Informal Structures. An Eulogy to Making

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1.
Manneken Pis house

Beautifully symmetrical. Carefully composed as if it were a stage set. (Fig. 01)

The brown colour and the geometric yet flowery pattern of the tiles transport us to the late 1970s and stress the contrast with the thoughtful motif of the garden wall, where the typically Portuguese off-pink marble creates a strong striped pattern defined by the black thick mortar lines. At the back of the garden the marble pieces attempt to go wild, despite the evidence of containment, forming a random pattern similar to many other houses across the south. The strong red tiles that shape the horizontal edge of the wall match with the red of the railing that announces the entrance. That same red is also used on the short trousers of the Portuguese version of Manneken Pis[1] who, coming from Brussels to Portugal and being overlooked by Saint Mary on the entrance wall that, not to be disrespectful, would certainly not be able to stand naked dripping water into the fountain. The fountain, a central element of the composition, no longer has fresh clear waters, but a dormant green fluid due to the heavy rains. Outside – the public space of the private property – in the garden facing the road, two tables and their respective set of chairs and a parasol with the 'boundi' and 'lipton' logos on stand next to the manicured bushes in fake stone pots. If it hadn't been raining, it would have been the perfect spot from which to salute a passer-by. On each side of the door, half-hidden by a striped curtain of metal chains, typical of the Portuguese countryside, with their middle points marked by a rustic lamp, two signs welcome the visitor: a tiled painting of Saint Mary who blesses and protects the property, announcing the religiosity and seriousness of the inhabitants, and A Nossa Casinha [Our Little House] that seals a stamp of ownership. Apart from the slightly cracked paint on the shutters' boxes, the house is immaculate, well cared for, looked after with pride. The plants are lush; there is no sign of waste, no sign of negligence. Taste might be at stake to some, but care, pride and a sense of ownership evidently are not.

From Vernacular to Contemporary Vernacular

As a consequence of the recent socio-economic changes, vernacular constructions are reinvented into objects and spaces that reflect certain current geographical and social contexts leading to a new form of the 'vernacular', namely the 'contemporary vernacular' which inherits from the former the strong resourceful attitude and the will to produce it with one's own hands, to express one's desires and taste. However, whilst the first, the 'traditional' vernacular implied the transmission of specific skills and their knowledge from one generation to the next, the latter, the 'contemporary vernacular' does not necessarily involve the mastering of a specific skill. The act of making by oneself always implies a sense of self-pride and achievement which goes beyond any formal qualities of the object or space, that being one of the most valuable qualities of 'contemporary vernacular'.

1 *Manneken Pis means Little Man Pee in Marols, a Dutch dialect spoken in Brussels. The small bronze fountain sculpture, also known in French as Le Petit Julien, is a famous Brussels landmark. It was designed by Jerome Duquesnoy and installed next to the Town Hall in 1618/9.*



Fig. 1. Manneken Pis, Santiago-dos-Velhos, Portugal © Luísa Alpalhão

Paul Oliver — the British architectural historian and researcher, pioneer of vernacular architecture studies, who over five decades authored and edited various leading publications on the topic of the vernacular[2]) — starts the introduction of his *Encyclopedia* by stating that, due to the variety of categories and the geographical scope of buildings in a multitude of contexts and conditions, it would be difficult and potentially inaccurate to regard 'vernacular architecture as a single phenomenon'.[3] The term is often used in reference to 'indigenous, tribal, folk, peasant and traditional architecture'.[4] However, there are certain characteristics that are common to the most and leading to the following definition:

> "Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all the other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are customarily owner or community built, utilising traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them."[5]

Despite the fact that buildings are normally associated with architects, the dwellings (the most significant typology of buildings erected around the world) are often still built by their owners or by communities that jointly make the effort to gather resources, or by local specialized craftsmen; this way of building generated much of man's built environment,[6] representing approximately 90% of the world's housing stock.[7]

2 *Architecture for All: The Photography of Paul Oliver, https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/pauloliver.html, accessed on 27.06.2016.*

3 Paul Oliver, Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World vol. 01 (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997), xxii.

4 Ibid., xxi

5 Ibid., xxiii

6 Ibid.

7 Lindsay Asquith & Marcel Vellinga, *Vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century : theory, education and practice (*London : Taylor & Francis 2006), 7

The term 'vernacular architecture' was first used in England in 1839 but it was only after 1950 that it started being more commonly used.[8] According to Oliver, there was an overall growth in interest in ethnographical researches in support of the archaeological or the evolutionary ones, especially during the Arts and Crafts movement. However, Oliver claims that the focus continued to be the contemplation of the forms and authenticity of the constructions, promoting a nostalgic and romantic feeling for the rural traditions in decline; very rarely researchers used to examine or even to tackle the social contexts. Instead, they endured on classifying aesthetic 'styles' following the Modernist interest in formal qualities, rather than on the social context or on the reasons which lead to the choice of certain forms and materials.

