State of affairs: (be)LONGING

Hanne Van Reusel

Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven, campus Sint-Lucas Brussels & DAD, Politecnico di Torino

Hanne.vanreusel(at)kuleuven.be

Abstract. This paper takes you along on an exploratory journey; a metaphor used to define the messy and engaged performative urban design practice that is developing through academic research . Together we cross four main key concepts of this journey; being 'we', 'longing', 'belonging' and the 'performative'. The concrete example of the imagination, exploration and construction of the 'Maison des Possibles' will help us to unfold a reading of the map that gives expression to the exploratory journey. In addition, a vocabulary of travel metaphors aims defines some of the characteristics of the performative urban design practice. The journey is still on-going and uncertain; it is leaving a lot of questions open.

Keywords. Performative urban design, we / participatory design, (be)longing, Maison des Possibles.

Dear reader,

I would like to take you along in "an exploratory journey". A travelling metaphor that will give expression to the highly engaging yet flou performative urban design practice (Gadanho, 2007; Herrero Delicado & José Marcos, 2011; Gadanho, 2011; Wolfrum & Brandis, 2015; Cambridge Dictionary, 2017) that develops around notions and experiences of participatory design (Björgvinsson, et al., 2012; Saad-Sulonen, 2013; Van Reusel, et al., 2015; Doucet, 2015; Smith, et al., 2016; Agger Erikson, 2016) , commoning (An Architektur, 2010; De Moor, 2012; De Pauw, et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2014; Commons Josaphat, 2015; Kip, et al., 2015; IASC, 2015; Van Reusel, et al., 2015), performative urban design, and belonging in the urban context of Brussels. The performative design practice is developing in the context of a doctoral research implementing action research (Swann, 2002; Kemmis & Retallick, 2004; Herr & Anderson, 2005) and research by design (Verbeke, 2013) methods.

   Our travel will be guided by a map (see figure 01), that is aimed to grasp the tacit knowledge, enliven experiences and creative outcomes that have been developed within this research. It offers a roadmap in-between various reflections and often still wandering / wondering thoughts.
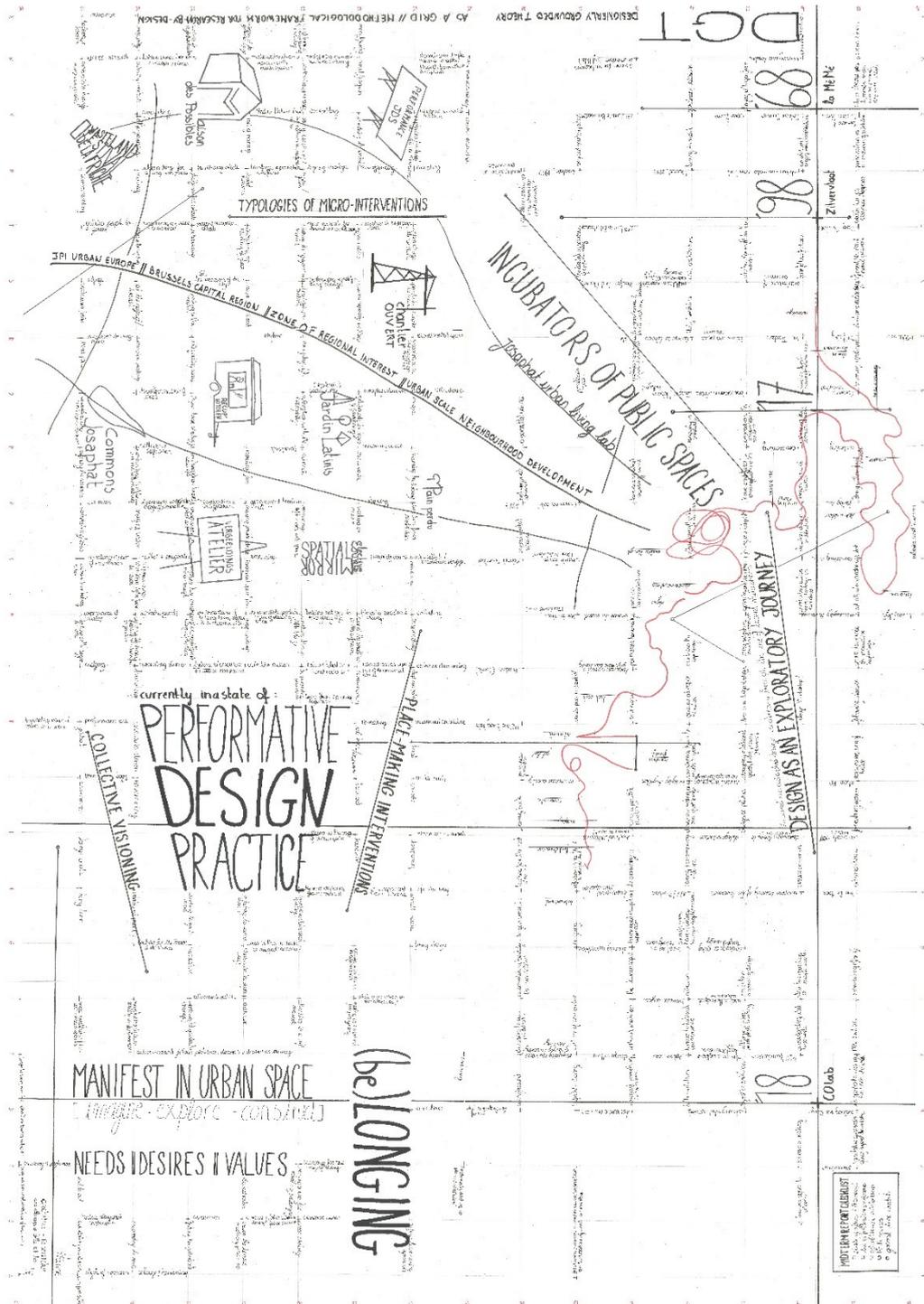
Figure 1
The map gives form to the tacit knowledge and enliven experiences of the research and design practice.

