

TOWARDS A SITE-SPECIFIC PRACTICE – Reflections on Identity of Place

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Introduction

*To places of behind, between, bewildered
Where forgotten words climb your ears
Where stone and earth
Tell whispering their stories*

Places exist not only physically, but just as much in people's minds as memories, stories and names. The identity of a specific place cannot be truly grasped only by scientific means. Next to the geographical and architectural facts, a place exists in its hidden layers, its atmosphere, the experience and rituals of its users and passersby. This article is a reflection on those underlying aspects of the identity of places. Themes playing a leading role are character (experience, atmosphere), memory (history, tradition, morphology) and activity (social structures, use). In architectural practise I depart from the clear or hidden values of existing situations. The given factual data of a site are combined with rather subjective narratives in order to develop architectural strategies to strengthen its specific character. Based upon the idea that urban liveliness is generated by activity, more than by cosmetics, this method does not only result in actual building projects, but just as well in temporary interventions in the urban landscape, publications or expositions. The themes are illustrated with some site-specific projects in Helsinki, Tallinn and The Hague.

Character

How come a place can be remembered? When exactly is it that architecture, or in a wider sense a certain place, could have a meaning? Architecture becomes interesting when it brings about a certain experience, when it evokes associations

or memories. An experience becomes meaningful and remembered by something different than usual, by wonder. No rules exist to make this kind of architecture. Factual data like scale, material and construction, are only part of the understanding of space, the meaning of places goes beyond their actual form and is to be found in their effect on the human mind. Some factors may have an influence on the subjective experience of places. Sensory experience, approach, contrast and the influence of time are essential elements for an *architecture émouvante*, like Le Corbusier put it in his *Vers une architecture: L'architecture, c'est un fait d'art, un phénomène d'émotion ... La construction, c'est pour faire tenir, l'architecture c'est pour émouvoir*. (Le Corbusier 1923.)¹

In his book *Flesh and Stone* Richard Sennett (1994) gives an overview of the role of the body in urban space throughout different periods in history, like the Democratic movement of citizens in the Greek agora or the Roman forum, in which the individual is subordinated to the representative façades of the buildings. Here he describes the birth of Roman cities based on a grid with a centre approximating the navel of the body. This was to be the centre of the city, physically as well as religiously. The navel, or *umbilicus*, was the point in which earth and sky came together. Apart from this metaphorical role of the body one could discuss the more direct bodily experience of architecture. In our contemporary culture one is mainly visually orientated. This mentality has become so commonly accepted, that the role of the other senses in the perception of architecture is highly underestimated. The book *Questions of Perception*, written in 1996 by Holl, Pallasmaa and Pérez-Gómez, extensively deals with this subject.

A real architectural experience is not simply a set of images, a building is encountered, it is approached, confronted, related to one's body. As we open a door, our body measures the weight of the door, our legs measure the steps if we ascend a stair, our hand strokes the handrail and our entire body moves dramatically through space. The authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the tectonic language of the building and the comprehensibility of the act of the construction to the senses.

(Holl, Pallasmaa, Pérez-Gómez 1996: 35–36.)

Even though place in itself is a fixed phenomenon, the character of place is not limited to its physical boundaries. The way a place is approached influences the way it is experienced. Expectations are made or secrets are revealed. Other senses

¹ 'Architecture is an object of art, a phenomenon of emotion ... Construction is to keep in place; architecture is to move.'

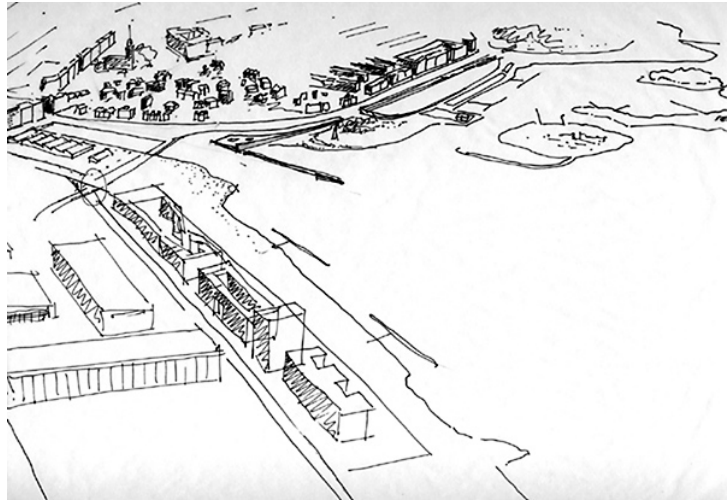


Figure 1] Merisatama Helsinki. Sketch of the urban development plan. (Graduation project, Delft University of Technology, K. M. Havik, 2000).

