

## **In the Middle of Things – Experiments with a Design Approach**

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### **Abstract**

The initial implementation of a design process is usually based on previous analyses that are either made by the designers themselves or drawn from outside sources. In this experiment, we questioned this process and investigated a different approach to specific places, actors and environments in the form of an activist act based on designing objects, repairing existing structures or even demolishing them from a position in the middle of things, not objectively, not impartially, and above all not at a distance.

The authors of this article were also interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann for the thematic issue „Architecture as Intervention” about the design studio and the possibilities for transferring the learnings into architectural practice. See also: Vollbracht, N. & Saat, R. (2024). Interview: Hybrid Internship. Dimensions. Journal of Architectural Knowledge, 4(7), 171-178. <https://doi.org/10.14361/dak-2024-0714>

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### 1. Introduction

The site visit is a practice familiar to most planners. It consists of a single or recurring visit to a place slated for transformation in a subsequent planning process. Insights are gathered by walking the perimeter and photographing specific situations or through encounters with people on site. These insights are then abstracted and translated conceptually. The distance on the part of the visiting planners ensures the location can be analyzed objectively and evaluated with regard to its problems and potentials (e.g., SWOT).

We aim to contrast this common practice with an experiment, which we call Hybrides Praktikum. [1] The starting point for this experiment is a kind of naive immediate design, repair or modification of a found problem – an activist action, so to speak, in which the smallest issue possible is the first to be addressed. The following criteria provide the unifying foundations for the approach:

1. Selection of tasks according to what is feasible and relevant;
2. Direct involvement of the designer in the action;
3. Consultation with the people on site, whose agreement is not only assumed but usually also obtained explicitly;
4. Responsible, self-reflective action with the best intentions.

Beginning from the specific intervention, the wider context of the situation can be explored and understood, step by step, in the course of its preparation and execution. The design and realization process becomes a tool for the production of a solution, but ultimately also a tool for gaining knowledge, which may be implicitly inscribed in the solution or explicitly documented by the solvers. It is important that the solution should not serve as a unique spatial or architectural gimmick or as a manifestation of one's particular aesthetic preferences. Although the intervention is an artifact in its own right, it is not the equivalent of a work in the sense of a personal architectural oeuvre.

### 2. Case Studies

Various locations in Aachen, which are inscribed with a left-wing political agenda, marked the starting point for our work with students from RWTH Aachen University. Their projects are described and presented here as test applications of the method. Without any specific prior knowledge about the places and topics, the students – after an initial site inspection and in consultation with the actors – immediately implemented small repairs or objects.



1 A student removes the roots of a dead tree that had affected the foundation of a brick pillar, leaving it in danger of collapsing. Authors' note: the faces of the women in the background have been anonymised using AI and image editing tools.



2 The removal of the roots and the act of carefully dismantling the corner pillar attracted the attention of the wider neighborhood. In addition, a barrier that had blocked the walkway for over two years could be removed again.

