Freeing Architecture

An exploration of the act of play in the built environment

"SHAPES OF NOTHINGNESS"

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''*I start from a feeling, not an idea, certainly not an ideology. I am in service of my story, which wishes to be told, and I have to understand where it wants to go*''

– Federico Fellini

SUMMARY

[Fascination]

A feeling of nostalgia arises whenever I think back at the times I could play like this. The feeling of freedom, freedom of the body and mind. If only I'd known I would nearly loose this ability one day, would have enjoyed it more at the time and was conscious when it started to fade.

[problem]

The problem is the act of play has taken on an ever-decreasing form of importance in society, hence today play has it's difficulties in finding a way to exist, to co-exist, alongside phenomena as growing individualisation and competitiveness (Verhaege, 2018). The unwritten rules set the standard for all of us to follow; play is something for children not for adults. This could result in a penchant for hollow aesthetic and uniformity that leaves no room for play, growing egotism and decrease in creativity (Huizinga, 1938).

[Research question]

What are the characteristics of places where the act of play has the opportunity to arise?

[Methodology]

This research is grounded in close examination of 21 precedent projects, chosen on various bases; a difference in scale, a diversity in architect/artist and a distinction in the appearance. analysis will start with the creation of a frame of reference, through establishing different over arching categories, followed by the a more analytical approach tackling every project one by one through text provided by architect or artist, writing on what occurs and close drawing of the observed, in terms of artifacts, the material, as well as atmosphere, the immaterial.

[Expected Results]

List of architectural themes, like 'journey through space' and 'breaking with formilisation' that form an overview of themes and (mostly) do not make a direct statement about form itself. This is important because in the end, there is a focus on what the architecture evokes rather than what the object itself is.

Fascination

Over the past couple of years I've watched my little niece and nephews grow up; from tiny newborns to toddlers, evolving their own personality and character. For hours and hours they play with great imagination and creativity; building a house with just a couple of branches and gazing at the sky above whilst recognizing elephants and giraffes in the clouds.

A feeling of nostalgia arises whenever I think back at the times I could play like this. The feeling of freedom, freedom of the body and mind. If only I'd known I would nearly loose this ability one day, would have enjoyed it more at the time and was conscious when it started to fade. Playing outside every day, whilst it was raining cats and dogs, minus 5 degrees Celsius or a very warm summer day. Hide and seek, collecting feathers, splashing through muddy puddles and accidentally falling in a duck pond, to then craw out with wet clothes and a smile on my face. Life was one big playground in which I was invited to experience.

In the twenty years that have passed since, the act of play became less and less present in my life; a phenomenon that will most likely also occur with my cousins. Only sometimes, very rarely, there are specific places where I can sense this feeling of freedom again. For example, whilst kitesurfing. The feeling of being one with the ocean, scared yet excited. Pushing your boundaries and exploring new movement. Even sometimes when I look outside a window that frames the clouds beautifully, and watch them drift away as my mind does the same.

My own experiences with this phenomenon made me realise that architecture has the power to evoke those emotions and feelings that can make you experience this feeling of freedom for a – perhaps- short period of time. Architecture cannot change the contemporary culture in which 'play' plays a submissive role and cannot cause a sudden paradigm shift. I can, however, investigate the existing qualities of places where play can arise and learn to understand the phenomenological role that architecture plays here.

Problem Statement

Over the past decades, the act of play has taken on an ever-decreasing form of importance in society, hence today play has it's difficulties in finding a way to exist, to co-exist, alongside phenomena as growing individualisation and competitiveness (Verhaege, 2018). The unwritten rules set the standard for all of us to follow; play is something for children not for adults. Since the beginning of time philosophers, cultural anthroposophists and historians raised the issue of the great importance play has within society, Johan Huizinga among them. In 1938 Huizinga published his book *Homo Lundens* (Man the player), in which he expressed his ideas on how mankind could not only be seen as *Homo Faber* (Man the Maker) and *Homo Sapien* (Man the Thinker), but also contained a third characteristic, namely playing. He describes the act of play as followed: "Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner". In his opinion,

the lack of play for humankind was caused by the advance of capitalism and the accompanying mass culture and mass consumption. With as result a penchant for hollow aesthetic and uniformity that leaves no room for play, growing egotism and decrease in creativity. French film director Jaques Tati (1907-1982), inspired by this concept of play and observed changes in society, turned this idea into something visual, where at the same time, it was his idea on what the future could look like. In his film Playtime (1967) a society invested with capitalism, consumerism and soul-less architecture is shown, with people that become less and less creative. Huizinga's plea, therefore, was to start playing in the right way, where 'pure play' does not interfere with commerce, political or public interests.

