Translations – radicant design for transforming harbour sites

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Extending the theoretical understanding of site specific harbour transformation developed in a paper of the same author for Portusplus 2/2011, this article aims at introducing the notion of "radicant design" in order to formulate a particularly adequate approach for transforming harbour sites under the precarious conditions of the globalised 21st century economy and societies in Europe.

These observations are exemplified through a recent harbour design project, namely the temporary bike trail across Lisbon's harbour on the Tagus riverfront.
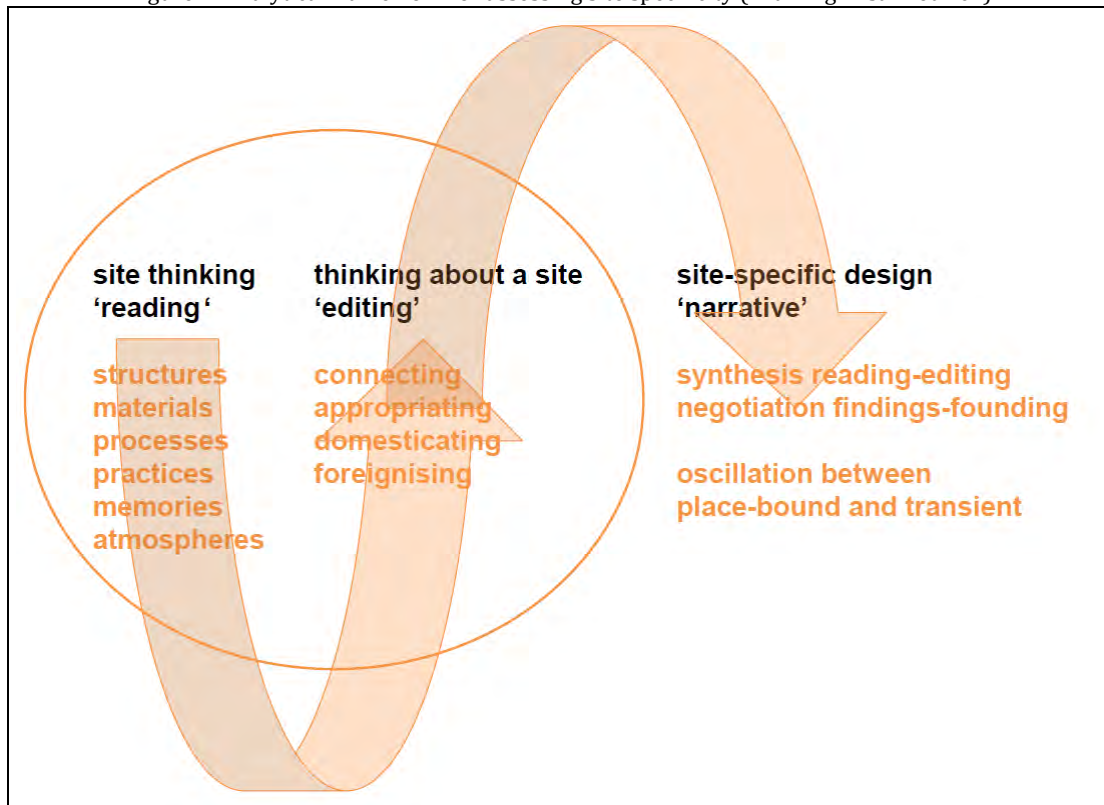
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Introduction