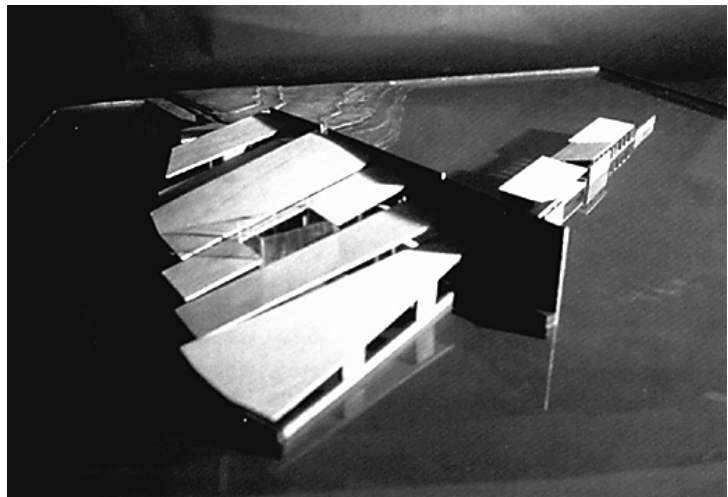


Figure 2] Scale model of bathhouse.

than the visual also take part in this process. Consider for example the sound of footsteps on a square, the sound of an opening door, or the opposite, and the total silence in a hall. Squares and streets for example ‘sound’ differently, according to the material on which is being walked: hollow sound of steel, softer wood, as opposed to stone and marble. Taste and smell are highly influential on human memory. It could be the taste of fish or the smell of the pavement after rain, which strongly reminds you of a harbour or a square you’ve visited in your

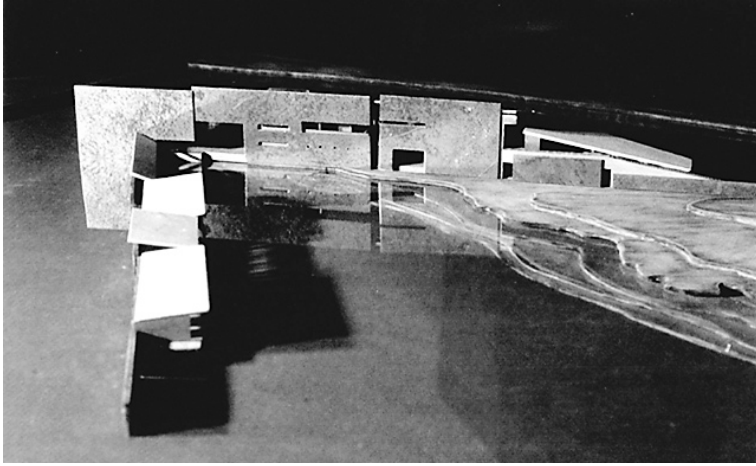


Figure 3] The bathhouse seen from the sea.

