SUMMERSCHOOL

AGAINST THE SMOOTH CITY

03–07 AUG 2020

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FOR THE CITY

FAILED ARCHITECTURE

Photo's by Maarten Laupman

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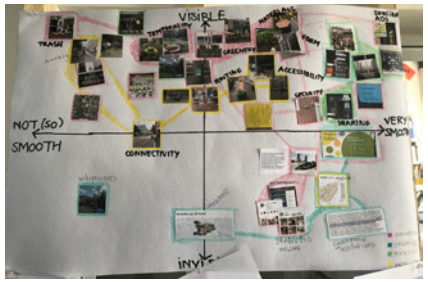
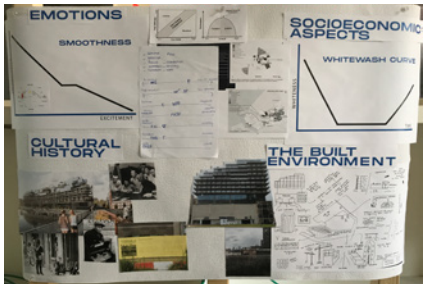
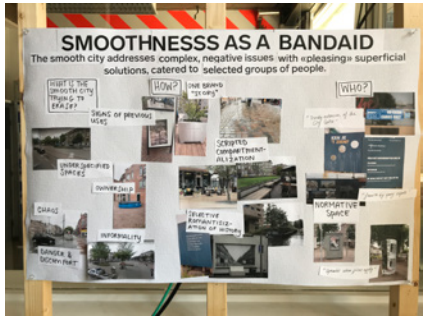
AGAINST THE SMOOTH CITY

How can we unsmooth the city, or design against smoothness? That was the question asked during the summer school Against the Smooth City, which took place from 3 to 7 August 2020. For this one-week studio we teamed up with René Boer and Mark Minkjan of Failed Architecture, who helped us to guide the participants in a critical engagement with contemporary urban smoothness.

Cities are increasingly becoming smooth, scripted and completed urban landscapes, apparently freed from any kind of imperfection, abnormality or friction. The rise of the 'smooth city' is a major shift in the development of the city and is closely related to similar processes of 'smoothening' in other domains, such as fashion or consumer technologies. The demand for safe, clean and well-functioning urban environments is understandable, but what does the consolidation of the 'smooth city' mean for the conflictive, non-normative and subversive side of the 21st century polis? Does the 'smooth city' threaten the vitality of the public domain, and even the democratic character of our cities?

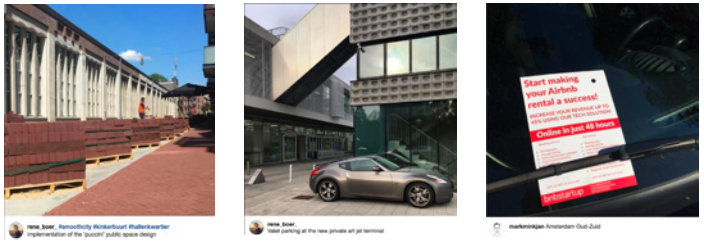






‘Smoothness’ has been on the rise in cities worldwide for many years. It occurs in different forms and intensities and is experienced differently by different people. It has also been observed, described and theorised by many using different perspectives and concepts. During the summerschool participants were challenged to develop a nuanced understanding of the smooth dimensions. During the first three days presentations were given by Anastasia Kubrak, Colin Keays and Pablo Sendra. Participants were also introduced to the four research locations: the Hoogstraat, the Central District East, Kop van Zuid & Katendrecht and Middellandplein & surroundings and divided into small groups to each research two locations and look for (un) smoothness. Their findings were put together into a mindmap and presented to the rest of the group.

After creating a better understanding of the concept of smoothness in the city the participants were asked to choose a role in the designing of strategies and interventions as a critical response to the ‘smoothness’ of a certain place, and the potential qualities of ‘unsmooth’ spaces. They could choose the role of the artist-designer, the grounded urban practitioner, the developer, the landscape architect and the performer.



THE SMOOTH CITY ACCORDING TO FAILED ARCHITECTURE'S MARK MINKJAN AND RENE BOER

"A closer look does not reveal any aberrations or abnormalities. There don't seem to be any abandoned properties, undefined elements or forgotten corners. No alternative narratives, ideas or (sub)cultures have been allowed to make a claim on, intervene in or transform urban spaces, unless they have been neatly encapsulated and made servient to the dominant script. While tensions and confron- tations are only allowed to surface beyond its immediate boundaries, it is represented to the outside world as a wealthy, successful, consumable and predominantly white envi- ronment. Welcome to the Smooth City. "
- René Boer in Smooth City is the New Urban.