Can transforming harbour sites in European port cities can be developed site-specifically with the help of designers? This is the question I am researching as a landscape architecture scholar at the University of Copenhagen. Starting from a closer look on site theories and design paradigms I had published my first explorations in Portusplus 2/ 2011 (www.reteonline.org). In my paper I had put forward an understanding of site as a dynamic relational construct (based on Burns/Kahn 2005), of site-specificity as relational specificity, oscillating between a place-bound and a transient pole (based on Kwon 2002), and of design as transformation of the existent (based on Braae 2012), a transscalar working mode bridging the gap between a seemingly scientific analysis and a seemingly conceptual design act, synthesising these into one creative move, sensible and sensitive at the same time. From these definitions I had composed a framework of analysis for site specificity through which harbour transformation projects can be assessed – considering them as site-specific if the editing of a site is closely linked to the reading of it. The reading, as I have developed it, is determined by the designers' 'site thinking', i.e. by their a priori ideas, stemming from a disciplinary or personal background, whereas the 'editing' is following the designers' 'thinking about a site', i.e. their topical ideas, particular for a site with its various conditions. The analytical framework enables researchers to examine how designers 'read' their harbour sites and how they 'edit' them. The parameters of analysis have since been developed further through a paper with co-author Ellen Braae published in the 2012 spring issue of the *Journal of Landscape Architecture* (Braae-Diedrich 2012). In this paper we have proposed to analyse design projects along the reading and editing of structures and materials from site (as physical parameters), of its processes and practices (as flux parameters) and of its memories and atmospheres (as immaterial parameters), and we conclude that site specificity is made from a clever combining, weighting, networking, performing of these parameters into a guiding narrative (fig. 1), a design concept that has the potential to generate harbour transformation relying on a much broader societal legitimation than a conventional commercial concept, as it progresses from negotiation.

In this paper I want to extend the theoretical understanding of site specificity developed so far by the notion of 'radicantity', as defined by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (Bourriaud 2009), in order to formulate a particularly adequate approach to harbour transformation under the precarious conditions of globalised 21st century economy and societies in Europe. These thoughts shall be illustrated through one case study, namely of the temporary Belém-Cais do Sodré bike trail across Lisbon's harbour on the Tagus riverfront, commissioned by the municipality of Lisbon and the Lisbon Port Authority, designed and realized by Global landscape architects with P06 graphic designers in 2008-2009 (Diedrich et al 2012: 159, a+t 37/ 2011: 34, www.gap.pt/ciclovia.html).

Figure 1. Analytical framework for assessing site specificity (Drawing: Lisa Diedrich)

site thinking
'reading'

structures
materials
processes
practices
memories
atmospheres

thinking about a site
'editing'

connecting
appropriating
domesticating
foreignising

site-specific design
'narrative'

synthesis reading-editing
negotiation findings-founding

oscillation between
place-bound and transient

Updated design discourses for the globalized world

The revitalization of derelict port areas has greatly benefitted from the economic and societal developments of 20th-century Europe. This is manifest in a body of urban projects built over the last three decades all over the continent, relying on high public and private investments, producing entirely new urban districts, internationally acclaimed and widely published – big business. However, experiencing the current economic and social turbulence one might also suspect that this glorious epoch is coming to an end, at least in Europe, and ask how long one should continue to regard the 'classical' big harbour conversion business as only answer to this 'post-industrial' era and evolving from 'post-modern' thought. In Europe, post-modernism is primarily understood as arising in opposition to modernism, being associated with the closing down of heavy industry and the denial of universal design and tabula rasa attitudes. Indeed, the former era has named the latter and therefore still qualifies it. Inherited words testify to inherited discourses – so even in 2012 society hasn't completely left the 20th century. But new words are emerging, novel arguments are entering the debate, and in some transforming harbour areas design works can be observed that deal in new ways with conditions different to those of the late 20th century, tracing possible paths into an alternative 21st century harbour conversion practice.

