

belong

The connections built up by your action
lead to a sense of belonging and a change
of spatial perception.

NO PURPOSE CITY

sketching the affordances
of informality

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Malte Sonnenschein

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What is Public Space?

01

In understanding what public space actually is, it is essential to define not only its physical attributes, but also a certain level of expectation of what it should provide in its role within the urban environment. In talking about this environment, Richard Sennett defines it as “a physical solid that contains many different ways of living”.¹ He distinguishes between the built environment, naming it “ville — the solid of buildings and streets”² and the influence of its habitants, “a cité — the behaviour and outlook adopted by the people who lodge within the physical place.”³ In this thesis I will investigate how both play together and where they affect each other when colliding in public space.

So, what spaces in the urban environment am I talking about? I consciously want to demand more from public space than how it is defined by the UNESCO: “A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level.”⁴

Historically, in Western Europe, governmental institutions are tasked with designating, designing, maintaining, and regulating said spaces.⁵ As Berlin-based architect Barbara Hoidn puts it, it is representative of “the policy makers’ and politicians’ obligation of transparency, the state’s guarantee of unobstructed access to information for all”.⁶

Understanding this basic principle of public space, first premises for its design can be derived: An unrestricted accessibility means, public space cannot be designed exclusively to one single use.⁷ The consequence is also the first indica-

1 Sendra, Pablo, Sennett, Richard:
Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 8

2 ibid.

3 ibid.

4 UNESCO: Inclusion Through
Access to Public Space.

6 Hoidn, Barbara:
DEMOPOLIS — The Right
to Public Space. 2016. P. 8

5 Chin, Susan: Urban Design
through Public Space.
2016. P. 32

7 Schneider, Bernhard: Public
Space — A Question of
Structures. 2016. P. 66

tion of a fundamental problem that can be observed in European metropolises: "To meet the requirements of its various, often simultaneous uses, its design and structure have to remain sufficiently unspecific."⁸

I want to establish a different reading of how or by whom public space should be designed by taking the term public space literally. I follow Hannah Arendt in referring to it as space belonging to the public.⁹

From this definition I also conclude the right of the public to alter the space. A right that, following Hoidn again, equals "the individual's right to expression of opinion and participation, to active and politically mature forms of cooperation, and also the striving for a balance of individual and collective interests."¹⁰ And this right is increasingly exercised, as citizens and initiatives contribute their ideas on how to improve functionality but also the maintenance of public spaces. I am not alone with valuing this contribution, seeing it as a crucial participation. Susan Chin, urbanist, and architect, states this development is "ever more critical to the ecology of a successful metropolis."¹¹ In this thesis, I focus not only on why, but also how to develop more intimate areas which can be more beneficial to social interaction amongst a city's residents. In doing so I will examine the designer's position within that process to be able to prepare a briefing for further action.

In the book *Designing Disorder*, Sennett raises a related question: "Could the buildings, streets, and public spaces be designed to loosen up fixed habits, to disorder absolute images of self?"¹²

By repeating this question, I already express an acceptance that the surrounding public space does not yet fulfil this task, and even though des-

ignated to being public, cannot live up to the UNESCO's definition. Furthermore, I argue that the mere existence of physically accessible spaces will not be able to do so. "We are trying to avoid discussing public space as a space of conflict, one that is not necessarily a space of 'being together' or an entirely positive environment.", John Endom concludes.¹³ But existing conflicts immediately counteract the accessibility without barriers claimed to be the very basis for defining said spaces.

"[The term] 'public' reproduces a hierarchy of belonging and a dominant idea of 'the public' that eclipses a multiplicity of diverse minor 'publics'."¹⁴

And while the term public fails to capture the diversity of the citizens, the space designed to serve this public contributes to the same generalisation. "Bodies that share a majority of characteristics with the local norm are those perceived

⁸ Schneider, Bernhard: *Public Space — A Question of Structures*. 2016. P. 66

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Hoidn, Barbara: *DEMOPOLIS — The Right to Public Space*. 2016. P. 8

¹¹ Chin, Susan: *Urban Design through Public Space*. 2016. P. 32

¹² Sennett, Richard: *Designing Disorder*. 2020. P. 8

¹³ Nagati, Omar Chabani, Meriem Edom, John: *Contested Space in the City*. 2016. P. 49.

¹⁴ Akademie der Künste, Goethe Institut: *Public Space — Fights and Frictions*. 2016. P. 8

primarily as constituents in this notion of the 'public'. On the contrary, bodies that do not conform to the norm, be it on the basis of their gender, their race, their health, their age or, more generally, their behaviour, are excluded from this notion to an extent proportionate with their degree of non-conformity. Consequently, the 'space' of the 'public' will also be proportionally less appropriate for those non-conforming bodies."¹⁵

It seems, exclusion is an unavoidable result in dealing with the public.

"Public space is needed for those things that are meant to be seen and heard by everyone," Hannah Arendt deduces, "and to effectively achieve this goal, said space has to be accessible to everyone. Yet creating the necessary conditions for a communal space to be accessible to the general population is hardly a trivial task."¹⁶

If this is not yet achieved — do we have to question, if public space even exists?

¹⁵ Akademie der Künste, Goethe Institut:
Public Space — Fights and Frictions,
2016, P.8

¹⁶ Schneider, Bernhard: Public
Space — A Question of
Structures, 2016, P. 65

Stellenboschplein, The Hague



I looked at the neighbourhood Transvaal in The Hague. There is no lack of public space — and also no lack of initiatives and people who are already trying to solve the problems of drug abuse or littering. Yet there is a lack of utilised public space. Richard Sennett notes we draw the wrong conclusion „that sheer openness is a sign of interaction.“¹⁷ He describes this deduction simply as an error. "It's an error founded in a basic biological principle: We need to mark space and that space needs to have some quality of protection as well as opening to the outside. [...] Simply removing barriers is a rough thing, it's not promoting social interaction."¹⁸

17
Sennett, Richard: The Architecture of Cooperation, 2012. Harvard Graduate School of Design. min. 04:43:01ff.

18
ibid.

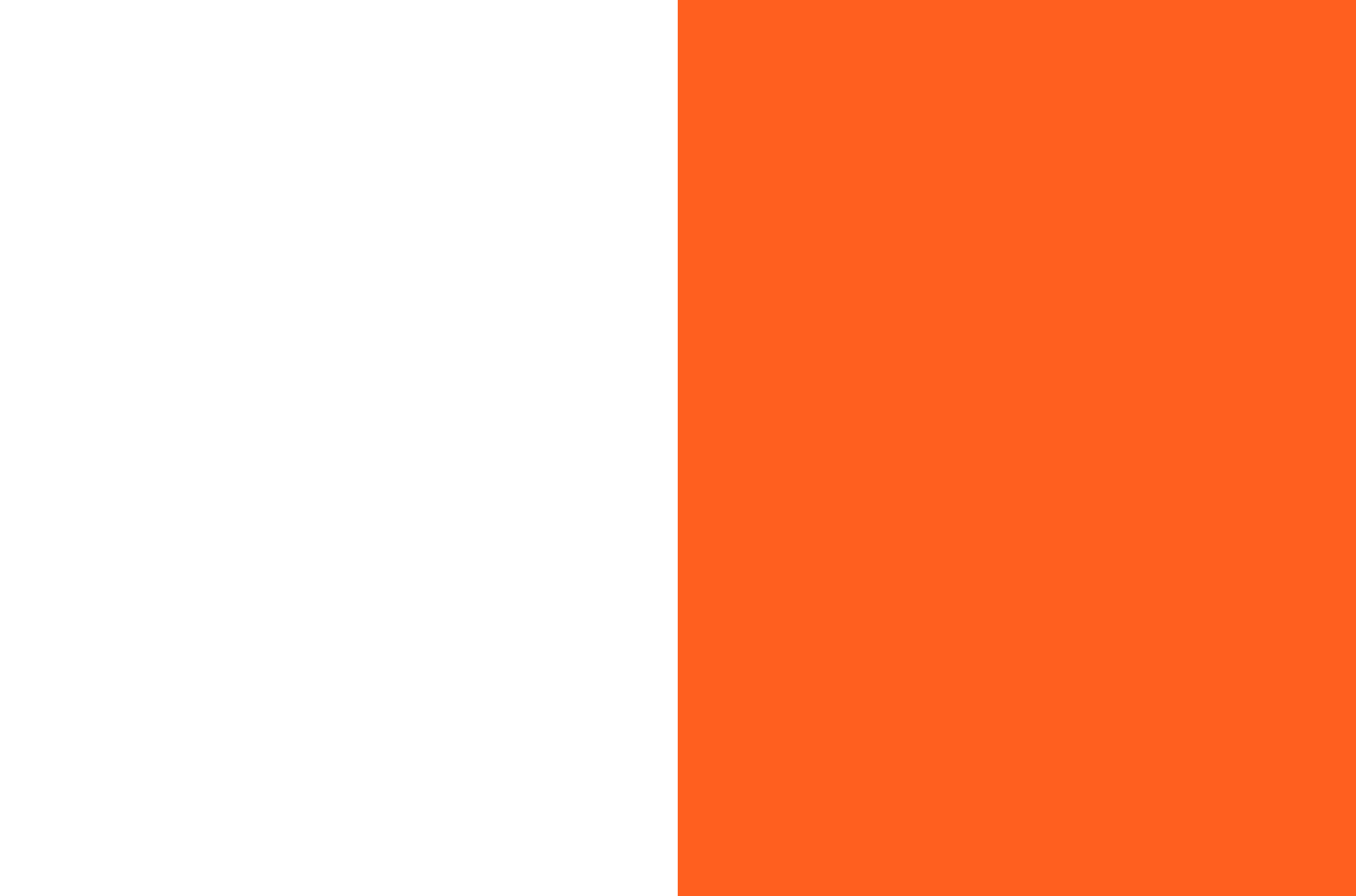
Kaapstraat, The Hague



The lack of utilization together with a busy and noisy transit area surrounding the square leads to an unused space — while some pedestrians cross it in fast pace to get to the other side in the months of my observation phase I never saw anybody pause in the square, let alone relax.

„No alternative narratives, ideas or (sub)cultures have been allowed to make a claim on, intervene in or transform urban spaces, unless they have been neatly encapsulated and made servient to the dominant script. While tensions and confrontations are only allowed to surface beyond its immediate boundaries, it is represented to the outside world as a wealthy, successful, consumable and predominantly white environment.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Boer, René: Smooth City if the new Urban. 2018.



Claims on Public Space

Following the architect and urban designer Omar Nagati, I look closer: "Reading the city as a set of multiple orders, and narratives and claims, is much healthier than reading it as 'the people' versus 'the State'."²⁰ The issue I target is not a lack of available spaces declared to be public, but rather the lack of utilisation of existing space — "for a space only becomes public when it is being used."²¹

In this thesis I will focus on spaces, which either are examples for present exclusion but also those which are failing their public nature in the attempt to avoid any exclusion. Spaces, that are set-up within the *ville*, but which in their nature prevent the localisation of the *cité*. How can designers influence these at present insufficiently public spaces to develop them according to their definition?

Especially in the development of further urban growth and re-urbanisation, we are in desperate need for well-designed public space, yet we can find the "scenario of urban streets, squares, and parks becoming underused and desolate as a result of globalization, information technology, and negative growth".²² And with utilised public spaces becoming a scarce good, these fall victim to the detrimental effects of overuse.²³

I will examine the expectations articulated by the society for specific public spaces and develop tactics for action that offer alternatives to interchangeable universal design attempts.

The questions of who the public is, what spaces are meant to be public and what characteristics are needed for them to actually become public lead me away from static forms to a re-in-

²⁰ Nagati, Omar; Chabani, Meriem; Edom, John: *Contested Space in the City*, 2016, P.49

²¹ Lüdcke, Felix; Schütz, Theresa; Ozarslan, Asli; Teymur, Amir: *Present People*, 2016, P. 268

²² Polinna, Cordelia: *The Constitution of Public Space*, 2016, P. 21

²³ *ibid.*

terpretation of the built environment in the public sphere. They challenge its formal constitution and its institutionalized character — and lead to an informal approach of alterations. I draw on perspectives from the fields of the political, spatial and sociological investigation of tasks and characters of public space in order to further understand the complex network of influences in it. This supports an awareness of the multi-layered impact of any design intervention.

"We wonder 'for whom' public space is designed, but also 'against whom.'"²⁴

Space in the public domain has the potential to mediate between user groups who otherwise meet little or not at all in everyday life. It can offer contact at eye level between these and towards the authorities.

