

Reflection Paper

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Transitional Territories Graduation Studio 2019/20

1. The Last Romantics. REM
(*Reclame Exploitatie Maatschappij*)
Island, Radio Noordzee, 1963-
64. Six miles off Noordwijk.



2. Many Western philosophers
wrote on the theme, for
instance: Schmitt, Carl. *The
Nomos of the Earth*, New York:
Telos Press Publishing, 2003;
Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy
of History*, in Cacciari,
Geofilosofia dell'Europa.
For more on this topic:
Guérard, Cécile. *Philosophie
légère de la mer*, Paris: Edition
des Equateurs, 2006.

3. Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*,
Oxford: Oxford World's
Classics, 2008 (first ed. 1651).

Since the beginning of the graduation year, my research has been questioning the theme of territorialization, and more specifically the given notion of the *sea-as-a-territory*. In fact, as part of the Transitional Territories studio, it felt crucial to really understand this notion, precisely in relation to water, both in the research and in the design phases of the project. Moreover, a previous fascination on the heroic years of the North Sea pirate radios (1) – the last anarchic statement against the nation-states rule on water – would naturally direction me to position critically towards the notion mentioned above. Therefore, my first act of research – and formalization of a theoretic background – has been the attempt to build an epistemology of the concept of *sea-as-a-territory*. On one hand, the sea is defined as the historically limit-less, context-less, free environment par-excellence (2). However, on the contrary, the territory is a political technology, based on the act of bordering – creating edges. It is generated as the outcome of a process, a sequence of phases – from exploration and mapping, to reclamation, ordering, planning, exploitation: a linear univocal movement in time towards a progressively increasing condition of total rationalization. Freedom and limits, dynamic and static, sea and land, irrational and rational: the notion of the *sea-as-a-territory* is therefore a controversial one, yet already embedding a deep imbalance in this original tension between opposites. In fact, it represents the supremacy of the rational exploitation of the sea – a productive geography for the sustenance of the collectivity – over the irrational experience of the sea – a romantic memory of individual freedom.

Therefore, the choice to further investigate territorialization originates as a reaction to the (recent) worldwide trends of aggressive sea reclamation, colonization and exploitation, which appear to be particularly harsh within the waters of the North Sea. We live indeed in times of radical transformations: the historical identity of the sea – as the symbol of limit-less freedom – is threatened by our acts of rationalization and exploitation. However, we also live in times of radical choices. There is a clear urgency to (re-)imagine what the sea might become in the close and far futures, in order to challenge this vision – or to fully embrace it: anyway, a clear narrative is needed. To achieve so, a main line of inquiry has been summarized from the original lines of research. The ambition is to question the possibility for coexistence between the human will of perpetual rationalization – the political tool of the territory – and the likewise human need for an irrational experience of a free sea – the need for a memory of the sea as a common good to last. Therefore, besides a general staging of the *tragedy* of the (sea) territorialization, the primary aim of the project was to play with the notion of edge – meant as limit and division, as conflict and definition – between these many dichotomies: rational and irrational, productive and romantic, land and sea, anthropic and natural, process and experience.

The choice to directly work *on* the sea – and therefore the theme of the island – comes naturally as an answer to the research premises. An island is by definition isolated – a closed system without any interference; a convenient tool to mirror/project a truly “naked society”, free from the roots and limitation of land. However, an island can also be strongly linked to its surroundings, if it is considered the furthest outpost of the exploitative logics of land towards the sea. As such, it is part of a *pier*, defined as the transitional element between the static rational logics of land and the dynamic romantic essence of the sea. The *pier* is the typology of the anthropic relation between land and sea, or the artificial arm of the *Leviathan* – the state or the collectivity (3) – to drag resources from the sea to the centre(s) of power – the cities. A previous version of this story had already been developed during the phase of collective research: as members of *the Oceanic Project* group, we traced a map of the North Sea power-scape. These maps revealed the whole power process as a univocal linear action of exploitation – from the productive backyards to the islands of power. Therefore, the *pier* becomes a design tool, a typological expression of these land-sea power games.

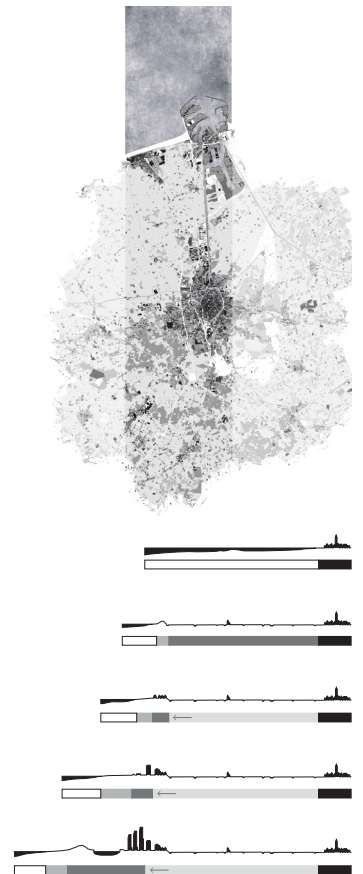
The definition of the typology of the *pier* opens the second phase of the research, or the spatial epistemology of the territory. I proceeded by studying and collecting *piers* along the North Sea coasts, an activity which finally allowed for the identification of the project site: the Eastern Flemish Coast. Besides the appropriateness of the site by a typological/spatial point of view, it was necessary to investigate its historical evolution, in order to apply the previous theoretical findings on the trends of territorialization – or the temporal epistemology of the territory. Therefore, a line from the beating heart of the Flemish Coast territory – Bruges – to its further outpost