"Amsterdam is also being cleaned up: the city wants to get rid of its famous Red Light District, which lies just a few metres behind the Red Carpet; the number of coffee and tourist shops is being confined. In virtually all urban situations, temporary creative projects are parachuted- in to imperfect places to attract new audiences and new investments. It signifies the direction in which Amsterdam is going: it's on its way to becoming an incredibly liveable, comfortable, clean and pretty city; but of course, the cost is its soul."
- Mark Minkjan in Haussmann and the Sanitisation of Amsterdam.

THE LANDCAPE ARCHITECTS

The Smooth Gatekeeper

By Sophie Czich, Noortje Weenink & Martina Zimpel

In the 'Smooth City', complexities are deliberately erased. Spaces and narratives are simplified to form a streamlined version of urban life. The city, with its highly scripted and predictable spaces, becomes easy to use and thus remains unquestioned. The opposite of smoothness, unsmoothness, does not necessarily equate to unscriptedness. Like a theatre script that results in a different play according to a different director and actors, the 'Unsmooth City' enables a variety of narratives and interpretations. As such, smoothness and unsmoothness can coexist and even enhance each other.

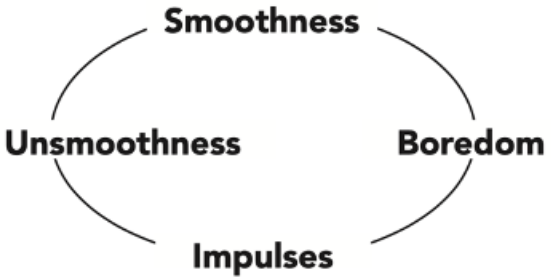
As the epitome of tensions between the smooth and unsmooth, the area of Katendrecht forms an interesting point of research/ intervention. After years of isolation, this semi-peninsula is gradually being transformed into a destination and leisure playground, not just for the citizens of Rotterdam, but also for tourists. Kop van Zuid, its wealthy northern neighbour, is colonising the area, using a dominant and one-sided narrative at the expense of the actual and complex history of immigration and unsmoothness of Katendrecht.

The 'Smooth Gatekeeper' rebalances the existing power relations between these areas. It utilises the unclaimed water space in-between by eliminating the existing bridge and replacing it with an 'inefficient' landscape bridge. This new (third) space at the end of Kop van Zuid seems to connect to Katendrecht, but directs back to itself. A gap is left where it should reconnect to the land, rendering the bridge not only inefficient, but also unfinished.

The enhanced quality of stay offers a variety of interpretations and experimentation, turning the focus away from Katendrecht as an area to claim. Gradually transforming from a solid hard structure into a porous soft space, the 'Smooth Gatekeeper' invites multi-sensory experiences and challenges the user's spatial and bodily expectations. A door, hidden in a mirrored wall and known only to Katendrecht residents gives the residents the power of accessibility to the area. In this scenario, the Rijnhavenbridge is permanently opened and used as an outdoor projection space. It is only visible from the south, thereby excluding the privileged Kop van Zuid.

THE GROUNDED URBAN PRACTITIONERS

By Flo Hettenbach, Marijke Vermande & Sascha Herfkens



Many of today's global cities, where the presence of piles of money is translated into floors of reflective glass, are suffering from a high degree of smoothness. Apart from the workforce mechanically flowing in and out of the central business district, its streets are empty and lifeless. Rotterdam's central business district also suffers from the architectural failures of the past: monotonous streets, blind walls, or empty ground floors, neat-looking spaces you want to leave as quickly as you can.

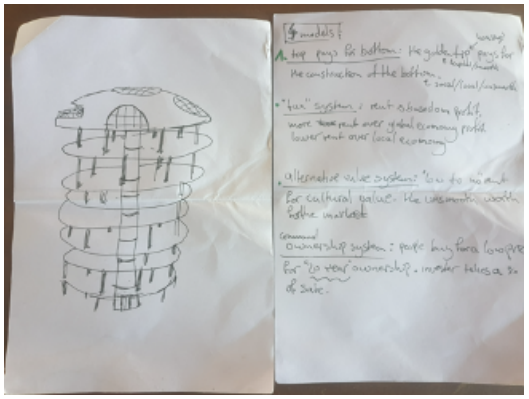
From cities like flowing rivers – where nature and humans interact, where there are spots to stay, rest, and meet others (and maybe even swim, if you're feeling adventurous) – the city is being transformed into straightened canals, which work efficiently, but human-human (and human-nature) interaction is reduced to a minimum, there's no room for surprises. The smooth city just 'works'... but "all work and play makes Jack a dull boy".[1]
As Grounded Urban Practitioners, we propose to bring the soul back into the city, to put the 'public' back into public space. We propose bringing the municipality together with the owners of the CBD buildings to negotiate usage of currently underused spaces and turn them into publicly accessible spaces.