"'To live together in the world,' according to Hannah Arendt, 'means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it, the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.' Without said table, 'two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.'"²⁵

Spatial designers are trained in reading places, their background enables them to analyse the existing relations of dominance and to expose and question them through their work. The UNESCO claims that „well-designed and maintained public space is critical to the health of any city"²⁶ and further states: „Such gathering spaces allow for social mixing, civic participation, recreation, and a sense of belonging."²⁷

By tackling the different influences of control

and power on space, this demand can be met. The process of experiencing and handling spaces differently societally can be encouraged through design.

The approach to activate existing spaces by involving residents is not new. As Jane Jacobs famously puts it:

"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."²⁸

Including informal interventions into formal urban planning processes can be beneficial to not only citizens but also to the urban design process as a whole.

The current power relations can be of different origins. They lie partly in the physical design, the provision, and maintenance of public space but also a variety of claims by its users.

²⁴ Akademie der Künste, Goethe Institut: Public Space — Fights and Frictions. 2016. P.9f.

²⁵ Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures. 2016 P. 65

²⁶ UNESCO: Inclusion Through Access to Public Space.

²⁷ UNESCO: Inclusion Through Access to Public Space.

²⁸ Chin, Susan: Urban Design through Public Space. 2016. P. 32

In differentiating these claims, I distinguish between three scenarios:

First, colonized public spaces, referring to outside areas of restaurants or cafés and the like: areas occupied within the public domain, where habitation is now conditional on the purchase of consumer goods. They play together with an increase of privatised public spaces.²⁹

Second, the occupation by dominant user groups. This does not necessarily establish a similar rule set, while it may well be just as exclusive or absorbing. "From the micro-space of the body to large-scale contexts, people apply a multitude of strategies to further their own area of control."³⁰ Common examples here may be accumulations of bullies, drug abusers, police presence or people without housing.

Third, institutionalised control plays an important role in the cityscape. I am describing the effect of urban planning failures, be it architecturally overloaded places or the opposite, the lack of spatial infrastructure. Both overcrowded and underdeveloped spaces elude use by residents through their architectural pre-set. The decisions that lead to this form of control are made and implemented by institutions or municipalities.

The influence of these three, often overlapping scenarios, changes from place to place, sometimes even by the minute — and is in its effect individual to everybody. While some may avoid the affected parts of the public realm all together, others may not even feel an exclusive impact.

²⁹ Lin, Ying-Tzu: Child-friendly Cities from an Urban Planner's Perspective, 2019.

³⁰ Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures, 2016, P. 65

"A relentless battle is fought in the virtual as well as the physical public space of the city to determine who is in charge where, with individuals laying claim to their participatory rights."³¹

Not only is every individual confronted with this conflict and due to its positioning in the public sphere forced to endure its effects, willingly or not, everybody will contribute to this imbalance of dominance for the same reason. "The players are in constant motion, new ones are joining, while others disappear from the scene."³²

While residents might use chairs and tables on the sidewalks, colour on their buildings' walls, advertisement, and decorations, every passer-by can actively join this competition: "by generating

³¹ Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures, 2016, P. 65

³² ibid.

noise or playing loud music they can increase their share in the acoustic space, with perfume, their share in the olfactory space, and with graffiti their visual reach. Moving very fast or very slow, or with a rolling, space-consuming gait, an individual can limit other people's mobility, or repel them with an unpleasant odor or through littering. A person can strip a space of its public character, for example by destroying park benches, or make it unsafe for others, be it through walking seemingly or actually dangerous dogs, through drug dealing, or violence."³³

Next to this conflict of power relations, there is a whole list to add to the phenomena endangering the 'publicness' of public space as subcategories to my concept of three characters of claims, for instance: "surveillance [...], exclusion of the urban undesirable, technology individualism [...], privatisation, gated communities, defensible spaces and military urbanism, semi-privatisation in commercial pseudo-public spaces [...]"³⁴ — most of which are "related to an increased state of control."³⁵

³³ Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures. 2016. P. 65

³⁴ Backer, Matthias Det: The Publicness Paradox: Young People And The Production Of Parochial Places. 2016.

³⁵ Ibid.

Anna Paulownaplein, The Hague



The extended outdoor areas of multiple cafés around the square don't leave much of a pedestrian zone for users who cannot or do not want to afford a beverage.

"Urban researchers found that security and private interests have been prioritised in recent decades, transforming public space into a series of highly regulated sites of consumption-based activity. Certain behaviours have been curbed, limiting civil liberties like the right to protest, to dissent, to be heard, the right to be homeless or not to consume. Public space has been sanitised, exorcising difference as a result, often in the context of private leisure and consumption practices. Some argue that public spaces are rapidly becoming spaces of homogeneity and social control; they've become closed and closed-minded"³⁶

Ziegenmarkt, Bremen



After a couple of incidents in the area, the police sets up camp to promote security. The social place otherwise used by passers-by and residents in conversation falls victim to this approach.

Hannover



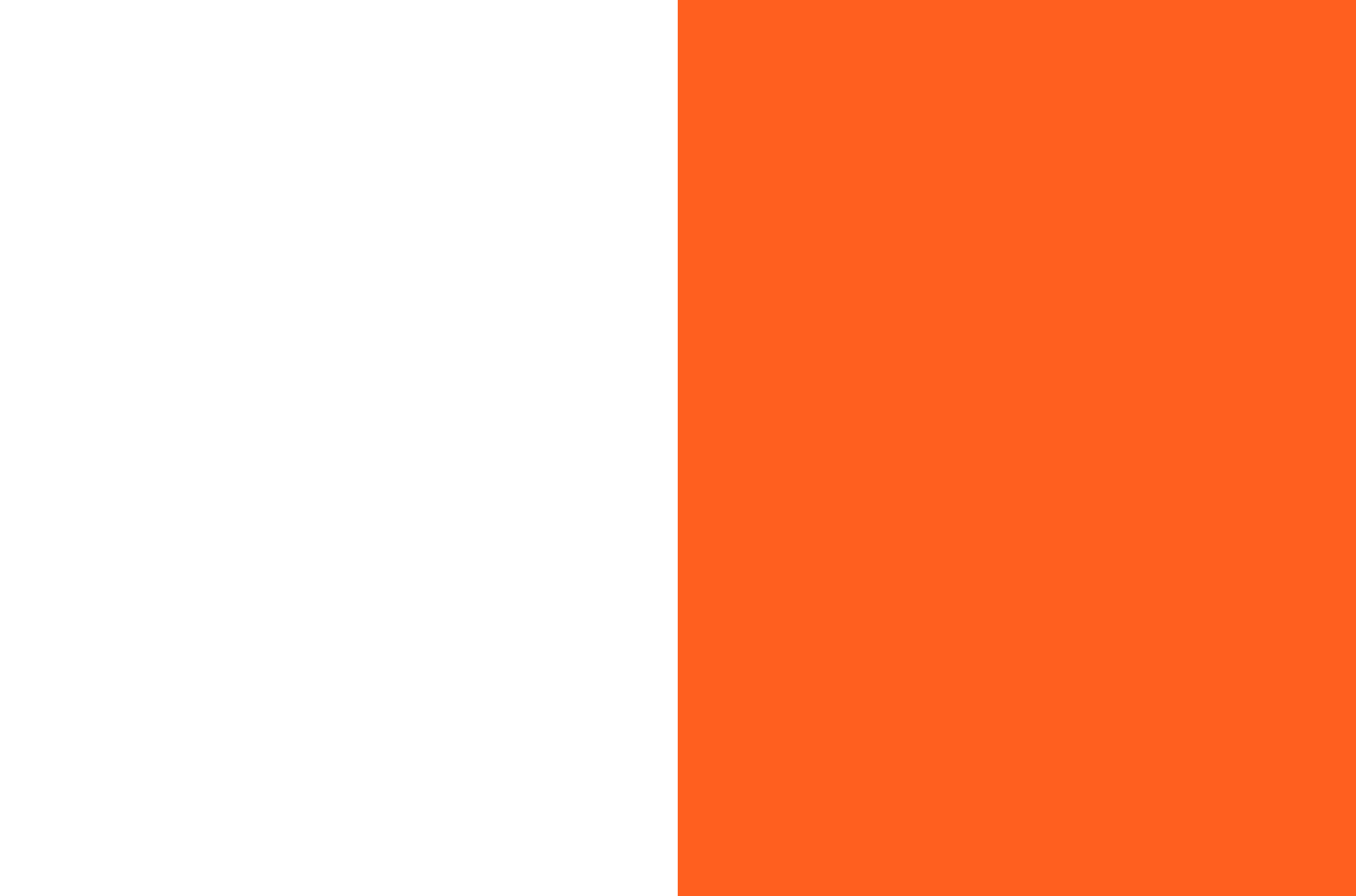
The city council banned alcohol and cigarettes on all playgrounds.³⁷ The rubbish and presence of users of such substances made the places unattractive to families and children — yet now, with their behaviour being banned, that user group is excluded. The playgrounds remain mostly unused after five o'clock in the afternoon. The atmospheric exclusion of one user group is exchanged by law for that of another.

37
Vollmer, Michael: Härtere Gangart:
Zigaretten und Alkohol sind auf
Spielplätzen ab sofort verboten. 2018.

Rivierenbuurt, The Hague



Fences, Poles, Signs, Trees form a collection of architectural structures that have grown closely together over time. Partly for cars, partly against them, partly to beautify or protect other infra-structures, they prevent the use of public space, while only a few kilometres away, free tables and benches line the canal banks.



Condoning Collaboration

In the Netherlands, the process of legislators embracing the informal handling of space is not new. "In the 1990s, people's need to meet and interact grew, and user experience became increasingly important."³⁸

Pedestrians started to reclaim space from cars and began to alter spaces according to their needs, places to meet appeared. "An interesting tension arose between formal and informal."³⁹

Urban planner Cordelia Polinna speaks about a renaissance of the inner-city. According to her, "public spaces are again serving as communal spaces and are turning from mere transit zones into stages for different uses and offerings."⁴⁰ Due to societal change, more time is spent in the public realm again. She traces this transformation back to more single-person households, more flexible lifestyles due to globalization and a new leisure behaviour.⁴¹

In more recent times, of course, the pandemic of COVID-19 has led to a shift of focus towards the vital role of public spaces, as an international study by urban planning office Gehl examined.⁴² Yet Gehl emphasises the fact that more than a third of the study participants do not use the public space — a clear sign of the often critical condition public space is in but also of a lack of flexibility to meet the new demands brought about by the pandemic.⁴³

The ongoing revival gives us the chance to rethink how public space is created and puts its development in the spotlight.

"This process may be challenging and provoke controversy, but it will undoubtedly lead to new

38. Karssenbergh, Hans; Laven, Jeroen: Public Space and Placemaking in NL. 2017.

39. *ibid.*

40. Polinna, Cordelia: The Constitution of Public Space. 2016. P. 21ff.

41. *ibid.*

42. O'Connor, Eamon: Public Space Plays Vital Role in Pandemic. 2020.

43. *ibid.*

opportunities, new types of places, and improved economic and social well-being in our rapidly urbanizing metropolises."⁴⁴

These alterations of formal planning are what I aim to support and test, to also enable others to follow.

One could argue that the questioning of power relations in the urban environment has been a constant development since urban living was established — and thus the intervention of different groups in it is also part of the *cité*.

In the 1990s, the Dutch government condoned the efforts by the residents: "[it] even helped to remove the first stone from the wall: the formal embraces the informal."⁴⁵ This is referring to the establishment of a hybrid zone. The legal status the first few centimetres of public space bordering residential buildings was changed. Authorities accepted the important social function of these areas. "80% of informal contact between neighbours takes place there."⁴⁶ Again, Gehl's study reveals that during a pandemic these areas are even more important and extended — quiet streets and places allow for longer exchange, although at a distance.⁴⁷

In the case studies I consult, I analyse the projects and starting points of other designers' interventions preceding my own project and compare the spatial qualities of their work with my own proposals.

The extension of this condonement is the aim of my project. I want to test its limits, shift, or reveal them. To carry it further, from the door to the public square, from one's own home to the unused or underutilised public spaces.