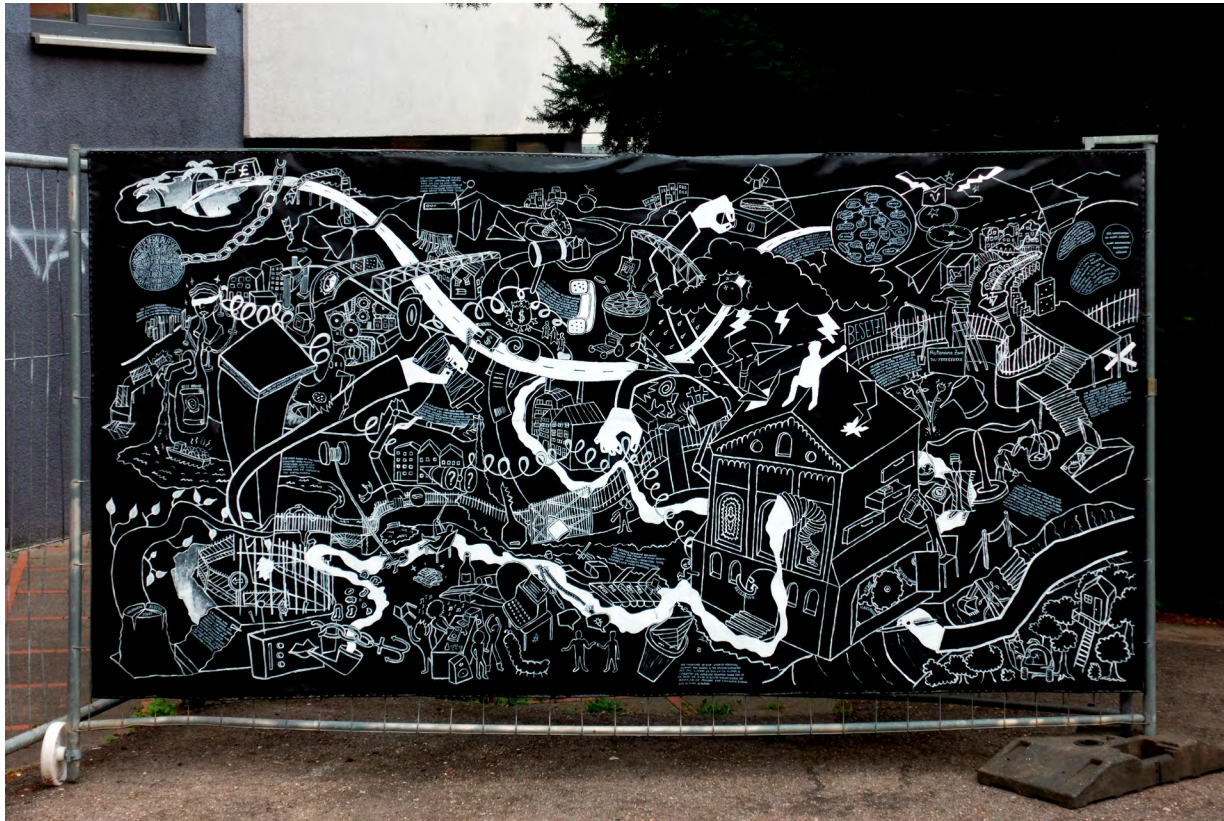
## 2.1. A Corner Pillar of a Monastery

A group of activists have been occupying the historic buildings, the large garden and the inner courtyards of the monastery on the Lousberg since August 2021. Their protest is directed against the exploitation interests and opaque ownership of the property. [2] Before the squatters moved in, the complex had stood empty for many years. The monastery complex extends backwards from the street into the plot and is only visible from the front over a short distance of around 15 meters. This part of the monastery forms the only spatial connection to the public street.

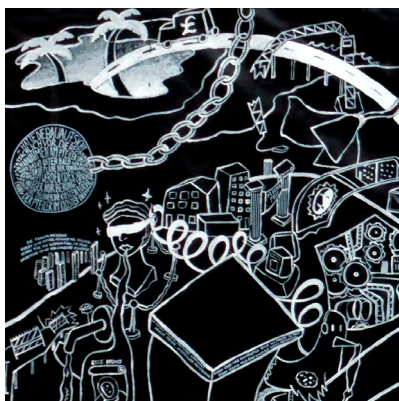
During the first inspection, it was noticeable that part of the sidewalk in front of the monastery was blocked by barriers. One fragile corner pillar was leaning out. The purpose of the barriers was to protect passers-by from harm in the event of the pillar collapsing. As an intervention, this pillar was carefully dismantled in the first step and its components preserved so that it could be rebuilt congruently. The work on site led to a large number of conversations and correspondence with neighbors, passers-by and residents of the monastery and detailed observations of the place and the actors. The insights into the intersections between the squat and its immediate surroundings as well as the relationship to the city and the question of ownership were visualized in a 3.20 x 1.60 meter map. Unfortunately, the reconstruction of the pillar was interrupted by the authorities - a careless oversight on our part.

