

Interview: Hybrid Internship

Nina Vollbracht, Robert Saat

interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann

Eva-Maria Ciesla, Hannah Strothmann | *You are both research assistants at RWTH Aachen. Last year, you taught the »action research« seminar Repair What You Want – Destroy What You Like. How would you describe your collective seminar work and intervention in urban space and architecture as a discipline and a practice?*

Nina Vollbracht, Robert Saat | We have focused on how we approach places, or rather fields. As architects, we are used to creating a supposedly customized solution for a specific, pre-formulated problem from a wealth of objective information and planning principles. We allowed ourselves to contrast this with a different approach, which may initially seem naïve: The Hybrid Internship.

This is not about opening up a field from the outside and making it viable for further steps, but about moving directly into the center of things, aware of one's own presence and actions, and acting from there.

Can you describe to us your method, techniques, and instruments of intervention? Why did you choose them? Where do you see the potential?

In the first step, we made certain observations on site without having been on a specific search, which provided the framework for the experimental setup. The next step was to enter the field, naturally in consultation with users or residents. The methods and techniques used were as informal as they were expert. In the simplest sense, they were small manuals, let's not call them interventions but events that were the starting point for the field research. To use the metaphor of a scientific experiment, we had an extremely concrete experimental setup but, at the same time, no clearly

identified object of investigation. Simply, you could summarize it like this: We poured water onto a surface and watched what happened.

Can you tell us about some of the results of your interventions?

To test this approach, we offered a design studio for master's students at RWTH Aachen University in the summer semester of 2023. We selected certain locations in Aachen where a left-wing agenda is obviously implied in advance.

The students, Adrian Valery, Max Lesch, and Victor Navarro worked with a group of activists who have been occupying the historic buildings, the large garden, and the inner courtyards of a former monastery since August 2021 (see <https://aachenbesetzen.noblogs.org/>). The monastery complex extends backward from the street into the depth of the block and can only be seen from the front over a short distance of approximately 15 meters. This part of the monastery enclosure forms the only spatial threshold for the public. During the first inspection, it was noticed that part of the footpath in front of the monastery was blocked by building-site barriers. A fragile corner pillar protruded crookedly from the wall. The barrier was intended to protect passers-by from injury in the event of the pillar collapsing. Due to an intervention, this pillar was carefully removed in the first step and its components were stored so that it could then be rebuilt in the same position. The work on site led to a large number of conversations and correspondences with neighbors, passers-by, and residents of the monastery, as well as detailed observations of the site and the actors.

The insights into the intersections between the squat and its immediate surroundings, as well as their relationship to the city and the question of ownership were visualized in a 3.20 x 1.60 meter mapping. Unfortunately, the renewed walling-up was interrupted by the authorities – a carelessness on our part.

A second group of students focused on a venue for concerts – the autonomous center in Aachen. The center and its visitors have been the victims of attacks by right-wing extremist groups and individuals in the past. One example of this is the letterbox located in the public space, which was regularly destroyed, stolen, or defaced. Replacing it and making its shape and design as attack-proof as possible was the starting point and the focus of the intervention by Cyril Queyrau and Lennard Flörke. In contrast to the approach in the previous case study, the object was not designed on site



1.

Demolished brick pillar. © Max Lesch, Victor Navarro, Adrain Valery.



2.

A person removes the roots of a dead tree. The roots had lifted the foundation of the brick pillar on the neighboring property so that it was about to collapse. This, in turn, led to the road being closed for over two years as the authorities were unable to attempt to repair it. This was due to the issue of the ownership of the neighboring property being unresolved. Due to the barrier, the neighbor could no longer reach her house unhindered with her walking aids. The act of removal attracted the attention of the wider neighborhood. © Nina Vollbracht, Robert Saat.

but in the studio, manufactured in the workshop, and then screwed in on site. Without claiming to have been created in a participatory, but rather in a deliberately wilful and speculative way, the letterbox is also criticized as embodying the »prefabricated aesthetic« of design-build projects.

The letterbox itself remains brittle in its function and effect. It was designed for this specific context from a functional point of view, yet its appearance remains impure, raw. Why polish it? Maybe even paint it in a »nice« color? The world consists of dirt, labor, and injustice (Frichot 2019).