In his 2009 essay *The Radicant* French art critique Nicolas Bourriaud refers to Jacques Lacan's idea of the *erre*, the wandering, easily associated with 'erratic', even 'erroneous' movement, but which is understood as positive, as a driving force into the unknown: "(The *erre*) is something like momentum. The momentum something has when what was formerly propelling it stops." (Bourriaud 2009b: 93) So one could say that the modern engine has stopped, the car keeps going, and people are caught in the forward motion initiated by modernism, sitting in the car and trying to find a different fuel, trying to run it

according to the present topography, along wondrous ways, wandering… In which direction might become clearer, the more the forward motion slows down. For when something stops, something else emerges. In order to see and shape what emerges, people might have to cease looking back and naming their epoch post-modern, out of the wish to rid themselves of the forward-looking modern ideology. Only then will society be able to acknowledge and become involved with where people live now, in this present moment: in a globalized world. Globalization is the phenomenon that, since the collapse of the communist bloc in 1989, has embraced all of the world's societies. Going beyond familiar studies of globalization from social, economic and political points of view, Nicolas Bourriaud takes a fresh look at the *aesthetics* of globalization, surveying contemporary works of art and how globalization impacts the 'life of *form'*. His new vocabulary, elaborated from close analyses of works of art, also proves extremely helpful for identifying and qualifying works of landscape architecture that deviate from the trajectory of the run-down engine and engage with new driving forces.

Overcoming deterministic figures of thought

'Altermodernity' is the word Bourriaud suggests as a name for the field society is currently exploring. In doing so, he accepts the fact that Europe's societies have not yet left 20th-century thinking (the run-down engine), but at the same time situates them within an alternative state of mind (the new driving forces), even though he does not name the content of this alternative. When browsing the claims of architects and landscape architects of the post-modern period, it is easy to identify them as answers to modernism and one feels the urge to finally close this chapter and start asking for alternatives: alternative ethics, alternative aesthetics, and also alternative self-conceptions for other designers. One activity we would do better to bring to an end is the search for origins, for roots, for the essence of things as a motor of design. Christian Norberg Schulz' book *Genius Loci* written in 1979 is the best known theoretical statement of this tendency, detecting archetypes (the cosmic, the classical, the romantic landscape) in precise geographical regions (the north African desert, southern Europe, the north of Europe) as the essence from which building should derive its inspiration. Art theoretician Mari Hvattum observes the same 'tyranny of site' (Hvattum 2010) in recent works by architects and landscape architects where for example only stones from local quarries are used, or endemic plants. The other conviction that needs to be overcome is the belief in facts, figures and quantified items as the motor of design. This tendency can be observed in Ian McHarg's seminal book *Design with Nature* (1969), which starts from the wish to make nature scientific and therefore acceptable to planners, then dissecting it into various layers such as geology, surface hydrology, botany and climate, and suggesting that landscape architects process these facts into building directives. In recent times, 'data school' architects like MVRDV claim to derive their designs directly and exclusively from data, claiming that a building or a landscape be a spatialized collection of facts and figures. In the first case, the essentialist position, the designer is considered a medium with metaphysical capacities – obscuring his or her reasoning. In the second case, the positivistic position, the designer is seen as an accountant running an operation system – negating his or her sensitive skills. Both positions are deterministic, because the designer is defined as somebody who has no choice other than to build from origins or from facts.

Radicant design for harbour sites

While these positions may elucidate the radical post-modern answers to the radical modern ethics and aesthetics, they do not help us much further today. In a globalized world with its ceaseless flows of goods, information and persons, the question of origin is

mostly irrelevant, and the computing of facts and figures is taken for granted (Diedrich 2012: 155). It is here that Bourriaud invites us to challenge the proper radicality of modernism and post-modernism – the obsession of beginning from scratch or from history – and introduces a pragmatic alternative, based on the following metaphor:

"To remain within the vocabulary of the vegetable realm, one might say that the individual of these early years of the 21st century resembles those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does. Ivy belongs to the botanical family of the *radicants*, which develop their roots as they advance, unlike the *radicals*, whose development is determined by their being anchored in a particular soil." (Bourriaud 2009b: 51)

Immigrants, exiles, tourists, commuters, urban wanderers seem to Bourriaud to be the dominant figures living under the precarious conditions of the globalized world. *Radicant* is the name he gives to their way of anchoring and translating themselves into the spaces they enter. They have their roots somewhere – these are the first ones – and then they need to settle elsewhere, so they grow secondary roots, which adapt to the particular soil they find in the places they happen to arrive. Radicants are in a constant dialogue and in constant motion. They are "caught between the need for a connection with (their) environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and the opening to the other." (Bourriaud: ibid)