Intervention and research by Adrian Valery, Max Lesch and Victor Navarro.





3 Depiction of different actors inside and outside the monastery on the Lousberg and their networks. Original Size 3.20 m × 1.60 m.



4 This area of the drawing addresses topics related to the monastery's involvement in a case of insolvency chain.



5 Here the portrayal of the direct relationship between the occupied monastery and the neighborhood—what happens around and beyond its borders—is addressed.



6 The monastery's internal processes, social networks, and physical condition are examined and explained, maintaining a degree of anonymity to protect the identities of those involved.

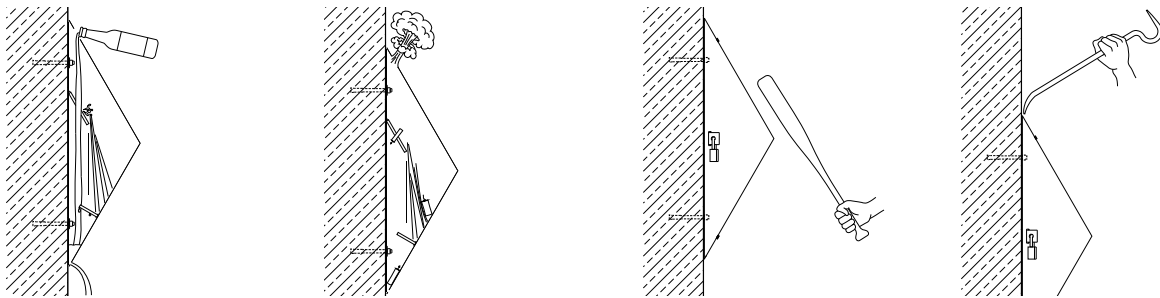


## 2.2. An Anti-Fascist Mailbox

In the past, the Autonomous Center in Aachen has been the victim of attacks by right-wing extremist groups and individuals. One example is the letterbox located in front of the entrance, which has been regularly destroyed, stolen or vandalized. Replacing it and making its form and design as attack-proof as possible formed the starting point and interest of the intervention. In contrast to the approach in case study I, the object was not designed on site but in the studio, manufactured in the workshop and then installed on site.

Without claiming to have been created through a participatory process, but rather in a deliberate and speculative way, the letterbox also addresses the criticisms levelled at the “pre-design aesthetic” of design-build projects, for example. The letterbox itself remains rigid in its function and effect. It was designed for the specific context from a functional point of view, yet its appearance remains impure, raw. Why should it need to be polished? Or painted it in a “nice” color? The world consists of dirt, hard work and injustice. [3] The ensuing analysis of the right-wing extremist scene in Aachen and its attacks on individuals and civil institutions is based less on contact with activists and more on research in archives.

Object and research by Cyril Queyrau and Lennard Flörke.



7 The structure inside is designed to protect the letters from attacks.



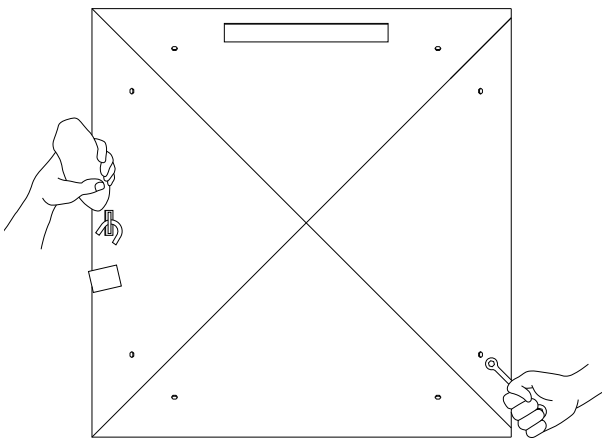
8 Situation in public space.