Not differently from what happened during the Modernist period, form continues to capture the immediate attention whilst any social context or characteristics require a more in-depth exploration and understanding of the objects and spaces. This outward reading often leads to equally superficial re-interpretations of these forms that are not derived from a study of their properties, whether they are social or formal, but from their aesthetic value with romantic connotations – sometimes pastiche representations of the past.

In 1964 'vernacular architecture' reached, for the first time, a wider audience beyond researchers, architects, anthropologists, historians and geographers. The general public was invited to visit the exhibition *Architecture Without Architects*[9] raising awareness of the richness of buildings that were, according to Oliver, dismissed by 'politicians and populace alike as representative of a backward past opposed to their modern ideas and aspirations'.[10] The exhibition commissioned by MoMA New York and curated by Bernard Rudofsky — a Moravian-born American architect, writer, and social historian — had a decisive role in the way 'vernacular architecture' was perceived and valued from then onwards, despite its remaining focus on formal qualities.[11] Photographs of non-pedigree architecture, buildings from remote countries built by their users with local resources and responding to local climate conditions would contrast with the familiar historical portrait of architecture which, according to Rudofsky:

> "(…) amounts to little more than a who's who of architects who commemorated power and wealth; an anthology of buildings of and for the privileged – the houses of true and false gods, of merchant princes and princes of the blood – with never a word about the houses of the lesser people."[12]

Regardless of Rudofksy's efforts to portray and promote constructions 'by all and for all,'[13] to raise awareness of their importance as models, not to copy, as with 'neo-vernacular' buildings,[14] but to learn from them for the design of our cities, many vernacular buildings have been destroyed during the post-industrial expansions making room for modern housing projects, with the aim of promoting an illusory idea of modernisation. Modernisation often being a paramount concern for technocrats and the perfect ally of form and efficiency, it was translated into non-site or user specific buildings that are unquestionably profitable or desirable at a first glance.

It is in the limbo between vernacular construction and modernity that 'contemporary vernacular architecture' emerges. With industrialisation changing demographics at the turn to the 20th century, various suburban settlements started germinating between cities and rural areas. That, along with the phenomena of migration, led to new building typologies, and

8 Oliver, Encyclopedia, xxiii.

9 Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigree Architecture* (N.Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1987)

10 Oliver, Encyclopedia, xxiii.

11 Rudofsky, Architecture Without Architects.

12 Ibid.

13 Oliver, Encyclopedia, xxiii.

14 Ibid., xxii Oliver mentions that 'neo vernacular' has been recurrently used to define architect-designed buildings with forms that are clearly influenced by a vernacular tradition.

"spontaneous architectures"[15] (often marginal and illegal) arose out of need. Oliver considers that the term 'popular architecture', which includes the provision of commerce, entertainment and public facilities, is more adequate to designate these buildings than 'contemporary vernacular architecture', even if both imply the existence of an "owner-builder". [16]

The "owner-builder" understands his own needs, tastes and desires and builds according to them and to his economic possibilities. He is resourceful and resilient, though he might lack the professional understanding of architecture as discipline, as well as he lacks the desire to experiment and to push the building beyond what is known, beyond his limited set of acquired skills. The architect, in contrast, often projects his personal views onto someone else's buildings, dismissing the specific requirements and tastes of the future users, and often creating spaces that are not functional to those who inhabit them. His knowledge and education do not necessarily translate into quality or taste. Despite Oliver's rejection of the term, other scholars and architects, based on the definition of the 'vernacular' consider these makeshift constructions and self-built migrant houses as 'contemporary Vernacular'.

The Portuguese architect António Coxito, in his essay 'O vernacular contemporâneo', defines 'contemporary vernacular' as a neologism and a supposed oxymoron, highlighting the extent to which it refers to more accessible, less erudite materials and forms of working, more responsive to climate and available resources.[17] Coxito claims that the vernacular has by now acquired new characteristics that relate to economic and social changes, and that contemporary materials now tend to be linked with industrial constructions, such as shuttering materials, scaffolding, corrugated aluminium sheeting, metal beams, bricks, piping, and other non site-specific materials.[18] Moreover, opposite to the notion of anonymity, the collective builders embody the definition of vernacular, their homes being full of personality and emanating a sense of pride and, at times, a certain degree of ostentation: they express the character of those who build and inhabit them, whether they are houses or signposts, façades or street gardens.