By implying simple but creative interventions to these smooth and empty spaces, we want to take the boredom out and put the life back in. By matching a variety of interventions with a variety of spaces, we discover what is possible in a sea of possibilities.

1 Reference from the movie The Shining

THE DEVELOPERS

By Ilya Lindhout, Tanja Poteza, Tiemen Visser & Flore Lenaerts



The current situation

OEC, standing for Open End Capital, developed a plan for the transformation of Delftse Poort. Located at Weena and next to Rotterdam's Central Station, Delftse Poort is the entrance to the city. Until 2009 it was the highest building of the Netherlands that – with its sheer size and surface – symbolizes the ultimate smooth capital. The simple edgy shapes in combination with a high and a low part make the building clearly recognizable in the skyline of Rotterdam.

Problem

Right now the building is said to be the ideal working environment for today's professional, but doesn't serve today's citizen. "High end" reflects a focus on a specific user group, not reflecting the diversity of inhabitants, cultures and businesses in Rotterdam. It therefore symbolizes a "smooth" image of a preferred reality.

- Serving only a specific group of professionals
- Smooth image of preferred reality
- Absurd rent prices

Strategy

OEC sees the potential of the Delftse Poort to reflect the strengths of Rotterdam: innovative, diverse, dynamic and open. Through refurbishment and deconstruction of the building we create an open end system that is capable to constantly adapt and evolve. An open space for businesses of different shapes and sizes that is easy to plug into.

The core of our business model is the introduction of social capital into the value chain. We incentivise our occupants to invest social capital into the building in return for rent reduction. This process increases the value of the building while inhabitants gain monetary capital.

The transition to ownership by a eligibility model allows for a phased investment return. In times of reduced economic opportunities the model remains resilient as the production of social capital increases. We see the buildings market value based on this social investment and speculate an increase in value.

By creating these conditions for the unplanned, our investment contributes to the unsmoothing for the city.

Phases of return of investment

1. Top floors are sold to the super rich.

2. The return accounts for the reconstruction of the top and ground floors and the implementation of the open-end system to the bottom floors.

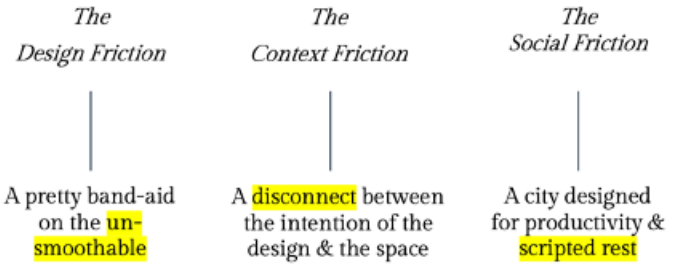
3. Rent is based on income and half is used for maintenance of the building.

4. After occupants have invested a certain amount of social capital into the building, they become eligible to buy a part of the building. This system creates a return of investment over time, as more and more socially invested occupants will be able to reap the benefits of the speculated increase of value.

Urban Smoothness seems to be what every city aims for. In the surface-level design of public space, this aim translates into a feeling of safety, harmony, mobility, and accessibility for “everyone”; perfectly curated streets and public squares that use design cues to nudge users this way or that way. Neighborhood by neighborhood, the city becomes an organized, controlled environment that facilitates a smooth flow of day-to-day activity with the aim of ultimately improving the performance of its citizens. But what happens when a city accomplishes this ideal smoothness? How do we, its citizens, experience this in our daily lives, and most importantly, how does it make us feel?

PERFORMER

If the city is so smooth, why am I so sleepy?
By Andrea Elera, Lily Higgins & Nera Jelaska



We chose the Kruisplein intersection as a fertile testing ground for our questions surrounding smoothness, since the location itself had recently been the subject of an attempt to smooth over it's austere, chaotic nature. The designers of this tactical urbanism intervention installed at Kruisplein were asked by the city government to limit the flow of cars through the busy intersection and to that end, created a collection of micro-parklets that served as both roadblocks and seating areas. While there was something pleasing about the way these small, grassy parklets contrasted the harshness of the intersection, we noticed several frictions arising as we looked critically at the design choices made.