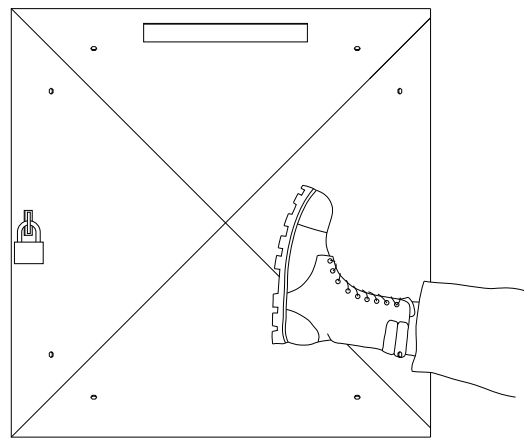
9 The moment the letterbox is attached to the façade.



10 The letterbox was tagged by third parties after being attached. Top center: فلسطين حقها [filastin haqah] Arabic: "Palestine's right" Side and bottom: زنان ازادی [zan zendegi azadi] Persian/Farsi for "Woman Life Freedom".



11 The outer shape of the letterbox is designed to withstand attacks.



12 The attacks illustrated here are inspired by the reports of people from the AZ and the research on the right-wing scene in Aachen.



### 2.3. Two Ramps and a Gap

The Queer Referat group recently moved into a ground-floor storefront, formerly a French haute cuisine restaurant. A group of queer students created this self-managed safe space and event venue for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans and intersex students and their allies. The website announces with modest self-criticism: "Our premises are only partially wheelchair accessible (several steps to get to the back room, no disabled toilet). We are working on reducing the barriers." [4] The interventions focused on the building's thresholds and one narrow spot with the aim of creating barrier-free access to the toilets. Barrier-free access is a prerequisite for an application for funding to ultimately make toilets entirely barrier-free. For this reason, a section of wall that blocked the entrance to the toilet was first demolished, and two ramps were built from leftover wood.

Contrary to case study II, most of the work here was invested in the finish of the surfaces. The color coating imitates the material that marks the threshold: Belgian granite at the entrance door and click vinyl with dark brown oak decor in the interior. The new material flows over the thresholds, blurs the edges and shapes the ramps organically out of the existing volumes, as though they had always been present. The interventions were ultimately followed by translation work into designs for barrier-free and queer-friendly toilet planning on site. The work puts forward various theses that are provocative in their spatial design or material aesthetics in order to visualize a queer utopia instead of depicting the status quo.

Intervention and design by Franck Ducotterd, Noemi Preisler, Vanessa Rüter and Leonie Tebbe.



13 Situation of the threshold before the ramp was installed.



14 The new material blend in with the existing conditions in a kind of mimicry.



15 The demolition of a “wall of shame” made room for the wheelchair turning space required to gain eligibility for public funding.



16 The second construction provides wheelchair-accessible access to the Queer Referat's premises from the street.



## 2.4. The Garden in a Monastery

The cloister is the center of the historic monastery complex from case study I. Due to the monastery's long vacancy, the surfaces and components are in poor condition. Flaking on the windowsills provided the impetus to address the boundaries and thresholds: the interior and the exterior. In parallel to the repair of the windowsills, an insight into the interpersonal and architectural structures, processes and relationships within the monastery could be recorded through the windows.

The second intervention was the repair of a broken gutter. During the repair, it became clear that an obviously diseased tree was responsible for the damage due to its falling branches, which were falling because the tree was not receiving enough water. The process established a relationship between the objects, also reflected in the intervention to channel the water back towards the tree.

Intervention and research by Lars Bögel and Nick Münkner.



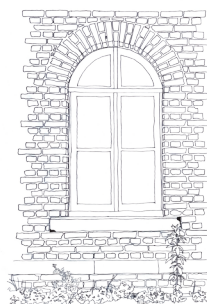
17 Repairing the windowsills provided an opportunity to analyze the boundaries and transitions between the interior and exterior of the monastery.