The Portuguese *Manneken Pis*, as depicted in the written vignette, is a clear example of 'contemporary vernacular'. Though often simple in form and not necessarily made of wealthy, expensive materials, the 'contemporary vernacular' is a product of immense pride, rich in detail and looked after with care. Whether it relates to everyone's taste or has been well built is debatable, but the care and thoughtfulness of the owner is unquestionable. In relation to other houses of similar nature, the geographer and scholar Álvaro Domingues, who has published several books on the topic, states that:

> "Most of the houses are simple houses that belong to people who do not have much money for ostentation, or cultural capital for erudite aesthetic exercises, neo-classic or any other. In their scarcity of resources and materials, what they call for is the public scenography of the private realm, the care and detail with which they illustrate their religious beliefs or the will that, through punctual citations of cut camellias and fake fountains they achieve a junction to the minimum lexicon of distinct and aristocratic gardens."[19]

The *Manneken Pis'* house incorporates the formal elements of Oliver's definition of vernacular. It is a building built without architectural erudition and related to the context, though not necessarily to the landscape. It has distinctive characteristics related to the region reflected on the choice of materials – marble stone and tiles – as well as simbolic ornaments – Saint

15 Oliver, Encyclopedia, xxi.

16 Ibid.

17 António Coxito, 'O Vernacular Contemporâneo' in Arte Capital, see http://www.artecapital.net/arq_des-103-o-vernacular-contemporaneo, 2014 (20.04.2016).

18 Ibid.

19 My translation. Portuguese original quote: „A maior parte das casas são casas muito simples, de quem não tem dinheiro para grandes ostentações nem capital cultural para exercícios de estética erudita, neo-clássica ou outra. Na sua escassez de recursos e materiais, o que chama a atenção é essa cenografia pública da esfera privada, o cuidado e o pormenor com que se ilustram crenças religiosas, ou o desejo cm que, através de citações pontuais de camélias podadas e falsas fontes, se junta um léxico mínimo de jardins distintos e aristocráticos." Álvaro Domingues, *A Rua da Estrada,* (Porto: Dafne, 2009)

Mary and the fountain's boy. It is, however, a product of modernity, a form of 'contemporary vernacular' rather than of 'vernacular' *per se*. Its owner was also its builder and the technologies used were those of the time when it was built (the 1970s). It expresses more than the formal qualities; in the way it has been laid out it depicts the needs of the user and his family. It externalises their religious values, their economic and cultural status, their taste and some of their habits. It mirrors to the exterior, to the public realm, part of their everyday lives. The marginal aesthetics of the house conveys someone's life story, the narrative of the life of the building's makers, connecting form to experience, to traces of use, and to an immaterial spatial understanding that derives from its making process.

2.
Emma in Geneva, Berlin, Munich and Saint Petersburg

Emma wiggles throughout the neighbourhood. Like a caterpillar, her seven parts move in an apparently disjoint manner, though they are all part of a whole with her 'hardware' that gathers the necessary tools for people to work on site, using wood as a building material; and her 'software', a set of construction plans and instructions for modules which are developed to be easily assembled into chairs, tables and shelves.[20] Over the years, Emma has had various reiterations, having travelled flat packed from Geneva to Berlin (2011 and 2012-13), and from Munich to Saint Petersburg (2014 and 2015), being reassembled with each travel. She is a "mobile activator" in the shape of a train formed by multifunctional tables on wheels, a creation of the German collective *Raumlabor* (Space Laboratory).[21] She is part of what the practice categorises as "Participative Buildings":

"Building for us is a tool to create mutuality and to initiate engagement with spaces. Participatory building leads to different and often surprising questions and ideas on the concrete spaces, it helps on finding topics that affect the environment of people."[22]

This set of seven tables is made of old pallets, bamboo sticks and empty cable rolls. Regardless of whether she is in Geneva or Saint Petersburg, she is always surrounded by children hammering nails, assembling and sawing wood with the help of their parents or of *Raumlabor's* members [Illustration 02]. At dawn, Emma is encircled by banquets of freshly prepared food, people gather around and have lively debates on the future of their neighbourhoods [Illustration 03], watch films screened from her back. DJs set the rhythm for Emma and her guests to dance at the beat of the music. Emma has a language of her own that everyone understands regardless of whether she is in Germany, Switzerland or Russia; she is an international "mobile activator" meandering through the streets of different cities, inviting the local inhabitants to join her in her parade, to rebuild her, to engage with her and with the other people who, intrigued by such a creature, have also joined the parade. She is nomadic, sharing her own background and her own ways with those who engage with her, asking questions, triggering discussions, provoking new thoughts. But then, as she arrives, she wiggles her seven tables, and disappears. Her body and form did not change to reflect the differences of those who interacted with her in the different contexts. The pallets remain un-pierced with other materials, forms or ornaments that carve the specificities of the site or participants, despite Emma being an experienced globetrotter. Those with whom she interacted have embraced what she had to bring: new, fresh and different ideas and "ways of operating" (see 3). Perhaps the intention was never to generate a long-term mutual transformation, though one would believe so, from her looks, so dangly and engaging, ready to start a conversation. After her brief stay, Emma departed, leaving behind the memories of the joys she prompted.

