**P4 GRADUATION – FINAL REFLECTION**

Gijs Jacobs
5261856

_THE DIGITAL COMMON:_
'An autonomous local community resisting the globalizing oppression of neoliberalism.'


_In:_  Berlin, Friedrichshain


**Abstract of the project:**

Berlin's history of oppression gives it an interesting role in the development in European thought. In this project, that history is recontextualised through the story of electronic dance music (EDM) and used as a basis for an alternative approach to both old & new potential models of society.

The project attempts to create the infrastructure for an autonomous local community in Friedrichshain, resisting the globalising oppression of neoliberalism. The 'vacant space'- plot located near the famous club 'Berghain' is a typology that can be found across Berlin which suggests a different approach to society that is analysed and used for an architectural proposal. Inspired by the non-hierarchical infrastructure of the network, this project proposes a series of indeterminate modular skeletons that can be appropriated by the local commune. The project is managed by a democratic digital portal using a 'shared ownership model', which also provides 'open source' libraries for a series of different products ranging from modular building components to digital code, music, books, artworks, etc.
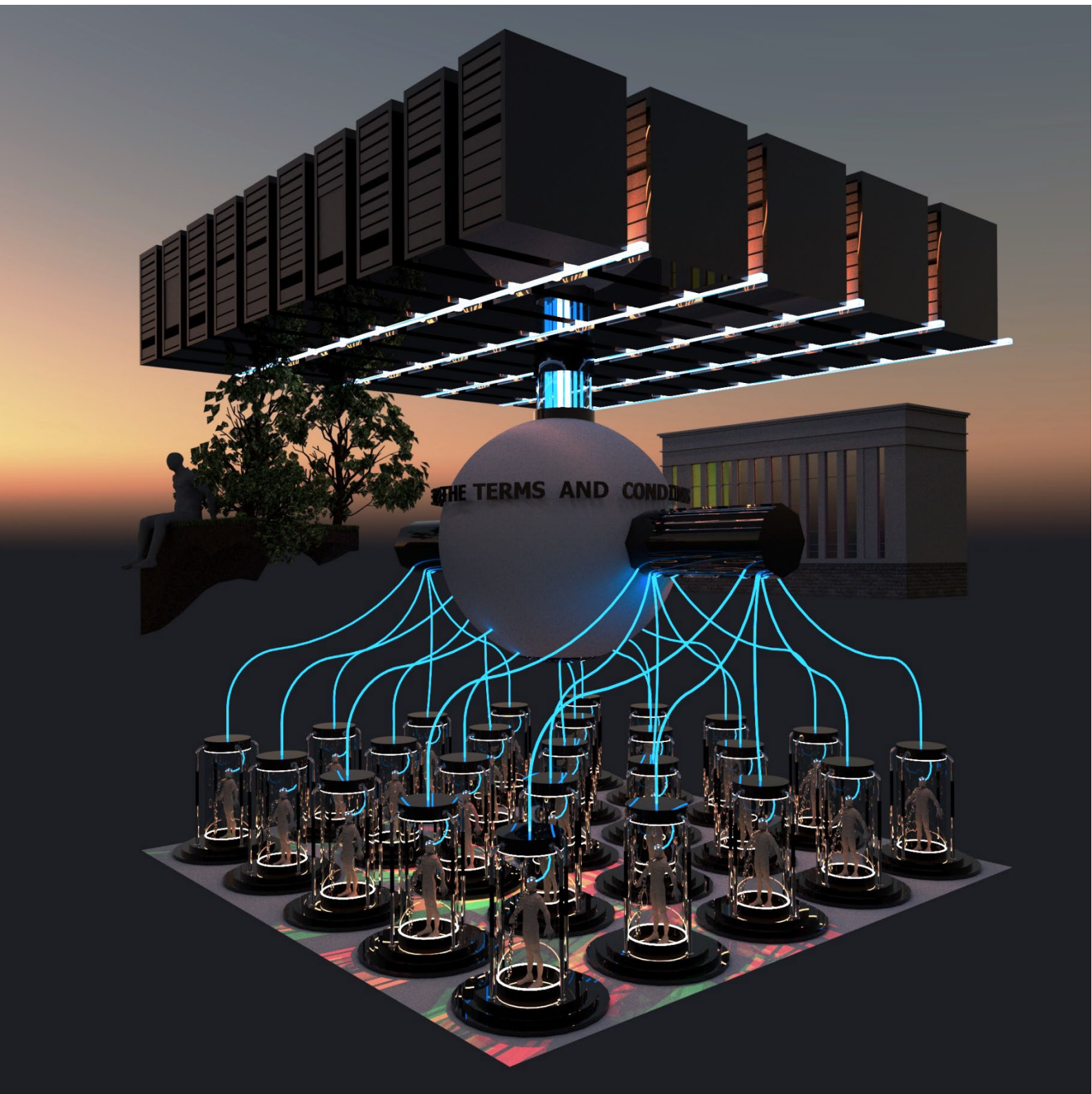
An abstract cube depicting some of the local site qualities with a global problem-statement.

