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Invite and participate
Related to the proposition on improvisation, is the action of consciously creating systems that allow for participation and co-creation. Not by seeing them as easily to be ignored options but as co-defining the end result. On paper, there is a marvellous device for this (marginalia). In mediaeval manuscripts much space was intentionally left open around the text so that readers could scribble their annotations and remarks in the margins. In subsequent versions of the manuscripts these could then be incorporated in the official text, again with sufficient room for new remarks and criticisms. Over time, this resulted in a layered text written by multiple readers and writers, and the revisions were still visible for later readers. In practice, achieving that many rich layers through invitation and participation is difficult, though not impossible.

Entering Yona Friedman’s apartment in Paris means entering a personal universe: a place filled with egg cartons, styrofoam plates, milk cartons, dangling shiny knick-knacks, tomato sticks, empty toilet paper rolls, pieces of scrap paper, chicken wire, straws, and countless other things that you would usually throw away after use. Not so Yona Friedman. He turns all of this into a fantastic new world that inhabits, indeed takes over his flat. Or, in his own words:

I am trying to dissolve the articulate shape of the room. Objects in a room tend to direct your view. Here the volume, the form of the room, has completely vanished... Everything changes here all the time, but slowly, never all at once.
On a small and very personal scale, Friedman shows how he thinks cities should develop: slowly, never from scratch but always building upon what is already there, with a minor role for the ego-architect and a huge role for the user, dissolving space, moving away from an aesthetic or formalist view forced upon the inhabitants.

Entering the workshop of designer Thomas Lommée in Brussels means entering a system. Wooden slats with holes in them, metal bars, plastic washers, screws and bolts, PVC pipes; seemingly worthless materials that turn out to be the building blocks of the OpenStructures system. Lommée conceived a collaborative form of meccano to which anyone can contribute designed or reused elements or structures, as long as they are based on the shared geometric OS grid of 4x4 cm squares. This has already resulted in collaborative designs for a kitchen, a coffee maker and a bicycle. Lommée believes in modular systems because they are flexible in their use and function, making them last a long time. His open system introduces variety because a great diversity of people participate in the design.

Both Friedman's world and Lommée's system are invitations to design the world differently. Both offer space in the form of a structure that stimulates occupants, designers, inhabitants and users to show initiative. Friedman helps them by providing manuals in the form of comics in which he shows step-by-step how one could design floorplans, inhabit the space, start urban farming, organize traffic, but also how one could create a neighbourhood or build irregular structures. Lommée too provides an extensive how-to manual on his website, explaining step-by-step the possibilities of what can be done in his open structure.

Besides having an open and inviting structure, in both cases the element of time is crucial. Friedman believes in slow development, gradually adding layer upon layer to the city. For him, human unpredictability is a given: no one can predict what a resident may wish one month or one year from now, including the residents themselves. This is why it is pointless to plan the city. It can only come into being.

Lommée also believes in the adaptive capability of people, but of things as well: an object or a building can also change with the times and meet any new requirements it brings. He developed this idea in 'Autarkyecture'. An important inspiration for this was the BBC television series and book How Buildings Learn by Stewart Brand. Earlier, in 1968, Brand had made an important contribution to the ecological and do-it-yourself movement in the United States with The Whole Earth Catalog, a treasure trove of useful tools, knowledge, activism, examples, et cetera. In How Buildings Learn he addresses the question of what happens to buildings as soon as they are being used. Do buildings learn from changes? From how they are used and from their users? And can they be designed in such a way that they can cope with those changes? The series' motto is: 'All buildings are predictions, all predictions are wrong.' In other words, buildings are rarely used exactly as their design intended. And that
is precisely what Friedman is saying: we have to accept the unpredictability of human behaviour. And therefore stop making buildings for the average man, who doesn’t even exist, according to Friedman.

Several attempts have been made in architecture to incorporate time, change and the necessary space for differences, unexpected uses and newly developed wishes in the design. In the Netherlands, architect John Habraken introduced his ‘supports-infills’ principle in the 1960s. Habraken is convinced that it is people who make their environment but that designing the common elements (the ‘supports’) is the responsibility of the architects. His separation of supports and infills is based on the separation of authority. Authority is fundamentally different from user input or participation, which both still assume the presence of a professional who takes decisions and guides the process of user input. In Habraken’s view, the architect is responsible for the collective spaces and outdoor spaces—the supports—and the users are responsible for the ‘infills’, the floorplan, the interpretation of the space. Authority creates responsibility and with that come care and maintenance. The supports-infills principle introduced the dimension of time in architectural thinking, in the sense that the process should come first, as well as the possible changes that would affect a building over time. Partly planned, but always with room for allowing things to come about, just as Friedman advocates.