Many a harbour transformation site is characterised by these precarious conditions, and the strip of half-abandoned harbour areas along the River Tagus in Lisbon is just a perfect example of it. As a recent fall-out of the industrial epoch and in a situation of economic decline, it does not attract global capital and big business – it probably never will – and therefore it does not allow for radical decisions on developing new hypermodern port facilities or on converting the area into lavishly designed urban districts, and consequently it does not call for radical 20th century design. However, this pending state of affairs, where nothing is determined, opens up the field for negotiation and for overcoming exactly those deterministic figures of thought quoted above, inherited from 20th century thinking. It makes way for a pragmatic approach focusing on attitudes towards the present moment, the specific plot and the people who might be interested in occupying it as radicants. It is precisely here that Bourriaud's idea of radicantity can further inform the notion of site specificity for design, namely as radicant design. Instead of creating a radical finite oeuvre on a well defined site, radicant design evolves infinitively through negotiation over time and space, along with continuous inquiries, interventions and evaluations, into a dialogue of many actors and agents. This evolution and the related design processes, according to Bourriaud's strand of thinking, can be considered as much part of the design work as the various elements, persons, materials, events, memories and atmospheres. The work cannot be described as a classical form; it is a progressing form. Its authorship is blurred: the classical framework of designers, clients and public no longer fits – all are co-creators. Not that these evolutive and cooperative work modes would be unfamiliar to designers, especially to landscape architects – on the contrary, but they didn't propel 20th century design discourses. In order to initiate an alternative discourse for the 21st century, it seems appropriate to also borrow from Bourriaud the aesthetical expression of his concept of altermodernity, namely the 'journey-form' (Bourriaud 2009b: 106), and exemplify it through the Lisbon harbour project (fig. 2-4).