on the sea – the Belgian maritime offshore wind sector – was traced, also passing through the port of Zeebrugge – the physical *pier*. Embedded in this line, it was possible to identify a story of actions of adaptations and colonization: from the first polder reclaims and the drying of the brackish marshlands, to the reinforcements of the new coastline, and further to the building of the touristic towns-stripe, the maritime harbours and the shipping canals. A progressive advancement of the coastline is still ongoing today, as the growing touristic and commercial pressure for new developments is demanding to push the front further (4). Moreover, several issues – such as storm waves surge and lack of fresh water – threaten the stability of the whole territory.

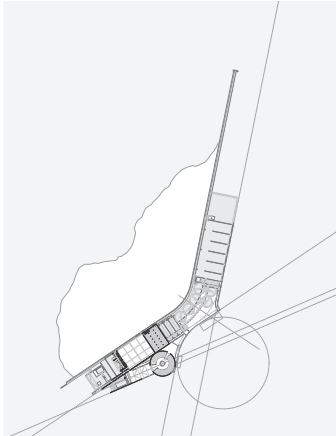
Therefore, it comes the possibility of a multiscale design proposal. It is necessary to engage both the territorial dimension, via the *pier*, and the architectural scale. The latter should be understood as a tool to tell a story: to unveil the dichotomic narrative of territorialization, to expose the controversy of the linear process of rationalization – at the expense of irrational experiences – and to provide a renewed vision for the sea to come. However, this story might have very different outcomes from the same premises. In fact, it calls into question many grand themes of the Architecture master such as the relation of the built with the non-built environment, or the most abused concept of sustainability, which often share a wide public consensus on some very vague and general points; however, when it comes to debate the “how”, then the controversy arises. Territorialization proved to be a wicked problem and giving an answer – or providing a vision – implied to take a radical position. Therefore, to solve the ethical issues coming from such a condition, it comes the choice to produce a scenario, to clarify my own stances on territorialization – and in general, on the human action of rationalization – and to generally push for a less naïve debate on such a pivotal topic. Both the choice to align with an existing regional plan for a new frontline of storm-waves protection artificial islands, as well as the proposal for a desalination plant – the most aggressive process of sea exploitation – to solve the water scarcity issue, have indeed provoked a heated debate. However, due to the regional past of aggressive land-sea relations and the path dependency which originates from this history of sea enmity, and the impossibility to locally produce freshwater in other equally reliable ways, this scenario seems to be not only the most realistic, but also the most preferable for the growth of the region. Moreover, for its harshness and aggressiveness towards the territory, this scenario becomes a possibility to further push the notion of territorialization to its extremes, indeed unveiling its real definition whilst allowing to question its deep political meaning in relation to the sea. The extremization of such process works as an action of violent polarization, which is carried out as an alternative research approach to reveal the couples of opposites – the dichotomies – identified since the very beginning as the tools to better stage the *tragedy* of (sea) territorialization.

Therefore, the choice to proceed towards a hyper-technological approach: the “engineering” and rationalization of the *sea-as-a-territory*. Furthermore, another ethical issue had to be solved. In fact, this approach mentioned above – and carried on by my design proposal – appears to be a convenient solution for the survival and growth of the region; yet, the region does not necessarily have to survive. Other visions on the process of territorialization are indeed more clement towards the exploited land and sea: among all, the proposal of a total anthropic retreat, thus an extreme act of de-territorialization. This would also mean a withdrawal of the Leviathan rule on the sea, allowing it to save its memory/identity of an irrational limit-less entity, beyond land laws. Nevertheless, as the outcomes of the research phase would suggest, such a complete U-turn is not only unlikely, but perhaps not even desirable. The choice of a hyper-technological approach, involving yet another aggressive advancement of land towards sea, wants indeed to be a political declaration of the will of the collectivity to resist the strength of the sea, and to exploit it for survival – for food, energy and trade. Therefore, this project also wants to provocatively challenge the real meaning of inhabiting a territory which is not originally suitable for settlement – or for certain kinds of settlements. However, designing with a hyper-technological mindset does not mean to carry on business as usual. In fact, it is necessary to mitigate the notion of *sea-as-a-territory* and any other form of territorialization, in order to allow for that coexistence of opposites mentioned above: an awareness of the dichotomy. Yet, awareness does not imply consciousness. Therefore, the role of the architecture project becomes thus to unveil this mutual relation between rational and irrational, productive and romantic, process and experience.