Nowadays, architecture is at times used as means to evoke the act of play. However, not all of these places would be labelled with 'pure play'. When looking at Googles offices for example, play is used as a method for increased productivity and therefore an increase profit. Sociologist Richard Sennett (2018) argues that in these places, an important element of a creative process is overlooked, namely the confrontation with unruliness; making an attempt to overcome various obstacles. These places are very much complete self-contained spheres with in its design a scarcity in resistance and confrontation with the real world. Eventually, creativity, but in a much broader sense our whole of thinking suffers though a lack of genuine play
In the end, I believe that there are places that offer the 'pure' act of play for everyone. Here, there is no emphasis the difference between certain age groups, as play is often seen as an act for children, and no profit can be gained from it; a place inclusive for all. Hence, the underlying question in this research is: **what are the characteristics of places where the act of play has the opportunity to arise?** It is mainly about the concepts of place, atmosphere, form and their mutual relationship; the connection between the material and immaterial is at the heart of it all.

Extended introduction: The Experience of Places (of play)

"*I enter a building, see a room, and – in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it*"
– Peter Zumthor

Play is a phenomenon that takes place temporarily, in a certain place. The journey towards this place can already cause a change in one's mental state. Just as when we move from the city to nature; we step into another environment, a sort of second reality; the reality of our dreams, imagination, hopes and history (Barrie, 2010). Once arrived at the specific place, it is not only about the visual perceptual quality, also called the form or the material, but certainly also about atmosphere, the immaterial, to be able to invite the actual act of play. However, one must recognise the power of the visual and the fact that we primarily are visual creatures as mankind. Architecture, at first glance, provides this visual experience; movement, approach, dynamic views, altering lights and shadows, an ever changing array of images that temps to engage. This is in contrast to engaging or critically analysing our senses and emotions, something equally as important, as Rasmussen (1959) stated

Fig.1 Jaques Tati, *Playtime* (1967)

" it is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it".

The Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) spent years designing playgrounds in, sometimes temporary, empty lots in the city of Amsterdam after the Second World War. In these places his focus was on the creation of non-hierarchical, non-symmetrical compositions with a balance between the play elements and the space in-between them. The form was as important as the counter form, in the empty spaces spontaneous games could take place. The elements themselves were designed without a designated function; they could be used in different ways and with their simple, abstract forms they stimulated use of the imagination. His designs therefore did not aim to show what they are or how they should be used, they rather suggested what they could be. He did aim to evoke spontaneously inclined to movements, like jumping, balance, climbing, and the play structures were designed for this purpose (Kollarova & van Lingen, 2016). It shows us that through the use of form, movement can be achieved.

In contrast to Van Eyck's playgrounds, German philosopher Bhöme argues that the atmosphere of architecture was first realised by art nouveau artists who believed buildings should not be judged solely on the functionality of spaces, but on the experience of them and would describe this as the ''sphere of felt bodily presence'' (2013, p.33). Finnish architect Pallasmaa (1936-) would agree on this and suggests atmosphere is generated by a series of multisensory functions that together combined create an overall mood (2014, p.203). However, there is no clear-cut answer as to the exact content of the word atmosphere, as Peter Zumthor (1943-) described it as ''when a building manages to move me'' (2006, p.11). It is clear that atmosphere is a great, personal an individual experience, however Zumthor did construct points of concern he applies to create a certain atmosphere such as, among others, temperature, light, sound, material presence and compatibility, levels of intimacy and the relationship between interior and exterior (Zumthor, 2006)

Methodology

In order to explore and start to understand the main question proposed, it is important to select an appropriate method. This research is grounded in close examination of 21 precedent projects, chosen on various bases; a difference in scale, ranging from small scale projects like elements or objects to large scale, one of buildings and even landscapes, a diversity in architect/artist and a distinction in the appearance.

