

MATTER MATTERS: DESIGNING MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS AS TRIGGERS OF NEGOTIATION

JOHAN LIEKENS

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, SINT-LUCAS
BRUSSELS/GHENT, BELGIUM & CHALMERS
SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, GOTHENBURG,
SWEDEN

JO.LIEKENS@ARCHITECTUUR.SINTLUCAS.WENK.BE

ABSTRACT

This paper ventures from a twofold interpretation of this conference's theme: 'Making Design Matter!'. An inseparable twin pair 'Matter' materializes. One twin, 'Matter' as to be of relevance, folds in a unity with the other, 'Matter' as in to become materialized: Matter Matters.

This twin pair operates as a lens through which we explore how design operates in between relevance (ethics) and materiality. The lens focuses on the mediation between these two issues. Looking through the lens, the question arises what kind of attitude in designing we consider to be relevant and reviving for today's people and world? And in addition, how is this relevance and its constitutive design attitude backed up by materiality, i.e. by the material working of the artefact? Are there different genres of materialization operative?

We suggest that a critical questioning design attitude, provoking a dynamic of negotiation through materialized designs, contributes to ongoing investigations of socio-spatial challenges, offering different, possibly refreshing, perspectives. This suggestion is exemplified by

NEL JANSSENS

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, SINT-LUCAS
BRUSSELS/GHENT, BELGIUM & CHALMERS
SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, GOTHENBURG,
SWEDEN

NEL.JANSSENS@ARCHITECTUUR.SINTLUCAS.WENK.BE

two design cases of both authors, in which dynamics of negotiation and different genres of materialization operate.

A LENS ON DESIGN: THE TWIN PAIR 'MATTER'

- OR, HOW DESIGN OPERATES IN-BETWEEN RELEVANCE AND MATERIALITY

A twofold interpretation, that is what emerged to us authors when thinking about this conference's theme: 'Making Design Matter!'. 'Matter' and 'Matter': a twin pair, manifesting itself as a folded entity.

In a first interpretation, to make matter is a call for an ethical stance on relevance, on meaningfulness. It instigates us designers to make our designs count, to enhance their performance within the world. Often design is perceived being primarily relevant to a targeted audience of connoisseurs, isolated from the real world in magazines, galleries and other exemplary and synthetic environments. Or, more democratic, design's relevance is considered to be a subservient, instrumental one, filling in the functional gaps with prostheses: between the flower and its water, we must design the vase. Hence, we think about the vase and design countless variations of it, considering the categories of the flower and the water as known and fixed and leaving them unquestioned. Design –and its accompanying design attitude– then constitutes an 'affirmative' act(ing). In our opinion, to make matter, to take an ethical stance on relevance, we must move beyond variations in the vase. We must not affirm but question the categories between which we design. Looking from a broad perspective, we believe that the main categories at stake in design are people (mankind) and world (environment). Unlike the water and the flower, people and world are unfixed, complex categories, both entangled in the many socio-spatial challenges we face. Hence, what needs to be problematized or questioned

critically is how people and world relate to each other, a relation that is always established by some form of design. Our design act(ing) –and its accompanying design attitude– has to be ‘critical’, if we want to instigate variations in thinking on meaningful relationships between people and world. ‘Making Design Matter’ thus is to address our full capacities of acting within the socio-spatial constellations that relate people and world.

In a second interpretation, the other of the twins appears. ‘Making Design Matter’ then is about design as a material manifestation to be encountered in the world. Design then being a material kind of ‘something’ Gilles Deleuze refers to when stating that ‘Something in the world forces us to think.’ (Deleuze 1994) We suggest here that it is necessary to draw materiality as a constituting term into the equation of instigating variations in thinking, hence in creating meaning and relevance.