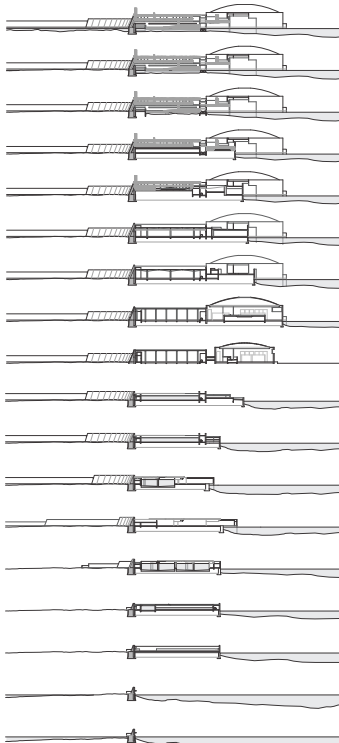
4. Map of the *pier* Bruges-Zeebrugge and sequence of the historical phases of sea territorialization, by author.



5. Map of the island,
by author



6. Sequence of sections
of the Wall, by author



7. Menga, Filippo,
Swyngedouw, Erik, *Water,
Technology and the Nation-State*,
2018

The reasons behind the choice of the island have been briefly mentioned before. However, being an artificial island (5), it also plays the pivotal role of a landscape-architecture machine: an anthropic intervention yet deeply dependent on the surrounding natural conditions – sediments flow, waves direction, wind strength, tidal cycles. The *formation* (I) and *accommodation* (II) are indeed the first and second of four phases which constitute the linear narrative of definition of the machine, in parallel to the linear process of territorial reclamation: a minimal anthropic imposition – a wall (6), interacting with the mentioned natural conditions, creates the opportunity for the island to exist. This act questions our understanding of what is natural and what is artificial, the first blurred edge. Then, the *production* (III): on the other side of the wall, protected from the storm waves, the desalination plant is assembled. Entirely powered by offshore renewable sources – wind and “blue” energy – its cycles are integrated in the existing regional water management, giving shape to a circular system of water use, re-cycle and discharge: an environmentally harmless outcome from a hyper-technological mindset. Again, the edge is blurred: can human ingenuity coexist with natural cycles? Finally, the phase of *colonization* (IV) introduces the human presence in the factory: most of the products of the industrial process are indeed locally re-used in a system of public baths. These – and the artificial island as a whole – act as the self-celebrative landmark of the human achievements on sea territorialization: a profusion of *hybris*, which is anyway stemmed by the parasitic conditions of the architecture of the baths, a reminder of the ephemeral condition of the whole anthropic structure.

Therefore, the island-machine aims not to answer the premises of the research, but to reveal the meaning of formalizing a *territory of the sea*, as an excuse to reflect on the territorialization process as a whole. This project indeed wants to tell a story, the tale of human struggle to relate to our surrounding environment – and specifically to the sea; however, it does not necessarily provide answers. The ambition to play with the notion of edge, as stated at the beginning, becomes an opportunity to unveil the tension between opposites: an action which perhaps might end in denying the existence of such dichotomies themselves. It is thus a trigger to rethink the role of humankind in the shaping of the world; or more specifically, to give a hint on both the beauty – and impacts – of our endless action to adapt the environment for us to inhabit it. This project wants to provide citizens with not only awareness, but also consciousness of the meaning of inhabiting a certain territory – or all the territories. Pride or shame? Any sort of moral answer to this dilemma is left to the observer.

However, a further reflection is needed on the political meaning of territorialization, or the imposition of the nation-state rule – the collectivity – on the sea, thus the putting aside of the individual will to freely experience the same sea. The wall of the island-machine divides the built half – desalination and baths – from the unclaimed unbuilt half. It also prevents to see both the landscape-in-formation and the sea, only allowing the existence of some semi-hidden viewpoints. This condition might be justified by the protective function of the wall itself, which therefore serves the collectivity; however, the individuals are then prevented to access the only free space left of the fully *urbanized*/rationalized sea: there is no more space for pirates. This project therefore wants to question the legal and political status of water (7): is the original political agreement of the Leviathan also valid on the sea?

A final point needs to be made on the theme of the ephemeral. As architects, we live in the dream of creating things/buildings to *last* for a long time – or *forever*. The whole society – both individuals and the collectivity – tends to deny death, meant as a possibility for the endlessly growing linearity of time not to last forever. In fact, the same idea of circularity actually implies the indirect possibility to keep on business as usual, just differently. And this project, as a tale of human struggle to relate to our surrounding environment, does not want to be different: in the extreme attempt to last forever, the ruins of the island have been designed. In a future scenario, when the sea level will rise enough to prevent the possibility of living on the Belgian coast, the whole island will lose its meaning: no coast will be left to be protected, or people to use the desalinated water. However, the wall will last as a warning, to the punishment of human *hybris*; or as a timeless monument to its ingenuity.



Masterplan of the Belgian
North Sea, 2070.
Map by author.