The analysis of these projects started with careful structuring; an intuitive process that contained a rather rough analysis of the precedent projects, as there is a lack of existing categorisation of projects for play in the body of knowledge available today. The most obvious organization method would be working through the various scales, however when observed side by side, categories/overarching themes can be established. Subsequent a more analytical study of the particular projects will take place, in the form of text provided by architect or artist and writing and drawing of the observed, in terms of artifacts, the material, as well as atmosphere, the immaterial. Finally, in order to grab a essence of a particular project, the method of collage is

used. Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) used collage as a method of research and the creation of the new. It is often composed of three techniques; overlapping, which is about the abstractification of fragments and overlap them in order to produce new meanings; layering, to compile fragments and create new identities; and juxtaposing, placing two entities next to each other to display the main fragments emphasized in the project through contrast (Ramadhaniar & Lukito, 2020). In this step, the rational findings are translated into a visual composition, making it more easy to compare the different projects and verify the previously mentioned themes.

Expected Results

The first, important, thing to notice is the difference between types of play and they way they appear in within built structures. The three types that can be recognised are: mental play, play of the mind through imagination caused by experience or atmosphere, physical play; which is distinguished as (unexpected) movement of the human body caused by artifacts and lastly a combination of both witch results in wander; movement of the body whilst one's imagination drifts off. Here a certain spatial configuration is something that produces this phenomenon. Following, 7 themes were recognised whilst (roughly) analysing the precedent projects:

- Contrast: in sense of built structure towards its surroundings and materials
- Journey through spaces: what may be a free or fixed route
- Form: that invites usage
- Rhythm: either chaotic or Linear
- Breaking with Formilisation: different usage of objects than one is used to
- Framing of surroundings: consciously draw attention to something.
- Movement: either within the building itself or its surroundings

The outcome of this research will not be a toolbox with architectural elements to make use of in the design project, as this excludes the important notion of atmosphere. It is about the holistic/overall experience of a space that could potentially invite the act of play to take place. Therefore, the result will be an overview of themes or points of attention that (mostly) do not make a direct statement about form itself. This is important because in the end, there is a focus on what the architecture evokes rather than what the object itself is.
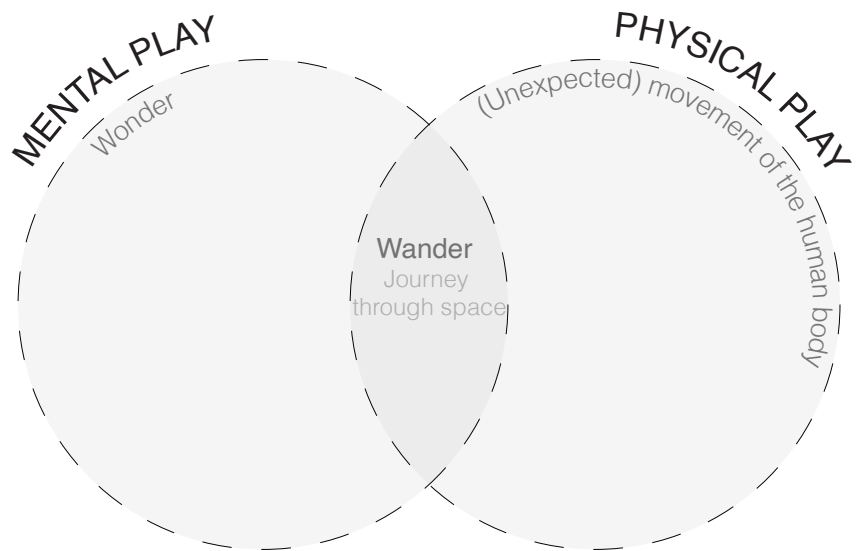
MENTAL PLAY

