

Disconnecting

Your mind

A spot beyond imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Night falls. After a busy day, the late diner has been more than welcome. Satisfied I crash on the couch. Done. I turn on the TV. After a bit of zapping up and down the channels, I suddenly feel agitated. The programmes overrule each other with tasteless entertainment, endless blathering about stuff we really don't need to know and subjects that will be repeated until the end of time but were already exploited to the max ages ago. I realise this ritual won't give me any satisfaction at all.

Ten years ago, after my repeated but unfruitful attempts to graduate as a bachelor in economics, I decided to go into banking. Back then it seemed like a wise decision. I thought a career in finance would give me security and peace of mind. My employer fulfilled my materialistic desire with a brand new company car, with limitless fuel card. Finally things seemed to be in the bag. Three years later, the year I turned 30, I got more or less stressed out by the absurd work I was doing. Solving other peoples' money problems didn't give me any gratification whatsoever. One day, I was transferring 25 million euros to a private account like it was nothing. This got me thinking. A few months later, I basically got myself fired because of this growing negative attitude towards commercial banking. With the financial crisis banging on the front door at that same time, my career in banking came to a complete standstill. A few months later I got hired as an ambulance driver, accompanying doctors in emergency situations. I accepted it with joy. It gave me the peace of mind and the time I needed to be able think about my next step in life.

One year and a dozen options later, on a very nice spring day, I was sitting in the Vondelpark with a friend. She asked me why I never tried to apply for art academy. Apparently I was always talking about it. I realised that I actually didn't have the guts to try. She pointed me to the fact that I really had nothing to lose. I agreed. I applied. I got accepted. Three Months later I was living my wildest dream.

Since my financial situation changed after I quit banking, the rent on the shared apartment in the centre of Amsterdam became too expensive. I found a room on a shared houseboat at the outskirts of the city. It turned out to be the perfect trade! No trams, no cars, no bikes, just a handful of neighbours, a lot of green and water all around. It didn't take me long to realise this was exactly what I needed. It's a home, where my mind is able to come to rest. Here, I can disconnect from the hectic city. I can remove myself from the machine we call the world, without anyone noticing.

So, why am I watching crap oozing out from the television?!
Crap that is even financed by frequent attempts to get into
your head and boost the weakness of our materialistic desires.
Every 20 or so minutes, the crap I'm watching has a break
filled with bullshit. I need to go outside, a bit of nothing
around me. But lucky me, my favourite bit of nothing is at a
walking distance of just 5 minutes. It's the perfect spot.

THE SPOT

When I found 'the spot', it felt like I was the first human being ever to have this privilege. As if I walked through an invisible magical door, I stepped into some kind of time machine. Not the one that allows you to travel in time, but the one that disconnects your timeline from the timeline of the world around you. Maybe, because I've always been keen on finding interesting spots, it didn't take a lot of effort to notice the potential here. Hidden behind a rowing club and, with until recently, an old and forgotten warehouse, at the dark and quiet south bank of the Amstel river. There's a small pier, running about 20 metres into the river, just enough to disconnect me from the riverbank. From there the view is magnificent. It overlooks the river at its widest point, with the city of Amsterdam on the opposite side. I walk to the end of the pier and settle down. My legs are hanging over the edge, my feet dangling just inches from the water.

Underneath the pier, the water is moving, sometimes quite rough because there's more wind here than in the centre of the city. This reminds me of the times I went sailing with my dad. No rush, no goal, just wind and water. Only now this feeling seems even better. My busy life tells me to enjoy the calmness. And I think the memories I gained since then, good and bad, let me experience this calmness more intensely than the trips with my dad used to do. I can literally feel my body come to rest. I have disconnected myself from the busy world. I can still see the world is moving, but as it seems it doesn't need my presence all of the time.

So, here I am. I'm living my dream. I'm writing my thesis. Since I do realise my whole mindset is benefitting from being in this spot, I wonder what it is exactly that provides me with this welcome calmness. There probably are a lot more spots like this one. What if I can get to the bottom of this spot and find the secrets to its effects? Maybe I can figure out the recipe, so I can to seek similar spots or implement it on spaces that have a stressful effect without the recipe. In the following chapters I will analyse all of the elements, which I think are crucial for this stress-relieving experience.





ANALYSING THE ELEMENTS

WATER

Because you're practically surrounded by it, the river Amstel is the most obvious one of all elements. Besides water being the most important element of the existence of life itself, it is widely known to be calming for the mind. The open seas, lakes, rivers, canals and waterfalls attract people who want the breath of fresh air.