But how does one make an open-ended design in which things (whatever they may be) can originate? That was the central question to which Habraken and his colleagues at the Architects Research Foundation (SAR) tried to find the answer. One part of the answer is letting go of control over the final look. Another part has to do with believing in communality based on diversity. Habraken has this to say on that:

Fortunately, there is now a renewed interest in the question we asked with regard to the communal system in which all people themselves are free. And these two elements cannot be separated. I can only manifest myself if I fit into something. One cannot make oneself understood until one speaks a language. Therefore, we must now pay attention to the communality of the design.

Without rules, no game, one might say. Without language, no expression. Without a support construction that invites and facilitates, there can be no personal development, freedom, or expression.

Just as authority goes further than participation and lays more responsibility with the users, inviting is more radical than offering. Inviting assumes an action, a gesture. You always need someone else to whom to extend the invitation. Without the other, it doesn’t work. This has consequences for the form of the invitation as well as for the appreciation of how it is answered: the form must be sufficiently open and the appreciation of the contribution must be inherent in the design.

Marginalia, Quinta Monroy, the do it exhibition concept, Beck’s Song Reader, Supports and Infills, OpenStructures and other examples.
they only exist by the grace of the answers to the invitation. They share the control, the authorship of the result, with those who wish to contribute to that result. Crucial in this is that they do not take the average as their starting point, but rather the exceptional. The goal of this form of inviting is not to arrive at a half-hearted consensus but to achieve the highest attainable outcome in which people can recognize themselves, by which they feel embraced and can and may be part of. That is very much at odds with the type of planning, designing, building, risk management, banking, insurance, care and selling that we all know and which is primarily based on the grey average. This leads to the shrugging indifference typical of public issues, as nobody really recognizes themselves in that grey average. It belongs to no one, you don’t really have many objections to it, but neither are you enthusiastic about it. ‘It’ll be all right, and if not, then still.’ Or: ‘There’s not much I can do about it, is there?’

The average makes life simple, cheap, efficient and controllable. But the average also makes life boring, restrictive, smug and unreal. And the latter turned out to be fatal for the economy: the economy was based on models in which irrationality was excluded, crises were impossible and the market would regulate itself. Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve System in the United States from 1987 until 2006, had for many years been a firm believer in this fairy-tale. However, in 2008, he had to admit before Congress that his worldview had been false:

I found a flaw in the model that I perceived as the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak. ... And that is precisely the reason I was shocked. Because I’ve been going for 40 years with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.10

The value of letting things grow, develop, run their course rather than planning everything in advance leads to a form of invitation and corresponding possibilities for participation that are open to reality, complexity, the messy humanness of humanity.

2 www.openstructures.net.
3 ‘The Ville Spatiale’ in Yona Friedman, Pro Domo (Barcelona: Actar, 2006).
4 According to the OpenStructures measurement system as developed for housing by Thomas Lommée and Christiane Hoegner in 2013, commissioned by Z33 as part of the exhibition ‘Atelier à Habiter’ (www.z33.be).
7 Klase Havik and Hans Teerds, ‘Define and Let Go: An Interview with John Habraken’, OASE 85, pp. 8-16, p. 11.
8 For the design of the communal, also see Rule 9.
9 Such as the social housing project Quinta Monroy by architecture studio Elemental in Chilli (2004), http://www.elementalchile.cl/en/projects/quinta-monroy/. Or do it by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier: ‘do it was designed to enhance difference and complexity, and propose a different model of thinking about our time, in which the goal was no longer to discover the truth and freeze it in amber. No two interpretations of the same set of instructions are ever identical... The title itself, with its imperative form, asks the visitor to act, not only to observe’, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ways of Curating (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014). And also Song Reader by Beck, a new album only for sale as sheet music. Those who wish to hear Beck, must play Beck. See YouTube for versions of Do we? We do door Amy Regan, Benedikt, Doozy, Joan Wasser, Automatic Toys.
10 Terry Jones and Theo Kocken, Boom Bust Boom (2014), NPO Doc, broadcast 12 September 2015.