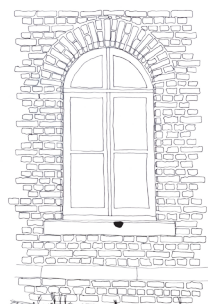
18 The repair of a gutter offered the opportunity to analyze the water cycle within the old monastery garden and thus supply the dried up tree with nutrients.



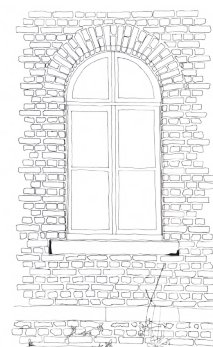
FES  
Hier gelingt es uns mit den Materialien die wir zur Verfügung haben farblich nah an den Naturstein heranzukommen.  
Im Verhältnis (1:1)  
1 EH Spielstrand  
1 EH weißer Sand  
1 EH Zement weiß  
1 EH weisse Steine



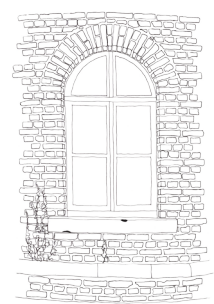
FES  
Durch ein starkes Abgrenzen der Farbgebung des Steinestriches möchten wir auf den Vorfall und das Thema Reparatur aufmerksam machen. Insofern wurden wir von dem „Kontext“ aus dem japanischen.  
Im Verhältnis (1:1)  
2 EH weisse Sand  
2 EH Zement weiß  
1 EH schwarze Steine



FES  
Auch hier wollen wir durch eine andere Farbgebung hervorheben. Die Mischung ist aber sehr sandfarben geworden und so richtig zuhause sind wir nicht damit. Wir lernen daraus. Nächstes Mal trocken vortrocknen.  
2 EH Spielstrand  
2 EH Zement weiß und grau

