

## Urban Body: Rotterdam – *Spaces for Diverse Publics*

Public Space or Spaces for Diverse Publics? How can we transgress the conceptual gridlocks of modernity? Are there new conceptions and instruments to be found that break free from the legacy of modernism in the hope to effectuate an enabling urban environment?

The 2009 Urban Body programme sets out to explore the spaces between the public and private domain. Using Rotterdam South as a case study, a two-phased investigating will seek strategies through design and action to instigate innovative responses concerning the role between publicness and space. Moving away from the outdated paradigm defining the non-private space as simply 'public space', the studio departs with the understanding that city is a myriad of 'spaces for diverse publics'.

### *Charlois publics*

The open, yet highly undefined spaces of Rotterdam South, and in particular the communities of Charlois will once again set the stage for a *research by design* and *action-research* approach striving to enhance our conceptions regarding 'publicness', as well as our design praxis as architects and urbanists. The architect's position has been in constant flux and the question to what extent it can regain its empowered role as mediator between politicians and inhabitants through the insertion of its own politically motivated yet collectively responsible choices concerning design and public action will be looked into. To seek ways and strategies to architect new forms of movement and action with the body of the urban dweller is the challenge of this studio.

### *New Architects, new architectures*

Can we invite, perhaps instigate the users to appropriate *their* 'public domain' and in so doing generate a sense of citizenship through temporal and collective ownership? How can we go beyond the building and the street to find a new form of architecture that explores this border condition? Can we not enrich the discourse between the extremities of private and public by exploring the gradients between these two poles? If a paradigm shift is to take place that is sensible to the range of diverse multicultural citizens emerging in the current metropolis, then through design investigations a new language and toolset can be generated bridging the border between theory and practice, both for designers as for policy makers. That we cannot mend the problems we are confronted with using the same tools and language that created them is a recognized passage, but the challenge to go beyond and propose new tools and languages has yet to prove successful.

The current city suffers with the legacy of modernism as it remains entrapped within its spatial and political logics. Modernism's spatial and bureaucratic effects saturate the contemporary urban field further stressing the natural progression to advance towards a sustainable model of urbanization. Politicians struggle to find strategies to administer whilst inhabitants creatively respond with innovative tactics of avoidance. We are left with the question if indeed it is possible to design spaces of *affordance*, where the needs and desires of both politician and citizen can be met.

### *Architecting the Body*

The semester program has been setup in a two-fold manner. First a *research by design* exercise lead by Sang Lee from Border Conditions studio will set out developing a focus from the spatiality and physicality of the environment exploring innovative interventions that invite alternative forms of action and enactment in the neglected area of Charlois, Rotterdam. Taking a purely 'objective' position, students will develop their design process and investigate ways to vitalize urban space using the human (urban) body within the spatial (urban) body of Charlois as the defining context. For whom one is designing, where they may come from, what they may need, which program to install, etc., all such queries will be left out as only body, space and technology and their interrelations be examined. A 12-week studio (Feb 2 – Apr 22) will be developed to generate creatively driven architectures for the public terrain of Charlois where form does not follow function, but action.

#### Studio brief:

One of the conditions that exemplify today's architecture in dense urban context is a highly dynamic flux of mediatization and its potential link to the architectonic that can actually register the vitality of such everyday's measure. The studio's primary objective is to produce the mediation between an urban context and the conception/production of architectonic codification, and ultimately to propose a strategy of architectural construct that has given way from the clarity of static geometry to the complexity in dynamic

variability, that of aggregate accumulation.

Within the limited scope of the studio exercises, we will deal with a syntactic approach that consists of aggregate units organized and arranged so as to reflect and register tectonic transformations vis-à-vis the site variables. The primary component of the studio deals with the relationship between the tactile consideration of making and how it can be further implemented. The initial process will be centered on the physical construction of an aggregate tectonic unit as a pretext to its accumulated effects in structural configuration. Subsequently the investigation will be focused on how the aggregates can be assembled and permuted according to given variables derived from Rotterdam Zuid. This will primarily involve trans-coding of mediatized information (e.g. texts, images and sounds) into architectonic elements using the aggregate units organized within a syntactic structure.

#### *From Dreams to Deeds*

This will lead and overlap into the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the semester (Apr 6 – Jun 24) wherein students will partake in an *action-research* studio lead by Alexander Vollebregt from Spacelab together with Margit Tamas from Media Lab using new media technologies (camera, gps & weblog) focussing from the socio-cultural layer fostered in the spatial conditioning of Charlois. During a 3-week preparation period, seminars on the ‘production of space’, borrowing from space syntax and the situationists will be established while media techniques will be gradually developed. Simultaneously, through weekly social engagements, a gradual and strengthened relationship will be formed with diverse inhabitants documenting and analysing spatial practices in the public domain (week 2 – 5). Building an acute and sensitive awareness to their everyday urban livelihoods, students will correlate film, body and space to distil and understand contemporary urban desires and struggles while using their own bodily sensations as the instrument of perception. There may also arise the possibility to participate in the Moving in Free Zones II Film together with cultural producer Lucia Babina and filmmaker Jacopo Gandolfi from IStrike Foundation. This interdisciplinary and inter-professional platform will be established in order to generate alternative perspectives on contemporary urban life and the potential role of the architect and urbanist concerning social sustainability. Design and proposals for new forms of public space and policies (e.g. spatio-temporal governance) that generate an enabling environment where citizenship can be stimulated through collective ownership will be researched (week 4-7). Through the use of new medias in a creative exchange platform, the challenge for students and inhabitants alike, will be to transgress current bottlenecks of social development by finding innovative strategies and tools to progress local dreams to viable deeds.

#### *Postproduction and Reflection*

A post production period (week 7-10) will allow for careful reflection and critique in order to discover the type of knowledge formation generated by the two approaches and how the spatial disciplines, whether architect or urbanist, can sensibly engage in everyday urbanisms. Final visualizations produced in both phases of the semester will be displayed in various public areas in Charlois in order to stimulate public debate and responses. A film, website and publication will be made and be the subject of discussion at a symposium held at V2 (Institute for Unstable Media) in Rotterdam.