Figure 2. The space of the Bicycle Trail is made from the existent environment, including materials, light, views, sounds, atmospheres, which are edited through minimalistic interventions
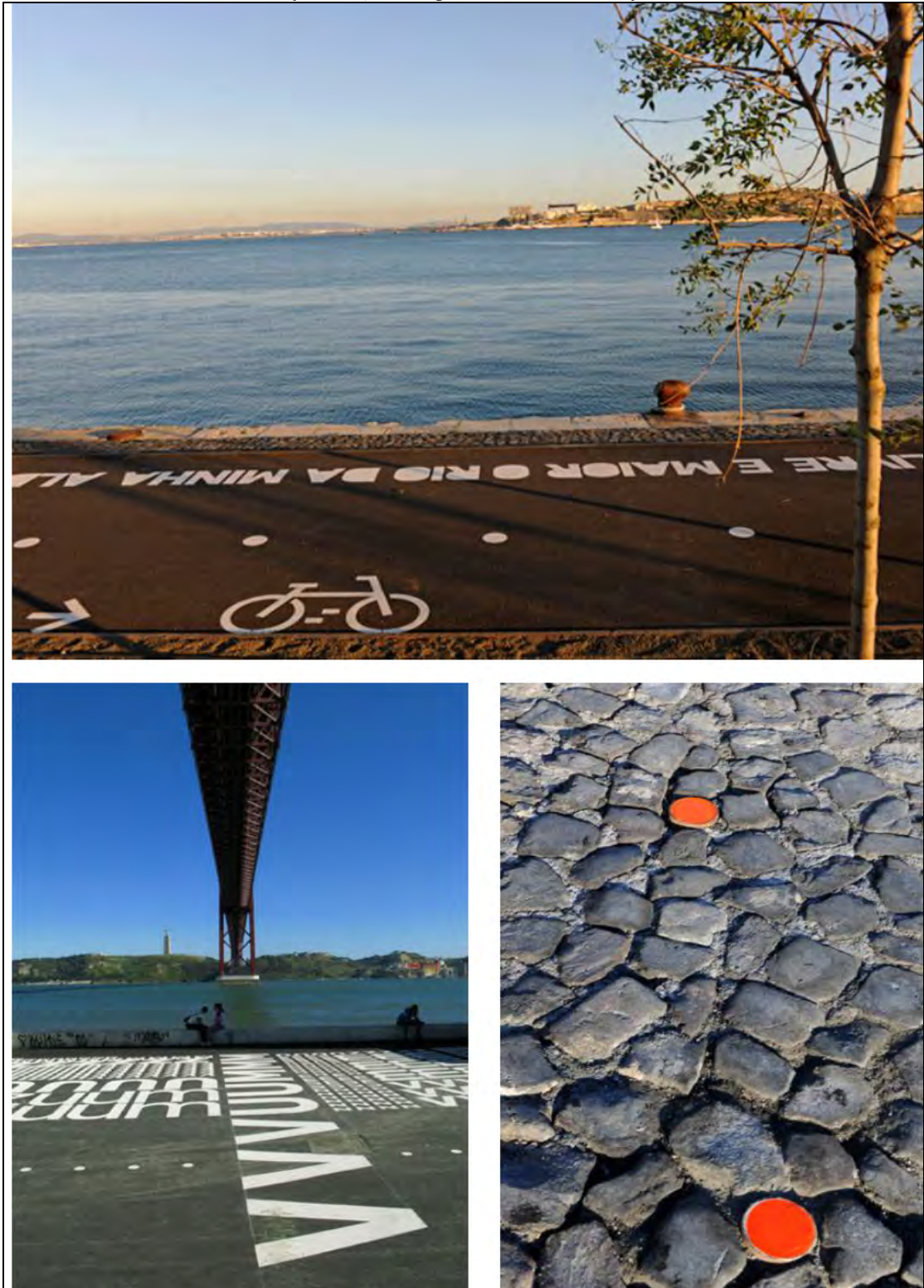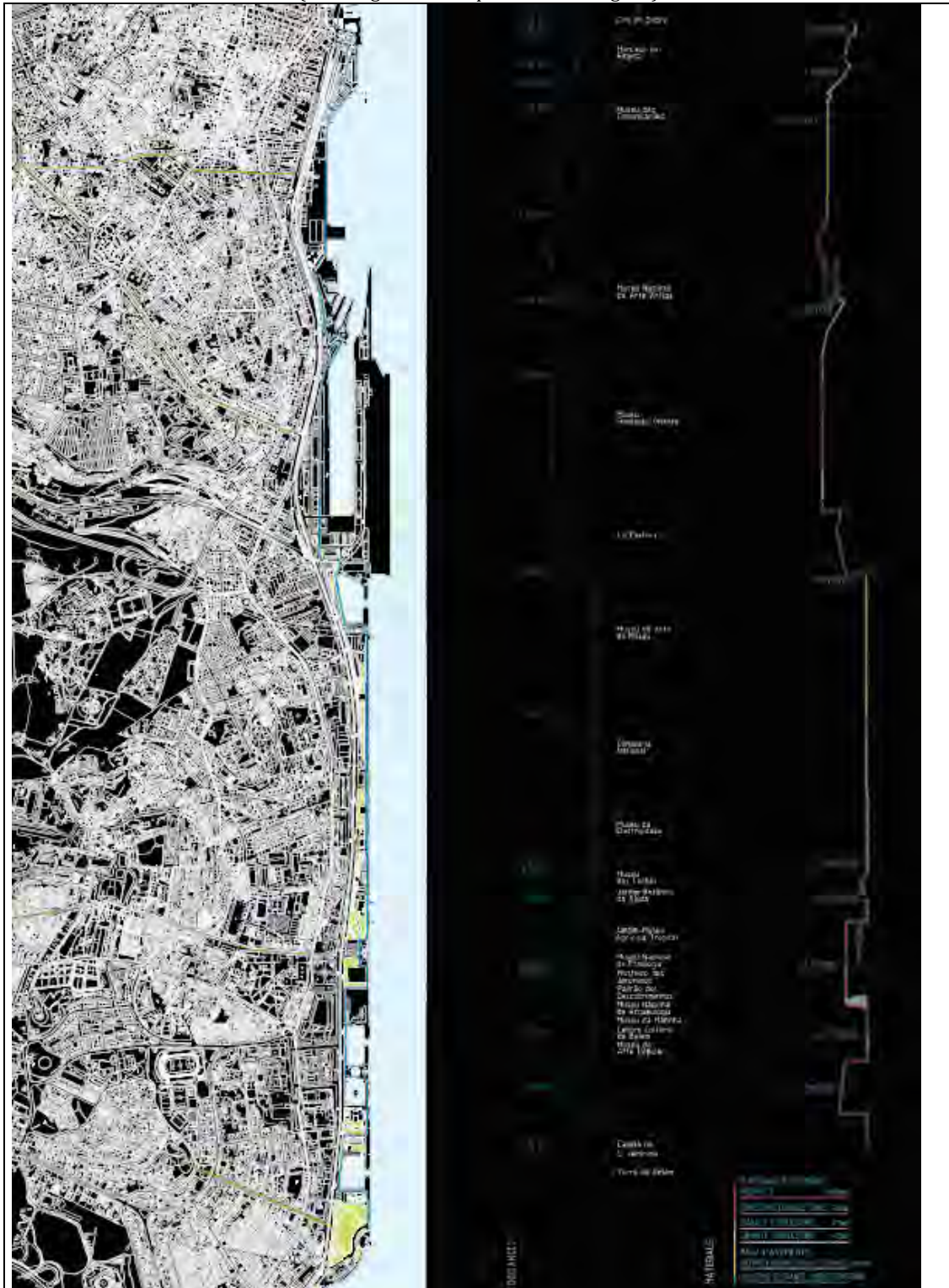(Photos: João Delgado da Silveira Ramos)