Wonder

PHYSICAL PLAY

(Unexpected) movement of the human body

Wander
Journey
through space

Fig.2 Different types of play

First Design Idea

The first design idea was just a quick thought that came up. The dutch beach as a location due to it's movement in surroundings and its vastness. Then, a journey from the dunes to the sea, along which smaller 'pavilions' or 'follies' are scattered. In the back of my mind the the established 7 themes of play in architecture.
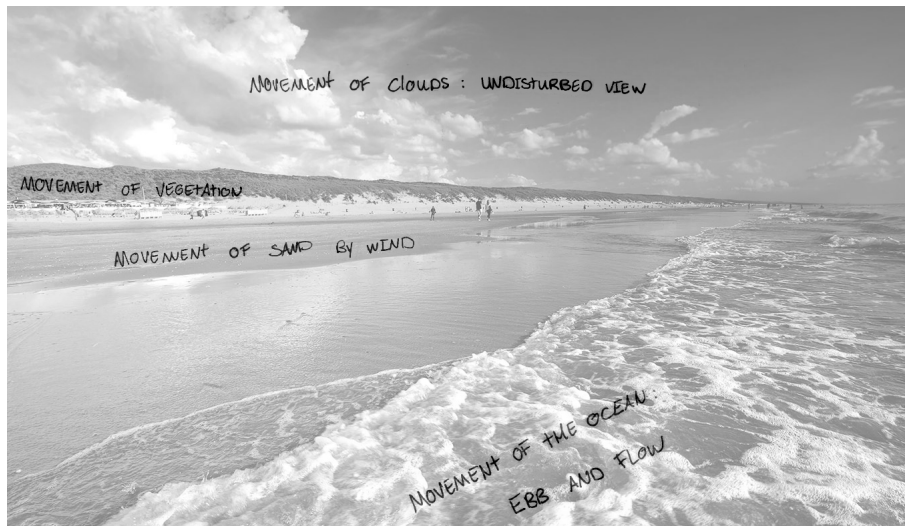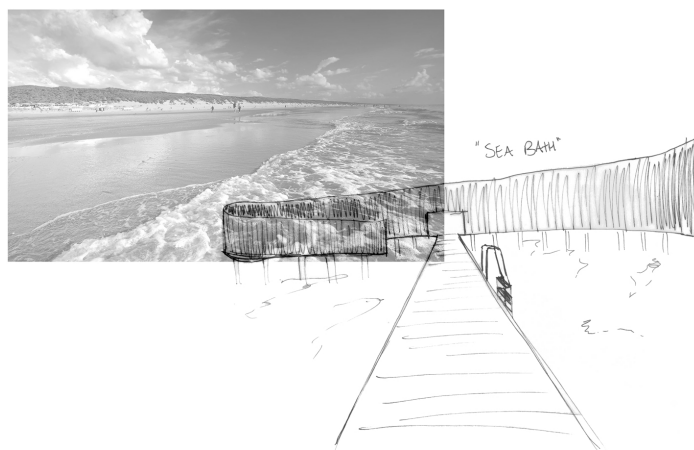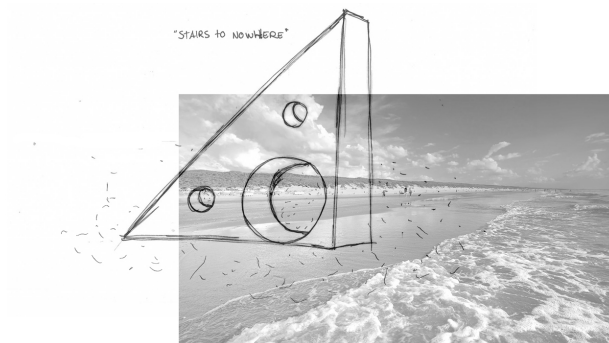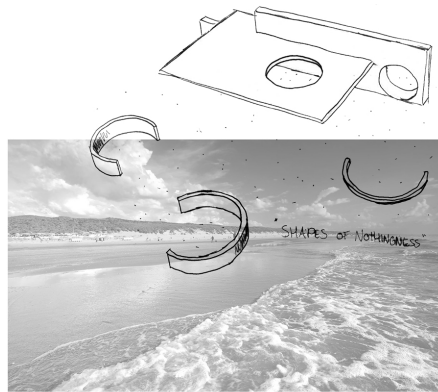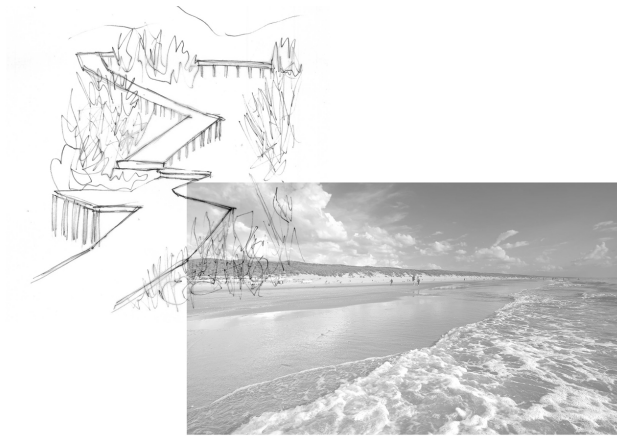

