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THE LANGUAGE OF THE WALL

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Language is used as a form of communication by humans. It is conveyed by speech, writing, gesture and written symbols. The function of language is to express your identity and emotional release to be able to understand each other. ¹ In “The language of the wall” I explore and learn a new language that is spoken by the wall.

Introduction

There is a city wall that exist in the middle of the city of Amsterdam. The wall is part of the land that is called the, Marineterrein. In 1655 a former naval dockyard, then an old naval area, a place that has changed functions and forms through the years. Now land of the naval establishment and partly open space to public.

My fascination with the city wall started when I was reading the book about ‘The land within the walls’ which is about the Marineterrein in Amsterdam. This book is written by five authors, it contains five fictional stories telling stories about people who lived inside and outside the wall.² One story in particular left me a stimulating impression. It is a story about a woman who lives across the wall, who became curious about the wall and the land behind. She would take daily walks along the wall and look at the wall from her balcony checking the IJ and the passing boats from now and then. It almost became an obsession. Just like her daily routine, I also decided to take a walk along the wall and discover character.³ After a couple of visits to the site I finally had discovered the value of this terrain, it is the wall.

This journey is written in the diary.⁴ My This is the element that makes the Marineterrein the Marineterrein. But this discovery had left me with many thoughts and questions about this element. Do we value walls? Because of its negative presence and tool as a symbol of a physical barrier that controls, limits but also enables from seeing the walled land.⁵ How do we make walls today? And how can we as designers start a conversation with the wall? Change the role of this element that contributes to the environment in a positive way?

In this paper I will share my personal observations on the city wall of the Marineterrein in Amsterdam. My personal reflection of this wall will be explained further based on comparing various case studies that discusses the different gestures of the wall.

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The aim of this research is to question the meaning of the contemporary architecture element today. I hope to bring awareness and change the view on the everyday element that is surrounding us. This paper is a journey of how I learned the ‘language’ of the wall to be able to communicate with this element and helping me to understand the ambiguous characters of the wall of the Marineterrein which I hope to have more future conversations with that will lead me to the design proposal.

The written symbol

The gatehouse and city wall of the Marineterrein are one of the oldest elements that exist of the terrain. The gatehouse was built in 1660, the entrance in this ‘wall’ was meant for marines and yard workers.⁶ Since the site has changed functions over time, the role of the wall did too. And newer openings were created in the wall. The strict defensive role of the wall is switched to a more friendly wall (even though a very little has changes to its appearance). The wall protects the oasis behind from changing but also controls the flow of people from entering because for many this land is still unknown.

Generally speaking, of the wall as an architectural element in a city, the role is taken over by new defensive elements that have a different look to them or in fact have a rather more recognizable feature to them such as rocks, trees etc.⁷ It is a more subtle design that tries to influence the use of the space without being noticed.⁸ Where even branding comes in to play for example the Emirates Stadium in Londen where the name of the Arsenal soccer club also functions as a huge shield. The typical look of a wall is transformed to fit in to the environment to hide the aggressive appearance and it became an attraction



Eda Karabocsek, Camera on wall 1, Marineterrein Amsterdam, 2021



Eda Karabocsek, Camera on wall 2 and 3, Marineterrein Amsterdam, 2021

place to tourist and supporters of the soccer club to take pictures.

With the new, supposedly smart and invisible techniques of border surveillance (such as drones, cameras with night vision, heat detectors, etc.), walls and fences seem to have no meaning anymore. By removing these barriers, the borderline becomes borderland because the technology makes it possible to identify the target from kilometres away before coming close to the wall.⁹ Then almost every ground we are walking on will almost feel like there is a presence of control, division and limitations. ‘The wall’ will always be by our sides.

From my observations to the wall of the Marineterrein, I can also see that this new technique of border surveillance is being implemented. Cameras added on and behind the wall all pointing to a different direction. I thought it was a bit disrespectful to the wall, acting like the wall doesn't have a purpose or meaning anymore. What will happen if the wall of the Marineterrein disappears?

¹ Crystal, D. and Robins, Robert Henry. “Language.” Encyclopedia Britannica, March 9, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language>.