Figure 3. Masterplan Bicycle Trail Belém-Cais do Sodré, Lisbon Harbour
(Drawing: Global Arquitectura Paisagista)

This project has been developed out of the lack of a perspective for a comprehensive harbour transformation project for Lisbon's riverfront as port authority and municipality couldn't reach a consensus about the future use and property conditions of the Northern bank of river Tagus. The port is still using parts of these spaces, others have been handed over since the mid-90s to the municipalty or to developers and have been transformed into leisure areas or new city districts (among them the area of the former Expo '98) without however achieving a continuity. In order to give access to the waterfront and complete the Lisbon bike trail network, the project of a temporary bike trail from Belém to Cais do Sodré arose within the city council and was formulated as a design project by both the municipality and the port authority, then commissioned to the team of Global landscape architects and P06 graphic designers, who carried the work out in 2009.

Figure 4. Signage on old warehouses to the side of the bicycle Trail Belém-Cais do Sodré, Lisbon Harbour
(Photo: João Delgado da Silveira Ramos)

The Lisbon harbour journey-form

The Lisbon harbour bike trail is a temporary one, it will not last. But it has already transformed the area in giving urbanites access to it, in having introduced a new aesthetic layer in the form of an asphalt lane, kerbstones and pavements, painted orientation signs and literature quotes. It is more than a banal bike trail with a line painted on the ground all over, it is a fine-grained and absolutely ingenious declination of a bike trail's vocabulary and signage requirement into a landscape architectural project that has observed every single square centimetre in order to find the adequate solution for every micro-site. The painted line is there but it transforms into dots, pavement, stone and asphalt ribbons, the signage is there but it permutes into literature quotes and transcription of ambiances, it invades surfaces and buildings to the side of the trail and converts it into a space of atmospheres encompassing the whole of the site beyond the limits of the proper bike lane, beyond the static form, and inviting to perform it.