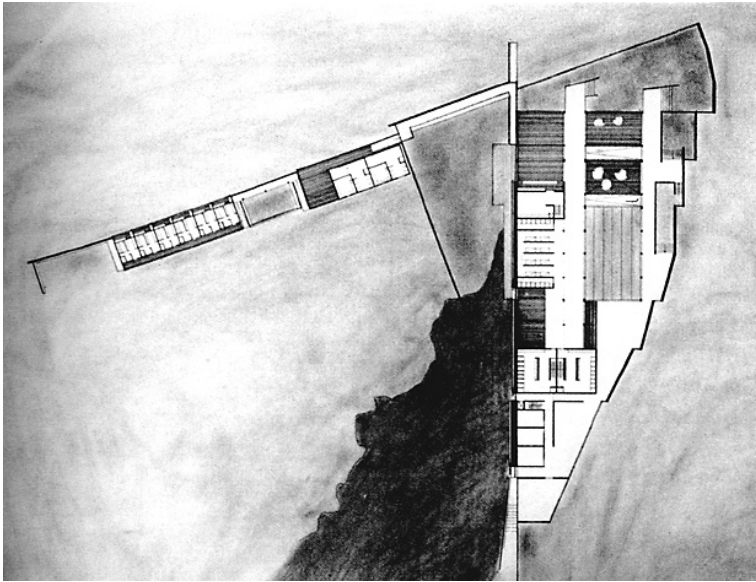


Figure 4] Plan of the bathhouse.

youth. Touch is the most direct of all senses and is directly connected to materiality. What you can touch exists. In the Dutch language, the word *nemen* means 'to take' and *waar* stands for 'true'. The literal translation of the Dutch word *waarnemen* ('to perceive') therefore, could be 'to take for true'.

My graduation design from Delft University of Technology in 2000 is a study on the experience of architecture and landscape, and the identity of place in this perspective (Fig. 1–4). The architectural design for a bathhouse at the southern



Figure 5] Europan 2001, site Kadriorg (Estonia).

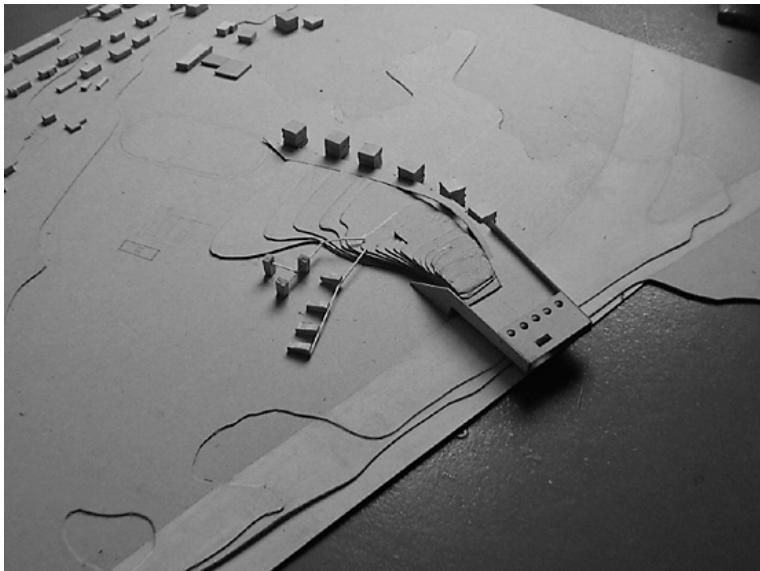


Figure 6] Scale model of urban design.

waterfront of Helsinki gives way to the exploration of different themes: the character of the site to start with, but also some essentials in architectural experience: working on the edge of land and water, the use of light and material, and the experience of a building which is designed to serve the human body.

Even now, returning to Helsinki seems like a reunion. Everything is familiar and yet at the same time surprising. It is not only in my memory, but I also run through the abstraction of the maps that I studied and through my own drawings. The pace