Fluid Spaces

A constantly shifting societal context calls for a constant change in the design of public space. To serve the present user group, a fluid design must replace our static understanding of the built environment. Just as "[...] use and appropriation are never static, but form over time like sediment, layer by layer."⁴⁸

It is a fluid network of influences that is in a state of permanent change. "[...] we cannot talk about freedom without talking about power. And the city, while being an exemplary theatre for self-expression and social engagement, is also a site of complex networks of dominance."⁴⁹ Therefore, public space is in no way accessible to all since the effects of this contest of control impact everybody differently.⁵⁰

A statically designed public space will always exclude parts of a fluid and diverse society. Yet an inclusive design is more than relevant.

"The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of unnumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised."⁵¹ The designer's contribution to these perspectives, as Arendt calls them, should empower others to become more present as well.

SueAnne Ware who describes herself as a design activist quotes Don Mitchell: "What makes a space public [...] is not its preordained 'publicness'. Rather, it is when to fulfil a pressing need, some group or another takes space and through its action makes it public".⁵²

44
Chin, Susan: Urban Design
through Public Space, 2016, P. 36

45
Karszenberg, Hans; Laven, Jeroen:
Public Space and Placemaking in
NL, 2017.

46
ibid.

47
O'Connor, Eamon: Public Space
Plays Vital Role in Pandemic,
2020.

49
Sandra, Pablo; Sennett, Richard:
Designing Disorder, 2020, P. 15

51
Terdts, Hans; Grate, Christoph; Koeboek,
Catherine: Four Themes for Architecture in the
Writings of Hannah Arendt — A Plurality of
Perspectives, 2020, P. 19

50
Hoidn, Barbara; DEMOPOLIS
— The Right to Public Space,
2016, P. 13

48
Venloesem, Els; Dehaene,
Michiel; Goethals, Mariëtte;
Yegenoglu, Hüsnü: Social Poetics
— The Architecture of Use and
Appropriation, 2016, P. 17

52
Ware, SueAnne: Asylum for a
Design Activist, 2016, P. 31

"To connect with others who differ racially or religiously, whose ways of loving are alien, who come from distant cultures, people have to loosen up inside themselves, treating their own identities as less absolute, as less definable. You could say that people have to engage in a kind of self-disordering."⁵³

What can be observed in public spaces is a thoughtful design, trying to refrain from enhancing any claim. The setup of squares often aims to not serve as a stage for one particular user group trying stay out of this competition or at least to not advantage anyone. Similar to my findings, the anthropologist Mark Augé describes spaces as *non-places*. He speaks of spaces that miss a relation to people or history and appear identity-less. Other than me he finds such places in airports, and shopping centres and motorways.⁵⁴

The result are designs that allow for a durable, easy maintainable spaces that cannot be taken over easily — equipped with pavement as a solid foundation. By trying to be open to anybody equally, yet not to be occupied for good, they end up being occupied by nobody. The result of an absolute all-purpose area is the exact opposite: a no purpose space.

These spaces are what I refer to as the urban desert. Not spaces that are deserted and out of control but deserted through an overload of control.

The exploration of their individual character in the respective interplay between *ville* and *cité* serves as an analysis of such empty areas in the public sphere. It is the first step to revitalise them.

Susan Chin agrees with me "that any vacant or underused space can be converted into a beneficial public space".⁵⁵ We need to test different approaches, "adapt existing rules of use, care, and modification, and if people and government collaborate to devise ways to share the responsibility to design, construct, and maintain them."⁵⁶

To deny a place any purpose and to label it as wasteland seems extreme. Even without users, it

54
Weiß, Stephanie: Orte und Nicht-Orte — Kulturanthropologische Anmerkungen zu Marc Augé. 2005. P. 271.

55
Chin, Susan: Urban Design through Public Space. 2016. P. 36

56
ibid.

remains a place that maintains a certain structural and transitory use through the traffic circulating around it or contributes as a void to the loosening of the dense urban structures. The view from the window of the residents, which may fall on the square, also corresponds to a use. The different scenarios of use correspond to the variety of ways to claim spaces. The use of a public flowerbed might be olfactory just as it is visual, transitory areas can serve for fitness routines and an empty square just to escape crowded surroundings.

It is not a question of discrediting these scenarios, but I want to point out the lack of the most important task of public space: It is a place of exchange and confrontation, not only with the familiar but also with the other and thereby contributes to a more open and tolerant society. It lacks, to speak with Hannah Arendt, the essential aspect of public life: its plurality.⁵⁶ Using a somewhat provocative terminology underlines the urgency with which we need to change the way we handle public space.

Narrowing down the design's role, I analyse how to work in the public sphere, where to apply design and whom to involve or to target. The question of the tasks and positions of design, designer, and the current state of chosen locations leads to a strategy and a tool set to then be spatially developed.

56
Tardis, Hans; Gate, Christoph; Koelboek, Catherine: Four themes for Architecture in the Writings of Hannah Arendt — A Plurality of Perspectives, 2020, P. 19

Informal Alteration, Maastricht



Pedro Gadlano: "But what I do think is interesting is that even if the State tries to regulate those spaces, people will always find a way — or we hope that they will always find a way — to appropriate these spaces and make them their own, instead of just being imposed upon them."⁵⁷

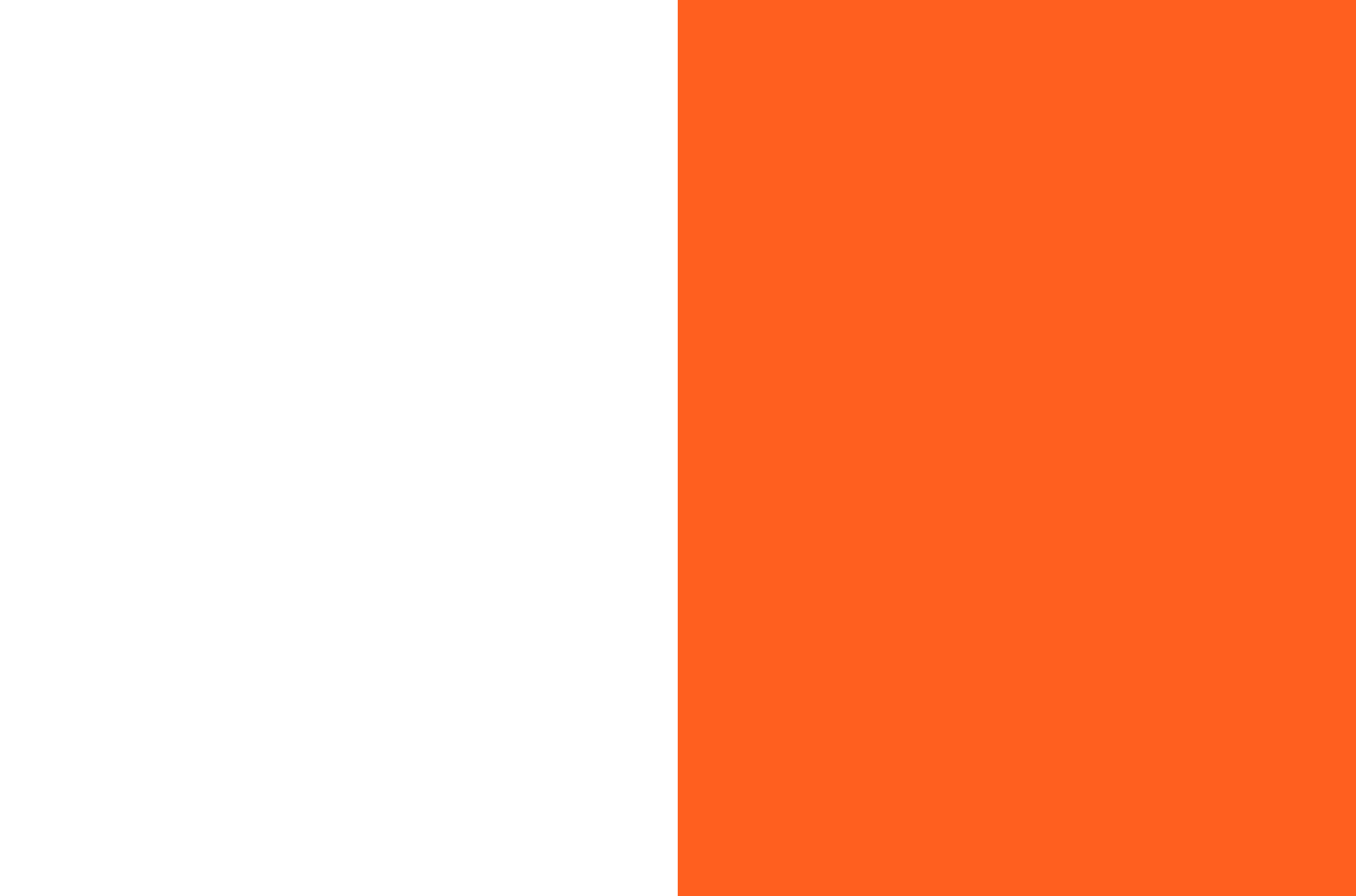
Informal Alteration, Transvaal, The Hague



In my understanding, an intervention in public space can only be part of the constant learning process and a changing reaction to the demands.

Its experimental nature also underlines this: The designer does not act as a problem solver in the face of social problems, but can stimulate dialogue about these problems through experimentation.

„The outcomes of doing can be good or bad. We can learn from both, but mistakes teach us more than success.”⁵⁸



The Process of Positioning

02

Being situated amongst urban planners, different kinds of architects, be it landscape, commercial, or residential, the municipalities, and citizen initiatives, it is important for spatial designers to define their role and the role of their work in addressing public spaces.

Informality as a Design Principle

"Though the designs could enable a complex, diverse, loose city to function, they alone cannot cause it to exist. They are tools, necessary but not sufficient for creating a nurturing urban civil society."⁵⁹ In this quote I read a principle for the task of design in public space: It is not about creating community or society, but about influencing the context in which it has the opportunity to gather, surface and grow.

The result of its application is almost impossible to predict. Omar Nagati goes even further in saying "[...] if you look at public space, I don't believe necessarily that the design determines, allows, enables or limits. You cannot really say: 'This design will lead to this practice.'"⁶⁰

"A lot of planning goes into designing cities that exclude and hide people who are not a part of the city's aspired image. [...] Exclusionary design is endorsed by policies which are centred around a certain demographic and are thus eventually harmful to the rest. Those whom society grants the least agency are hit the worst by these tedious processes of strategically harming the built and social fabric with exclusionary interventions."⁶¹ Even if no specific effects can be predicted, spatial

⁵⁹ Sendra, Pablo, Sennett, Richard: Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 9

⁶⁰ Nagati, Omar, Chabani, Meriem, Edom, John: Contested Space in the City. P.49

⁶¹ Sanval, Iga: Affordances and their Role in Placemaking. 2016.

design must nevertheless work against this political exclusion. On the contrary, it has the chance to contribute to the development of inclusive places. The unpredictable reaction is not a reason to refrain from developing those, but rather an argument for temporary, constantly evolving interventions. Sennett advises to act in curiosity, not thinking you know how the other feels and to react by leaving space to react to allow for cooperative design. He speaks of the application of a "minimum force"⁶² in altering spatial experiences. Thereby design can subtly intervene in the behavioural reaction to our built environment yet leave room for an individual interpretation — and a continuous change can live up to a continuously changing society. At the same time, the professional design lays a foundation for further engagement and its effect becomes dependent on residents — so the approach avoids becoming a simple beautification of the urban scape and thus simply supportive of gentrification processes. It also prevents an overwriting ego-design and protects personal, subjective readings of and relations to the space. I will not dive deeper into the topic of gentrification, since I follow both Michael Mehaffy and Peter Moskowitz in their analysis that gentrification is not just the effect of re-designing public spaces, but merely the consequence of political decisions.⁶³

In giving the citizens the opportunity to form their own ideas in reaction to the design and by openly exhibiting its temporary nature, a process of thoughts should follow that ideally brings the user to intervene themselves. When that happens and residents act independently in the construct of the city and urban space, their proposal becomes informal.

Of course, not all residents have the same opportunity to realise their interests in the public space. Socio-economic conditions, time-consuming family or professional situations, different skill sets or character traits can quickly contribute to one user group asserting itself more strongly than others in the informal changes, although the designer has strived for an inclusive process. This is why it is so important to see the process not as a one-time effort that happens once and is completed afterwards, but as a continuous fluid process of change. Public space is never finished.

If one user group asserts itself against others through its handling of the space, another problematic scenario occurs: The presence of dominant user groups. Consequently, authorities and designers are again demanded to get involved and initiate changes.

