Petra Marguč

LEARNING FROM LIMITS IN TRANSVERSAL DESIGN
The stakes of mutual understanding within the project for the Deportation Station in Bobigny

AUTHOR

PhD candidate, KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture, Belgium / ENSA Nantes, CRENAU, France
petra@polimorph.net

SUPERVISORS

Johan Verbeke (+),
Laurent Devisme (ENSA Nantes), Jo Van Den Berghe (KU Leuven)

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ABSTRACT

Three partners, the city of Bobigny, Polimorph association and the MRTE laboratory of the University of Cergy-Pontoise - undertook in 2013/2014 the action-research project "Places of memory, places of urbanity" on the site of the former Bobigny railway station in the Paris region which served to deport one third of French Jews during the Second World War. The project was financed by the Ministry of Culture and Communication within the program "Intercultural practices in heritage institutions" and by the City of Bobigny. The purpose of the action-research project is to integrate the site better in its current territorial and social context, the idea being to transform the railway wasteland into a place of memory and a place of urban life for Bobigny. The action-research also sought to explore the process of patrimonialization by experimenting with participatory mechanisms. The initiative led to a situation of disagreement between the partners, to a progressive blockage and the breakdown.This article attempts to evidence beyond individual and collective emotions the underlying phenomena, facts and situations that led to the blocking of the transversal approach and to the interruption of action-research, such as mutant identities, divergent ideas of conflict management, ubiquitous sectorization and maintenance of dominant spokespersons. Furthermore it explicates how these may be recurrent in intercultural practice and how they are intrinsically related to the shaping our environment. It reflects on the role of the architect in transversal design process and how an alternative model than the juxtaposition of material and immaterial phenomena is necessary to bridge the gap between body and mind, individual realities and social realities, and to consider a continuity between sensing, imagining, telling and enacting upon our environment.

Three partners, the city of Bobigny, Polimorph platform for architecture and urban design and the MRTE research laboratory of geography of the University of Cergy-Pontoise, undertook in 2013/2014 an action-research project "Places of memory, places of urbanity, The former Bobigny deportation station. Living heritage as a space for interactions in the changing city". It is from this former railway station in the northern suburbs of Paris that during Second World War one third of French Jews were deported to Ausschwitz. The project was financed by the Ministry of Culture and Communication, within the program "Intercultural practices in heritage institutions" and by the City of Bobigny, who is managing the site since 2006. Today, the site is blocking the path between the very popular housing estates in the west, cité de l'Etoile, and the city center with all amenities in the east. The railway wasteland was recognized heritage site and also pilot site for a biodiversity strategy. Many reflections and studies for developing the site into a memorial have already been carried out before 2013. However the city wants to see it more anchored in the territory, to integrate the site better in its present urban and social context. The idea is to transform the railway wasteland into a place of memory as well as into a public place for everyday life for Bobigny today. The action-research also sought to explore heritage processes by experimenting participatory methods.

The stakes were high, the situation complexe: How can we value memory in public space, inscribe such an unprecedented event and painful heritage in the city? How can we transmit this history to future generations and allow the site to become meaningful for the descendants of the victims of the Shoah as well as for the surrounding residents living there today? What link can be imagined between memory, history, city and landscape in order to create a place meaningful to these different users? Could the biodiversity of flora and fauna present on the site today nurture a culture of diversity, a place of urbanity and citizenship tomorrow?

For responding to these challenges geographical, urban, socio-cultural and spatial reflection were gathered with the aim of integrating into the development process those who live there, those who work with the context and those who carry the memory. In the partnership of three, Polimorph was in charge of conceiving the transversal action-research approach anchoring the action-research on ground and amongst the realities of the different stakeholders.

Despite the fact that the intercultural practice has been initiated and supported by two strong institutions, the Ministry of Culture and the city of Bobigny, and despite real spatial, societal and cultural relevance, the project has been stopped after seven months, at the time of the municipal elections in march 2014. But the context of the political changes is not the dominant

factor for stopping the project. Since beginning of this same year, frictions and obstructions between research partners multiplied, led to a progressive blockage and to a breakdown after the first project phase.

This particular case is used to examine facts and situations which impacted on a mutual understanding between project-partners in order to learn from limits in transversal design approaches. It evidences phenomena of inconsistency which gradually undermined the collaboration, such as blurred identities, opposite ideas of conflict management, a practice of partitioning not only of the territory but also of the institutions, the people and the minds, to name but few. Although the meticulous mechanisms at play are experienced and described within the Bobigny project, similar behavioral patterns could be found in other collaborative ways of transversal project development.