20 Raumlabor, http://raumlabor.net/partitatives-bauen/ (19.05.2016).

21 Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011)

22 Raumlabor, http://raumlabor.net/partitatives-bauen/ (19.05.2016).



Fig. 2: Emma, Hoftour, Berlin
Fig. 3: Emma, Geneva







Fig. 4: Shabbyshabby, Schlafdom für Theaterpilger by Wiebke Lemme, Nataliya Sukhova, Viktor Hoffmann, Andreas Helm, Berlin

Shabbyshabbys

Encountered in unexpected places across Mannheim and, one year later, in Munich, makeshift bedrooms for rental designed and built by international art and architecture collectives, including *Raumlabor*,[23] took over the two cities for a month. Their temporary and provocative nature suggested the use of found, reclaimed, adapted and adopted materials. Everyday materials were assembled into unique, experimental and unusual designs that would otherwise be considered marginal; yet they could now officially inhabit those cities, the authorities of which commissioned the designs in the first place.

Circular bins to deposit recyclable glass merged at different heights creating an agglomerate of domes painted in gold, under which two or three people could sleep. (Fig. 4) On top of a boat's deck, opened colourful umbrellas covered a roughly put together timber structure, under which a bed for guests had been jammed, so they could overlook the river while resting under a colourful semi-globe which would protect them from the rain. (Fig. 5) Yellow construction pipes knotted with black cable ties created a tunnel placed at the corner of a park, inside which a red blanket expressed the comfort one would feel when sleeping in such unusual cocoon. These are only a few of a multiplicity of highly imaginative and inventive constructions. All temporary, all made out of reclaimed materials, all of which transformed those two cities for a short period of time.

For a month each year those spaces were inhabited by bold constructions to be rented out for an accessible price. They were collaborative, resourceful and resilient, but, in some respects, could have been placed in any other city, and could have been used by any other visitor. That was their nature. They were participatory buildings. They expressed the designers' personal views or those they assumed to be the users' views or expectations. Extravagant, even when discrete, they stood out for their originality and boldness. They fulfilled the brief they had been given and were successful during the period of time they lasted for. They were, after all, an experiment which did not intend to provoke any long term spatial or social transformation, their value relied on their ability to be transformational during the moment in which they existed.

23 Ibid.




Fig. 5: Shabbyshabby, Under my Umbrella by Heinrich Altenmüller, Gini Ganserich, Mathias Komesker, J-dog Günenberg, Alex Terres, Arni Tolna, Aachen, München, Wien and China

Participatory Architectural Interventions

In 2005, the architectural historian Peter Blundell Jones reopens the discussion on 'participation' from an architectural and urban perspective. "Participation" first became a topic of interest in the 1960s[24] with particular focus in South American countries where inequality and scarcity of resources were prominent,[25] but eventually fell out of fashion. According to Blundell Jones, his collection of edited essays *Architecture and Participation* was published within an 'European political context in which 'participation' had become a buzzword, but with little thought given to what the word actually meant'.[26] The book came out prior to the 2008 global economic crisis; since then, a plethora of participatory projects[27] emerged and, subsequently, many publications on the topic. Blundell Jones defines architectural participation at the basic level to emphasize how it is often shallowly portrayed amongst the general public and the political realm:

> "(…) architectural participation can be defined as the involvement of the user at some stage of the design process. Too often this involvement is a token, bringing a degree of worthiness to the architectural process without really transforming it. Recently, government policy in Europe and the USA has made participation a necessary part of public work, it has thus effectively been institutionalised, another box among many to tick in order to get approval and funding."[28]

24 M. Krivý, T. Kaminer, "The Participatory Turn in Urbanism" Footprints Delft Architecture Theory Journal, Autumn 7:2, 2013, 1-6

25 Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture* (London: Verso, 2014)

26 Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till, *Architecture and Participation* (London: Spon Press, 2005), xiii-xvii

27 Karin Shankar, Kirsten Larson, *Participatory Urbanisms: an anthology* (Berkeley: University of California, 2015), 3-10