Ideally, the result of this informal, temporary transformation serves not only as a stage for the residents and initiatives, helping them to gain more visibility, but also as a suggestion to the authorities about how an informal approach to space can expand its usability.

"This alternative position does not imply that the spatial expertise of the architect is no longer valued. It requires architects to leave their comfort zone and to act in an open way during the various stages of the building process, in the same way that users are asked to take on an active role and enter into a dialogue with the designer."⁶⁴

Informality not only describes an intervention without an authorized initiator such as the (local) government, it also stands for a direct and literal transformation following the wishes of the intervening user. It thereby does not compromise as much

⁶² Sennett, Richard: *The Architecture of Cooperation*, 2012, min. 02:39-44ff.

⁶³ Mehaffy, Michael: *The Gentrification Challenge: Placemaking as the Problem, or Placemaking as the Solution?* 2019, p. 27

⁶⁴ Vervloessem, Elis; Dehaene, Michiel; Goethals, Marleen; Yegenoglu, Hüsnü: *Social Poetics — The Architecture of Use and Appropriation*, 2016, p. 13

and might spark more of a controversy about the design. But this controversy is the dialogue wanted and needed by testing space in a city.

Design sociologist Ezio Manzini claims that "design for social innovation is everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability."⁶⁵ And I believe a sustainable process of fluid change equals what expert design can contribute, kick-off and fuel.

It is a process of protesting the current handling of space. Following John Edoms question: „In order to design a space which allows protest to take place, must it have resistance built into it?“,⁶⁶ I would answer that continuous questioning and elaboration of the design will provide a spatial development that is resistant and critical, yet the design itself does not always have to be.

I see the task of the expert design of public spaces to produce Möglichkeitenräume, spaces of multiple affordances, soliciting people to experiment and allowing for individual projections.⁶⁷ These spaces, even though represented physically, stay much more atmospherically present.

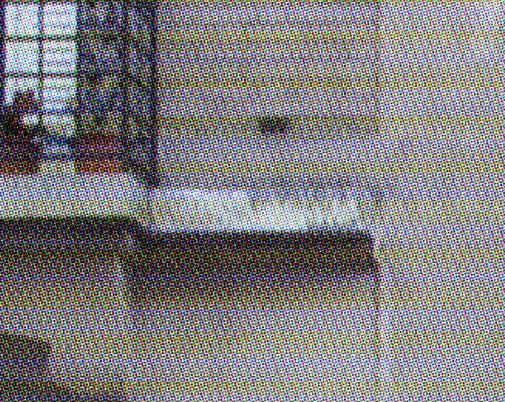
⁶⁵ Manzini, Ezio: Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation, 2015, P. 62

⁶⁷ Sanjiv, Jay: Affordances and their Role in Placemaking, 2016.

⁶⁶ Gaditano, Pedro; Chabani, Meriem; Edoms, John: Contested Space in the City, 2016, P.8ff.

Passage 56, Paris

by aaa — Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée



By reopening the former footpath to the public, a place of gathering and exchange is created. Doina Petrescu, part of aaa, says the atelier "employs tactics of community organisation and activism, to create 'commons', sites of genuine participation and democracy amongst the crumbling social structures of the welfare state."⁶⁸ In a city scape voids are almost expected to be closed off by fences, they created a common offering infrastructure and retreat instead, inviting the public in.



Spiral Garden, Rotterdam

by Observatorium



Activating neglected courtyards, Observatorium created a temporary place to relax and escape the noisy city together with motivating a process of change by involving the residents.⁶⁹ "Such interventions are like stones thrown into a pond, setting things in motion when all is still. It makes people alert and sometimes irritated. At best, one action can lead to the next, setting in motion a chain of doing and thinking."⁷⁰ Their aim was to create a spatial form to enhance the existing value of the site.

69
Observatorium: Spiral Garden, 2012.

70
Boxel, Elma van; Koreman, Kristian:
City of Permanent Temporality,
2019, p. 14

Sleepsculpture for 24 Persons, location unknown

by Daan van Houter



Adding an otherwise private or intimate activity to the public realm, questioning its status of an anonymous and cold space, this project raises an important discussion in my opinion. "These negotiations may cause discussion, arguments and possibly some conflicts, but this could be interpreted positively since those using the space would be creating social interaction and innovative ways of communal life."⁷¹

Cineroleum, London

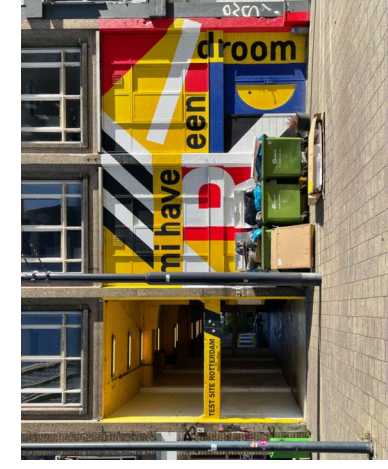
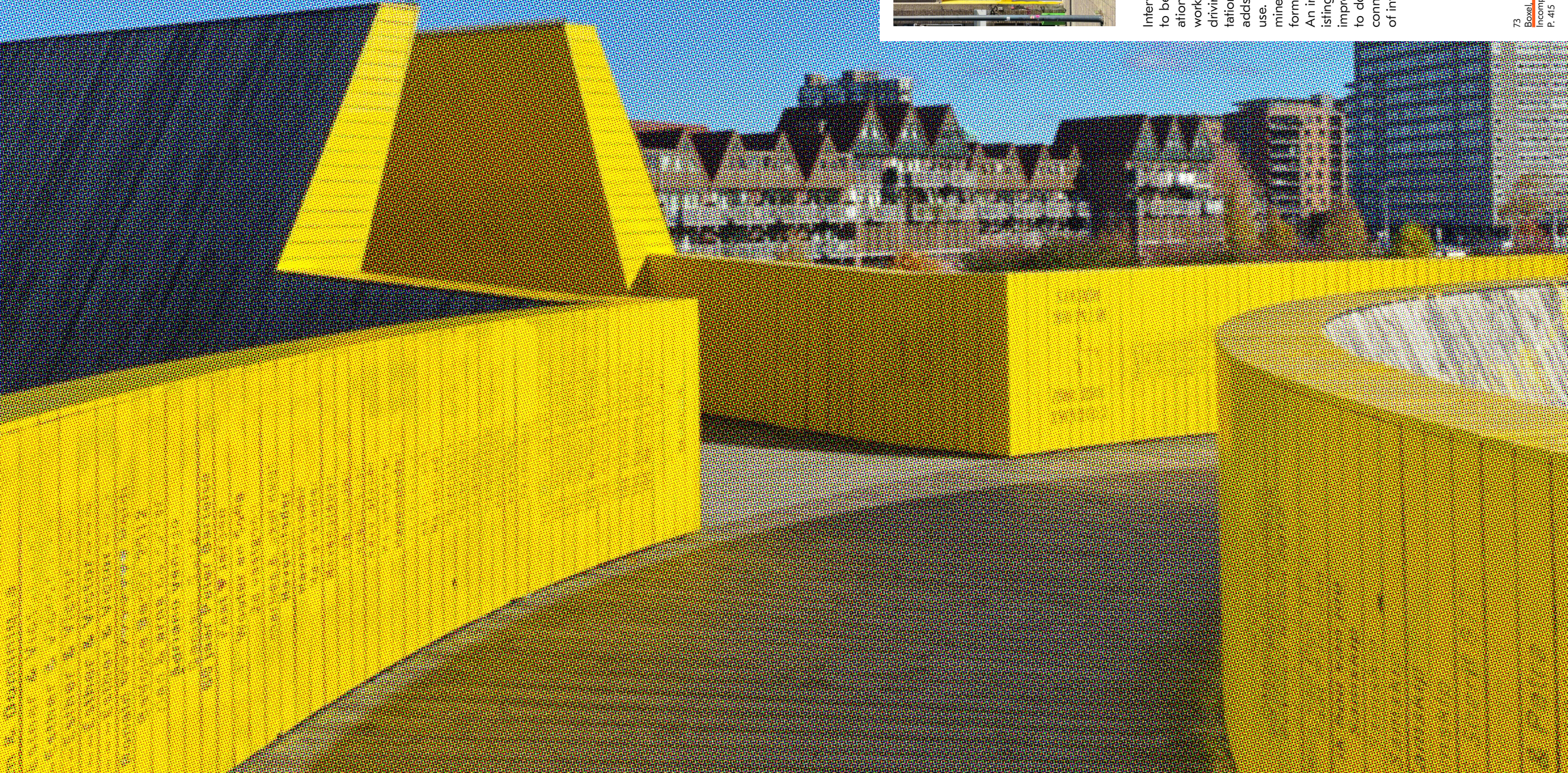
by Assemble



An empty petrol station is transformed into a temporary cinema. Reclaimed and donated materials are used to improvise the decadent interiors of the golden age picture palaces. The textile walls are pulled up all around after the movie is over, revealing the residents' all-day surroundings after the social experience of film-going.⁷² The alternative reality of the cinematic experience finds a place next to traffic and in a car centred context.

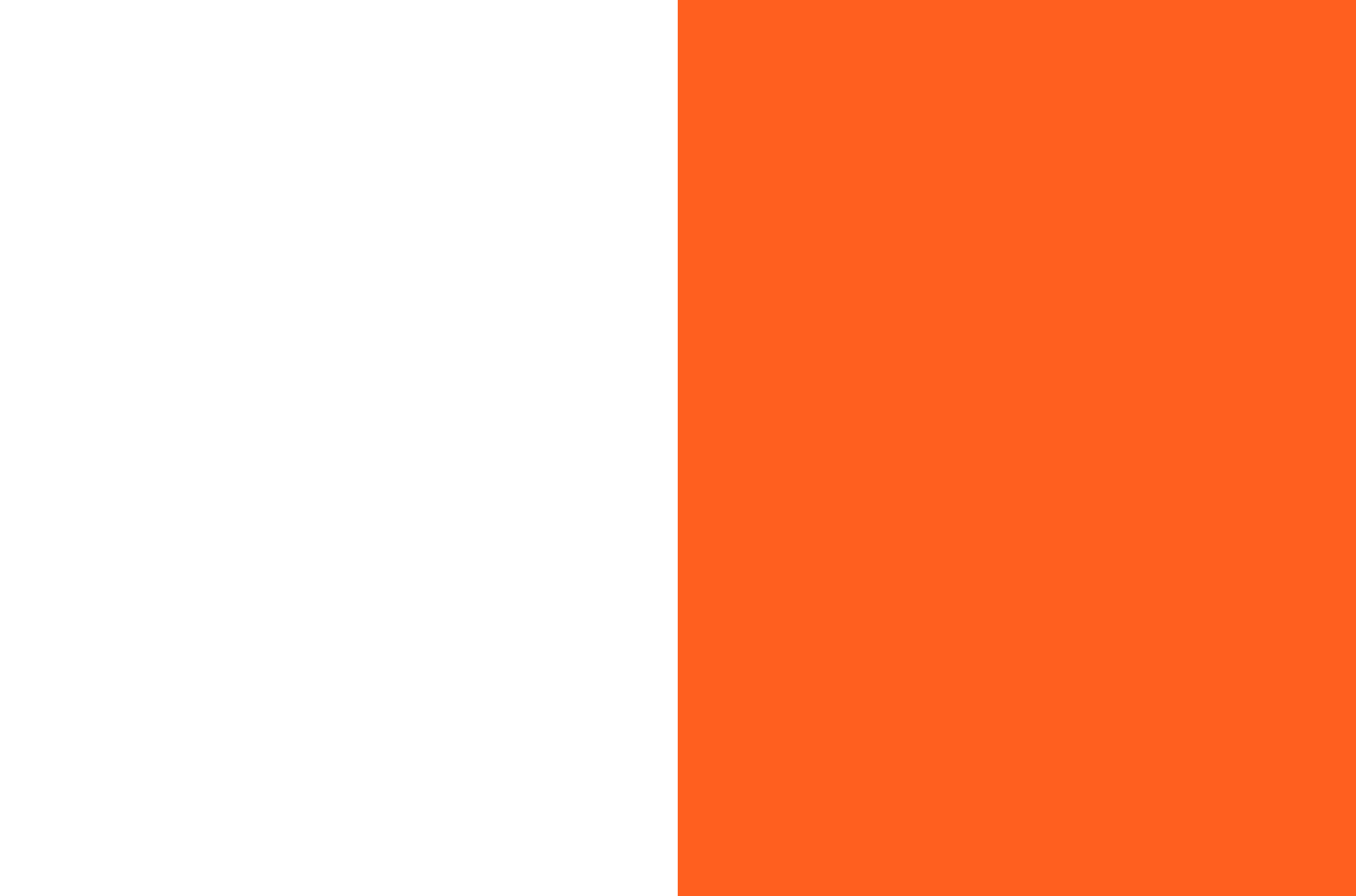
Luchtensingel, Rotterdam

by ZUS — Zones Urbaines Sensibles



Intervening in existing urban structures needs to be a continuous process of temporary alterations: "New insights into how we want to live, work, spend leisure time, and move around are driving forward a process of constant adaptation. It has no end. Sometimes the function adds to the place, but location often adapts to use. The porosity of the urban structure determines how a space can adjust and take on new forms of occupation."⁷³

An initial factor for ZUS to intervene in the existing cityscape and to make suggestions for improvement was also the lack of security due to dominant violent user groups and the poor connection to the wider public due to the lack of infrastructure.