This raises a few questions about the limits of transversal design and intercultural practice, namely:

- How can a culture of transversal design be nurtured despite an inconsistency between enunciation, practice and material reality, an inconsistency between what is being said, how things are being done and what is really there as a material fact on the ground?
- What role can an architect play in a transversal design process?
- Why should transversal design be fostered anyway?

RESEARCH CONTEXT: MIDDLE MARGINS MATTER, THE ART OF DYNAMIC BALANCE IN TRANSVERSAL DESIGN PRACTICE

I am exploring transversal design techniques in my professional practice and also as a teacher since many years. With Polimorph we were developing integrative design tools through real productions with real stakeholders, to be as close as possible to real conditions one encounters in practice. Over time, from one production to the next, through an approach of urban prototyping, we could improve and refine some tools and techniques. As an architect and urban designer, I am fascinated by the relationship between territory, things and people, by the embodied know-how that already exists as personal reality in each one of us and as a social reality within objects. If a configuration of people, human agency, leads to the production of an object, can the creation of an object, material agency, lead to a reconfiguration between people? The human body and the material territory would be the key and shared ground of both.

In my PhD research I am focusing on connectivity properties in transversal design, where a dynamic balance between territory, things and people can be cultivated to drive transformation processes forward. The pivotal condition

where systems are connected for exchange is called Middle Margin. Middle Margins can concern:

- a way of practicing: to go so deeply into a territory until one touches a limit, where resistance presents itself, where the territory acts back and thus explicates underlying phenomena

- a terrain: a certain type of terrain in which underlying dynamics are palpable but have not found a form of expression yet; often these are territories in transition in which a need for intervention is felt without however a clear response at sight

- specific things: concise objects which express a social reality and induce an evolution of relations. These forms have a leverage character.

Can we talk about middle margins in the Bobigny experience and if so, in what is it driving?

From a geographic perspective, the site of the deportation station in Bobigny is located at the margin of several urban sectors. Today it is perceived as a residual space, a boundary within the urban and social fabric disrupting a spatio-social continuity. This was not always the case. Extending the spatiotemporal framework, one can perceive how other periods of occupation existed in resonance of societal changes before and after the deportation of the Jews, during which the site was an integral part of urban life.

Today the site is in transition, its spatio-temporal situation is again vacillating: while the members of the Shoah's memorial associations are aging, land pressure is being deployed from a major infrastructure development project of Greater Paris, which is in close proximity to the site. Even if nothing is done on the memorial site itself, it will change under the pressure of external forces.

The subject of transversal design and the catalytic role of action protocols and relational objects to drive creative interaction processes forward was treated in previous presentation. I have also spoken about the lure of considering the material world as an objective reality, for depending on our angle of view we don't see the same thing, the same thing does not have the same meaning depending on who is looking. Personal truth and socially shared reality often do not refer to same interpretations of a situation, a matter of fact can stand for a range of significances.

An investigation into mechanisms of game, play and pleasure dynamics in one particular project, the urban game called Tabula Rosa, revealed how this game provides a setting for transversal design wherein the interaction amongst multiple stakeholder works very well, stimulating individual and collective imagination and producing learning a new. The investigation revealed the relevance of the interaction environment and its rules of the game. It ev-

idenced the relevance of player mechanisms for providing a space where a participant can freely enact his multiple identities between actor, player, narrator and avatar, and draw upon a broader range of his or her experience. Participants could change position and allow to be displaced without risk of losing face, legitimacy or control. Within the setting of Tabula Rosa, entering the urban game and progressing together towards transformative project proposals works surprisingly well. However, exiting the game and reconnecting the outcomes of the play to urban dynamics does not happen so directly as I would have imagined.

The purpose of investigating the project experience of Bobigny situated at the opposite end of a transversal design experience is to learn from the circumstances in which transversal practice may fall apart.

THE FALLING APART OF TRANSVERSAL PRACTICE IN THE ACTION-RESEARCH FOR THE DEPORTATION STATION IN BOBIGNY

The project strategy was planned in three phases over twelve months, each project phase would end with a public restitution translating the achievements into a format exploitable by and operational for the greatest number.