Folding then ‘Meaningfulness’ and ‘Material Manifestation’ into an entity constitutes a dynamic of ‘mediation’: a mediation on meaningful relationships between people and world through the medium of design’s and architecture’s material manifestation. To speak with Rick Robinson: ‘Artefacts people interact with have enormous impact on how we think. Artefacts do not merely occupy a slot in that process, they fundamentally shape the dynamic itself.’ (Robinson 1994)

This lens on design, the folded entity of meaningfulness and material manifestation, thus produces a twofold question for further elaboration. First, what type of design attitude –and what type of design– do we consider to be relevant and reviving for today’s people and world? Second, how is this type of attitude and design backed up by the material working of the artefact? Are there different genres of materialization operative?

In this paper, we will focus mainly on the question for another design attitude. However, the role of the ‘material manifestation’ will at several occasions surface, amongst others in the design cases.

A CRITICAL QUESTIONING DESIGN ATTITUDE INDUCING THE DYNAMICS OF NEGOTIATION

Now what new design attitude do we consider to be relevant and reviving for the interrelation between people and world?

We face many and complex socio-spatial challenges today and we need a continuous effort in sense-making and revising in order for the world to move forward meaningfully. Hence, as designers and architects, the time has come to address our full capacities of acting. However, according to Sanford Kwinter, our ‘capacities of acting -practically, ethically and politically¹- in the world’ are currently ‘atrophied’ (Kwinter 2002) To

revive these capacities, we suggest that another kind of design attitude is needed towards the ‘objects’ we design to relate people and world. Kwinter suggests that we should look for ‘pathways that would have as a role to restore to architecture (and design) specifically the active, and not merely reactive role it once had in shaping cultural and social life.’ (Kwinter 2002) The reactive here then being parallel to the affirmative mentioned earlier, the active then parallel to the critical. One of these pathways, following Kwinter, is a revision of the architectural or design- object. ‘As design practice and thought are deflected away from the traditional and largely “aesthetically” constituted object and simultaneously reoriented toward a dynamic macro- and micro-scope field of interaction, an entirely new field of relations opens itself to the designer, theorist, or artist.’ (Kwinter 2002) Hence, as designers and architects, we should conceive our objects or artefacts as mediating within these fields of interaction. As mentioned earlier, our objects or artefacts then can instigate differences in thinking, becoming triggers of negotiation in sense-making and revising processes. This is the core of our new design attitude.

Arguably, all design and all design attitudes are concerned with thinking about novelty, the most commonly known being designing solutions for existing problems (the vase). However, the critical design attitude we look for unlocks a novelty of a different kind: it enables us ‘to think the world anew’ (Stagoll 2005) through designs that search to redefine the interrelation between people and world, thereby surpassing the existing, generally accepted relation.

Adopting this design attitude, we put the relation between people and world under critical questioning by means of designed objects or artefacts we activate through their materialization. Artefacts created alongside such a critical questioning design attitude consequently trigger a similar questioning within the people that encounter these artefacts. A difference of questions emerges (different possibilities, different visions), generating contrasting viewpoints, which in turn provides fuel for negotiation processes. Processes which in today’s society are paramount to induce change. We might thus say that a design attitude which enhances meaningful performances within the interrelation between people and world, is one of critical questioning, inducing the dynamics of negotiation on different possibilities and desirability.

Recapturing the other twin, materiality is an essential constituent to install mediation in the field of interaction between people and world. Designs can be seen as necessary material agents, acting as ‘interceders’ (Rajchman 2000) to our thinking. They are encountered, sensed, experienced, and it is primarily through this that a dynamics of negotiation can unfold. Deleuze identifies the starting point of thinking as a grasping ‘in a number of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary tone is that it can only be sensed.’ (Deleuze 1994) Materiality tickles the senses

and accordingly starts thought processes. Hence, we might say that materiality is inextricably involved in sense-making.

In the following, we present two design cases we were involved in to illustrate aspects of this critical questioning design attitude and the nature of the artefacts produced alongside. Also aspects of materiality, of different genres of materialization will be touched upon.