The work on site and the exchange with the members of the AZ were followed by desktop research on the right-wing extremist scene in Aachen and its attacks on individuals and civil-society institutions.

Finally, we would like to present the case study that was realized on the premises of the Queer Referat. The association of queer students has created a self-managed safe space and event venue for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex students and their allies. On its website the Queer Referat modestly announces that its premises are only partially wheelchair accessible as there are several steps to get to the back room and no disabled toilets: »We understand the importance of accessibility and are actively working to make our spaces as accessible as possible.« (www.queerreferat-aachen.de). The interventions by Franck Ducotterd, Leonie Tebbe, Noemi Preisler and Vanessa Rüter are working on an existing thresholds and bottleneck with the aim of creating barrier-free access to the toilets. Barrier-free access is a prerequisite for a funding application to ultimately convert the toilets to be totally accessible. For this reason, a wall covering the entrance to the toilet was demolished and two ramps were built from the leftover wood.

Contrary to what was claimed in the previous case study, however, most of the work during this project was invested in finishing the surfaces. The color coating imitates the material that marks the threshold: Belgian granite at the entrance door and click vinyl with dark brown oak decor inside. The new material »flows« over the thresholds, blurring the edges, and molding the ramps organically out of the existing structure, as if they had always been there.

These interventions were ultimately followed by designs for a barrier-free toilet that questioned the original situation. The work is an invitation to imagine a queer utopia.



3.

The anti-fascist mailbox of the Autonomous Centre Aachen was designed as a reaction to the constant attacks by right-wingers. The letterbox was tagged by third parties after being attached. Top center: فلسطین حق [filastin haqah] Arabic: »Palestine's right«. Side and bottom: زن زندگی آزادی [zan zendegi azadi] Persian/Farsi for »Woman Life Freedom«. © Lennard Flörke, Cyril Qureau.



4.

Two constructions provided wheelchair access to the Queer Referat's premises. Their material harmonizes with the existing materiality, creating a kind of mimicry. © Franck Ducotterd, Noemi Preisler, Vanessa Rüter.

Where do you see the potential of the projects to intervene in urban environments and in political and economic forces that shape architecture and contemporary cities? Where do you also see it having influence beyond the seminar?

We should not overestimate our role as architects at this point. Many problems in construction and urban design are political in nature and should only be solved democratically – we don't need to be architects for this, but rather an active part of civil society.

In our opinion, our discipline wavers between overestimating and seriously underestimating its own possibilities. But isn't it true that it is only through attentive observation and questioning that we understand why things look the way they do? We think that only when we gain an overview of the network – according to Latour (1993) – we can start to access and understand the manifold connections.

What roles do architectural knowledge and design play in applying your method and in the different interventions?

Our method is an invitation to hybridity. We believe that it is equally important to utilize the specialist knowledge we have as architects and to incorporate methods from other disciplines. This also includes admitting that we don't know everything – but rather that we are experts in design. When applying the method, it is fundamentally about realizing that form is not just the output of an architectural, creative genius. Rather, the genesis of form seems to us to consist of many more threads and streams than we can keep track of. Our task as architects is to place ourselves at their center and bring them together, without any claim to genius and certainly not in a self-referential architectural gimmick. One could also recognize references to the »invisible design« described by Lucius Burckhardt in his book *Wer plant die Planung? Architektur, Politik, und Mensch* (2004) in our approach.



5.

Additional projects include the repair of a gutter which provided the opportunity to analyze the water cycle within the old monastery garden and thus supply the dried-up tree with nutrients.

© Nina Vollbracht, Robert Saat.



6.

Repairing the window sills provided an opportunity to analyze the boundaries and transitions between the monastery's interior and exterior. © Nick Münkner, Lars Bögel.

Where do you see the possibilities for transferring your ideas about intervention to everyday architectural practice and the building professions? What are the difficulties of transfer? What should change in the profession?

We would like to make this clear: First of all, this is a purely academic approach and teaching format. We are primarily concerned with the training of young architects and their ability to engage with our built and unbuilt environment. We do not claim to bring this format into an economic context.

To distill an approach from this method and then apply it to other areas in advance would ultimately call the method itself into question and would be paradoxical. After all, it also represents a plea against supposedly objective and pre-defined approaches to solutions but is inherently processual; which is not to say that we wouldn't want to try it out again.

References

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