28 Jones, Architecture and Participation, xiii-xvii.

Within the same publication, the architect Doina Petrescu, founder of the collective *atelier d'architecture autogerée*[29] — a practice concerned with the reinvention of public space through networks of self-managed spaces, where residents gain access to their neighbourhoods transforming them through different forms of inhabitation and coexistence — gives a more comprehensive definition of participatory design with a wider scope, beyond 'the users involvement at some stage of the design process'. Petrescu considers it to be a 'collective bricolage'.[30] In her own words:

> "Individuals are able to interrogate the heterogeneity of a situation, to acknowledge their own position and then go beyond it, to open it up to new meanings, new possibilities, to 'collage their own collage onto other collages' in order to discover a common project. As in *bricolage*, in participative projects, the process is somehow more important than the result, the assemblage more important than the object, the de-territorialisation more important than the construction of territories."[31]

While Blundell Jones' definition illustrates a placebo for a more active engagement of the users in the process, which neither interests the governments nor the users — who would choose not to have a say, Petrescu's approach suggests a more involved, inquisitive and active role for all those concerned with the design process, whether they are users, clients or designers, prioritizing the process rather than the physical outcome. Both imply a political position that intends to inform the way in which cities, buildings and the public realm are shaped, aiming to do so in a more democratic way. Both suggest some form of dialogue, even if the first lacks depth or interrogation of the problem. Compared to the first, the latter requires a joint process of discovery where the core problem is unravelled with the intention of being tackled collaboratively, through the interaction between the members of the self-managed spatial networks, thus provoking a process of change and transformation, and creating a shared sense of belonging. Consequently, Petrescu undervalues the importance of the final object, which is arguable. As the object is effectively the reflection of what has been learnt and made collectively, its form and aesthetics should not be neglected, because accomplishing a beautiful object or space becomes a source of pride.

However, either due to its superficial form of engagement, as expressed in Blundell Jones' definition, or to the high expectations of commitment from the users who supposedly should want to become active agents of change of their own environments, 'participation' is often no more than a 'romantic notion of negotiation, inclusion, and democratic decision-making' — as the architect and critic Markus Miessen put it.[32]

When analysing it from an art-based perspective, where 'participation' also reclaimed popularity in the late 2000s, hand-in-hand with what was then occurring within the architecture realm, the art critic Claire Bishop defines it as a phenomenon where:

> "the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant."[33]

This third definition implies a different level of engagement and exchange between the various actors involved; the roles of the art object, the artist and the audience are subverted and blurred.[34] Here, despite Bishop's critique, the artist remains the creator and initiator of the project even if he or she eventually becomes a collaborator or producer of situations. Bishop

29 atelier d'architecture autogerée, http://www.urbantactics.org/ (20.04.2016).

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 13-24

33 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso 2012)

34 Shankar, Larson, Participatory Urbanisms, 3-10, 129-148.

is dismissive of the potential loss of the artists' authorship, of the artist becoming a relational artist engaged in participatory projects where authorship is shared. Paradoxically, many of these relational pieces are rather ephemeral despite being collectively produced, i.e., produced by the artist and the former 'audience' who became together 'co-producers' or 'participants'. The relational artist provides the idea, curates the procedures and sets the rules for collaboration. Rarely does his or her artistic product reflect the inputs from the 'audience-producer' in the process. Instead, the 'audience-producer' tends to engage passively. The artist triggers the participatory process by sharing his or her idea that invites participation and interaction, but often there is no reiteration of the process into a product that reflects the input from both artist and 'audience-producer'.

Bishop's concern with the loss of authorship of the artist in favour of a collective authorship should, in my view, not be a major concern in relation to participatory projects, as, ultimately, the artists' signature is inevitably embedded in the project. Instead, more problematic is the ephemeral nature of these projects; they tend to become wrapped in a romantic bubble, while leaving no legacy, whether immaterial or material — as criticized by Miessen. Participatory projects often become no more than mere events that postpone tackling the roots of certain major social issues. Making is often used as disguise, instead of being a tool to reach the core of these issues, thus leading to a more creative and inclusive approach to the making of our cities: a *bricolage* (DIY) of give and take. This, though, requires time, commitment and tolerance, none of which is part of the often frugal approach to participation, consequently transforming it into nothing more than a box-ticking exercise for the lower common denominator, as defined by Blundell Jones.