M.U.D – THE INTENTIONAL RUPTURE OF THE BELGIAN COAST TO INDUCE THE AGE OF MULTI-USER-DIMENSION – FLC EXTENDEDⁱⁱ

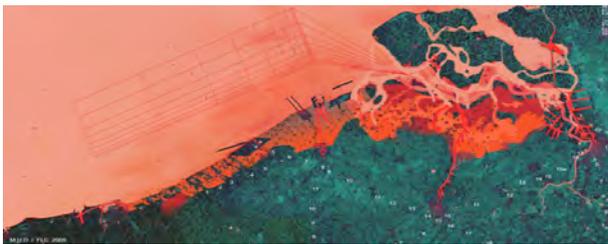


Figure 1: M.U.D - artist impression - photo FLC extended 2005

The M.U.D project critically questions urban planning principles and the use of space, by designing a highly dynamic relationship between the categories of sea (nature) and land (human settlement).

The case taken is the Belgian coastline, a long but ultra small urban strip. All along this coastline high-rise holiday homes stand as close to the sea as possible, the materialization of the so longed for 'view on the sea'. The design team considered a number of socio-spatial phenomenaⁱⁱⁱ, one of them being the phenomenon of 'Flood'. 'Flood' revolves around the interaction between water and land and its effect on the border area between both. The dike, up till now the main coastal defence, will not suffice when consequences of climate change set through. So, much energy is spent now in reinforcing the coastal defences, according to the ruling 'hold-the-line principle'. But what if we were not to stick to a strict dividing line but, instead embrace the dynamics of the encounter between water and land? The borderline would change into a transitional area: a landscape the designers called 'Future Conflict Zone' would be created, designed as a flooding area. This means that locally the dike becomes porous and the land depoldered. Depending on the landscape behind, the sea then gushes or seeps through dyke breaches into the flood areas.

In this context of 'Flood', M.U.D stands for mud, the substance that is a mixture of water and land. But M.U.D also stands for Multi-User-Dimension because territory and ownership become subject to the dynamics of the sea and are subjected to constant negotiation and redefinition.

The ever recurring occupation of land by water changes the statute of the area into a 'free space', not

permanently colonisable, acting as a buffer against the advancing urbanisation from the inland and against the rising sea level. The de-poldered land escapes control, it is unstable, therefore hard to claim, it installs a material agent to mediate the use of space over time. This mediation over use and function of the territory is induced by the ever changing nature of the materiality: land-mud-water-mud-land... It necessitates continuous negotiation between the multiple stakeholders that want to realize and maintain different functions and generate economic and social value.

The M.U.D project experimented with issues of hybridity, ambivalence and mixture, introducing a revised notion of zoning in urban planning. Zoning, conventionally oriented to fixate the use of every square metre of space in M.U.D becomes subject to time and dynamics. The negotiation triggered here by combining the materiality of water and land, does not steer to a fixed end-state but to a continuous redefining over time and a search for variations in degrees of freedom of programming the use of space.

So, unlike common urban plans, M.U.D turns the sheer physicality of the territory into an active agent in the negotiation on use, so introducing a mediation between the materiality of the place and the meaning that is attributed to it.

Being a pre-figuration, a so-called utopian project, the ideas on ambivalence and negotiating the use of space over time are triggered and discussed through what we call, a projected materiality. The effects of the projected materiality are however consciously enhanced by the actual materiality of the representation of the project by means of a carefully designed and materialized installation. This installation has been materialized in different ways, in different contexts^{iv} and operates as an artefact embodying ideas about spatial settlement. As such, it triggers thoughts and discussion in the public.



Figure 2: M.U.D as ambient information and cognition system displayed at HVDV University Library U Ghent Dec2005-Jan2006 - photo FLC extended

So, there are two genres of materialization at work: the projected materiality of the project's proposals and the actual materiality of the project's representation. Both instigate thoughts, questions and negotiation on the issues the design project foregrounds.