In the first stage, Polimorph established together with the geographer a prospective diagnosis. This was done and mapped by intensive fieldwork, immersion on the ground and some forty interviews with institutional, professional, memorial and local actors. In this first phase we wanted to verify the stakes and prepare three transdisciplinary workshops which should take place in the second stage. These thematic workshops would initiate project synergies between institutional partners already in charge and the local partners which are implicitly there but which do not play a role yet. From these transversal design sessions we would propose guidelines in form of an operational action plan in stage three, which would then become part of the project brief for the design commission to follow.

By playing with several spatiotemporal framings, by overlapping material phenomena encountered in situ, with what is being said by a variety of people about the site and the practices operating in site, we could evidence very quickly major stakes which were not considered by the key actors so far and which should be considered for the successful further transversal project development.

Imbalance between the accumulation of expert knowledge on the one hand and its enacting capacity to transform the context on the other hand

We observed that despite a tremendous accumulation of expert knowledge

amongst different stakeholder groups, memorial, institutional and professional actors, their lack of enacting that knowledge and transforming the territory was just as important. To counteract that imbalance and to initiate change, involving people who could bridge between the expert level and the ground seems essential. A first step could have been to open up and introduce local knowledge into the steering and scientific commissions already in place, and also to provide instances where project dynamics could meet across expert groups.

Difficulties to consider what is beyond personal preconceptions and outside of the angle of view

The imbalance between knowing and making knowledge impacting goes hand in hand with the difficulties to see and to hear what exists beyond personal preconceptions. The angle of view of some of the key actors was so much focused in direction of the Deportation to Ausschwitz, that they could not perceive and take into consideration what else there is. Despite the fencing and despite what one might believe at first glance, everyday urban practices and small memorial ceremonies already do coexist at the moment of our study. Traces of precarious habitat recorded on site testify that excluded populations already live there, supported informally by the city's maintenance people, with the concern to remain unnoticed (see figure 1 and 2). In conversation we also found out that the position against an opening up of the memorial site towards everyday uses is far less pervasive among memorial actors than we were told. All these observations would require an adjustment and reformulation of the project's objectives.

A fragmentation into small expertise without a clear federating vision risks dispersion of project- and actor dynamics

Through fieldwork and interviews we observed that actually a strong commitment and desire to open the memorial site towards urban uses exists across different actor groups. To elaborate a shared vision did not seem so far off the track at all as it was believed, the divers actors just don't know about each other's positions, they lack opportunities to exchange. Furthermore, the municipal project development ongoing since 2006 proceeded very much by accumulating small chunks of expertise in parallel without elaborating simultaneously an overarching implementation strategy, which could be programmatic, socio-cultural and financial. This fragmentation complicates a synergy of efforts towards one same direction. The lack of a minimum of red thread throughout the process makes a better orchestration of actions and know-how which could counterbalance a tendency of dispersal a real challenge.

Anchoring all thought, enunciation and action to real bodily experiences and to the material territory as a key for constructing shared ground

In order to get a grip on the complex heritage and to progress despite of it, we decided to stay as closely connected as possible to material agency,

Figure 1: Although the site is closed down, it is being practiced as a shortcut between schools, housing and public infrastructure by residents from the surrounding areas as well as a place to hang out. (2013)

material phenomena we could encounter in situ and practical interventions immediately feasible. Three alternatives to rise and enact transversality in the second stage were proposed: either we could settle in site as a laboratory for producing lived heritage, which would then be presented to the public during the national heritage week; or we could mark potential access points


Figure 2: Mapping existing formal and informal practice on site reveal a coexistance between memorial activities and people living on site. (2013)

at the threshold between the memorial site and its surroundings in order to test where and how to design the transitions between memorial areas and surrounding neighborhoods; or we could produce a series of events in order to stir a territorial dynamic towards participatory involvement. For opening up a unidirectional viewpoint oriented towards Auschwitz, we simply turned around and followed the railway lines on ground in the opposite direction of the Deportation. This allowed us literally to increase the range of perspectives and to consider possible connections of our urban wasteland within a larger historic and heritage context (see figure 3).