Emma and *Shabbyshabby* are very different examples of 'participatory' interventions that bounce between art and architecture. They are designed by the same group, with the difference that *Shabbyshabby* also involved a variety of other international practices. They are both participatory and temporary. They both relate to any of the three definitions of 'participation' involving the user at some stage of the design process, as defined by Blundell Jones or presented in *Raumlabors*' "Participative Buildings". They generate an interrogation on the heterogeneity of a situation; as in bricolage, following Petrescu's approach and, according to Bishop's definition, they imply the involvement of the artist as a producer of situations. Yet how much involvement do the users have beyond the moment of the events that the artists prepared? How much have they absorbed from the few hours of participation? In which way could that ephemeral, discontinued experience transform one's approach to the built environment?

Both adopt an aesthetics similar to the one associated with the 'contemporary vernacular', with "more accessible, less erudite materials and forms that respond to the available resources" (as defined by Coxito). These are scarce, especially because of their temporary nature, not intended to last beyond the moment in which they have to perform. They could have been built by anyone who was imaginative, resourceful and skilled enough to do the construction, provoking new ideas amongst people who did not take part in the design or in the making.

Unlike 'contemporary vernacular' or 'vernacular' buildings, they were not initiated, thought out, or designed by those who will use them or inhabit them. They were thought by the architects and artists. These constructions retain their role as "activators" and intend to remain outsiders, not fully willing to engage with their surroundings – natural, geographical, social or economic. They belong anywhere as they neither respond to specific needs, uses, tastes or desires of a person or community, nor to local formal references, they are not designed with the users from the very beginning of the process until the moment the architect/artist leaves, despite requiring their involvement somewhere along the process. How much did they reflect the input of those involved? Change happens momentarily and is partially conveyed to the user in the proximity, and is achieved through the choice of materials that embody some form of resilience and DIY (Do-It-Yourself) aesthetics. Is that enough for this process of making to become truly participatory?



Fig. 6: The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour © Lucia Babina

3.
The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour came around for dinner

All the wives were seating around that big table lit by the natural glare coming from the large windows that invited the passer-by to join them in their meal. (Fig. 6) The vegetables looked lush: radishes, spinach, chard, tomatoes, pumpkins, all sorts of herbs from different origins, rocket, spring onions: a feast! Before, they had been cooking together with Marjetica, Katie and Elisabeth, mostly using the products harvested from their own allotments that had only been created a few months before this delicious meal was prepared. Between April and September, Dora's kitchen, part of the meeting point for The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour,[35] an initiative of the Slovenian artist and architect Marjetica Potrč and Wilde Westen – a group of young designers, architects and cultural producers, hosted various cooking events where women from the Nieuw West's neighbourhood in Amsterdam gathered to jointly cook cous-cous, pinda sauce, Boemboebali with Köftelik, tomato chutney and cassava stew, Masosa Moksi alesie and many more Surinamese dishes.[36]

For half a year Marjetica, Wilde Westen and Dori's kitchen became residents of the neighbourhood. It takes time to meet people, to gain their confidence, conquer their trust. 'Ymere, inspired by Miss Unal, took over and designed a new courtyard with many allotments.'[37] Before others joined Ymere, a cooking day was organised so that everyone would meet each other. Slowly, the grounds started being transformed. There were permaculture and compost making workshops by Free State Swamp; wild plants picking and cooking workshops, and residents of all ages and gender gathered gardening, growing and eating from their new allotments.

The garden wasn't opened for anyone to simply walk in. It was protected by the local residents, fenced off, and so was the community kitchen. They were public spaces, shared, though privately protected. They were there for them to use, but also for them to look after, to care for, to make them alive. It didn't happen overnight, it took time. It was a garden made with little more than some sticks, seeds, chicken wire and some bits and pieces collected here and there.

There were rules that, though symbolic, allowed for these spaces to be respected more than if they had been taken for granted, for free:

"The garden was empty and we divided it in pixels of 1 square meter each.
Each square meter costs 1 euro and residents can buy how many they wish.
Contract says that 50% of the harvest goes to the kitchen for collective initiatives.

35 Marjetica Potrč, https://www.potrc.org/project2.htm (19.05.2016).

36 The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour, http://kkvb-cfwn.blogspot.pt/ (19.05.2016).

37 Ibid.

Individual adults, groups of kids, families are now involved in the garden. Vegetables gardens amount to 30 units."[38]

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Far West, Amsterdam and The Netherlands Architectural Fund, Rotterdam all sponsored the project, in collaboration with the residents of the multicultural Geuzenveld-Slotermeer district. Not only did it mark a return to and celebration of local food production, but it also stressed how farming and cooking are basic ingredients to bring people who do not know each other, of different origins and backgrounds, to come together converting cooking and food growth into catalysts for transformation of public spaces, of our public realm.