A question that might be worthwhile to explore further is whether a high degree of projected materiality (in cases where a project is not meant or likely to get actually materialized) requests an equally high (that is, more than strictly necessary to convey the information) design attention to the representation of the project?

EXPLICIT – BUILDING FRICTIONAL ARCHITECTURAL INSTRUMENTS TO PROVOKE THOUGHT THROUGH EXPERIENCE AND USE – JOHAN LIEKENS^v



Figure 3: 'Ont-Moetingsmeubel, inviting for different uses, provoking wonder and thought - photo Johan Liekens

EXPLICIT is a research studio in the educational program of Interior Architecture at the Sint-Lucas Department of Architecture, unfolding in a series of mediating architectural instruments. Its constant is to build frictional furniture, or sharper, 'complicating machines' (Rajchman 2000). These furnitures have the intention to problematize or question issues, related to people and world, and related to the acting capacities of interior architects on these issues. Encountering, using, experiencing these furnitures triggers contrasting viewpoints, leading to negotiation processes. Hence, EXPLICIT's blueprint is the interaction between material manifestations and dynamics of negotiation.

EXPLICIT's genre of materialization is real, embodying materiality, not scaled or abstracted representation. The idea of 'milieu' or 'field of interaction', as it appears in the writings of Deleuze and Kwinter, is essential, i.e. designs being embedded in a field constituted by connections. Hence, EXPLICIT leaves the safe walls of the school environment, adopts a 1/1 embodying scale and edifies its designs within the real world, inviting for encounters (affects and uses), even aberrant ones. The materialized designs are simultaneously object, method and medium of research.

EXPLICIT is about stirring negotiation in an effort to renew categories to think and work with, from the perspective of interior architecture towards world and people. One of the designs, the 'Ont-moetingsmeubel', will be focused on, because it was fully built and adopted during an event.

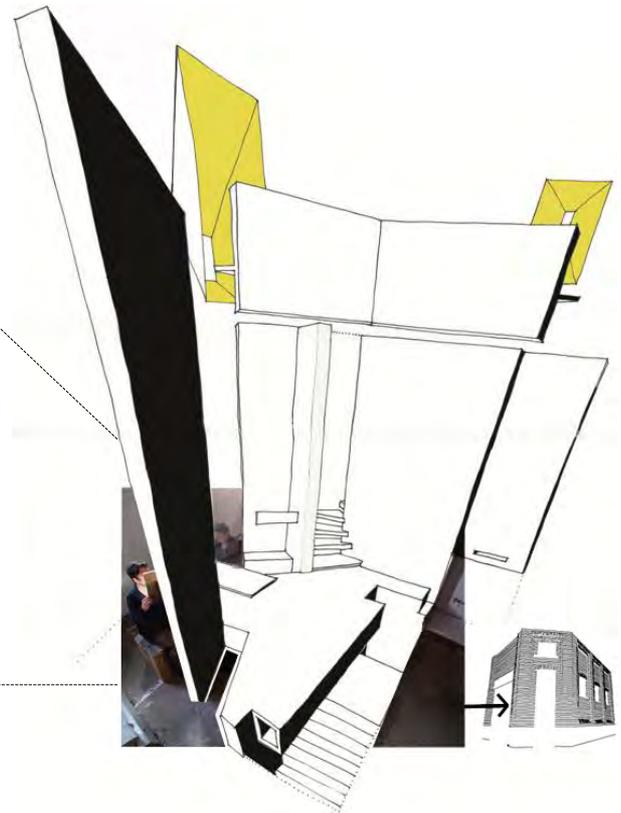


Figure 4: Scheme of the two story 'Ont-moetingsmeubel', installed in the public house in the right corner below; the yellow looking devices open up vistas (see text) - scheme Johan Liekens