Figure 3: At present, the site and all viewpoints are oriented towards Ausschwitz (left). In future, simply following the railway lines into the opposite directions could diversify viewpoints and anchor the former Deportation Station in the territory and connect it to other important local infrastructures (right).
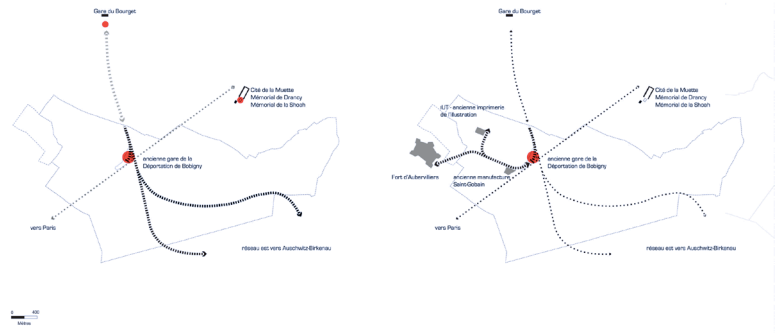
But all proposed options for continuing in the second phase should be postponed to after our action-research, which was neither a rejection nor a deliberation to act but a suspension. No agreement was reached to put in place some form of in-situ actions, situactions, where stakeholders could meet, exchange, envision and enact the future of the site together. This made our mission impossible. We have entered the project with the task of improving mutual understanding amongst site-relevant stakeholders, and we found ourselves devoured in blocking patterns internal to the three partied project team.

THE NATURE OF OBSTRUCTIONS: WHAT ARE THE OBSTRUCTING PATTERNS AND HOW DO THEY OPERATE?

The identification of stakes for a successful transversal design process observed and described above - the imbalance between an accumulation of expert knowledge and its enacting capacity, the difficulties in changing perspective, the lack of vision and the reluctance of anchoring thought in material reality - could have produced an adjustment of the development process. Instead, mapping and making the obstructing phenomena explicit engendered

the opposite effect, it reinforced the blockage and lead to collapse. At a later stage it might become useful to look at this phenomena in terms of a vicious cycle of positive reinforcing feedback, which can only end in death if not stopped (Cannon 1932) instead of maintenance of a dynamic balance. At this stage the nature of obstructions was examined using a matrix of lenses proposed by Audoux Christine and Gillet Anne who consider joint research and co-construction of knowledge between researchers and stakeholders as a test in translation (Audoux and Gillet 2014). It revealed the following patterns:
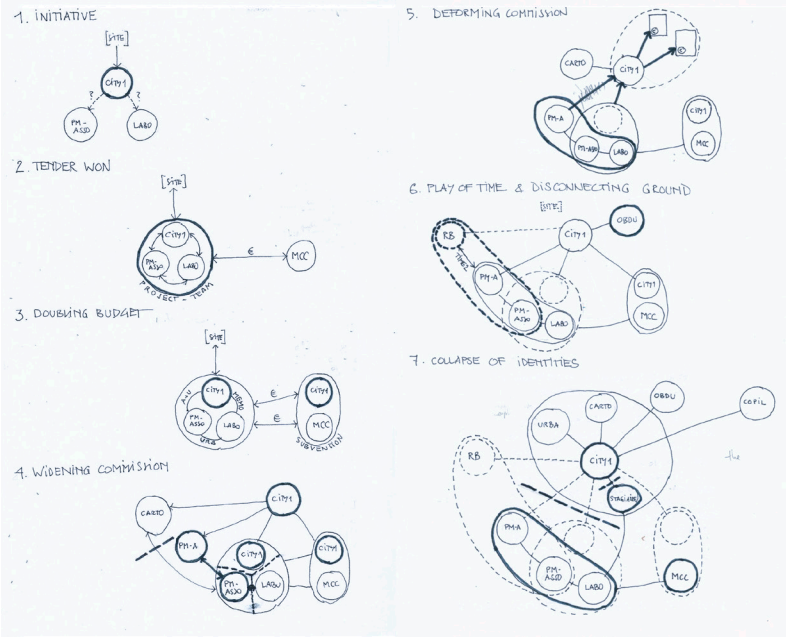
Evolving identities

One of the three partners, the city, has turned into a principal without ever making it explicit. This blurring of identities contributed to a dilution of the roles and responsibilities of the project partners (see figure 4). Progressive achievements did not get validated, whether this validation would be collegial or hierarchical, the lack of intermediate validations slowed down the process and prevented action. Initially the partners were aware that a multi-stakeholder action-research would bring about the unpredictable, the "living". However, these unpredictable events may challenge the distribution of tasks. Such shifting identities are a characteristic of transversal approaches, sometimes

the responsibilities of team members, "who is doing what when where", are adjusted seamlessly. In the case of Bobigny it generated misunderstanding, uncertainty and tension for one another.