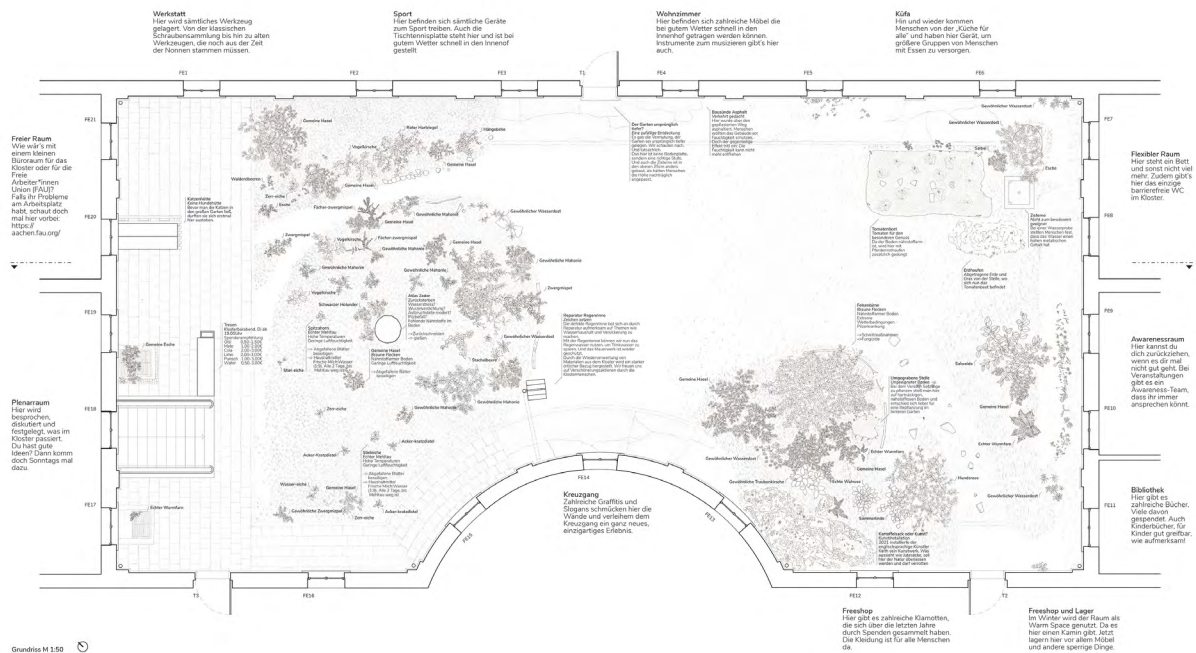


FES  
Das gleiche Mischverhältnis wie bei FES. Hier haben wir eine halbe Stunde nach Fertigstellung die oberste Schicht mit dem Schieber abgetragen. Dadurch kommen die Steine besser zur Geltung.  
Im Verhältnis (1:1)  
2 EH weisse Sand  
2 EH Zement weiß  
1 EH schwarze Steine



FE19  
Mit einer kleinen Farbprobe aus richtigem Steinergewürzmittel der Firma Rubensdewert konnten wir uns farblich dem Naturstein annähern.  
Der Steinergewürzmittel musste nur mit etwas Wasser angemischt werden.

19 Field notes of the repair.



20 Mapping of observations in the monastery courtyard.

## Hybrides Praktikum

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour describes how all scientific knowledge is assigned to different categories and viewed separately. The dualistic perspective, i.e., a distinction between subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, is understood as modern. [5] But doesn't this view hinder our understanding of a diverse, interconnected world? In order to overcome this dualism, we need to realize that we, as architects, operate in a network of complex interdependencies. Technical, social and aesthetic requirements and ideas are inextricably linked and must be considered in their interdependencies in design. As hybrid architects, we should act according to the principle of symmetry in our practice: in other words, taking a stand for both humans and non-humans. We should situate ourselves in the middle of things, and our research, design and construction should begin from this position. [6]

Our approach is based on the hypothesis that hybrid working, as shown in these case studies, shifts one's own position. There is a transition from the outsider planner, who visits and objectively evaluates a place, to an expert participant, who can understand the context of the situation. Of course, we cannot escape our own ideological imprints and influences, even from this position "in the middle". However, in the process we inevitably bring them into a dialog with what we have found – although without distorting our own agenda, which we as experts must represent from the outset through analytical determinations and adjustments. In this way, we may be able to generate inaccessible knowledge through design instead of just drawing on existing knowledge.



## Credits

1–6: Max Lesch, Victor Navarro, Adrain Valery  
7–8, 10–12: Lennard Flörke und Cyril Qureau  
13–16: Franck Ducotterd Noemi Preisler Vanessa Rüter Leonie Tebbe  
17, 19–20: Nick Münkner Lars Bögel  
9,18: Nina Vollbracht

## References

- 1 As opposed to the English translation “internship”, we use the original German word Praktikum. On the one hand, it highlights the importance of practice, of doing; and on the other hand, it conveys the situation of the doer: the Praktikant as a new, inexperienced learner.
- 2 <https://aachenbesetzen.noblogs.org/>
- 3 In her slim book Dirty Theory, Hélène Frichot argues against a pure and clean world. Using a quote from Mary Douglas, she explains that “purity is the enemy of change of ambiguity and compromise” (Douglas 1966). She goes on to say: “At its worst, the quest for purity establishes problems that are ill formed. Compromise is the promise we extend to each other to come together, to work through our ever changing environmental problems.” Frichot Hélène (2019): Dirty Theory - Troubling Architecture, Baunach: Spurbuchverlag.
- 4 <https://www.queerreferat-aachen.de/index.php/de/startseite/ueber-uns>
- 5 Latour, B. (2019). Wir sind nie modern gewesen: Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie (G. Roßler, Übers.; 7. Auflage). Suhrkamp.
- 6 Yaneva, A. (2022). Latour for Architects. Taylor & Francis.

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