## 1. THE INTRA-ACTION OF RESEARCH AND DESIGN

**An alternative approach to history and context…**
The very first research assignment into the project was an analysis of Electronic Dance Music (EDM). The topic served as an alternative, yet surprisingly insightful approach towards the broader historical, cultural and material conditions of Berlin. It somehow describes the fall of the wall from a perceived perspective, rather than only through historical facts. It describes Berliners urge for self-determinacy, their long history of oppression, and their search for multisensory freedom and the expression of it. It describes how in a rush of ecstasy, Berlins inhabitants felt the need to take authority into their own hands, claimed vacant spaces and transformed them into a new typology all together, which was the illegal rave[1]. This was the starting point of my long journey of critically rethinking the workings of society, as well as the roll of the architect in this new society.

> footnote 1) The illegal rave originated in similar form in Detroit first, yet Berlin played an important role in the popularisation of the genre. Within both cities the social conditions were chaotic, and an abundance of available vacancy led to the people using these buildings for raves.

Analysing the musical arrangement of EDM itself reveals yet another important insight into the diverse 'melting pot' culture of Berlin. The EDM-genres are mostly signified with its repetitive and recognisable, aggressive kick drum, mostly in 4/4 (the most common time signature in popular music). In the genre, the simplicity of this 'template' allows for a sort of <u>common ground</u> between genres (figure 1), and effectively gives all other instruments a higher level of freedom. In techno there truly is no limitation of what sounds can be mixed, and artists fully embraced the up-and-coming coming technologies & electronic sounds…
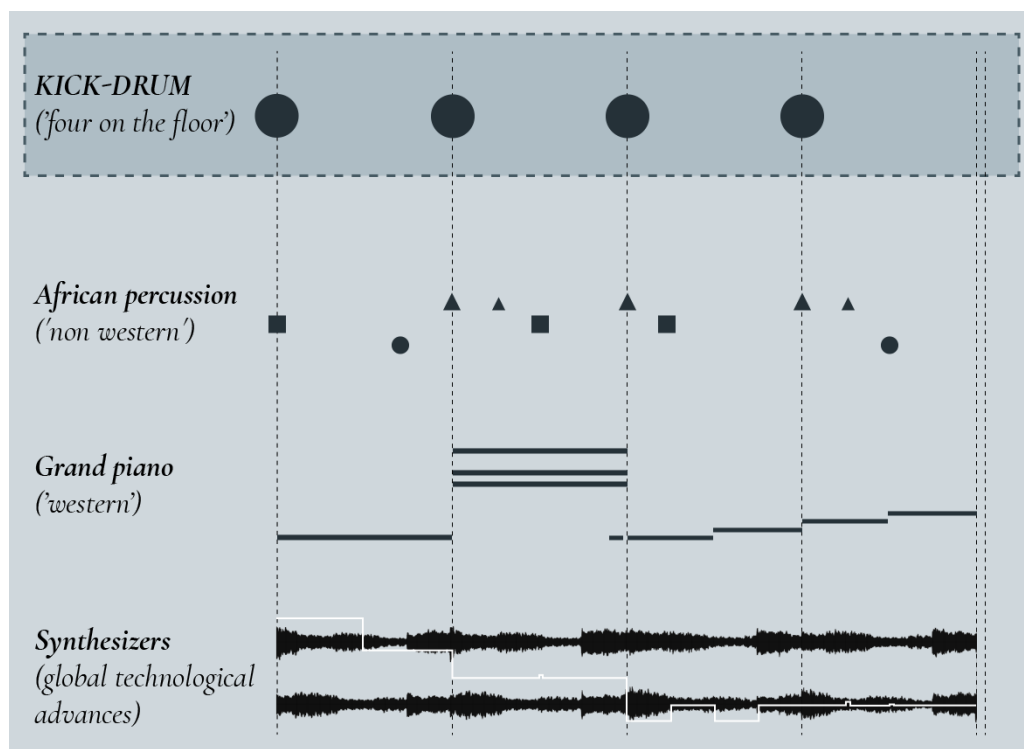