In spite of a shared awareness about the evolutionary and adaptive nature of transversal design processes, there was no upfront or parallel reflection on how to recognize, face and remedy the possible side-effects of shifting identities in the organization.

Divergent idea on conflict management: Diversity as a project driver to be nurtured versus diversity as an obstacle to be flattened

Bringing together actors with different concerns was enunciated as a major project objective. However, how to put them in contact, how to deal with divergences and handle potential conflicts, turned out to be a major opposition which manifested since the outset of the project. Polimorph endeavors to take an exploratory and pragmatic approach, to configure real situations in order to provoke direct contact, first person experience, nurturing divergent forces until intensity lines appear on the surface in order to situate the conflict and to make it tangible. This can accelerate the explication of potential friction, allowing the points of resistance to emerge. The city representative sought indirect exchange frameworks often through introducing mandated persons, city representatives as intermediaries. Avoiding confrontation by distancing potentially conflicting stakeholders and diluting adversity, while maintaining spokespersons.

The more work developed on ground, the more intense the opposition became. The fear of letting go, of not mastering the process took precedence over providing margins of freedom of speech and action left open to the different actors.

Pervasive Partitioning Patterns

The urban fabric of the city of Bobigny is a typical example of twentieth century partitioning of the territory into sectors of living, working, leisure, services, a patchwork. The site of the former Deportation Railway Station became a residual space in-between such sectors. Today it stands for disruption of the urban and social fabric. Action-research revealed that the boundaries to overcome exist not only in a fragmented urban fabric, but also in the operational practices of the institutions and in individuals. For example, we found out that in parallel to our project, the city commissioned a project to transform the abandoned rails at the western border between our site and the social housing estate into a walk, the Django-Reinhard Promenade. These two projects were not being thought in resonance, exchange has not been considered.

Searching for possibilities to relate the two projects and to imagine how they could respond to each other, we found that the municipal project managers belonged to different departments with very little culture of exchange between them, and little desire to change.

So we are faced with patterns of partitioning operating at the level of spatial planning, linked to a partitioning practice at the level of collaboration among actors and at the level of the engineering of the overall project in progress. We thus have a culture of partitioning deeply anchored in the functioning of the city and the society. This enters in frontal contradiction with a displayed will of a transversal approach open to a set of actors and users related to the site.

CONCLUSION : LEARNING FROM LIMITS

The limits for transversal design and intercultural practice encountered in this action-research are situated on two distinct levels: within the project itself which should lead to a design proposal (the imbalance between expert knowledge and its enacting capacity, the difficulties in changing perspective, the lack of vision and the reluctance of anchoring thought in material reality), and within the operational framework between the project partners (evolving identities, staying at distance versus getting in touch, a culture of partitioning with the consequence of losing sight about where things are coming from and where they are tending towards). Whereas the first concerns the design proposal for the site, the latter concerns the design of the organization. The limits encountered within the project for designing a proposal are not specific to transversal practice but rather symptoms of complex problems. The obstructions encountered in the operational framework which was organized as a co-creative process allowed to bring to the surface a series of disruptions between what is wanted individually by the partners and stakeholders and what is actually produced together. The transversal organization made that disruption evident. "Why do we collectively create results nobody wants individually? What keeps us locked into old tracks of operating?" reflects according to Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer (2013) a triple divide, that is the disconnection between self and the environment, the disconnection between the self and the Other and between the self and Self. The symptoms for obstructing the design proposal and the structural limits in the design of the organization, although situated on distinct levels, are related and part of the same coin. We cannot improve design proposals responding to complex situations without addressing the design process in itself. "As Albert Einstein put it so eloquently: "We cannot solve problems with the same kind of thinking that created them." Thinking creates the world. The structures of yesterday's thought manifest in the structures of today's institutions and actions. If we

want to upgrade our operating systems, we need to start by updating the thinking that underlies it." (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013).