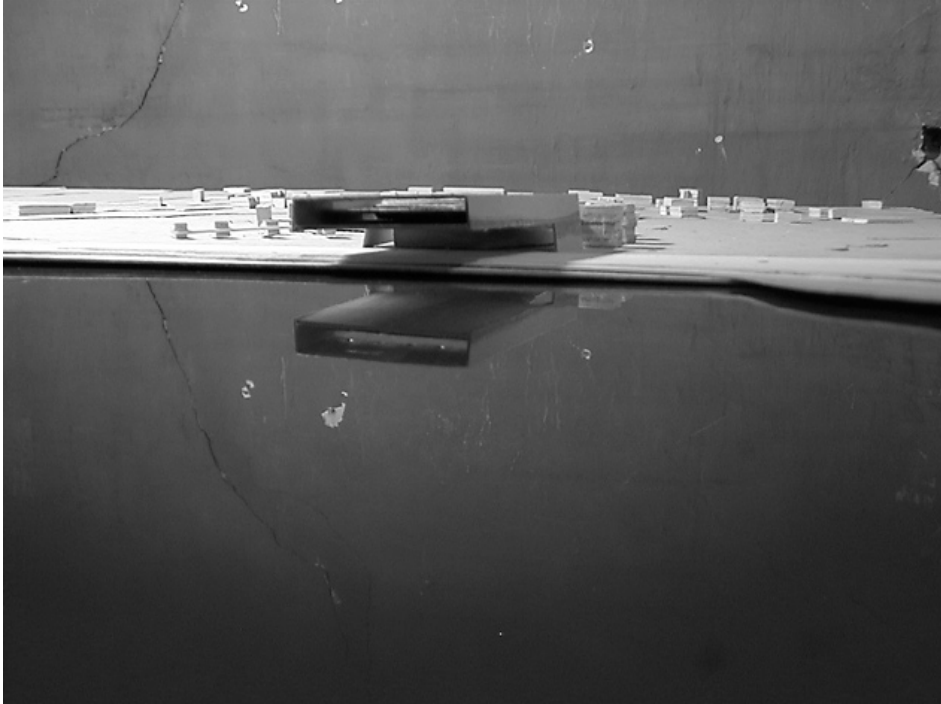


Figure 7] View from the sea (scale model).

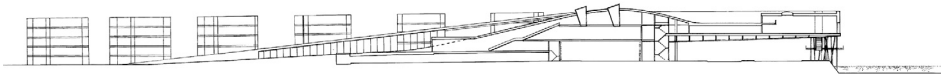


Figure 8] Section.



Figure 9] The building functions as a city gate (sketch by Hilde Remøy, 2001).

at which I walk along the coastline is slower than that of my hand that has so often drawn the same line. It is windy, I hear ropes ticking against masts, water splashing onto the quayside. The building is where water and land meet and sometimes one becomes the other. The water attracts but is inaccessible, or rather negotiable, reflections duplicate what you think you see. It is the swimming water in the indoor and outdoor baths, but also the snow that falls on the patio and the view of the sea.

From the city side, wooden roofs rise from the water. The roof segments differ in height and gradient. They are finished with wooden slats reflecting shadows, and

borders of snow in winter. It is a rust-colored wall that indicates the direction and along which the road rises into the building. I enter from the top and see immediately beneath me a swimming pool between large wooden columns. The roofs slope downwards; the floor is rocky like the rocks outside. Between the baths are areas with wooden floors that feel warmer and softer. Along the low rear wall light enters the room in long narrow streaks. Now and then, I see the sea through a large window, and a long pier with floating saunas.²

Memory

A place consists of different layers of times, users and uses superimposed on each other. Altogether, these layers form a broad storybook, telling the ins and outs of a place and allowing new stories to follow. The stories of a place are valuable material for urban and architectural practise. Tallinn is a city in which all different layers of history seem to be glued on top of each other, so close that you can touch medieval times, the 1920s independence, Soviet features and market economy all at once. Now and then, both are there, and in use. The character of Tallinn as a city of layers, and a subjective approach to this situation were the subject to my article for the journal *Maja* in autumn 2000. Looking at the city from a visitor's point of view, moving in different speeds through all different parts of Tallinn, I found myself in a movie scene. A surrealistic movie, with memory playing the lead actress. 'In the city centre every street corner offers surprise. The tiny wooden church looks funny, compared with the scale of the high-rise glass façade behind it. The sidewalk has made place for a construction site. A blue tram passes. Wood, concrete, glass. The materials are the autograph of time.' (Havik 2000: 25.) Tallinn is a collage of memory: layers are glued on top of each other, hidden and clear, old and new, astonishing and beautiful. Within those layers, how can one plan a city? The traditional act of urban planning in the sense of a two dimensional design seems no longer applicable to Tallinn's contemporary urban fabric. Nevertheless, the broad memory of the city offers a lot of building material for a fruitful discussion on urban dilemmas. It is a challenge to use this information in developing new proposals for Tallinn's many *in between* spaces.