The untranslatable term 'Ont-moetingsmeubel'^{vi} mediates between the idea of being goody-goody functional furniture ('meubel') providing possibilities to meet each other ('ontmoeten') with that of a resistance against furniture's -and by extension architecture's- oppressive character to oblige people to meet and act in directed ways ('ont-moeten' is translatable as 'not being obliged anymore'). On the lower level of the two story installation, connected to public space, seemingly functionally normal architectural constellations appear. However, a bench has inclinations, people slide towards each other; sitting at a table, normal distances are shortened, the knees of the opposed are uncannily felt; a wall with mirroring shutters leaves the decision for communication or narcissism to the two users manipulating them. Hence, functionality is disrupted, wonder and questions arise through the slightly

distorted positions the body takes while meeting, and interpretations are given. The higher level opens up framed vistas on places where meeting occurs less controlled: the street, the launderette, the call-office,... 'Ont-moetingsmeubel' is a negotiation on the thin line between architecture enabling and architecture forcing, and how they affect everyday actions as meeting. It is a negotiation on formal instrumentalized space versus informal free space, as the carriers of our everyday meeting.

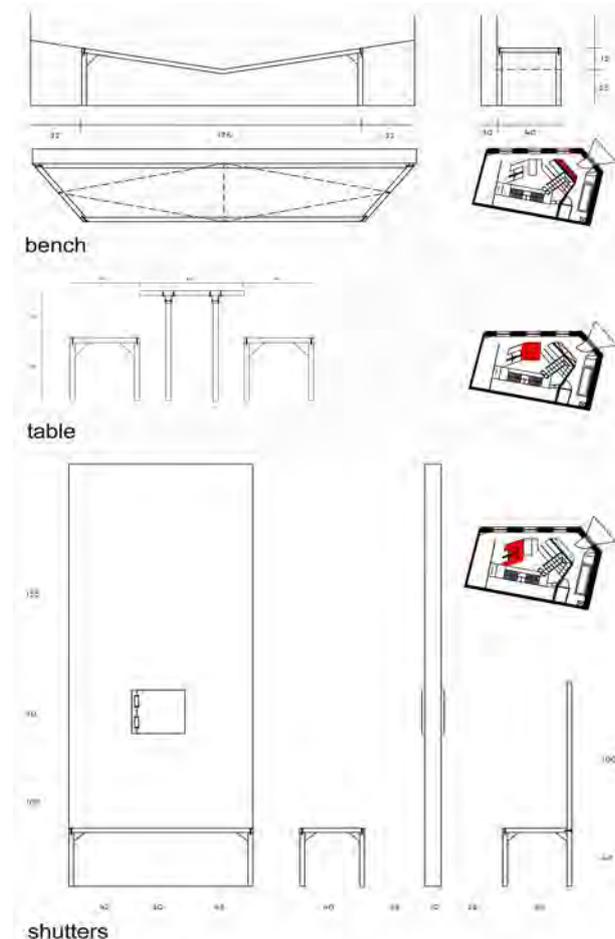


Figure 5: Frictional bench, table and shutters - scheme Johan Liekens and students 3ia 2009-2010

NEGOTIATION AS A DYNAMIC BEYOND MERE QUESTIONING: A SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

The projects touched upon each in their own way take up the engagement of acting -practically, ethically and politically-. This acting comes as the installing of materialized negotiation processes in the relation between people and world. Questioning reality -raising the question 'What if...?'- through designs opens up a space of possibilities, leading to categories to think anew this relationship. A critical questioning design attitude disrupts the reinforcement or affirmation of the

known. It activates architecture and design -practically, ethically and politically-.

In our opinion, this design attitude and the negotiation processes it installs operate in our projects, designing from somewhat disturbing perspectives on known and fixed categories. M.U.D questions the tradition of the hold-the-line principle in coastal urbanisation scenario's; EXPLICIT undermines the dominance of functionality, aesthetics and prescribed concepts over interior architecture, by building frictional architectural furniture, that through its being used raises wonder and questions within its user.