*Figure 1: A visualisation of the 'four on the floor' kickdrum as a common ground for different genres.*

This story about EDM plays in the heart of a long fight that was much bigger than the borders of Germany or even Europe itself. Berlins harsh separation into east & west represents the polarised historical context of the left & right political system, the liberal & the social, capitalist & communist: the private ownership model & the state ownership model. Within this harsh separation of ideology & space, Berlins inhabitants - perhaps unknowingly - engaged in a third ownership model all together: the shared ownership model, even if it was illegal.

After the fall of the wall, the fight between East & West Germany seemed to have settled. Communism as we have known it historically is dead whilst (neo)liberalism has since become the most dominant ideology in the world. But once again, the EDM shows us an interesting angle of these historical events. Most EDM clubs started as illegal raves in vacant buildings as initiatives of the people while the newly merged East-West government was still in distress. But most of these clubs eventually got privatized, which does not necessarily mean harm in and by itself. However today, Berlins music scene is rapidly commercializing, steering away from Berlins unique and diverse music & past, merging into the singular mainstream globalized monoculture. This is a trend that surpasses musical influences, but often originates from a point of commerce & profit combined with increased tourism in Berlin. These trends might not yet seem alarming, but clearly hint at some of the problems with the current predominant ideology: Neoliberalism. 'Neo', as it has since adapted new and harsher strategies by which it derives and sustains it dominance. Berlins history of oppression has not yet reached an end, the oppressor has simply changed.
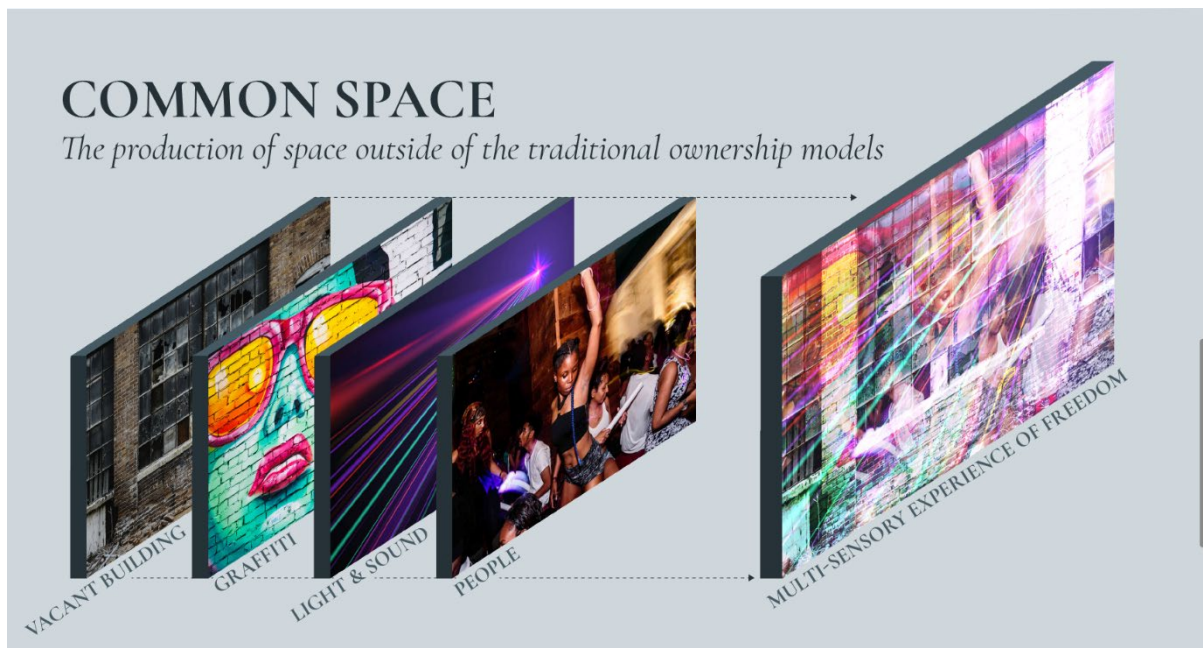