The Role of the Designer

In the understanding of the designer's position, I do not see it as being tasked with solving local problems, be it littering, crime, destruction of public property or the like. While acting as a facilitator within the area of my expertise and work on visual presence and spatial positioning, I do not want to hold the position of a facility manager.

In this interpretation, the designer is tasked with providing an alternative approach to the order introduced by authorities. Pablo Sendra sees this kind of disorder "as initial interventions that create conditions for unplanned use of the public realm, which are points of departure for a continuous and open process".⁷⁴ The architecture office ZUS also criticises the often conservative handling of urban development processes with their lack of experimentation. If any risk is eliminated before execution, "the opportunity to learn something is lost."⁷⁵ Sendra and Sennett join their claim:

"A vital and open city does not occur naturally."⁷⁶

To live up to the dynamic reality of ever unfinished urban environments, ZUS calls on designers to treat the city as a "living ecosystem that benefits from tests and experiments that question the

⁷⁴ Sendra, Pablo, Sennett, Richard: Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 53

⁷⁵ Boxel, Elma van; Koreman, Kristian: City of Permanent Temporality. 2019. P. 14

⁷⁶ Sendra, Pablo, Sennett, Richard: Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 3

status quo.”⁷⁷ Thereby it “is important that we recognize city-making is a chaotic and unpredictable process.”⁷⁸

I see myself working for the residents, to change or create a statement towards the authorities. But it is not about working against authorities either — the process can be much more constructive and can serve as the beginning of a spatial dialogue that discusses the handling of space. Reflecting on the Brussels based project *Parckfarm* OASE writes: “While the involvement of the designers generated an aesthetically appealing public realm, the participation of the many local actors into the production, organisation of events and care of the installations stimulated the activation”.⁷⁹

Ezio Manzini adds that in this way professional designers would work as activists and “focus general attention on ways of being and behaving that may be provocative in a certain context, but nevertheless offer opportunities that trigger very profitable discussion”.⁸⁰

Barbara Hoidn addresses the multitude of participation opportunities that have proven to be beneficial for planning processes, but that the duration of urban development processes often takes longer than the engagement of the participating residents can sustain.⁸¹ The bottom line I see is that smaller temporary interventions are far more suitable for activating residents than long-lasting planning processes.

In the public sphere, designers should therefore use their skills to challenge existing patterns and act as providers of examples and motivators. “There are places where improvised activities and social interaction do not happen because the ri-

gidity of the urban environment does not allow this improvisation to take place, and planning for disorder is necessary.”⁸² As stated before, I also see designers as tasked with locating, preparing, and establishing fertile ground for informal change. Thus, their work must prove itself not through the sustainability of its own form, but through the sustainability of the impact it has on spaces it tries to open up.

Informal interventions seek to initiate a process of emancipation. They do so by utilizing spaces for a more visible interaction as well as through spatially inviting and appreciating other participants to activate space themselves. The designer’s task is about making the right to the city tangible, both for the residents and for the authorities in charge. As urban geographer David Harvey summarizes: “The right to the city is [...] far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.”⁸³

When designers become active in a place, creating an awareness of the spatial potentials and the described right of each individual to use them as they see fit is always part of the starting point.

It is about “radicalizing the local”⁸⁴, as Jeanne van Heeswijk puts it, as she sees herself as a facilitator for the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces.⁸⁵

“[Expert designers] should agree to be part of a broad design process that they can trigger, support, but not control.”, Ezio Manzini agrees.⁸⁶ “Once they accept this view of themselves, and

77 Boxel, Elina van, Koreman, Kristian: *City of Permanent Temporality*, 2019, P. 15

78 Ibid.

79 Kandjee, Thierry, Pienknagels, Petra, Geelvinck, Bert: *Curing the City-Making Process*, P. 29

80 Manzini, Ezio: *Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, 2015, P. 70f.

81 Hoidn, Barbara: *DEMO-POLIS — The Right to Public Space*, 2016, P.12f.

82 Sendra, Pablo; Sennett, Richard: *Designing Disorder*, 2020, P. 3

84 Valiukevičiūtė, Kotryna: *Radicalising the Local* / Jeanne van Heeswijk interviewed by Kotryna Valiukevičiūtė, 2013.

85 Het Nieuwe Instituut: Jeanne van Heeswijk — *Radicalizing the local*, 2018.

86 Manzini, Ezio: *Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, 2015, P. 67

83 Harvey, David: *Rebel Cities — from the Right to the City to Urban Revolution*, 2012, P. 4

assume this blend of creativity, design knowledge, and dialogic capability as their specific cultural and operational profile, design experts are in a position to become effective agents of change."⁸⁷ Manzini mostly speaks of the opportunity of design experts to contribute to resident's initiatives.⁸⁸

My focus is slightly different, as I also consider designers capable and obligated to identify potential in places that have not yet been recognised or utilised — opening and activating places for potential change, not necessarily involving an initiating group of residents from the beginning.

ZUS calls it pro-activism, which "encourages the reconsideration of the norms and values that have brought the system, process, or place to a standstill."⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the goal stays the same: to "regenerate common goods and reinforce the social fabric."⁹⁰ Designers thereby might focus on projects beneficial for economically challenged neighbourhoods, but not target those exclusively.

Manzini also describes this influence of designers: "They spark off new initiatives, feed social conversations, and help the process of convergence toward commonly recognized visions and outcomes. In short, they make things happen."⁹¹ We both agree that thereby designers trigger conversations about the future of a city or region and feed it with new ideas and contexts.⁹²

In establishing the benefits and chances that come with opening up public spaces for residents and informal alterations, it is important for designers to bear in mind the possible downside of such a development.

Cordelia Polinna points out that involving local initiatives can also be seen quite pragmatic as an effort to make cost savings:

"Outsourcing the maintenance and design of green spaces to civil society also fits in with the logic of neo-liberal urban development strategies: Everything is being privatized, even the beautification of one's own neighborhood."⁹³

⁹³ Polinna, Cordelia, The Constitution of Public Space, 2016, P. 24

⁸⁷ Manzini, Eric, Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation, 2015, P. 67

⁸⁸ Ibid., P. 62ff.

⁸⁹ Boxel, Elna van, Koreman, Kristian, City of Permanent Temporality, 2019, P. 14

⁹⁰ Manzini, Eric, Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation, 2015, P. 64f.

⁹¹ Ibid., P. 67

⁹² Ibid., P. 70f.

And John Edom agrees that romanticising bottom-up initiatives while assigning them functional democratic processes seems to be a “mechanism of neo-liberalism”.⁹⁴ So spatial designers, being in the first line to contribute to this development with their work, need to articulate clearly what would be desirable outcomes and what needs to be prevented. They should demonstrate that “any vacant or underused space can be converted into a beneficial public space, if we test different approaches, adapt existing rules of use, care, and modification, and if people and government collaborate to devise ways to share the responsibility to design, construct, and maintain them.”⁹⁵ — but this “if” cannot be stressed enough. It is a collaboration, yet the government needs to be held accountable, while the contribution of the residents must stay voluntary, since the government is tasked to resolve systematic inequalities within the society. “What is troubling is that these spaces where non-white communities are living are often underfunded, not well taken care of and in some areas have bad and exclusive infrastructures.”⁹⁶

Since the contribution of design experts and residents are crucial to a beneficial urban development and maintenance process, the government should furthermore structurally and financially support and motivate such movements.

The Naivety of a Stranger

In addition to the awareness of the designer’s tasks, it is essential to analyse one’s own position in even more detail. This self-awareness is needed when handling spaces in unfamiliar contexts.

With their experience and their everyday han-

dling of the surrounding space, the knowledge accumulated by the residents and existing users is, even if it is subconscious, irreplaceable. Acknowledging this expertise is also acknowledging my own position: “‘I know that I don’t know.’ [...] It’s a starting point that embraces the notion of growth and flux and exchange and curiosity without exoticism.”⁹⁷ In concrete terms, it is about connecting to people I can identify as citizen experts on site, building up a small network to develop an understanding of the place and its needs with the help of local residents. In relation to the spatial and social context in a particular space, only a site-specific design can emerge. Experiments that may activate one place cannot necessarily solve the same problem in another.

My focus here is to act as a stranger, but not as a problem solver — so I don’t impose my expectations or analyses on the space in order to impose my solution but try to work in the service of the residents and in recognition of their expert knowledge of the place they use. My way of doing so is the continuous testing in public space, negotiating issues in spatial practice.

“Testing within reality requires an attitude that tacks between overconfident activism and healthy naivety. This testing takes thinking out of the rational domain and applies it to complex realities.”⁹⁸ This naivety, just as the point of not knowing a place, is beneficial to the designer’s work since it first leaves existing stories or issues aside. Still, getting to know the residents’ experience is necessary to prevent unhealthy prejudice. It is a process of acquainting, not only with people and habits, but also with the space itself.

At the same time, connecting different residents to the designers process can lead to new

⁹⁴ Nkegiti-Omar, Chabani, Meriem: Edom, John: Contested Space in the City, 2016, P.50

⁹⁵ Chin, Susan: Urban Design through Public Space, 2016, P. 36

⁹⁶ Adusei-Poku, Nana, Chabani, Meriem: Lambert, Leopold: Who gets to be the Public?, 2016, P.28.

⁹⁷ Adusei-Poku, Nana, Chabani, Meriem: Lambert, Leopold: Who gets to be the Public?, 2016, P.29.

⁹⁸ Boxel, Elma van, Koreman, Kristiani: City of Permanent Temporality, 2019, P. 15

connections within the neighbourhood itself and lead to an exchange that is beneficial beyond the designers engagement. "This exchange of knowledge and skills between communities aids the building of a wide-ranging capacity and expertise among residents, tenants and local businesses to have a stronger voice in planning."⁹⁹

Richard Sennett talks about the combination of porosity and resistance as a "spatial precondition for the kinds of social interactions that involve cooperating between people who differ."¹⁰⁰ Experimental, yet open for change or interpretation, as I distinguished the design intervention should be, this precondition needs to be part of the social interaction as well.

In addition to the position of a stranger that most designers take when spatially intervening I need to reflect on my individual position, which will always influence how I can approach people and spaces or in which context my work is read. It expands the awareness of being a stranger with a more political self-awareness needed for reflection of my own position.

And that position isn't conflict free, by far. Engaging in designing for the public sphere as a white male adds to a long history of ignorance and exclusion. The basis of most public spaces lies in a design made by men, for men. Beginning in the 1960s, voices like Jane Jacobs and later Dolores Hayden fought effectively for a more equal right to the city in Europe and Northern America, including people who differ in gender, ethnicity, belief, or socio-economic level from white, cis-gendered males, who predominantly fill the positions of architects and urban planners to this day.¹⁰¹ Yet in my work I need to constantly reflect

on my position of privilege that comes with thousands of years of patriarchy and colonisation.¹⁰² „When it comes to art and architecture it is important to realise that doing a project in a part of the world where your body has been the coloniser before, it is your responsibility to reflect yourself", Nana Adusei-Poku, professor for cultural diversity, points out.¹⁰³

It is also crucial to understand how easy it is to contribute to this inequality while reading spaces or interacting with people. „Tolerance for — and what are conceived as 'good intentions' toward — others, from normative bodies toward whom public space is calibrated, only constitutes a patronising testimony to this inequality. Architects and designers are too often the deliverers of such a testimony."¹⁰⁴ Again, it is important to accept to not know, as previously stated.¹⁰⁵ Adusei-Poku also emphasises the possible negative effects of transforming places into commons, giving access to all, and opening them up completely: "I find that they are spaces where I start to be able to breathe again, where I don't feel threatened by the people who surround me and very often the people who surround me in those spaces are of colour."¹⁰⁶ In a discriminatory reality, the imprudent opening of places used by minorities can also result in the re-constitution of societal inequalities there. Designers need to keep the negative effect in mind, which pure openness has especially for minorities, as they are already treated unequally in society and by authorities.