Noise, deviation, friction, chance, difference, some degree of 'user-unfriendliness' (Dunne 2005): all of them notions normally considered uninventive guests in the design processes, become valuable dynamics in the constitution of a main generative dynamic: that of negotiation. These dynamics, and the questioning attitude accompanying them, also operate within 'Critical Design', elaborated by Anthony Dunne as a counterweight for what he calls 'Affirmative Design' (Dunne 2005). Remarkably, Dunne as well talks about it as an attitude more than a movement.

However, in the light of the explorative nature of this paper, we want to end with a question, or better, an issue for further thought and exploration. Although related, we suggest that there might be a deficit in Critical Design as presented, when compared to the potential of negotiation as a dynamic triggered by design. As said, Critical Design is concerned with opening up a space of possibilities, but it doesn't give a clear account on how these possibilities then are distributed towards the formation of new categories to think and work with, in short, towards the formation of a body of values.

Critical Design de-territorialises, resulting in a space of possibilities. But in order to perform, we need to go beyond just opening up, beyond a relentless asking 'What if?'. Negotiation, by its own nature, is indeed also related to selection, which comes as a re-territorialisation. We suggest that Critical Design needs to be supplemented explicitly with a process of gradual selection in the space of possibilities, evolving from possibility to desirability to vision and new, actualized frames of thought. The question accompanying this suggestion thus is the following: How to pair within the designerly dynamic of negotiation both the dynamic of opening up (what if?) and the dynamic of narrowing down by selection, without relapsing in a reinforcement of the known?

The research projects of both authors are in the process of dealing with this question. 'Projective Research in Urbanism'^{vii} envisages a designerly mechanism merging the process of opening up (through critical design) with a process of selecting according to desirability, propelled by utopian thinking. 'Architecture's Provoking Instrumentality'^{viii}, through the educational project EXPLICIT, adopts a strategy of de- and re-

territorializing dynamics on themes close to interior architecture. It aims to constitute a 'different' vocabulary for (interior) architecture's acting. However, in this paper, we would like to leave this question open for discussion, as a trigger to thought within the reader, as an invitation to you.

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ⁱ The political understood here by Kwinter as the production of new possibilities.

ⁱⁱ FLC extended is an ongoing sequel of designers in free association. See also www.flcextended.be The M.U.D team consisted of: Carl Bourgeois, Marc Godts and Wim Van Der Vurst (design, visualization and scenography), Nel Janssens, Charlotte Geldof and Koen Pauwels (writings, research and feedback). M.U.D is a project made on the occasion of the 2nd international Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ The design team picked up three contemporary phenomena, Flood, Capsularity, Hypereconomy and explored by means of a pre-figuration how these dynamics, thoughtfully brought in interaction with each other and the existing environment, could lead to a new situation. For more information see: Goossens, C. 2007, 'M.U.D', *Achtergrond 03: Architect/Ontwerper/Onderzoeker? Casus Mare Meum: een oefening op de zee*, Antwerpen, Vai, pp.36-51.

^{iv} The M.U.D installation was exhibited in different settings: 2nd international Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam 2005 / HVDV University Library U Ghent Dec2005-Jan2006 / Casino Kursaal Ostend Summer2006 / CC Sharpoord Knokke-Heist 'Horizon 8300' 2009.

^v organized at the Department of Architecture, Sint-Lucas Ghent together with Karel Deckers, involving Ellen Fievez, Jens Lippens & Sanne Delecluyse and all other students of the Explicitstudio, third bacheloryear Interior Architecture 2009-2010.

^{vi} 'Ontmoetingsmeubel' can be understood as furniture that enables to encounter one another, but when written as 'Ont-Moetingsmeubel', its meaning shifts to furniture that liberates people from having to -as in being forced to- meet each other.

^{vii} Phd study currently undertaken by Nel Janssens.

^{viii} Phd study currently undertaken by Johan Liekens.