*Figure 2: The spontaneous appropriation of vacant space during 'illegal raves'*

Today, this vacant typology (figure 2) can be found all over Berlin in damaged areas from the war. These spaces are now pretty much exclusively privately owned, yet the way in which these spaces are appropriated has similarity to the vacant rave typology. It is one of these zones located in Friedrichshain, which started being appropriated about 10 years ago, that I picked for my site location: A plot near Berghain.

In retrospect this somewhat alternative analysis of the metaphors between EDM and ideology was even more fruitful than I could have expected when I performed it, as the entire analysis could now function as a metaphor for the final design proposal, in which I attempt to manifest such 'common ground' (like the 4/4 kickdrum) by creating a regular and repetitive core which can be appropriated by the diverse local commune and celebrate its diverse identity, whilst creating cohesion between difference (figure 3).



*Figure 3: a visualisation of the final design infrastructure*

**onnecting ideology & space, connecting research & design**

To refrain from creating a purely speculative project, the next step was to connect the different ownership models and their relative ideologies with actual cases in Berlin (figure 4). By doing so, I was able to zoom in from the city-scale and study the immediate context of the designated site – Friedrichshain -. Secondly it allowed me to connect the site-specific conditions to the formerly created framework, and thirdly it served as a critical reflection of my initial framework. This continuous back and forth of theory & practice, reading & writing, analysing & designing, imagining & creating, thinking & testing etc, is essential for my methodology and the development of thought in general. On top of this in other words 'empirical approach', the research should be done from as many different positions as possible as to prevent as many biases as possible. This is the 'plural empiricist' position I hold as an architect, and as ideological position.

Seeing how the 3 different ideologies manifested themselves in Friedrichshain, I was able to recognize and give form to the dominance of the neo-liberal ideology. The strip of commercial high-rise that is rapidly expanding along the Spree reflects its aggressive approach, whilst the buildings themselves portray the mass scale on which this ideology depends. The desolate singularity of the space that is created in these commercial zones portrays the indifference with which these buildings expand over richly historical grounds, ruthlessly wiping away traces of Berlins history & cultural identity in the process.
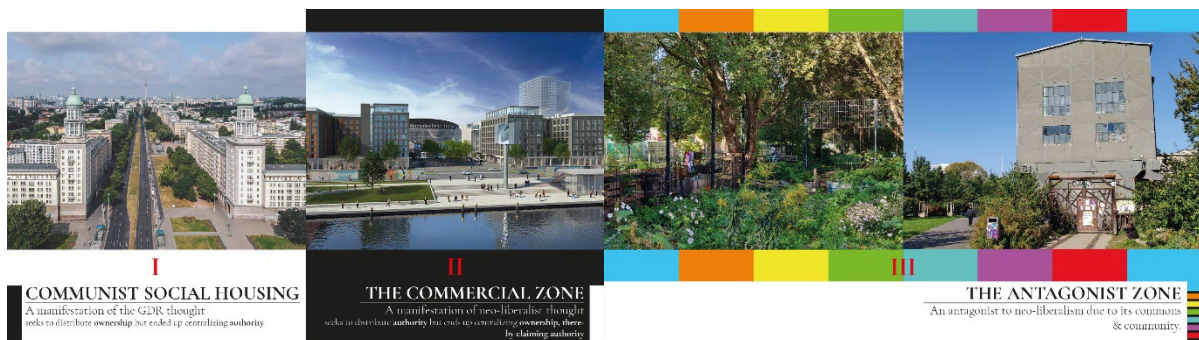