Making the essence tremble

We learned how not to be sure about things, how to make the essence of things vascillate (Cassin 2015). Mutating and multiplying spatiotemporal frameworks encourages the change of perspective deconstructing individual realities. Enabling a loss of certainty is a prerequisite to be able to look beyond the horizon and to experience what is there beyond personal preconceptions, to prepare the site and its actors for learning a new and reconstructing social truth together. Comparing what happens on the ground with what is enunciated and how this translates into spatial practices, is a method to verify and to assess to which extent this knowledge represents personal reality or social truth. Through this play of changing and juxtaposing positions, a situation that can appear at first glance stuck in a dead end, can reveal unexpected potentials for transformation. Our collaborative mapping techniques got confirmed as a method to verify what is existing in a given environment, not only as matter of fact in terms of an absolute truth, an isolated material reality, but in terms of what that matter of fact represents for one another, its significance, how it relates to and informs its environment. In the gap between a matter of fact as a personal reality and a matter of fact as a social truth, there is a path to construct.

Body drawings, filaments attaching imagination, emotion and material reality

In transversal design the position of professional actors is both central and vulnerable, fear of being instrumentalized, of losing control of the project and being evicted raises the question of "recognition" (Honneth 2005). However, the new context of action-research makes this pivotal position difficult, or at least repositioning it, because not only does this project create a new community, that of action-research partners, where the municipal mission manager becomes a member of a research team and new arenas of legitimacy in which expert actors must make "value the results of their involvement". Action-research intended to blur the boundaries of these instituted and imagined communities, through the devices, methods and approaches proposed. Round tables, interactive walks, micro-installations and actions, situactions, were based on the principle of recreating new "punctual" and hybrid communities in order to create new types of interaction and to confront each other's interests. Stirring loss of certainty could have been counterbalanced by re-enacting sense-making in direct experience in situ and in

context. Canceling such modes of experiencing encounter where the stakeholders could momentarily reconfigure their relation to the self, to the other and to the environment, had a devastating effect. Whereas an interaction setting such as provided by the game environment of Tabula Rosa allows the participant to experience continuity across confrontation, vacillating, opening up and mutating into a new stabilized reality, the possibility for experiencing a form of continuity could not be provided in the Bobigny project. This accelerated getting out of balance and interruption.

Designing with inconsistency and impermanence

Just as the gap oscillating between personal reality and social truth, there is a gap between felt sense and enacting. In the case of Bobigny, stepping out of the comfort zone reached a breaking point with no return. Investigating the urban game Tabula Rosa it appeared that the player mechanisms allow a participant to navigate freely between several identities. Within each identity the participant can draw upon a distinct bodily experience: as an actor, the participant is grounded in a physical reality and draws upon his past experience and existing knowledge; as a player, he is positioned around a game board which relates him to other players in a present situation; as narrator he formulates an idea in resonance with his experience and in relation to what is expressed by the other players in the game, they are creating a story together. As avatar, the participant accomplishes a displacement and represents himself in the story with a new projected identity. Whereas the game environment of Tabula Rosa activates the negotiation between several personal experiences towards a shared vision, bodily experiences activate the interplay between layers of felt sense, thought sense, enunciated sense and intentional enacting (Dunne 2017). That interplay takes time, finding the right words to form a coherent voice for what is meant is not immediate, but a stumbling process of repeated attempts (Schoeller 2017). The lack of shared language in collaborating with people from different backgrounds is a common hurdle, which was also present in the case of Bobigny. Why would we rely on a predominant mode of expression in one linear or hierarchical order? Where verbal understanding touches its limits, experiential understanding can unblock a situation and take over. An architect, as one of many design practitioners, knows how to see and act from the Whole (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013) while staying grounded in one singular specific situation, to reconfigure existing components into situations where alternative experiences can emerge. These design competences can contribute to a transversal design process through recurrent interventions of shared experiences, balancing inconsistency and impermanence by orchestrating a form of continuity in a co-constructing process.

For further investigating the place of the architect from where to enact transversal design processes and how they could be cultivated as a mode of practice with a coherent mode of expression, to grasp its potential public behavior, a contextualization of a community of practice in comparison to other examples would be a further step. To begin with artists' references such as Joseph Beuys' concept of social plastic, Thomas Hirschhorn's consistent use of everyday matter to create radical proposals reconfiguring everyday life, Tino Seghal's orchestration of pure experiences of encounter and exchange with close to zero material artefact and architects' references selected among the representatives of activists', sceptics', cosmopolitical or material fundamentalists' (Zaera-Polo and Fernandez Abascal 2016) and Patrick Bouchain for his engagement to shift the construction processes through playing with the legal framework could be approached. Furthermore, if inclusive transversal modes of practice are to be promoted, where and how can significant results be demonstrated?

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