There are multiple ways in which my experience of space is biased by privilege and my body stands for power relations society needs to overcome. An ongoing self-reflective process of such and their influence on my design is crucial to break

⁹⁹ Sennett, Richard: *Designing Disorder*, 2020, p. 46

¹⁰⁰ Sennett, Richard: *The Architecture of Cooperation*, 2012, min. 04:30:00ff.

¹⁰¹ Hayden, Dolores: *What would a Non-Sexist City be like?* 1980, p. 170f.

¹⁰³ Adusei-Poku, Nana, Chabani, Meriem: *Lampert, Leopold: Who gets to be the Public?* 2016, p. 28

¹⁰⁵ Adusei-Poku, Nana, Chabani, Meriem: *Lampert, Leopold: Who gets to be the Public?* 2016 p. 29

¹⁰² Sanders, Joel: *From Exclusion to Inclusion*, 2021, p. 85

¹⁰⁴ Akademie der Künste, Goethe Institut: *Public Space — Fights and Frictions*, 2016, p. 8f.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p. 28

those patterns of dominance. The healthy naivety of reading and experiencing spaces as a stranger thus only contributes to a constructive design process if it is subsequently thoroughly reflected upon.

Public Faculty No. 2, Oleanderplein, Rotterdam

by Jeanne van Heeswijk

and Hervé Paraponaris

Following a violent shoot-out in the area, this project questioned "the role of public space in the contemporary city and the notion of the increasing regulations and limitations that imply a feeling of safety. Whenever somebody sat down a bench immediately a waiter came out with a beautifully set table and offered coffee or tea. It was the start of a conversation about the perception of the square and what is desirable cultural behaviour. The answers and thoughts where written on the table cloth.¹⁰⁷ A cup of coffee as an urban intervention."



Nelson Mandelaplein, Breda

by Urban Synergy



In describing the starting point of the project, Urban Synergy states the stone surface of Nelson Mandela Square did not invite people to play or stay there for long, as all involved agreed upon. The unattractive layout of the square at the centre of the neighbourhood meant that it was not a meeting place for the residents.¹⁰⁸ Through a one-to-one scale model, the design was tested in public space, by residents, designers and municipality.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Urban Synergy; Klimaatadaptief wijkplein voor Tuinzigt. n.d.

¹⁰⁹ Urban Synergy; Herinrichting Nelson Mandelaplein, Tuinzigt Breda: participatief en klimaatadaptief. 2018. P. 4

Fountain House, Montreal

by [raumlaborberlin](#)



Creating a place with a change of atmosphere, climate, perspective and gathering, raumlabor say they worked with the "renaissance of the idea of common space"¹¹⁰, which is dependant on the relationship between the urban and the social structures.¹¹¹ With its classical architectural language and the focus on the fountain in the core, this project refers in many ways to historical roles of the public space. The fountain as a former source of clean water, opportunity for refreshment, dust collector, and place of exchange and amusement is brought into the present. Its planted façade counteracts the lifeless surface of the surrounding square.

110
Bador, Markus: Fountain House. 2014.

111
ibid.

Shabby Shabby Apartments, Munich

by raumlaborberlin

and Munich Kammerspiele



Placed in all sorts of places in one of Germany's most expensive cities in terms of rent, a user scenario is added to this dirty and dark passage.¹² "Articulated was the message that social housing need not be addressed with idea-less, generic and mass-produced design"¹³, a parallel to my protest against grey, empty, and characterless squares.

¹² Samson, Lindsay: *Shabby Shabby Apartments* by Kaunlabor, 2016.

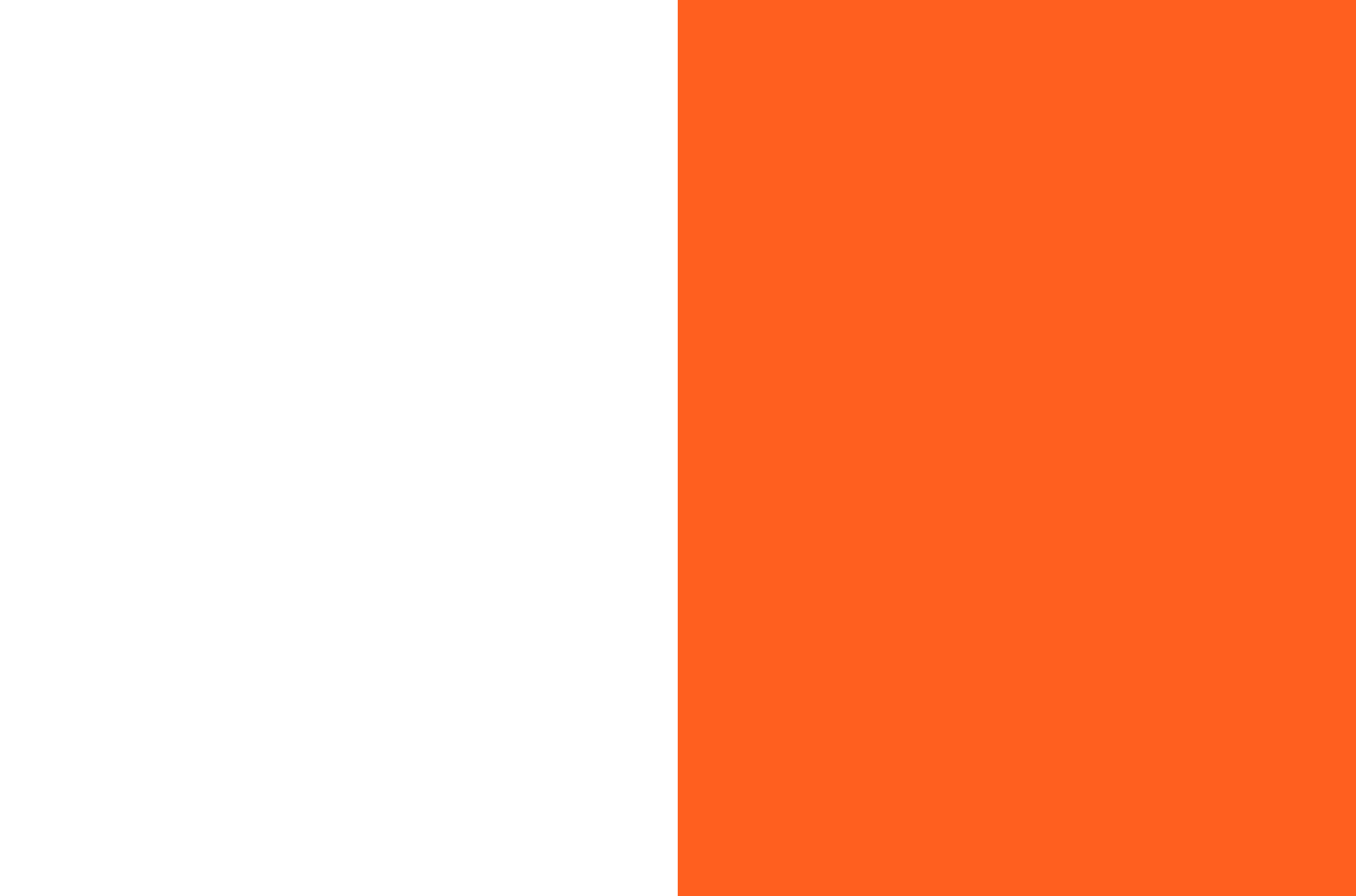
¹³ *Ibid.*

Le Orecchie di Giussano, Rome

by orizzontale



According to the collective, this one-to-one sketch targets the public spaces otherwise abandoned in this part of Rome.¹¹⁴ They state: "We hope to involve citizens through a short show and encourage them to think about the city's public spaces. Our goal was to start a dialogue with the inhabitants, exchanging experiences and ideas in order to find the best solutions together."¹¹⁵



In places I identify as being left without purpose, the public realm lacks its most important quality: the confrontation and exchange with the unfamiliar, the experience of otherness.

Public space is an essential, if not the most powerful, instrument for achieving and maintaining cohesion in a diverse society. For activist designers who seek to further develop this potential, no purpose areas appear as calls for action.

Recognizing the problem they can confront it — with a design language that in its temporary nature and with its intervening character offers what Sennett describes as the opening process of the individual in connection with the diverse society: On the permanent paved foundation, it appears less absolute, less definable and in its presence in the place itself alien.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, the design offers the possibility for connection that the underutilised place alone cannot generate. To do so, it must deconstruct the excluding atmospheric boundaries and try to bridge the physical ones.

A fundamental step in which informal changes in public space have a great advantage over conventional architectural interventions is the liberation of the design process from large parts of the bureaucratic burden. This kind of experimental sketching — in one-to-one, right on site — allows designers and users to test the potentials of places, to respond to changing demands in the process, and to reach a dynamic spatial development. Designers thus become not only activists in the political sense but can take immediate action by implementing change themselves. With an increase in duration of projects, obligations

¹¹⁶ Sennett, R. Sennett, Richard: Designing Disorder, 2020, P. 8

and demands increase, too — with designers and architects working more distant from direct exchange with the actual site and materials. They become administrative managers instead of directly carrying out the spatial change and the implementation of ideas.

My method re-establishes the direct link between spatial intervention, the creative origin and the affected people. On the one hand, it allows the theoretical concepts to be evaluated for urban development, but on the other hand, it also creates an understanding of the procedure for potential followers.

While urban development processes often take years and changes at eye level remain rare, the engagement of the activist designer allows short-term, fluid improvements of urban spaces. The activist therefore is not acting against the current situation but much rather for a better future scenario. They are contributing to public space, not protesting against it.

The step from identifying under-utilised parts of the public space to the creative intervention is shortened to the level of the active designer. The examples of spontaneity, a will to experiment, and the acceptance to possibly fail aim for an activating effect on residents. They take them along my own learning phase.

Designers become agents of spatial change. Informality, as a tactic for designers and residents alike, can develop into a strategy to overcome the impersonal and institutionalized notion of public space.

Simultaneously, aiming for a dynamic process of alterations protects the work from missing its target or closing off the space it acts in. It creates a dialogue — in my understanding, an interven-

tion in public space can only be part of the constant learning process and a changing reaction to the demands. However, the space and the temporary infrastructure remain within the property of the users.

Replacing institutionally managed urban planning processes entirely must not be the goal of informal engagement. The responsibility to provide a suitable public space has to remain with the authorities and existing inequalities need to be addressed and resolved by them. Yet in doing so, the political efforts on spatial testing must be expanded. It is exactly those underfunded areas where the decline of publicness is most likely to appear and easily identified. At the same time, a functional, inclusive public space is even more important for people in economically difficult situations. Economical challenges often result in limited living spaces, long working hours, and fewer activities and supervision for children.¹¹⁷ Consequently, I focus precisely on those parts of the city.

A policy of prohibitions and regulations that preserves a possibly inefficient or even harmful status quo in public space hinders its development towards exchange, diversity, and openness.

As a designer, I will question the given reality and create spatial visions that can be tested in their direct use. To do this, I investigate under-utilised places that remain without purpose, despite or precisely because of the continuous densification of urban agglomerations.¹¹⁸ I associate this lack of identity with the absence of a tradition or lack of opportunities to intervene. Interventions lead to an individual relationship and a diverse experience of space. A feeling of inclusion and safety grows with a sense of belonging. Belonging

117 Poon, Linda: To Build a Great Public Space, You Need More Than Good Design. 2017.

118 Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures. 2016. P. 64

stands representative for the right to be in a place.

Activism for the toleration of informality is therefore about the right to the city. However, the continuous exercise of this right remains within the responsibility and choice of the users.

Especially the last two years of the pandemic give designers the chance to use society's involuntarily attained focus on public space, expand it, and to find new forms of interaction with each other and with space.

Both my examination of the issues of public spaces and the pandemic show: It is not enough to provide blank space alone. Spatial designers have to think about interaction, test it and contribute to viability in the public sphere with their work. In the realities they create, they can become directors and sketch their innovative scenarios. If residents begin to use and react on the sketches new networks can emerge. They lead to a continuous utilisation of spaces.