The map, together with its accompanying travel souvenirs -such as letters, polaroid photos, a dictionary addendum and logbook- provides the content of a souvenir box, which functions as midterm report of the Ph.D. research (see figure 02). The map provides an orientation and unfolds the travelling metaphor in different directions and readings.
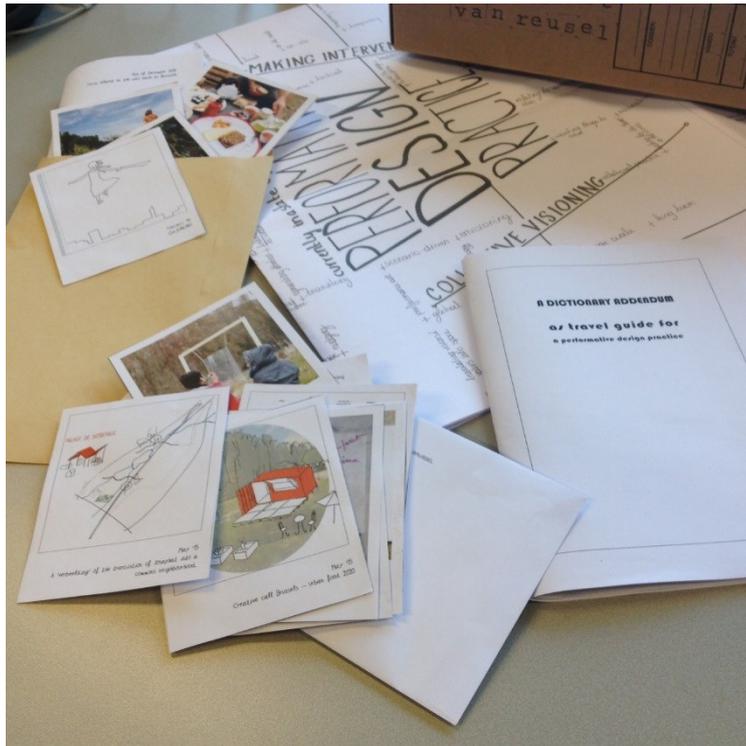
Figure 2
The souvenir box contains the map, letters, a dictionary addendum etc.

In this paper, I would like to show one way to unfold and retrace the journey. Please, join and let yourself be guided while I walk you through four key concepts; being 'we', 'longing', 'belonging' and the 'performative'. Our collective and on-going design process to realize a 'Maison des Possibles' will illustrate some of the facets that come with such an exploratory journey.

We

From now on we will travel together. This journey, its related research and design practice have a first person plural as subject. A division between me, you and all the other people that cross our road is blurry. We walk side-by-side. This is a collective endeavor.

The we's that we consist of entail different identities in which we take part or that we feel we represent. We, Brussels citizens. We, commoners. We, architects. We, part of a generation that is losing faith. We, dreamers. We, who temporary use waiting spaces.

We, who have been forming different collectives on and around the Josaphat site. We, who have different motivations to do so. We, who believe we can make a difference. We, who envision a more resilient future for the sustainable neighborhood that is planned to be developed at Josaphat.