Informal Structures, resilient processes

Despite the intrinsic value of making, to have no previous understanding of the process and what it implies transforms the beauty of experimentation and learning into an automated experience. "Informal structures" embed the process of discovery that originates from resilience and translates it into a specific formal language that tells the narrative of a process able to absorb all the influences of those involved in the process. Here lies the true value of making and resilience that translates into pride and ownership rather than into ephemeral involvement.

The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour reclaims what used to be farmland and had become a post-war modernist garden that eventually became a no-man's land, alienating the residents, thus subverting the democratic use of a space once shared by all who lived in the neighbourhood. Now, Aisha, Costa, Mostafa, children from Praktijk school and many others got to finally use their space, claiming to have their say as citizens, their space as residents, appropriating a space that was otherwise neglected.

For Marjetica the project is a '"re-directive practice," where people from various disciplines and backgrounds come together to forge new knowledge, and "participatory design," in which the people who are most directly affected – the residents of Nieuw West – are themselves involved in all stages of the project's development.'[39] For her, a community garden works like a political classroom, a semi-utopian space that, at the same time, is a real space where people meet and reimagine their city together, actively, by becoming themselves agents of change. The project becomes self-sustainable and an incentive for new forms of learning and sharing; this is only possible because the project was collectively put together, even if initiated by Marjetica. This characteristic is fundamental and makes a significant difference from projects that, despite sharing similarly marginal, informal aesthetics, and falling into the same umbrella of participation, are not products of a continuous collaborative process.

The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour came around for dinner; Emma in Geneva, Berlin, Munich and Saint Petersburg, Shabbyshabbys and *Manneken Pis* all have something in common, despite their significant differences. All, in some respect, share a non-conformist political stance, out-of-tune with any political agenda. This aspect stands out and becomes core to this piece of writing. All projects intend to be subversive, resourceful, autonomous and critical of a system that does not provide resources for all, that does not accommodate for a cultural democracy where the differences between people's needs and tastes are accepted and welcomed. However, not all four cases are examples of constructions 'by all and for all'.[40] Some remain dependent, responsive, rather than horizontally created amongst all the actors involved.

"Informal Structures" exist in-between the "Contemporary Vernacular" and "Participatory Architectural Interventions". They gather the best qualities of both, acknowledging how everyday life practices and "ways of operating"[41] are means of evading a passive position as citizens.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Oliver, Encyclopedia, xxiii.

41 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1984), xii



Fig.7: Passage 56 © aaa

4.
Passage 56, towards a collective narrative

Greens were climbing up the timber structure, the polycarbonate room on stilts lit up in red opened the doors to the passage. Passage 56, squeezed within the plot of 56 St. Blaise,[42] East of Paris, is a place opened to all, ready to welcome initiatives of all the inhabitants and NGOs of the neighbourhood and its surroundings. (Fig. 7) More than a physical space, it is a social host, where people regularly come together to make, to create self-initiated and self-sustainable practices related to food growth, gardening and cooking. Each initiator becomes in-charged of an initiative and activity, within a collective self-managed organism.

Atelier d'architecture autogerée[43] were the catalysts that kicked the project off. With their experience as architects and designers concerned with exploring possibilities for social constructions within the public realm, they quickly identified a site with potential to become a catalyst for change – a plot of land that had been derelict for years. In 2006, in partnership with the local government, local NGOs and local inhabitants, *Passage 56* started sprouting, as a project, as a site and as a series of social and cultural acts. Its ecological concerns translate its spirit as a social organism – of resilience and autonomy. It has a minimal ecological footprint and a compost laboratory, energy is produced autonomously and the objects are recycled. Passage 56 is a learning environment, an environment where knowledge is exchanged and through this exchange the space grows and becomes self-sustainable. *aaa* arrived, triggered the changes, brought the participatory process up to a stage when they were no longer needed – the project succeeded as a process, as a physical space, as a political act that resulted from a collective making, a collective narrative of self-sustained growth.

42 56 st. blaise, https://56stblaise.wordpress.com/18/, accessed on 20.04.2016.

43 atelier d'architecture autogerée, http://www.urbantactics.org/, accessed on 20.04.2016.

Conclusions: In praise of making

In *The practices of everyday life,* the French philosopher and socio-scientist Michel de Certeau, states the importance of bringing to light clandestine forms, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals caught in the nets of 'discipline'.[44] De Certeau considers these "ways of operating" as various practices that allow users to claim spaces that had been organized by 'techniques of sociocultural production'.[45] 'Sociocultural production', as defined by de Certeau, involves a passive "making" and "consumption", omnipresent within society 'silently and almost invisibly'[46] and become evident through the 'ways of using products imposed by a dominant economic order'.[47] "Informal Structures" imply a form of engagement that, even if it requires a catalyser in a first instance, leads, through a slow process, to the desire to own, to become the 'maker', the creative entity. Thus, the need for an external actor to provoke participation is surpassed, and participation becomes inherent to the group along the collective process. "Informal Structures" are a eulogy to making and embed a subversive approach to what is given, by taking nothing for granted.