The design friction - A pretty band-aid on an unsmooth space
What kind of uses does the design afford?

The context friction - A disconnect between the intention of the design and reality of the space
What kind of uses does the context of the place afford?

The social friction - A city designed for productivity and scripted rest.[1]
What kinds of uses are considered socially acceptable?

We explored these questions with a site-specific public performance as our research strategy. If these grassy parklets were in fact designed for the leisurely enjoyment of passersby, what would happen if we, three women, took a nap there in the middle of the intersection?

Performing sleep in public space gave us insights on the uses this context could afford: what does sleeping- or more broadly, resting- in public space mean in a smooth city? Although in Rotterdam sleeping in public space is prohibited , we discovered that in practice whether it is accepted or not is decided by social regulations.[2] There was no show of disapproval of our action but it was definitely seen as something that did not adhere to social norms. People weren't used to seeing "decently dressed" women sleeping there. Some of

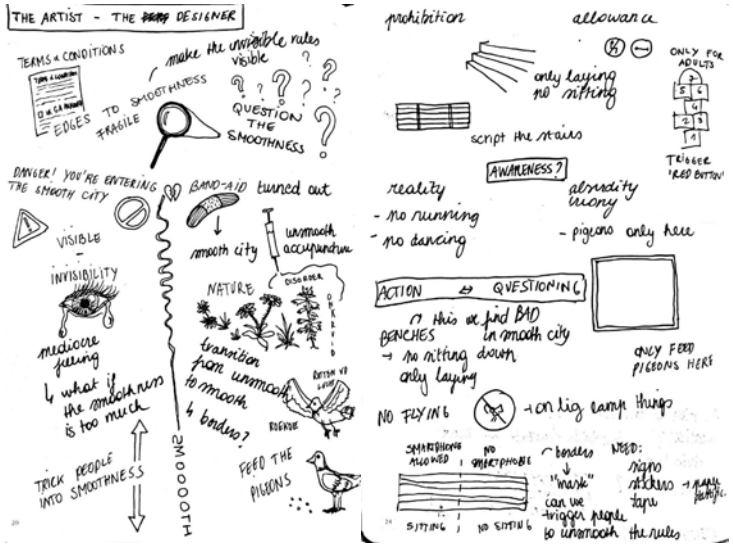
1 The title echoes Anastasia Kubrak, "User-Agent: If everything is so smooth, why am I so sad?". Anastasia Kubrak was a guest lecturer at the program.

2 Rotterdam Gemeenteblad (2020) Havenverordening Rotterdam 2020, Rotterdam, viewed 16 november, 2020. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/gmb-2020-12201>

them took pictures, others showed concern and asked if we were ok. An apparently docile and vulnerable act became controversial as it unveiled the hidden script behind the smoothness of the place. While the design screams “rest” and “leisure”, the social dynamic of the area still responds to productivity narratives. When using the parklets according to their intended use produced confusion from onlookers, we were led to the conclusion that the intervention mostly serves as decoration; a device to superficially “smoothen” the harsh, productive environment that is the center of the city, without actually developing real strategies to give people a place to rest.

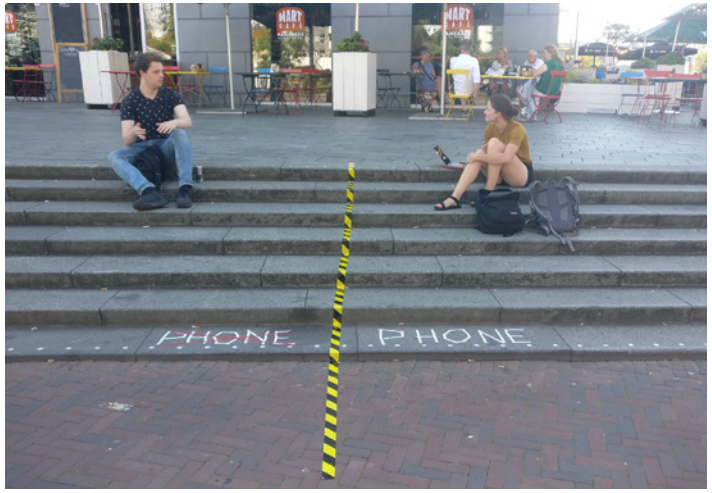
We also took into consideration how sleeping in the space made us feel, and if our bodies were able to slow down and rest in such an environment. Although the place is designed for resting, we felt like we were acting out of the script of what we were expected to do in public space. Our outfits – “corporate casual” – made this even more evident, as we played the role of the business woman on her lunch break and then disrupted it. This made us more conscious about the social regulations within ourselves, but also the understanding that such a small gesture can be a tool for empowering our autonomy and so, an act of resistance against scripted public spaces.