²This text was also published in *The Architecture Annual 1999–2000* (Delft University of Technology, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2001). *The Architecture Annual* offers a number of articles on the Faculty of Architecture's research programme and presents a selection of graduation projects carried out in the academic year 1999–2000.

In between was the theme of the European³ competition 2001, and Tallinn's Kadriorg Park was one of the sites. The competition area is situated in between four characteristic landscapes of the city of Tallinn: the sea, the medieval city centre, the Kadriorg housing area, and the park landscape extending to Pirita Harbour. West of the area, one finds oneself in an urban environment, defined by dwellings, office buildings and traffic. At the east side one finds Kadriorg Park with a lot of greeneries and old trees. A large highway will in the future block one of the most important features of this area, namely the direct connection to the sea.

Our design entry for Kadriorg offers a landscape-architectonic structure along which future developments can take place. The structure defines connections between Narva Road and the future highway along the coast, and defines the area in relation to the surrounding buildings and to the park. The landscape is lifted, starting as a grass slope, forming a square in the middle at 13 meters height, and ending as a recreation centre on high columns bordering the sea. The lifted landscape crosses the new planned highway and thereby provides a walkway to the water. At the western side, closely connected to the city centre, a series of urban villas forms the sharp edge of the slope. The east side of the slope is reserved for low-rise buildings of a smaller scale, that thereby relate to the more natural character of the park.

As we had experienced Tallinn as a collage of times, we took in consideration the aspect of ageing in our design. Therefore we did not deliver a 'finished' image, but allowed the area to grow and breathe, the slope offering a guideline. The landscape structure therefore would be flexible to be able to cope with future changes, and at the same time it offered a long-term strategy for the development of landscape and urbanity. The urban villas at the west side are composed of open floor plans with a technical service core. With the change of function, the use and expression of the urban villa will transform.

³ European is a pan-European architectural federation of national organisations, each of which organises and manages an architectural competition followed by implementations launched simultaneously on a common theme and with a common objective. The European competition is held every second year and is directed at young architects and young professionals in related creative fields. European 6 was organised in 2001.



Figure 10] *Hidden city* tour of The Hague. The roof of the 19th century Passage, The Hague centre, 2002.

Activity

In their recently published book *In Search for New Public Domain* Hajer and Reijndorp claim that meaningful public space needs urban activity, liveliness, tension. They ask for further thinking about the relationship between form and meaning, in other words, between physical and social space. In their view, not the formal aspects are important, but the possibility for exchange of social worlds. Public space, according to them, is not so much a place but an experience (Hajer, Reijndorp 2001). The diversity of urban spaces is typical for a city like The Hague. Slight movements and diversions in the street pattern cause hidden squares and terraces. From many spots one could oversee the old façades from a distance before going back into smaller streets and passages again. The terrace of the Italian ice cream shop close to the old church, for example, exists through a curve in the road. The Grote Markt square used to be a market place along the canal. Its shape is now a mediator between the busy traffic at the former canal and the small shopping streets at the other side. Some forgotten places in the



Figure 11] *Hidden city* tour of The Hague. Former power plant built in 1908.

city are now being rediscovered and redeveloped or used in a different way. It is worth studying the potential of those urban spaces and the different ways to deal with the specific character of such places in the 'streetscape'. With site-specific projects, we intend to bring neglected places under attention and offer visitors a different view.

The architecture studio *de Ruimte* was asked by the art centre to organise a city-tour through the centre of The Hague in autumn 2002. The journey named *Hidden city* (Fig. 10; 11) revealed a layer of extraordinary places in the city centre of The Hague that are normally hidden from the eye. Guides and narrators offered an intimate way to get to know these places and their stories. The journey started in the monumental power plant from 1908 and from there led



Figure 12] Abandoned house, The Hague city centre, 2001.



Figure 13] Demolition project by artists and architects in former houses, September 2002.

through underground spaces like tunnels, a pumping-engine station and parking lots, through backyards behind and between building blocks and continued on rooftops. A dinner was served in the 120-year-old *Hôtel du Passage* that has been abandoned for 30 years.