Yet this is not the only proof of a successful implementation. By merely observing and passively experiencing design interventions, new perspectives on everyday contexts open up. The relationship to the space is built through personal connection.

That is the reason to create spaces of multiple affordances that enable the experience and use of a variety of scenarios and invite residents to adapt the space according to their individual demands. A sense of belonging as a personal connection to spaces develops over a series of experiences, directing the focus to spaces which otherwise are drifting past empty on their way.

Belonging is therefore not only the consequence of opportunities to use a space or to be able to dwell there. Rather, it is about a person-

al connection to it that arises through an intimate knowledge about the place. It is part of a perceived ownership that does not necessarily have to be territorial — the affiliation with a space also evolves through an awareness of its personal value through different experiences.

In modern cities, an accumulation of transitory spaces can be observed that are designed purely for passing through.¹¹⁹ In contrast to this development, I work on the design of reference points. Places which invite people to dwell and provide a confrontation with other realities in the form of spatial design, but also in the form of other users.

My task is about creating examples of temporary interventions which try to kick off a continuous process of spatial change. This can only succeed if a conscious and adaptive design approach is used to challenge the existing power relations.

Passers-by and residents are confronted with new contexts in their everyday lives. They are invited them to engage differently with spaces around. The aim is to activate the unused and unseen places in their immediate environment and to question the habit of everyday interaction with them. The design can serve as an element of surprise that makes people pause in their daily routine. It connects places with the surrounding community. Building this link is the basis for a cooperative, exchange-centred approach to the available space, of which the designer becomes the initiator.

What might begin with a performative exploration on site, as presented in the case study by Jeanne van Heeswijk, depending on the presence of the designer, can develop into a more physical intervention. I will start a process of using the space in different settings, by myself, together

with guests or prepare a scenario for somebody else. The drawn visions of a spatial redesign by Urban Synergy in Breda discuss possible user scenarios and the provisional structures of orizontale offer a short-term experience of repurposed places. Subtle interventions must slowly grow into spatial proposals as the choice of material, size and temporality will become more sustainable and tangible as the learning process continues. The variety of options for creating spaces of belonging can be tested.

How far this process can proceed by the time this master's thesis is completed cannot yet be predicted. But it can become much more and expand into an ongoing design practice. Ultimately, aaa's project *Passage 56* also remains a sketch of a potential reality, only that it already exists for over fifteen years.¹²⁰

Design Brief

The process following this research will deal with this form of sketching in public space.

In order to investigate the question of whether public space even exists, the designer is asked to work on the deteriorated areas of it. Interventions that play with their ephemerality establish a precedent and thus motivate more people and initiatives to become part of the spatial development.

The designer does not have to spend time on selling a concept or planning but can become active immediately.

I, as the intervening spatial designer, am asked to establish an alternative reality, through material, by inviting people and actions, by creating events which enable this sense of belonging.

Therefore, any action taken must put the user first in creating an experience that connects residents and passer-by to the so far under-utilised square. I have to leave my comfort zone and to expect discussions, provoking residents to take ownership or even reject the offered scenario. I can only learn more from every dialogue and every reaction, including negative ones. In the reacting users they might spark interest to do things better, differently, or quicker.

In the beginning of this process, I need to put my visions first, utilise the space to the extend I see possible. Being visible and present on sight is part of the design method. Simultaneously, I must prevent myself from establishing an overwriting ego-design. I can never assume I know a better way of living.

When using a space, I am tasked to make full use of its potential. When my use finds an end, it must be given back to the public, free for anybody else to step in and create a reality of their own. Whenever the option arises a cooperation will be highly appreciated, and a co-creation can enhance the strength and depth of my alteration.

My exploration of the usability does not always have to be spatial and must not remain solely spatial: Action and social interaction are inevitably part of the invigoration. Design adds a socio-cultural layer to the space. Another empty structure will simply add to the existing under-utilised structures and is at too much risk to lead to an architectural overcrowding of the place. Here I refer back to the three major issues in public space and can deduce a basic rule set for any intervention, as it can neither be targeting one user group exclusively, involve an entry fee or paid consumption, nor — of course — adopt a static form.

The steps to take are simple:

observe

Investigate the area, identify the space to be targeted by alterations.

naive

Let naivety become a tool for an unbiased selection and experience.
Draw first visions of possible realities from the position of the stranger.

reflect

Revisit your own position and the character of your ideas.
Implement necessary changes in consideration of the knowledge about the area.

exercise

Build up contact to an audience, residents, and passer-by, when exercising the first sketches on site. Let the alternative reality becomes an offer to interact with the space.

interact

Start conversations with your spatial design and continue them in person. Questions arise.

refine

Initiate a process of act and response, develop different scenarios. More refined interventions follow. Document the sketching and the reactions.

catalogue

Build your catalogue of affordances with the lessons that can be drawn from the sketches.
List the parameters and different iterations that outline the scenarios and your reflection upon them.

adapt

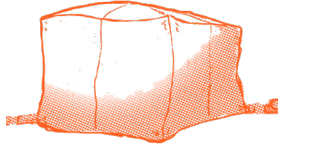
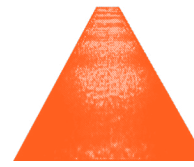
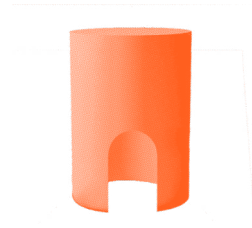
Adapt the design directly to the space after its evaluation.
The quality of the sketches changes. The tool set used can become more sustainable and efficient.

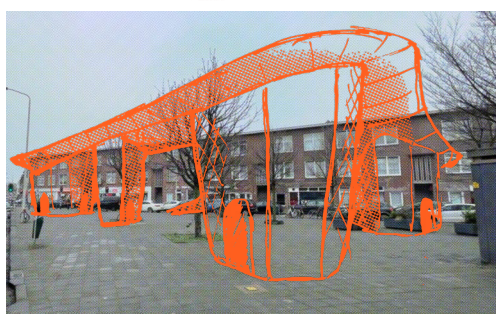
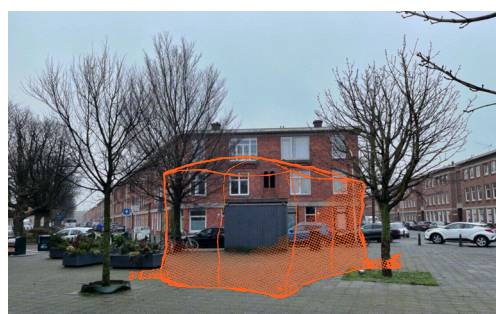
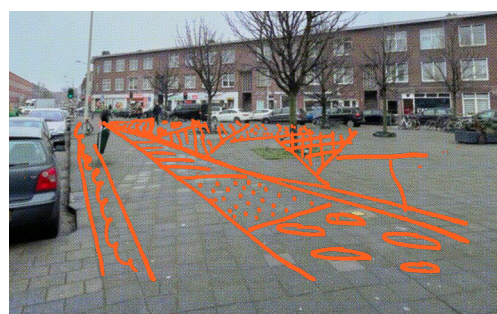
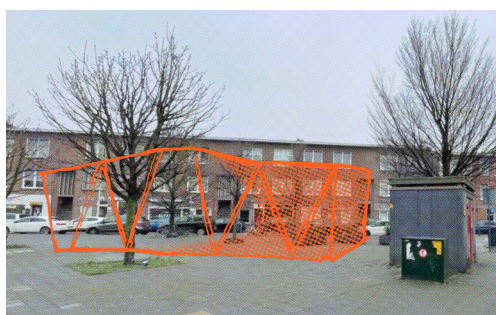
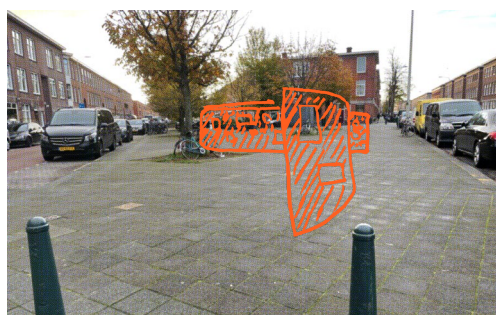
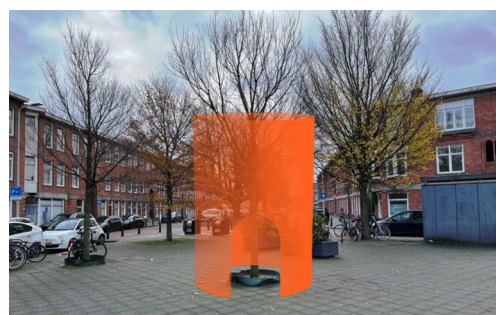
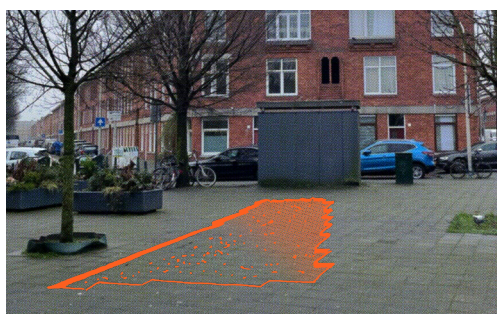
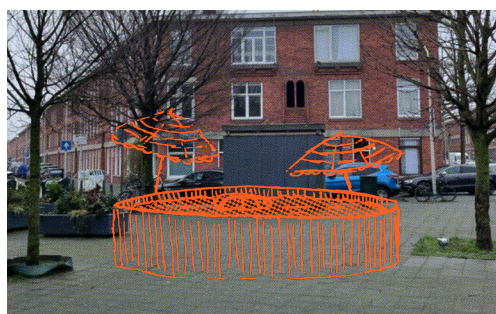
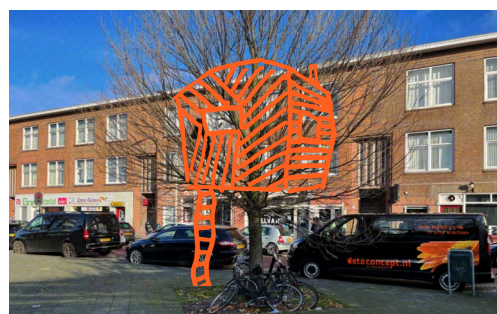
grow

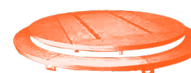
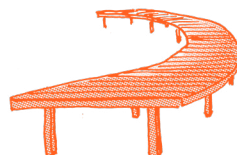
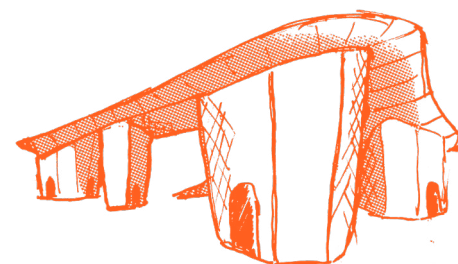
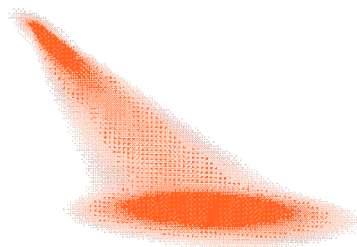
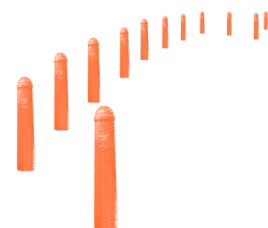
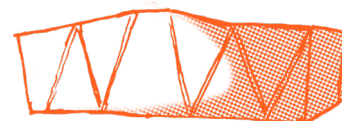
With the process and the testing of possible directions of the design the results can grow in their impact.

belong

The connections built up by your action lead to a sense of belonging and a change of spatial perception.







Glossary

activist designer

They are not only activists for a political agenda but become active themselves by taking immediate action and bringing about change.

The system relies on activists to tackle the issues it does not take care of itself. Recognized as an substantial party to the system being activist thereby does not equal being unpaid by authorities.

affordances

“solicit people with clues to express themselves through their bodies.”¹²¹ They can be of visual physical nature, but also aural, olfactory, haptic, etc. “Affordances are properties perceived subjectively by an individual. More affordances make a space more human, by allowing people to break their passivity and open up to each other.”¹²²

borders

Richard Sennett distinguishes between borders, permeable yet sensible atmospheric divisions, and boundaries.¹²³ “A boundary is an edge where things end; the border is an edge where different groups interact. [...] The boundary establishes closure, whereas the border functions more like a medieval wall. The border is a liminal space.”¹²⁴

boundary

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built environment

“refers to aspects of our surroundings that are built by humans, that is, distinguished from the natural environment. It includes not only buildings, but the human-made spaces between buildings, such as parks, and the infrastructure that supports human activity such

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Sanyal, Ira; Affordances and their Role in Placemaking. 2016.