Fig.3 Possible design location

Fig.4 First design ideas

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**Text**

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Figures

Fig.1. Tati, J. (1967). *Playtime* [image]. Moma. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/319907

Fig.2. Image by author.

Fig.3. Image by author.

Fig.4. Image by author.

Appendix 1. Precedent Projects
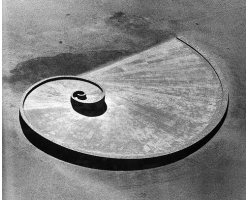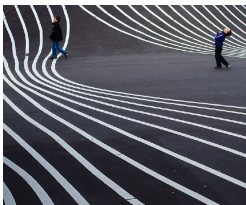

Goldene Spirale
Hannsjörg Voth
Marocco | 1994

Nieuwmarkt Playground
Aldo van Eyck
The Netherlands | 1968

"Table"
Junya Ishigami
Japan | 2005

Superkilen
Topotek 1 + BIG Architects + Superflex
Denmark | 2012

Black Hole
Anish Kapoor
Portugal | 2018

The End of Sitting
RAAAF
The Netherlands | 2014

Havoysund Tourist Route
Reiulf Ramstad Architects
Norway | 2007

The Mediated Motion
Olafur Eliasson
Austria | 2001

Moerenuma Park
Isamu Noguchi
Japan | 1988

Bos op de Veluwe
//
The Netherlands | 2021

Insel Hombroich
Bernhard Korte, Erwin Heerich
Germany | 1996

Negev Monument
Dani Karavan
Israel | 1963

Monte Resegone
//
Italy | 2021

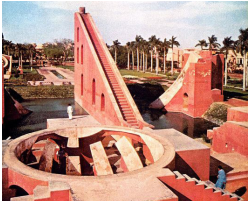*Infinite Motive*
Pezo von Ellrichshausen
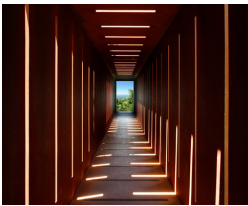Czech Republic | 2015

Dunes of Terschelling
//
The Netherlands | 2021

Feestaardvarken
Florentijn Hofman
The Netherlands | 2013

Jantar Mantar Observatory
Maharaja Jai Singh II of Jaipur
India | 1724

Kahoshima Bereshit
Dani Karavan
Japan | 1998

Open ended
Richard Serra
The Netherlands | 2007

Skyspace
James Turell
The Netherlands | 2016

Appendix 2. Planning until P2

wk 45 (8-14 november)	finalizing projects and themes		
wk 46 (15-21 november)			
wk 47 (22-28 november)		writing draft	
wk 48 (29-5 december)	in depth analysis of projects		
wk 49 (6-12 december)			
wk 50 (13-19 december)			
wk 51 (20-26 december)			
wk 52 (27-2 december)			
wk 1 (3-9 january)	reflecting/possible altering of themes	writing final	
wk 2 (10-16 january)			
wk 3 (17-23 january)	P2		
wk 4 (24-29 january)			

evolving design

Appendix 2. Scheme of research

Fascination: Play

↓

Problem: lack of play and play
placesin today's society

Literature

↓

RQ: what are the characteristics of places where
the act of play has the opportunity to arise?

↓

How do people experience
places (for play)?

Literature

What are places for play and
what do they have in common?

Case sudy analysis
1. Categorise
2. Analyse
3. Visualize

↓

Answer + position

Set of themes or categories

↓

Design intentions

↓

Reflect + position

Design project ....