One of the letters that come with the souvenir box and which accompanies the map, gives expression to these different 'us' (see figure 03):

We, Commons Josaphat (see figure 03, left polaroid) as a collective looking to bring the principles of the commons into practice within the future development of the Josaphat land. We, the Recup'Kitchen team (see figure 03, 2nd polaroid from the left) that co-created a mobile kitchen bringing people together around a healthy and sustainable plate to meet and discuss in and on public space. We, who love to garden

(see figure 03, 3rd polaroid from the left) and reconnect to nature and neighbors. We wildlife.

Figure 3
The letter and linked polaroid pictures that give expression to 'us'.

We, who are building the 'Maison des Possibles' (see figure 04). A 'we' that has merged different aspirations, projects and ambitions into a collective venture. We, who want to build a collective house to shelter our community-initiatives and nurture debate and collective decision-making. We, who are looking for a place to host intergenerational workshops on-site and be there to provide info. We, who look to build a minimal house that can be constructed by one person with no aid of electrical tools using recuperated resources. We, who want to become autonomous citizens. We, who need a greenhouse to grow and develop plants and social bounds. We, who see the possibilities in all these interventions. We, who dream this house to be the pilot for the development of a new neighborhood. We, who look for another way to develop our urban environment.

Figure 4
An image of what the Maison des Possibles could become.

The we's are vague, not very specified. Sometimes they are in conflict, always very entangled. Who does the I –as individual- end up to be in all of this we –the collective? Would it still be possible to travel alone? Would this be still desirable? What is left of 'the architect' in all of this we?

In travelling we are a lot in-between places. Often in-between places which we call home, where we feel we belong. We stand on one side with one foot, while having the other foot still on the other side. We bridge (see figure 05). You see the connections. Sometimes you feel entirely out of place. More often the in-between seems the most interesting place to bring together different aspirations identities and priorities.
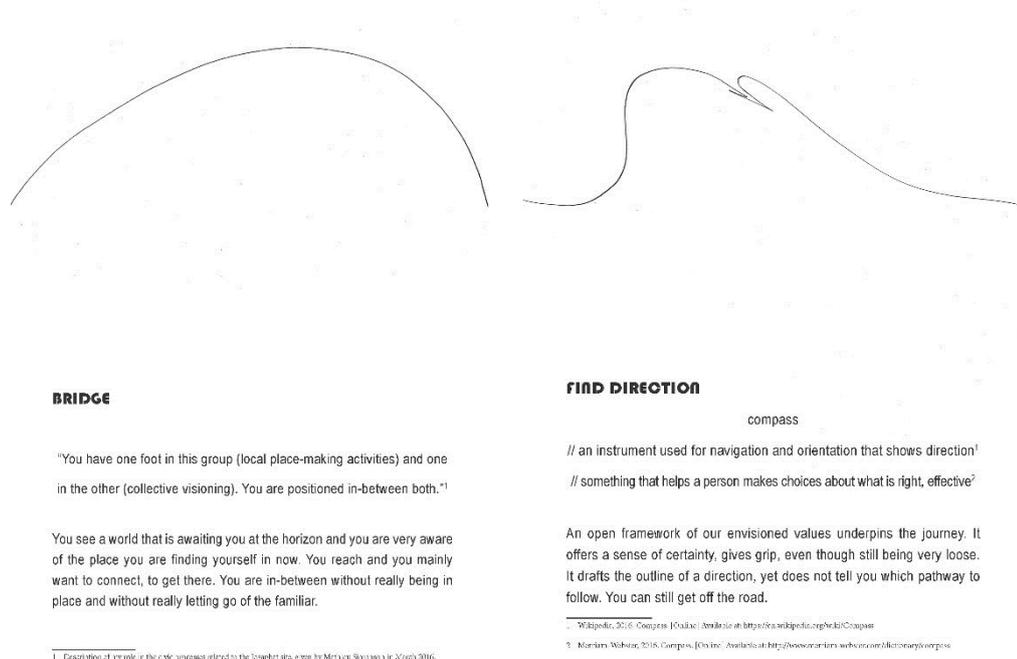
BRIDGE

"You have one foot in this group (local place-making activities) and one in the other (collective visioning). You are positioned in-between both."[1]

You see a world that is awaiting you at the horizon and you are very aware of the place you are finding yourself in now. You reach and you mainly want to connect, to get there. You are in-between without really being in place and without really letting go of the familiar.