Performative aspects are part of a journey-form. The new aesthetic layer invites to perform something new in coincidence with the site as found, the waterfront, the light, the vacant buildings, the vast expanses – a minimalistic design intervention has lead to a maximum of new experiences and to the appropriation of the site through uses, to a great deal unpredicted and unpredictable. Built from almost nothing, the work takes place rather than form: besides biking, people have started strolling, jogging, fishing. Sailing and canoeing clubs have invested old warehouses. Sports centres, cafés, night clubs have found a place here. Rather than awaiting an official transformation project people start to negotiate the site's evolution over time. All are co-designers of this journey-form: municipality, port authority, bikers, night clubbers, the light, the decomposing asphalt and colours, the sounds, the memories, the landscape architects, the graphic designers. Even if materially weak and fading, this bike track seems consolidated and strong as founded on growing solidarity and social consensus about its existence as an urban open space with

multiple perspectives of development. The current unpredictability of urban development is a great advantage of this journey-form. It can be shaped with more time, it will never be there but it will always be underway.

Within the space of translation

If the aesthetical expression of Bourriaud's concept of altermodernity is the 'journey-form', its ethical mode is 'translation'. Against the standardization presupposed by globalisation Bourriaud invites to "invent(...) a common world (and to realize), practically and theoretically, a global space of exchange" that would be "shared within the space of translation", defined as a "space of horizontal negotiations without an arbiter". This common world is actually one and many at the same time, namely a multitude of individual representations of the world among which we move, "practic(ing) translation and organiz(ing) the discussions that will give rise to a new common intelligibility." (Bourriaud 2009b: 188) As an alternative to standardisation, continuous translation seems to merge the local and the global. In the words of Bourriaud: "(...) What if twenty-first century culture were reinvented with those works that set themselves the task of effacing their origin in favour of a multitude of simultaneous or successive enrootings?" (Bourriaud 2009b: 22) If one considers that the conditions of 20th century have brought about 'site-specific design' as a way of negotiating between the two poles of place-boundness and transience, between museification and tabula rasa (fig. 5), one might speculate that another design approach might raise to fit the precarious conditions of 21st century Europe, negotiating continuous enrootings in a messy sphere of reuse and translation (fig. 6): 'radicant design'.