I COMMUNIST SOCIAL HOUSING
A manifestation of the GDR thought
seeks to distribute ownership but ended up centralizing authority

II THE COMMERCIAL ZONE
A manifestation of neo-liberalist thought
seeks to distribute authority but ends up centralizing ownership, thereby claiming authority

III THE ANTAGONIST ZONE
An antagonist to neo-liberalism due to its commons & community.

*Figure 4: Case studies in Friedrichshain.*

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**Connecting theory to perception & feeling**

And finally, by visiting Berlin I was able to get a feeling of the individual scale, as I walked through the Enormous city. This step is highly important as it allowed me to finally connect ideas and visuals I had created based on texts, images & music with my own feelings and impressions of the local atmospheres. Unfortunately, I could only be there briefly, so I tried to capture these atmospheres by creating an audio-visual psycho-geographic map (figure 5). By incorporating paces and rhythmic elements into actual audio samples of my walks through the city, I could associate those places to the feelings I felt when I walked there to some degree. This allowed me to keep those atmospheres in mind whilst designing, which is important seen as though I wish to maintain and support the diversity of Berlin's inhabitants.
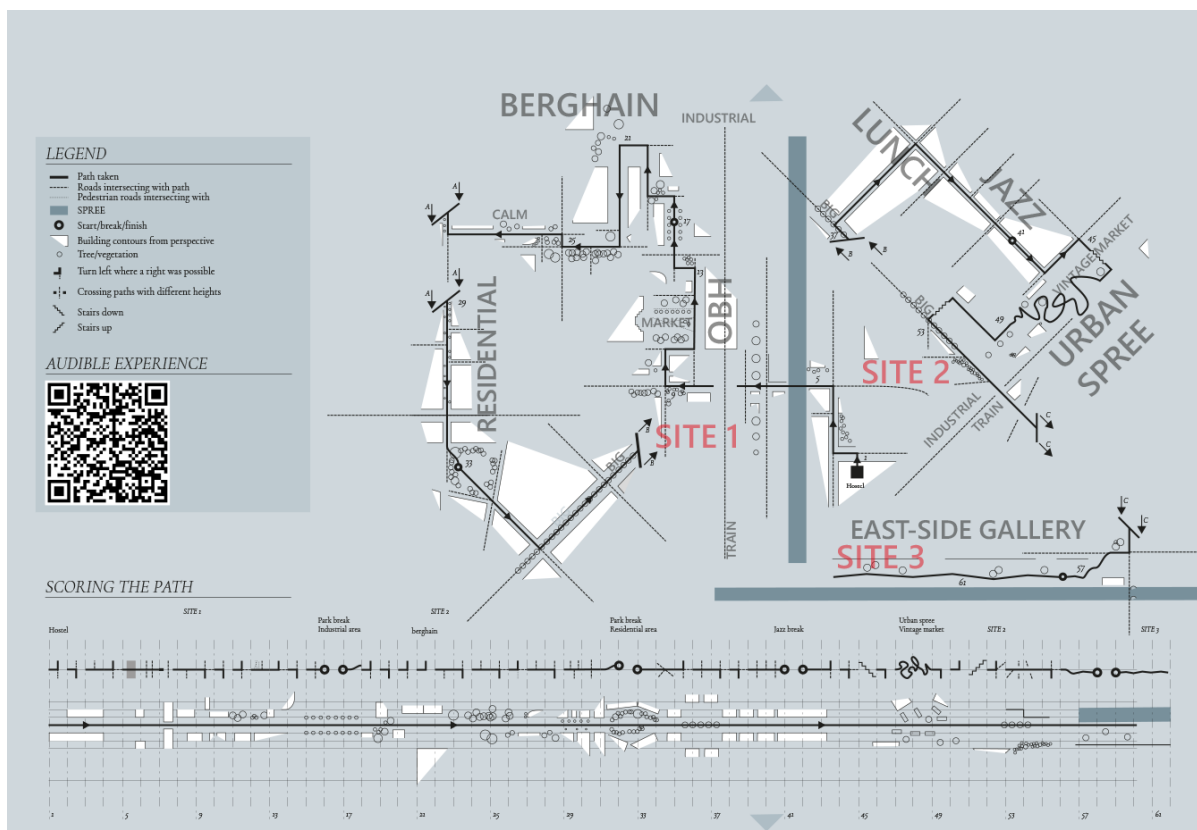