Another project in The Hague, the *Sloopzacht* demolition project, is literally the opposite of a building project (Fig. 12–15). In the centre of The Hague a row



Figure 14] Breakthrough.



Figure 15a] Works of individual artists.

of former social housing has been uninhabited for years, waiting for demolition. By organising a short manifestation in September 2002, we intended to complement the site and its history with a last notice of the public before it disappears. Our collective intention was to investigate the location and its structures under various artistic aspects and to put it under a different light. Not the work of the



Figure 15b] Works of individual artists.



Figure 15c] Works of individual artists.

artists but the site itself was the protagonist to be exposed within the projects. Because of the state of the buildings, transformations of any kind were possible, far beyond what reality normally allows. The specific characters of the individual buildings were expressed by the participants by means of acoustic installation, video, or any kind of spatial or architectonic mutation. All projects were tak-

ing place in the former living spaces of the buildings or in the former gardens, connected by a new essential routing created by breakthroughs, uniting all the installations to one body. During the opening days, several performances were held with the buildings functioning as the stage.

The sudden boost of activity around the place has given rise to interest from citizens and many visitors have enjoyed the possibility to access the site and be confronted with the artists' interpretations of it. Even the homeless and junkies who used to occupy parts of the buildings became enthusiastic and they themselves started to build, constructing a tent for their daily barbeque. Some even became our helpers during the construction work. Unintentionally, the project thus even had a strong socialising effect, bringing about a connection between different social groups in the city.

Notes towards conclusion

Thus three themes can be considered important in site-specific architectural practice. First, the theme of character deals with the intention to understand the characteristics of a specific place. Apart from its objective measurements every place has its atmosphere that is experienced differently by every single perceiver. Architecture should be able to reveal the intrinsic qualities of a site. The (subjective) perception of architecture, therefore, is just as important as research and theory.

Second, the aspect of memory is taken into consideration in every site-specific project. By research at the site different layers of time, geography, and culture are revealed. Subjective perceptions and revealed layers of memory derived from the study of a site's character and memory are then to find a place in a site-analysis. In analogy to shipping, factual data and subjective narratives are combined in a journal. The resulting mental and architectural logs are points of departure for new proposals. Rather than a fixed image, architectural strategies should offer a framework that allows time to breathe. Time can be used as a tool in urban and architectural design, taking into account ageing, growth and decay.

The outcome does not necessarily lie in built projects, but also in generating activity. Activity, the third theme in this article, can bring both character and memory into the field of architectural practice. Activities on the site may initiate a new way of thinking about a specific place and the value that it can have in the eyes of the public. Publications, temporary interventions and expositions are

ideal tools for involving the public and arousing a collective consciousness of the identity of a place.

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Kohaspetsiifilise tegutsemise suunas – mõtisklusi koha identiteedist

Kokkuvõte

Kohad ei eksisteeri üksnes füüsilisel kujul, vaid samavõrra ka mälestuste, lugude ja nimedena inimmees. Koha spetsiifilist olemust ei saa täielikult haarata üksnes teaduslike meetoditega. Geograafiliste ja arhitektuursete faktide kõrval üritab artikkel avada koha peidetud kihistusi, atmosfääri, selle kasutajate ja juhuslike möödujate kogemusi ja rituaale. Peamisteks märksõnadeks linnaruumi vaatlemisel on iseloom, mälu ja tegevus. Kohti tajutakse alati kõigi meeltega; kehalisel kogemusel on vajalik roll koha iseloomu tuvastamisel. Linnaplaneerimisel on oluline arvesse võtta linna arhitektuurilist “mälu”, selle ajalist mõõdet. Linnaruumi kujundab oluliselt ka seal aset leidev tegevus. Võib isegi öelda, et avalik ruum on pigem kogemus kui koht. Tegevuse kaudu saab taas-aktualiseerida kohti, mis ei ole enam aktiivses ühiskondlikus kasutuses.

Kuna linnaruumi loob tegevus, on seda võimalik mõjutada ka ajutiste sekkumistega, mitte ainult ehitustegevuse kaudu. Artiklis esitatud põhimõtteid illustreerivad näited autori kohaspetsiifilistest projektidest Helsingis, Tallinnas ja Haagis.