1 Description of my role in the civic processes related to the Josaphat site, given by Mets취u Sinanan=a in March 2016.

FIND DIRECTION

compass

// an instrument used for navigation and orientation that shows direction[1]

// something that helps a person makes choices about what is right, effective[2]

An open framework of our envisioned values underpins the journey. It offers a sense of certainty, gives grip, even though still being very loose. It drafts the outline of a direction, yet does not tell you which pathway to follow. You can still get off the road.

1 Wikipedia, 2016. Compass. [Online] Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compass
2 Merriam-Webster, 2016. Compass. [Online] Available at http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compass

Figure 5 & 6
An extract from the dictionary addendum, defining 'bridge' and 'find direction'.

We, as travelers that long for a place of belonging.

Longing

So together, we head along an exploratory journey from which we do not know ourselves where exactly it is taking us. The destination is in the traveling. We keep going on, as a wanderlust is pushing us forward. A longing.

We feel a driving force in us. An intuitive eagerness to continue and explore where we can get.

One of the letters accompanying our map reflects on this longing as " *driven by the need / desire for a sense of belonging and for creating places where people can belong.*" A longing that binds us. A longing that has an activist streak in the interventions and visioning processes we undertake. A longing that goes beyond what we act upon at our local everyday environment. A longing that reaches beyond the city, beyond Europe.

It goes beyond the here and now, yet is acted upon. "*A longing that is reinforced by the displacement that diverse crises have been (and are) causing. An ambition to set up something constructive, to dream, to aspire.*"

In the on-going creation process of the Maison des Possibles, we do not know what the result will be yet (see figure 07 and 08). We, each of us, do know –or rather feel- what we are aiming for. We travel all in a certain direction, yet not seeing the destination. There is a horizon, but blurry. Many voices and aspirations blend; long term ambitions get an ad hoc execution and vice versa.

Figure 7 & 8
The construction and imagination process of the Maison des Possibles is on-going, driven by a longing.

We talk a lot. Discuss, reflect, plan… Where are we now? What will be the next step be and how does this help us further on the overall journey? Alone you are faster, together we can get more far.

We find direction (see figure 06). We have been developing five main principles we value (Bollier, 2016). A framework that serves as a compass. We talked again and again. We write. We discuss again. We imagine. We build. We reassess the steps we made, in order to see more clear where to go next.

Yet the final destination remains open. We wonder if we might actually have a place to settle. If we won't be longing on for the rest of the journey… Isn't it the travelling in itself, the longing, that we actually desire?

We, as travelers that long for a place of belonging.

Belonging

It has been taking us a while now. More clearly we grasp the direction we have been taken on. We feel the motivation, the longing. We see, how it can lead us to a place of belonging. We keep travelling, continuing our searching for a place where we believe people feel well. "Bien-être". Quality of life.

We know where we want to go to; however, no map that will show us the way. And as such we wander on, gaining focus while going. Starting to more clearly imagine what our utopian destination looks like.

Belonging has a loaded meaning in academia, mainly discussed in social sciences as the relation between people and place (Benson & Jackson, 2012). But it is messy and ambiguous. A letter of the souvenir box, that is addressed to our co-travelers, expresses a perspective on what belonging could entail: "*The desire to crawl in a corner and feel at ease and safe. A sense of homeliness. 'Geborgenheid'*". One of the five main principles is to make our Josaphat site, a place with an atmosphere of conviviality and serenity.

We all imagine ourselves sitting in our Maison des Possibles (see figure 04), discussing, drawing, constructing, painting, … Lounging outside with a view on the collective garden and the small of healthy food being prepared in the mobile kitchen. We each imagine our own outcome. We see how at this place, still being constructed, could become our place of belonging. The destination bit-by-bit gains form.

Sometimes it is doubtful if we will ever make it. The road is still long. Fatigue hits in. Sometimes we cannot longer see where we are, let be where we are going. Dreams