*Figure 5: multisensory egocentric map of Friedrichshain.*

This textual journey from the generic to the specific, from the large context to the individual scale was by no means organised or chronological. This process is a chaotic jumping in between scales, investigating the largest scale by comprehending details, readjusting what details to look for by evolving the framework through which we look at the details, etc…

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## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MY GRADUATION TOPIC, THE STUDIO TOPIC & MY MASTER TRACK.

**Music & architecture**

My very first project in the master was a public building, in which I investigated the multi-disciplinary nature of the architect. By designing a public musical archive, I got intrigued by the profound relation of music & architecture. Both arts have a similarity in that they are participatory arts yet differ as they do not both equally embrace this. After the project I decided to dedicate my theory thesis to this topic and investigated the differences in the languages we use within both domains. This led to many interesting insights, hinting at the fact that the music-scene is more aware of its participatory nature, whereas the architect tends to cling to its elite status as 'creator'. The mason only lays bricks as per instructions of the architect, whereas the pianist must <u>interpret</u> the written notational score... another profound part of these differences between music & architecture is that music has created a set of standard intervals which have become universal within western music. This 'grid-like' system allows for a basic level of harmonisation between the intervals whilst maintaining a high level of artistic freedom. My project is an attempt to create this 'unity between difference' by creating a standardised grid that allows for a level of freedom in its appropriation. The analogy of music & architecture has been with me from the beginning of my master track and has always proven fruitful for me in both my architectural & musical journey.

**Society & the individual**

With technological developments beyond comprehension, and a world in distress due to the many emergencies we face, I have developed an interest in the large-scale conditions that underline our globalized society today. Even without architecture I had long wondered about the relation between me as an individual & the group called society. It interested me as I used to regard these phenomena as contradictions, and as a disconnect between the interest of the individuals and the collective action of society.

A fragment from my series of essays on 'self & society':
*"How come we realize the immanent threat of climate change, but only rarely see radical action against it? How come we have greater technological potential than ever before, yet are becoming slave to the technology that was created to aid us? How come that in this advanced world almost no individual would voluntarily want to fight to the death, yet still we are sending soldiers to battlefronts to die by each other's hands? And as a last example, how come the individuals of society are generally getting smarter, yet today the industries have created more repetitive and intellectually unenquiring jobs than ever before?"*

In a series of short essays, I explored what I would later refer to as the 'disconnect of the few & the many', or in other words the history of class struggle that has often been referred to by Marxist & socialist theories. Here I started to recognize some of the threats posed by neo-liberalism in contemporary society.

**Commons**

After this phase of theoretical exploration I got the chance to explore these problems in practice through a social housing project in The Hague. In the project I analysed some housing blocks in a relatively poor neighbourhood, that were poorly maintained and had a design that was

particularly intolerant of social interaction. The project oriented itself to studying how to create spaces of different levels of publicity, so that a natural flow between private and public space was created. The goal was to design the architecture that would invite intra-action between members of a community. In this final project of my first year, I was confronted with the question: '*what is common space?*'. Dealing with social housing in a relatively poor neighbourhood, this separation between the direct 'will of the masses' and the 'financial reality' was often stressed.