² Weijers, Nina; van Voss, Daan Heerma; Schröder, Allard; Peek, Gustaaf; Trujillo, Carolina. Het land binnen de muren; verhalen uit het Marineterrein Amsterdam, Das Magazijn, 2010, Verhalen: Noord-Korea

³ Karabocsek, Eda. Remembering out past conversations, Diary Entry 6, 2021

⁴ Karabocsek, Eda. Your protector, Diary Entry 4, 2021

⁵ Deutinger, Theo. Handbook of Tyranny, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017, p. 37

⁶ Lemmers, Alan. Van werf tot facilitair complex, Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, 2005, p.39

⁷ Deutinger, Theo. Handbook of Tyranny, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017, p.85

⁸ Deutinger, Theo. Handbook of Tyranny, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017, p.85

⁹ Deutinger, Theo. Handbook of Tyranny, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017, p.37

The presence of the symbol

If the wall of the Marineterrein disappears then all that there is left is the trace of a line on flat ground. The project that I want to discuss next touches up on how just a line on the ground can act as 'wall' without the presence of this elements. Artist, Francis Alys created a project called the 'The Green Line' where he walked around with a can of green paint behind him to leave behind line of green paint. The Green Line, also called the Armistic Line is a geographic dividing line between Israel and Palestine. The line was drawn on a map by Israeli Minister of Defence¹⁰ which means this 'wall' only exist on a map. Even without the physical presence the wall is still alive. The act was recorded and made into as short movie.

I asked this question with the wall of Marineterrein in mind. If the wall of the Marineterrein disappears the site will lead to another change in its function and the wall will only remain in our imagination, an emotion attachment. As a result, the site will also disappear, in the meaning of how the site is used now. The reason behind this wall is the reason the public area on the site is still alive. In this case the wall is the element that helps the site, to protect the accessible but still 'mysterious' and 'hidden' public space that brings people together in one area. But how can a wall become a more visible tool that contributes to an even more inclusive environment?

To drip the green paint on the city's ground along the line, to the extent of the walk, in a 1:1 scale map, is an act of transformation of the landscape.¹¹ A performative act that cuts through the route of the streets where neighborhoods, barriers and infrastructure line are. This performance discussed the political issue of Jerusalem. By 'cutting' through the existing elements in the city with the green paint line, it shows what the build of a wall can do for example. The line on the ground gives the same emotional effect as the wall does to us and the city.

As I also mentioned earlier, with the invention of the 'smart walls'¹² it makes me think about the physical wall and how it is now almost useless to build walls, but we are so used to this element acting as a protective and securing barrier in our living surrounding that the public and private spaces would have an almost weird look to them, and people will not know how to act. What remains of the symbolic value of the wall?¹³



"The Green Line / Francis Alys" June 2014. francisalys.com



"Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland / Daniel Libeskind" 16 Dec 2016. HNM



"WAL(L)TZ Installation / T SAKHI Architects" 17 Nov 2019. ArchDaily.

Exploration of different characters of the wall

The gesture

In the next case study the gesture of the wall is evident, without even moving. A two-meter-high brick wall in a small park in Amsterdam. That is the plan for monument in remembrance of the Dutch victims of the Holocaust. No wonder the residents were against the build of this monument because of the robust wall that will block the view, trees and will possibly lead to an unsafe environment due to the wall making extra corners. Despite the commotion of the residents the wall is currently in process of being build. And why would you think?

The monument of names, that is what the wall is called, consisting of one hundred and two thousand names inscribed on the brick. The bricks will carry the messages in memory of the victims. This act automatically gives the wall another meaning but also another gesture because now it is acceptable to build a two-

meter-high brick wall. The monument raises a historical awareness of where wars can lead¹⁴, and I think that the wall, chosen as the element for this design is well picked because in wars the wall is often used as a defensive and/or protective element. The additional reflective mirrored object that the wall is carrying establish a connection between Amsterdam's past, present and future.¹⁵

The wall created the space of the monument as a place where we are reminded to reflect on the past. But what about our physical interaction? How can this change the gesture of the wall?

Starting a conversation

During the panic week of this studio, we played games and explored the surrounding spaces with our senses and bodies which led to inspiring views on the project and sparked new conversations between each other. How can we explore the wall with our senses? To understand the wall from another point of view. How can we start a conversation with the wall?

T Sakhi Architects shows on how a designer can possibly start a conversation with the wall that includes people to engage with the element as well. Leading to a collaborative work where the character of the wall and the human characters living in the city can start a conversation with each other. This interaction activates our senses, a platform for bodies to response to the act

of overcoming an obstacle. The bodies of the people engaging with the wall become a part of the element and take part of the gesture.¹⁶

WAL(L)TZ is an in temporary installation in Lebanon for the Dubai Design Week that explores the wall as a physical element. The aim of this wall is mainly to active social interaction and addresses the social and political issue in Lebanon. In my opinion I think that this is an interesting way to use the wall, the wall has such a strong presence that even with a small interaction it can speak out about a current political issue where the people can take part of this 'protest'.