overlap, ambitions mount beyond what we can achieve. It is important to take the time to stand still once in a while. Both feet on the ground. To be in the moment (see figure 09). If we cannot belong at the place where we are now, if we cannot see its beauty, how will we ever appreciate our destination? Maybe it is this in-between, being in the journey, that is the place where we belong the most? Maybe the utopian image is already acted out right now?
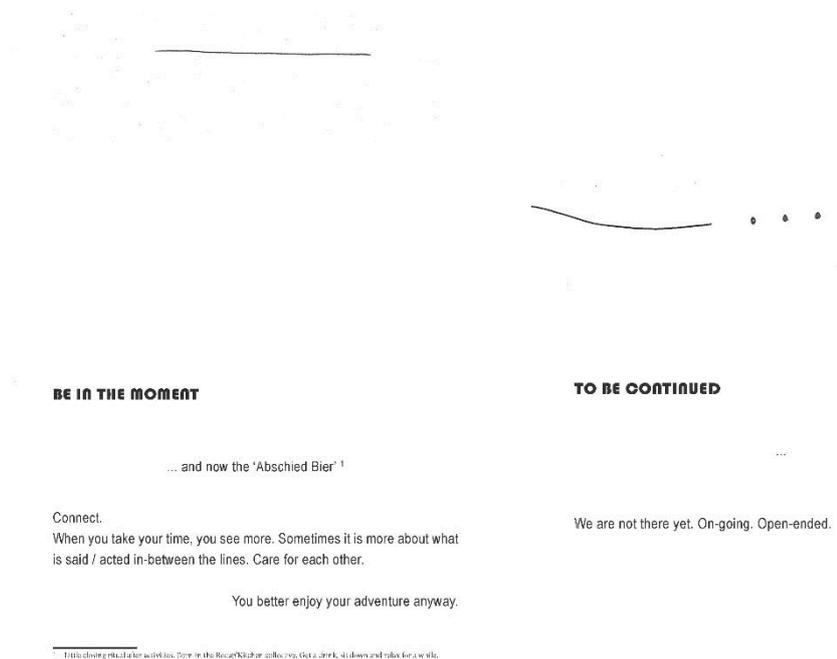

BE IN THE MOMENT

... and now the 'Abschied Bier' [1]

Connect.
When you take your time, you see more. Sometimes it is more about what is said / acted in-between the lines. Care for each other.

You better enjoy your adventure anyway.

[1] Little closing ritual after activities. Born in the Recap/Kletsbar collective. Get a drink, sit down and relax for a while.

TO BE CONTINUED

...

We are not there yet. On-going. Open-ended.

Figure 9 & 10
An extract from the dictionary addendum, defining 'be in the moment' and 'to be continued'.

So how can we make our journey enliven our longed for destination? We have a clue of the direction to go ahead, we stand still to reorient. We long for a different place, a place where we can end up. How can we fulfill our aspirations? How can we transform a site like Josaphat to a place that houses our community-oriented values? How do we get on to that place of belonging?

We, as travelers that long for a place of belonging.

Performative

In our exploratory journey, we have been experimenting different ways to continue our road. We have been working to outline a direction. It remains vague and open, yet we know that within this framework we can remain together throughout our on-going journey. Each of us acts upon our values, we work toward our place of belonging. It demands action, hands-on, physical action. It needs debate and visioning to keep an overview, to see beyond the next step to make.

We need both, if we want to reach further. We need to act while envisioning a future in order to impact. In the letter written to those who wonder –that comes with the souvenir box-, we give expression to this process:

"So we imagine, wildly what we see as possibilities right now and in twenty years. We visualize, dream, envision, discuss, agree upon, question…"

"So we explore how we can make things happen We lobby, we rebel, we wonder, we re-imagine…"

"So we construct, whatever we manage to set up within the time that is given to us (the temporary in-between)."

Our journey is a performative statement. Every step forward on our path has been an act to imagine, explore and construct toward our destination. As we walk, we perform, "*manifesting our desires in the reality*" (Herrero Delicado & José Marcos, 2011). By acting on our imaginations, possibilities manifest. We make it happen as we speak.

PERFORMATIVE is described in the Cambridge Dictionary (2017) as "*involving an artistic or acting performance*" and as "*specialized (language) having the effect of performing action*".

The Maison des Possible, in our wildest imaginations, becomes a pilot for the transition of Josaphat into a new neighborhood based on principle of commoning (Commons Josaphat, 2015). As we are building on, no matter how small our house, we believe we impact. We experience, we learn. We manoeuver our way through, cleverly getting around the complex landscape that reality offers us. We might never reach our destination; the dreamt place of belonging. But we are driven to head for it, longing as we are. We build on, bit by bit, discussion by discussion, screw by screw. At least within the current unfinished structure of the Maison des Possible, we can perform our manifest (see figure 07).

This is an exploratory journey. It as an architectural design process we are not so familiar with. We get lost from time to time, make detours as we sometimes travel too fast, too undirected. We stand still, be in the moment and look back, reposition and re-find the road to continue (see figure 10).

We still wonder about the scale we can impact on, the amount of change we trigger.

We, as travelers that long for a place of belonging

"*Nous sommes propositions en marche / nous sommes confrontation et dialogue / nous sommes expériences / création de mille possibles / espérances / constructions de mondes communs / nous sommes l'exubérance et la joie* »

<div align="right">Introduction 2016 Zinneke Parade in Brussels, theme fragil</div>

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