In this project, I revisit the notion of the common, this time from the public domain (instead of from the housing domain which is currently a private sector). This makes more sense, as the common is by its very definition a plural concept, meaning 'used or owned by more than one'. Working within the public domain also allows us to exceed the limitations of the now and speculate about the potential future. Therefor, this project was much more than simply a traditional architectural project. I used it to investigate the current model of society and the threats it faces, so that I can speculate about a future model of society that is in line with technological developments such as the internet, that uses a non-hierarchical network as its fundamental <u>infrastructure</u>.

## 3. THE RESEARCH METHODS & SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

**T.I.N.A & T.I.An.A**
'There Is No Alternative' has become the norm in economical discourse, with the widespread global acceptance of the private ownership model & capitalism. Along with the spread of these economic models, came the acceptance of the singular unopposed neoliberal doctrine. However, this model has historically long been opposed by what is generally regarded as its only real alternative; socialism, which has had experiments with a state ownership model but failed (the communist projects of east Europe). These historical events have led to the T.I.N.A. doctrine, however in this very project I claim that 'There Is An Alternative'.

**Plural Empiricism**
Due to neoliberals' aggressive success, many of the world's institutions, including the scientific institutions & education, are now subject to a neoliberal approach. This influences the way in which we describe history, explain behaviour & look at the position of self in society. Therefor it is extremely important that we stay vigilant of the biases this creates in our understanding of history and reality all together. This can be dangerous as it – neoliberalism - tends to look at the past with a confirmation bias, justifying its own existence by altering historical narratives accordingly. Just like in science, good results rely on repetitive harsh examination, in which results need to be tested thoroughly in order to be considered valid. This requires that it is necessary to look at each idea from as many different angles as possible and actively try to disprove them.

The same should be said for all ideas, as all ideas are susceptible to biases. Therefor, the T.I.N.A. doctrine is an especially harmful one for the development of thought, especially now with the widespread success of neoliberalism and its aggressive approach to other ideologies.

The architectural nature of this project makes it an empirical process, as I exemplified and described earlier in the chapter ´connecting ideology & space, connecting research & design´. There is a continuous intra-action between theory & practice, serving as the basis for the 'production of thought'. The plural antagonistic instruments & methodology with which I investigate attempts supersede the limitations of standard methods whilst avoiding as many biases as possible.

**Discussion & limitations**
For me as an individual this process was incredibly fun and educative. Due to the wide approach to ideologies on a global scale, I gained a much more complex understanding of the socio-political conditions in Europe, as well as geopolitical conditions. However, it should be stated that the number of factors in both topics requires far more investigation that would humanly be possible by one person in an academic year. However, by the very speculating itself, I engage myself and those around me in this very process of investigating. If the project were real, there would likely be many more difficulties in executing such a program, as it radically opposes many standards of today.

One disadvantage to this highly alternative & political approach to an architectural project is that I did not spend as much time on the traditional architectural products. The plural antagonistic approach was highly interesting yet could also be quite chaotic. There was no clear line of required products, so I decided what techniques and instruments were necessary per step. Although I think this was very insightful in many ways, in retrospect I could have incorporated more of the architectural drawing techniques throughout the project. I experienced this problem partly because I had a hard time conceiving a design that reflected my ideas well enough so that the architecture would speak in and by itself. But then again, thinking up a way to organise society is a notoriously challenging task and we can only learn by trying. For this reason, I am glad I dedicated my final year of architectural education to grasping these topics, as I firmly believe that neoliberalism lies at the root of many of the crisis we face today.

**The roll of the architect**
In the end, what I designed was not really about the 'end-product', but rather about the infrastructure – both physical & digital -. This posed some difficulties as I felt the need for certain 'standard products' were demanded by the studio, which is perfectly understandable. Yet this posed some issues in deciding how to communicate my ideas whilst creating standard architectural products. By designing the infrastructure for the 'production of space', instead of 'producing the space', I change the very roll of the architect. But changing a system from within that system often means doing 'other than the norm'. The struggles of this process are apparent in the many stories of small revolutions by minorities across the globe... As an architect in education but also as a person, I have witnessed this state of society and decided to use my authority as architect to liberate those who are oppressed by the globalised neoliberal dominance. I wish to use architecture as a weapon of liberation and distribute the basic human right to self-determination.