A fifteen-metre wall that is made out of recyclable foam with various cut-outs to create openings where the visitor can engage with each other, but most importantly become one with the wall. The fact that the wall is made out of a softer material makes the wall more approachable to the visitors, it gives out a more welcoming gesture and it is also making the wall safe to use as a place to stay. The bigger opening in the wall allows the guest to be inside the wall which encourages to reach and see beyond the barrier.¹⁷ The chairs placed along the wall, that are also made out of the same material, create places to sit or stand facing the wall or small openings. The addition of the chairs allows the people using the wall to interact with each other, it reconnects the people that are on the opposite side of the wall.

¹⁰ Francis Alys, The Green Line, 2004

<https://www.antiatlas.net/francis-aly-the-green-line-en/>

¹¹ Francis Alys, The Green Line, 2004

<https://www.antiatlas.net/francis-aly-the-green-line-en/>

¹² Deutinger, Theo. Handbook of Tyranny, Lars Müller Publishers, 2017, p. 37

¹³ Ritzen, Rob. 'Wat maakt de stad van vandaag zo anders, zo aantrekkelijk?'. Archined, Februari 27, 2018, <https://www.archined.nl/2018/02/handbook-of-tyranny/>

¹⁴ Daniel Libeskind, Holocaust Name monument Amsterdam, 2021 <https://www.holocaustnamenmonument.nl/nl/holocaust-namenmonument/ontwerp/>

¹⁵ Daniel Libeskind, Holocaust Name monument Amsterdam, 2021 <https://www.holocaustnamenmonument.nl/nl/holocaust-namenmonument/ontwerp/>

¹⁶ T SAKHI Architects, WAL(L)TZ Installation, 2019

<https://www.archdaily.com/928497/wal-l-tz-installation-t-sakhi-architects>

¹⁷ T SAKHI Architects, WAL(L)TZ Installation, 2019

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Conclusion

In conclusion, this research helped me to be able to understand the character of the wall of the Marineterrein and how our approach to the wall is changing through the designer's interaction with this element. The developing technology involving the wall is having an influence on the physical presence of this element. This research has led me to understand it is more about how the wall became an emotional attachment into our daily surroundings. In this case the wall of the Marineterrein lost its defensive role and became a sentimental component that is attached to the site. On top of that, the wall also has a function of holding memories of the terrain, but this also goes for people that hold a memory in their heart where this wall played a role.

Through the case studies I was able to view and compare the different possibilities of how, as designers, play with the wall as an object that brings the environment together and alongside address a political issue, but also use the emotional significance to make a spatial statement. In the WAL(L)TZ installation of T Sakhi architects in Lebanon¹⁸ I enjoyed seeing how a small change in the material of a wall can change the engagement with this element.

The holocaust remembrance monument designed by Daniel Libeskind¹⁹ showed a way you can use the material to change the character of the robust wall. And the performative approach to the wall, the Green Line by Alys Francis²⁰ presented the powerful character of the wall, a strong walk that shows even without the absence of the physical element the presence of this symbol is still active.

From reviewing the case studies, I see a lot of potential in the wall of the Marineterrein that can bring new views and ideas to the site and its environment. As a spatial designer I can have a role in changing the view we have on walls. Not only with materiality but, in my opinion, it is more about how we approach this element. From my point of view, I see the wall of the Marineterrein as a character which also consist of different characters within, for example the bricks, the windows and doors but also the land behind and in front of the wall they are all characters that plays a role in the conversation and gesture of the element.

All things considered, within the continuation of my project I want to focus on having a more profound conversation with the wall and its characters, highlighting the value of this element. The aim of my project is to see a different side of the wall and to spark a discussion on of the main elements in architecture.



Eda Karabocok, Details on wall entrance, Marineterrein Amsterdam, 2021



Eda Karabocok, Dog meets wall, Marineterrein Amsterdam, 2021

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¹⁸**T SAKHI Architects,** WAL(L)TZ Installation, 2019 <https://www.archdaily.com/928497/wal-l-tz-installation-t-sakhi-architects>
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