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ibid.

123
Sennett, Richard; The Open City. 2006.

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ibid.

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ibid.

126
ibid.

as transportation networks, utilities networks, flood defences, telecommunications, and so on.”¹²⁷

cisgendered

describes a person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth

cité

As defined by Richard Sennett part of the public space, contains “the behaviour and outlook adopted by the people who lodge within the physical place.”¹²⁸

citizen expert

A resident, who has accumulated active and passive knowledge about use, tradition, history, and experiences connected to the public space and the initiatives present.

colonized spaces

referring to outside areas of restaurants of cafés and the like: areas occupied within the public domain, where habitation is now conditional on the purchase of consumer goods. This “semi-privatisation in commercial pseudo-public spaces”¹²⁹ plays together with an increase of privatised public spaces.¹³⁰

common

jointly produced, maintained, owned, and used products, resources, or infrastructures of different kinds

defensible spaces

Concept by Oscar Newman to prevent crime, which “operates by subdividing large portions of public spaces and assigning them to individuals and small groups to use and control as their own private areas.”¹³¹ Therefore a threat to public space.

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Design Buildings; Built Environment. 2021.

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Sendra, Pablo; Sennett, Richard; Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 8

129
Backer, Mattias De; The Publicness Paradox: Young People And The Production Of Parochial Places. 2016.

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Lin, Ying-Tzu; Child-friendly Cities from an Urban Planner's Perspective. 2019.

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Newman, Oscar; Creating Defensible Space. 1996. Diane Pub Co. P. 2

design intervention

"Design Interventions are prototypes that provoke real world action and intervene in human behavior."¹³²

ego-design

Ezio Manzini calls it big-ego design, describing it as a "left over from the last century's demiurgic vision, in which design was the act of particularly gifted individuals capable of imprinting their personal stamp on artifacts and environments. [...] this way of thinking and doing becomes highly dangerous when applied to complex social problems."¹³³

fluid design

As opposed to static unmodifiable spatial infrastructure, fluid design proposes constantly changing and evolving set-ups in relation to a constantly changing society or user group.

formal

Describing a process or action which is commissioned, approved or executed by authorities, with a legal basis. Planning-oriented, top-down

informal

Describing a process or action that is initiated and carried out without a legal basis through the involvement of civilians. Action-oriented and bottom-up

institutionalised control

be it the architectural overload of places or the opposite, the lack of spatial infrastructure. Both overcrowded and underdeveloped spaces elude use by residents through their architectural pre-set. The decisions that lead to this form of control are made and implemented institutionally or municipally.

military urbanism

The growing adoption of military and security and surveillance mechanisms in architectural and police strategies for securing and controlling public space in the global north, taking input from both colonized areas and war zones.¹³⁴

¹³² Hill Smith, Carey: Design Interventions — (Prototyping User Experience 2/3). 2019.

¹³³ Manzini, Ezio: Design, When Everybody Designs — An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation. 2015. MIT Press. P. 66

¹³⁴ Graham, Stephen: Foucault's boomerang: the new military urbanism. 2013.

naivety

Accepting to not know, experiencing without being troubled by history, former experience or uses. Allows an unbiased approach and helps to identify unknown potential through naive experiments. Can lead to prejudice, if not reflected.

no purpose space

Underutilised spaces, trying to be open to anybody equally, yet not to be occupied for good, end up being occupied by nobody. The result of an aim for an absolute all-purpose area, being its the exact opposite.

non-conforming bodies

Bodies or people which do not conform to the current local norm, be it on the basis of gender, race, health, age, or behaviour.¹³⁵

occupied space

Public space taken over by dominant user groups with an exclusive or absorbing effect. "From the micro-space of the body to large-scale contexts, people apply a multitude of strategies to further their own area of control."¹³⁶ Common examples here may be accumulations of bullies, drug abusers, police presence or people without housing.

right to the city

"The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it. We need to be sure we can live with our own creations. But the right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights."¹³⁷

sketch

Rough draft, representing the chief features of an object or scene, in this thesis referring to one-to-one, three-dimensional objects that sketch out spatial scenarios.

stranger

Being foreign to a place or community, coming from an outside perspective.

¹³⁵ Akademie der Künste; Goethe Institut: Public Space — Fights and Frictions. 2016. P.8

¹³⁶ Schneider, Bernhard: Public Space — A Question of Structures. 2016. P. 65

¹³⁷ Harvey, David: The Right to the City. 2003.

strategy

As defined by Michael de Certeau, a strategy describes the preferred path to a desirable goal. In predicting that, it presumes control. "Strategy is self-segregating, in the same way administration and management are self-segregating, setting itself up as a barricaded insider. The strategic leaders become the Subject; the led and the enemy become the Objects. Strategy presumes an in-group that carries out campaigns."¹³⁸ In de Certeau's work, strategies are opposed to tactics.

tactic

As defined by Michael de Certeau, tactics are the purview of the non-powerful. "He understands tactics not as a subset of strategy, but as an adaptation to the environment, which has been created by the strategies of the powerful. The city planning commission may determine what streets there will be, but the local cabbie will figure out how best to navigate the lived reality of those streets."¹³⁹ In de Certeau's work, tactics are opposed to strategies.

technology individualism

Effect of modern technology on public space, use of mp3 players, mobile phones, etc.: What used to be public (conversations, music, exchange) or needed contact in person in public (meeting, seeing each other) is now done in private, hidden. Attention is diverted from the public to the private sphere.

transitory space

Parts of the public realm connecting different areas and buildings, used mainly for movement by cars, cyclists, public transport, pedestrians, and the like.

urban desert

Similar to no purpose spaces, which are under-utilised due to a lack of infrastructure: not spaces that are deserted and out of control but deserted through an overload of control.

urban undesirable

People who don't fit the city's aspired image, who are often the targets of hostile design. E.g. skate boarders, drug dealers or users, people without housing, etc.

¹³⁸ Goff, Stan: The Tactics of Everyday Life. 2016.

¹³⁹ ibid.

ville

As defined by Richard Sennett a part of the public space, similar to the built environment, contains "the solid of buildings and streets"¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Sennett, Richard: Designing Disorder. 2020. P. 8

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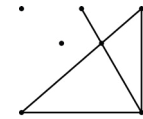
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**Royal
Academy of Art
The Hague**
Master
Interior Architecture

INSIDE

no purpose city
sketching the affordances of informality

Master Thesis
INSIDE — Master Interior Architecture
Royal Academy of Art The Hague

Concept, design
Malte Sonnenschein

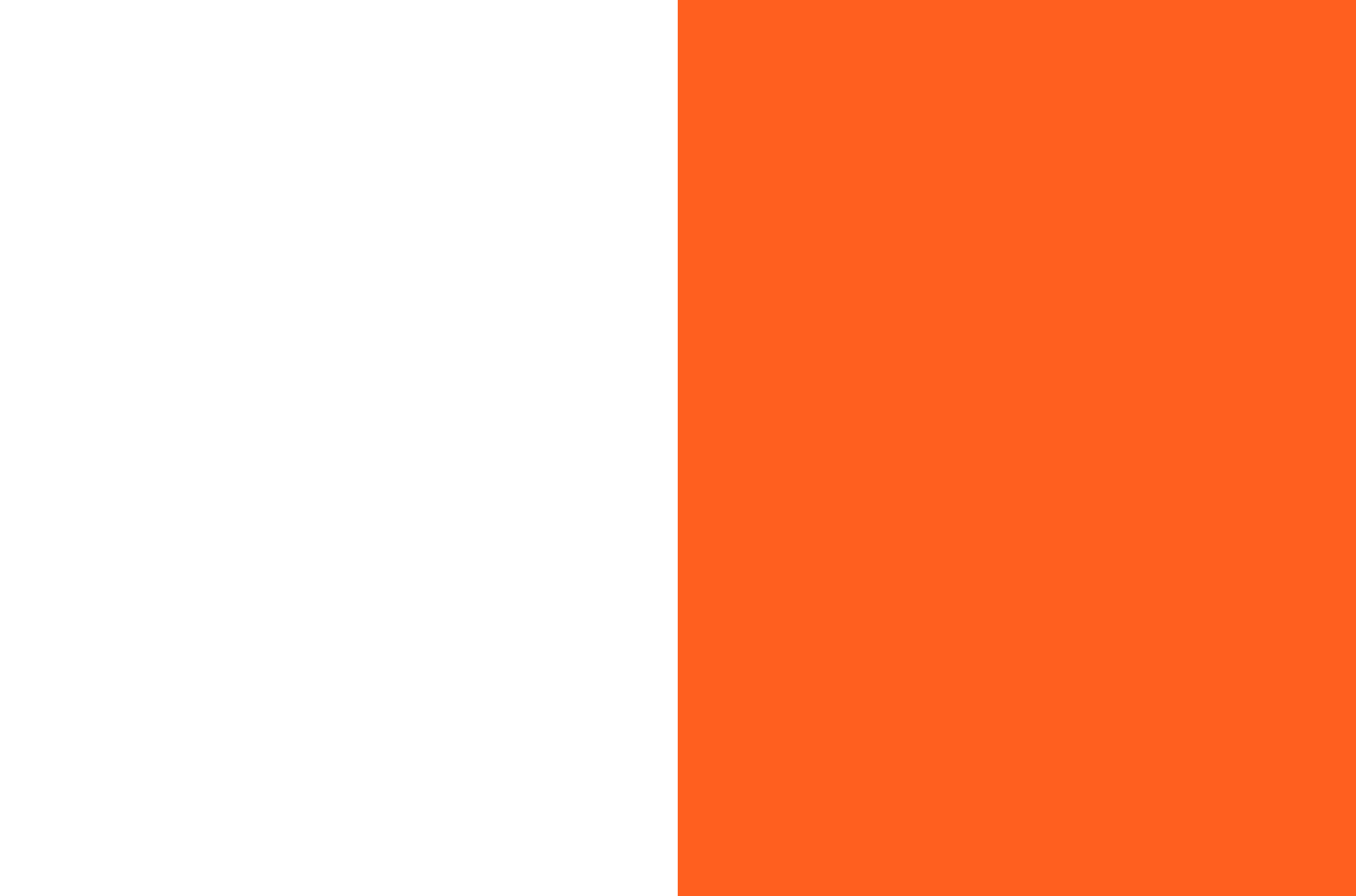
Guiding tutors
Jurgen Bey
Anne Hoogewoning
Gerjan Streng

Typeface
GT Eesti Text

Paper
Mondi Nautilus 120g/m²
Mondi ColorCopy Matt 160g/m²

Acknowledgements
many thanks to
Caterina Tioli and Ilaria Palmieri
Tjitske Hartstra, Chen Liu, Ariana Hosseini, Georgina Pantazopoulou, Mae Alderliesten, Tom Šebestíková,
Eda Karaböcek
Hans Venhuizen and Lotte van den Berg
Lucas Schmidt and Lina Stroh
and my guiding tutors

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INSIDE — Department Interior Architecture Master Royal Academy of the Arts The Hague, 2022



observe

Investigate the area, identify the space to be targeted by attentions.

naive

Let naively become a tool for an unbiased selection and experience.
Draw first visions of possible realities from the position of the stranger.

reflect

Revisit your own position and the character of your ideas.
Implement necessary changes in consideration of the knowledge about the area.

belong

The connections built up by your action lead to a sense of belonging and a change of spatial perception.

interact

Start conversations with your spatial design and continue them in person. Questions arise.

exercise

Build up contact to an audience, residents, and possibly, when entering the first time, the neighbours.
The space becomes an offer to interact with the space.

NO PURPOSE CITY

sketching the affordances
of informality

adapt

Adapt the design directly to the space after the first use.
The design is adapted to the space as more sustainable and efficient.

grow

With the process and the testing of possible directions of the design the results can grow in their impact.

catalogue

Build your catalogue of affordances with the lessons that can be drawn from the experiments. List the parameters and different iterations that outline the scenarios and your reflection upon them.

refine

Initiate a process of act and response, develop different scenarios. More refined interventions follow. Document the sketching and the reactions.

Malte Sommerich