In the book *Making*,[48] the British anthropologist Tim Ingold defends that 'the only way one can only learn things – that is, from the very inside of one's being – is to let them grow in you, so that they become part of who you are. (…) The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of knowledge, let alone of understanding.'[49] Ingold considers knowing to be movement.[50] He questions what the relation between thinking and making might be and considers that the theorist 'makes through thinking' and that the craftsman 'thinks through making' creating what he calls 'an art of inquiry'.[51] In parallel, in *The Craftsman*,[52] the sociologist Richard Sennett explores the dimensions of skills, commitment and judgement, and inquires into the intimate connection between hand and head. He draws an analogy between the way of working of the craftsman and one's attitude towards life and how we lead our lives and create our environments through a dialogue between 'concrete practices and thinking (…) establishing a dialogue between problem solving and problem finding'.[53] Both Ingold and Sennett praise the act of making as a tool for learning, not merely learning as a skill but as a means of emancipation, of gaining an understanding beyond the given, of becoming resourceful, tactical. Sennett emphasizes the slowness of the process and how the craftsman enhances his or her skills by continuously making and re-making, of being critical of his own makings.

The act of 'making' is key in all the four 'participatory' architectural projects described in this article. However, the power of 'making' and the empowerment it generates – as described by Ingold and Sennett – can only happen when all participants are involved in the process at all its stages, understanding the difficulties of 'making' and of 'making happen' what occurs in "Contemporary Vernacular" architecture, where knowledge is passed from one generation to the next, between builders. *Passage 56, towards a collective narrative* is, from all four projects, the one that conveys in all respects Ingold's and Sennett's praise of making and relates back to de Certeau's defence of clandestine forms, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals. The users continue the project once *aaa* leaves, having taken full ownership of the project, creating their own self-management structure, where knowledge is shared through the making of a space and of a social infrastructure where local residents and guests take the initiative to participate and to

44 de Certeau, The Practice, xiv.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, Routledge: 2013), 1-31
49 Ibid., 1
50 Ibid., 6
51 Ibid.
52 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008)
53 Ibid., 9

organize events, without requiring *aaa* to remain the catalysts of their future actions. Beyond its makeshift aesthetics and its formal characteristics, *Passage 56* results from a collective story that did not end at the moment when the construction was completed; on the contrary, that moment is used as an impulse for new self-initiated projects, similarly to *The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbour*.

Along this article, it became clear that 'contemporary vernacular' architecture, as a form of the 'vernacular' that responds to our present society and its socio-economic, geographical and cultural conditions, does have a close connection with 'participatory architectural interventions'. From a formal perspective, both involve a collective process of construction; the latter also tends to rely on reclaimed and reused materials, depending on what is locally available, thus leading to similar aesthetics when it comes to form, converting a marginal style into a familiar and accepted kind of alternative beauty. However, the process of collective building, and the level and form of engagement of the actors involved often differs. The former results from the need of the "owner-builder", whilst the latter tends to result from a commission to an architect or artist from an entity interested in, but external to the community who will eventually become the users, leading to a vertical form of participation. It is crucial to dress 'participatory architectural interventions' with makeshift marginal aesthetics and try to understand what impact they are having in society and on our built environment. Their value should not lie solely in their formal qualities, as imaginative and creative as they might be, but in the collective narratives they embed and transmit to others; these interventions ought to become storytellers.

The process of 'making' is the strongest connection between the two, but only when it involves an immaterial legacy – the learning of a skill and the adoption of a resilient and resourceful approach to life. This favours the process that passes before the form (that becomes secondary). When performed collectively and through a long process, 'making' leads to the emancipation and empowerment of those who make. 'Making' results from need and triggers a sense of pride and ownership, but requires more than a momentarily joint engagement. To become resilient and to be able to transform one's own built environment without depending on the state, 'making' needs to become a 'way of operating', activated by the acknowledgement of the possibilities rooted in everyday practices. These have the ability to generate new narratives within a fixed structure, but for these to be triggered, 'informal structures' ought to be accepted between users, architects/artists and all other parties involved. Together, they become 'owner-builders' of a collective construction of their own built environments prompted by the desire to make with one's own hands as a political statement and a more democratic form of creating our own neighbourhoods and cities.

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