam on the 28th of May of 2007. It was not so interesting if contemporary practice was revolutionary or reformists, he stated, the most important thing was that they were working with questions arising from the context – “from those in the field”. And if these architects’ questions arise from the context, so do their knowledge, imagination, and solutions. That is why these works have to be evaluated in their particular contexts, and not as examples of generalised attitudes or ideals. Nevertheless, the situation-specific approach is grounded on a sense of social responsibility, in which the desire for greater justice forms the core.

In the introduction to this study, Adrian Forty declared that the “task of making evident a relationship between two such utterly disparate phenomena as social practice on the one hand and physical space on the other has proved to be largely beyond capacity of language.”¹²⁶ Throughout these readings, I hope to have shown that while this relationship may be difficult to express in words, it is certainly present in contemporary architectural practice. Sharing a concern for justice, equality, and freedom, the architects in this study have proven determined to take on social responsibility, seeing their work as a way to improve people’s surroundings and – in a step by step manner – people’s lives. They do not produce a “social architecture”, but create environments – physical or processual – that relate to, facilitate, and improve social life in its broadest sense. I have tried to study both the differences and the shared concerns of these practices, and more than anything I have looked closely at their work and the way they go about it.

¹²⁶ Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000, p. 117.

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Interview proceedings have been developed and performed according to legal and ethical guidelines by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). NSD has approved the research project *Social Concerns in Contemporary Architecture* by Lisbet Harboe, registered by NSD as project number 25554. NSD is the Data Protection Official for Research for all the Norwegian universities, university colleges and several hospitals and research institutes.

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