THE ARTIST
By Lisa Marie & Erinn De Waele



The smooth city is a normative, scripted, controlled and overdesigned city. Because of its scriptedness, the rules gaining control are invisible and have an impact on social behaviour. The rules are invisible because they are based on norms in culture and society. It also means that following the rules only feels natural to a certain amount of people, the kind of inhabitant the smooth city is designed for: the adult, white middle-class. Our strategy as designers or artists is to trigger a reflection on the invisible rules in the smooth city. Signs are mostly used to clarify regulation and are a known tool for gaining control in public space. We did three interventions on the square in front of the Markthal in the centre of Rotterdam. The square has an anonymous atmosphere, therefore assigning the big amount of lawful and social control.

The first intervention we did was on the long benches that have armrests every other meter. This withholds people to sleep on the benches, excluding people who have to rely on sleeping in public space. The benches are smoothly designed and don't give the feeling they prohibit anything. Therefore, we wanted to give people the insight that these benches were specially designed not for sleeping. We did this by putting stickers on each sitting area with an allowance sign that you can sleep, but a prohibition sign that you can't sit. After a close observation we saw that people saw the signs, asked questions to others about it and eventually ignored the signs and just sat down. It also proves if you put an allowance next to a prohibition sign, people still feel like they are allowed to do something. The second intervention was based on an actor the smooth city can't control: pigeons. A lot of people eat on the stairs in front of the Markthal, attracting a lot of seagulls and pigeons. Here, we operated as part smoothness designers. We designed a sign that tries to control the pigeons, showing the fragility of this overly scripted place. The sign was put on two notable lampposts and says 'pigeons: no flying' with a prohibition sign of a flying pigeon. Some people laughed, but most of the passengers didn't even notice the sign. The last intervention was done on the stairs. We wanted to influence the behaviour of people. While seated, a lot of people are on their phone. We wanted to zone the stairs with a 'no phone' and 'phone' zone, scripting the public space and trying to control a big part of inhabitants. People noticed us putting the intervention in place, but almost everyone ignored it.



The three interventions show an interesting take on control in the smooth city but didn't give people a lot of awareness on control and smoothness. This was maybe because the gesture or scale of the interventions wasn't big enough or they should be longer in place for people to obtain reflection. The current discussion is also dominated by the topic of the pandemic, where zoning and signing is also used for controlling corona regulations.

WHAT IS THE INDEPENDENT SHOOL FOR THE CITY

The Independent School for the City is a post-graduate educational platform based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The school is an initiative of Crimson Historians and Urbanists and ZUS (Zones Urbaines Sensibles) and is rooted in their practices of combining a critical and activist approach to the city with effecting real change through architectural and planning projects. The independent school for the City is founded on a strong belief in an incremental instead of a tabula rasa approach to city planning which blurs the lines between critique and practice on the one hand, and research and policy on the other.

The Independent School for the City is a school in, of, and for the city. It builds on the conviction that strategies for the city – architectural and economic, spatial and social – should be based on real, first hand, empirical research. Empirical because the reality of the city offers interesting conflicts and unpredictable synergies to learn from and build upon. The school is fully independent and has an unaccredited status by choice. Its research is rooted in the different disciplines teachers and participants have been schooled in. It will not be constrained by the formalities of academia or disciplinary boundaries.

Participants and teachers form one team in which the advanced and less experienced will inform each other and contribute to the research. Research that is not necessarily solution-oriented or focused on final designs, and may not come to design as such, but will lead to a text, a film, an exhibition or an action. Our approach is open-minded but critical, inclusive but discerning, flexible but precise. This offers the participants and their international team of teachers the full intellectual freedom to research the city in the broadest sense. It will give us the chance to have seemingly coincidental encounters with parts or aspects of the city where clashes of various kinds take place, where otherwise invisible realities reveal themselves. These are, we believe, the instances that can teach us fundamental things about the city in all its complexity.
The educational programme of the Independent School for the City is composed of different stand-alone courses, ranging from a 4-day crash course on filmmaking in relation to architecture and the city, to an intensive 12-week programme on contemporary urbanism. The activist and multidisciplinary approach of the Independent School is strongly embedded in all activities, whether you participate in one single course or sign up for all of them.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FOR THE CITY

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