Figure 5. Site-specific design as negotiation of place-bound and transient components to outweigh the poles of a 20th century conception of world making, namely tabula rasa and museification
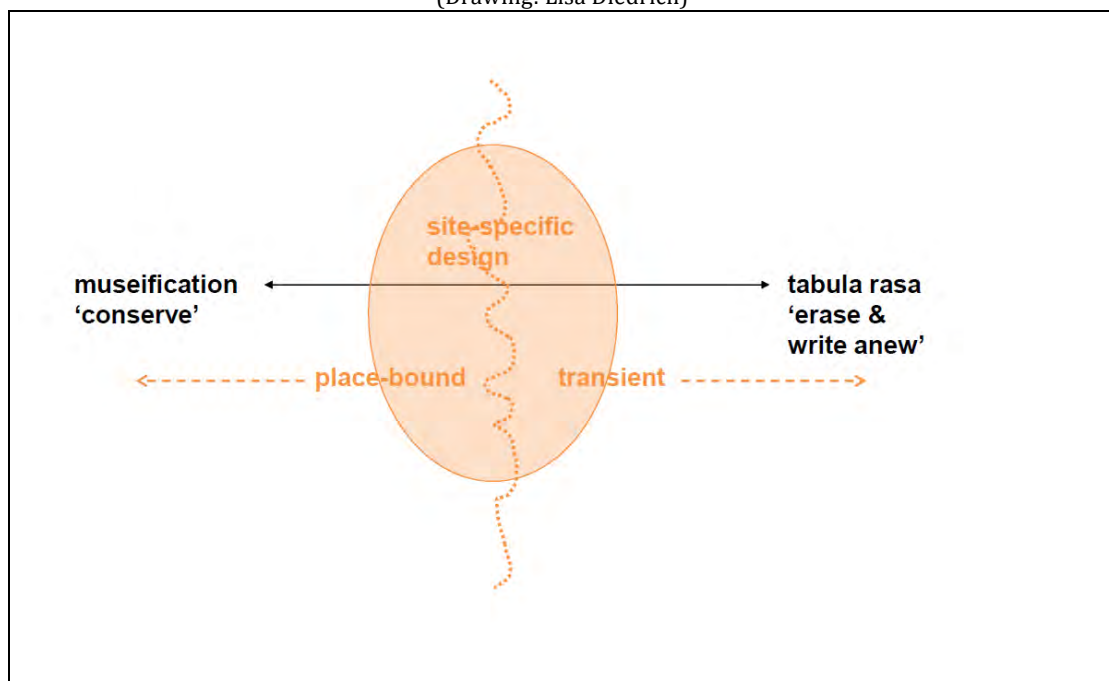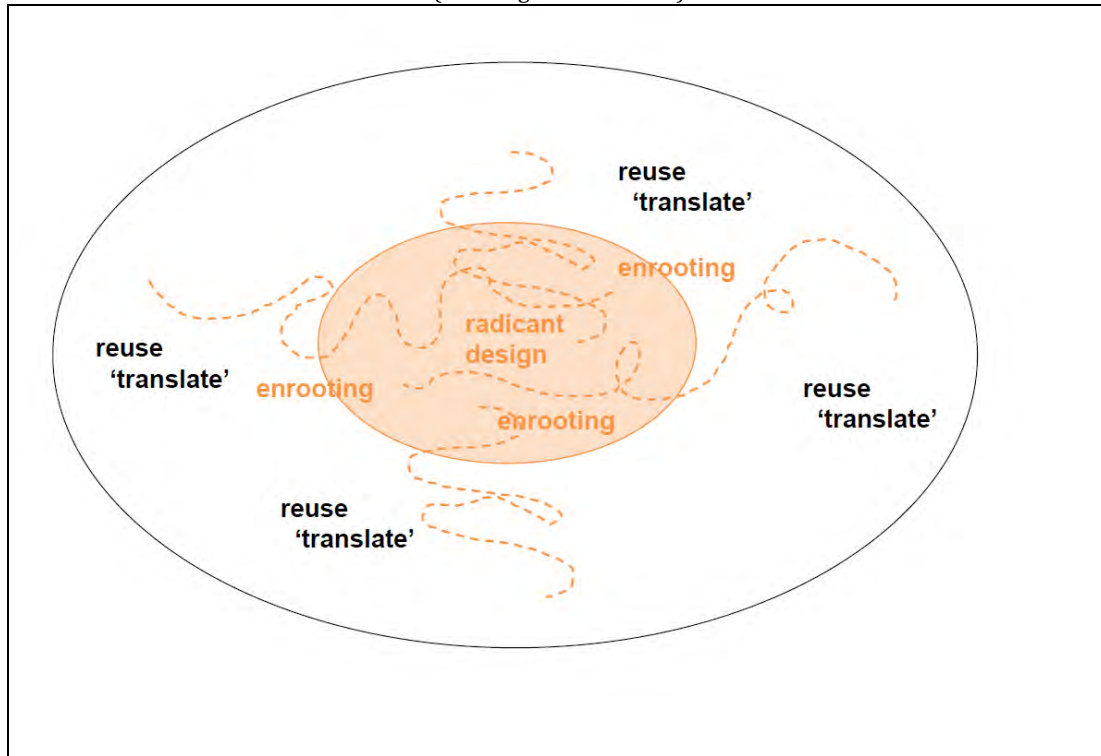(Drawing: Lisa Diedrich)

Figure 6. Radicant design as continuous enrootings in a shared space of translation,
fitting into a 21th century conception of world making as reuse
(Drawing: Lisa Diedrich)

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