Thanks to gravity and because of water being fluent, it makes its way through the tiniest of holes. Water always travels to the lowest possible point. This makes it move. Down rivers, waterfalls and manmade canals. The sound it produces is a constant white noise, which is proven to be relaxing. It's even sold as a product to help babies go to sleep. Explained with Simon Stevins' law, the law of communicating vessels, gravity and pressure make the water levelled when it finally ends up in lakes or seas. This balance is relaxing for the eye and thus the mind. Moreover, it gives us the power of overview. We can see as far as the horizon. We can actually see the bending of the earth. The magnitude of this massively big planet becomes visible for the eye. The mirroring quality of water provides extra light and lets us see the world from a different perspective. And the ever-changing tides, waves, streams and waterfalls give water the impression that it's alive, unlike its steady counterpart, the earth itself.

But what is it that makes water so powerful? In most cases, open water is much colder than the human body. Because of this we cannot stay in it for too long. It will cause the human body to go into a hypothermic state, which we all know is deadly. And since we cannot walk or even stand on it, water historically is a natural border, hard to overcome. It has been one of the most dominant borders ever. This impossibility has been so powerful it is even used as a tool to convince people to believe in more than just one religion. According to ancient sagas, Jesus apparently walked on water and Moses could even split a sea in half. Not likely, but it tells something about the invincibility of water. Since the beginning of mankind, we've been conquering the open waters. At some point, we started using ships to get us overseas. Together with the countless myths about the dangers of the unknown world beneath the surface, sailing was the perfect topic for numerous exciting tales on exploring the world. You may know the pirate story about The Kraken, a legendary sea monster that lived off the coast of Norway and Iceland. And of course Nessie, the mysterious creature claimed to inhabit Loch Ness in Scotland. Not so long ago, airplanes became the solution to relieve us from the impracticalities of the mighty oceans. Now, high above the dangers of the open

waters, we're trying to conquer gravity by imitating birds. With hundreds at the same time, we're sitting ducks in an enlarged tin can with wings, and still not very safe and sound. Despite all modern techniques and their appliances, we'll never be able to truly overcome this massive natural border with only using the strength of the human body.

Water is often used for its quality to tranquilise the mind. The park, an artificial place to free your mind, is only complete if it includes a pond. City canals were intentionally built as water roads for transportation, but today they function as a tourist attraction and to integrate the expanding city with its surroundings. Water has always inspired architects. It can form the perfect match if used in the right way. It seems to be the irreplaceable element, which gives a building the balance it needs to become a place to find peace of mind. *"The most essential auditory experience created by architecture is tranquillity. Architecture presents the drama of construction silenced into matter, space and light. Ultimately, architecture is the art of petrified silence."*¹ This refers to spaces, which are silence for the ears. *"A powerful architectural experience silences all external noise; it focuses our attention on our very existence, and with all art, it makes us aware of our fundamental solitude."*² But without any doubt, this also applies to the eyes. There's an obvious reason we sleep with our eyes closed. Tranquillity for the eyes means tranquillity for the mind.

There are quite a few renowned buildings where the qualities of water have been integrated successfully. One of the most celebrated ones is "Falling Waters" build by Frank Lloyd Wright (IMAGE 2). The rocky waterfalls, on which the house was built, seem to be part of the construction. The structure becomes one with its environment. This 'organic architecture' is based on the idea of being human, being part of nature and culture at the same time.³

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005), p. 51.

² Ibid, p. 52

³ Juhani Pallasmaa, "Orchestrating Architecture" (*Oase, Building atmosphere*, No. 91, 2013), p. 57



IMAGE 2 // FALLING WATERS // FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT



IMAGE 3 // QUERINI STAMPALIA PALACE // CARLO SCARPA

A great example of water being successfully integrated within an architectural structure is Carlo Scarpa's restoration of The Querini Stampalia Palace in Venice, Italy (IMAGE 3). Water enters from the channel, which the palace overlooks through water gates along the inner walls; in a little channel with two labyrinths sculpted in alabaster and Istrian stone by the sides; and it is located in the garden: in a spacious multi-levelled basin, made of cement and mosaic. Because water is both the main element of the city and that of the building, the subtle overlap between the inside and the outside make the structure seem to be one with the city. The most striking thing about it is that the changing tides can be experienced on the inside. This makes the building transform continuously, without it being directly visible for the eye.

It is the power of water to adapt to its surroundings. This exact power should be an example of how we could adapt ourselves to our surroundings with the given elements of a certain time and place. This quality of water is also described in 'Ni Ten Ichi Ryu' (the Way of Strategy), a book on the teaching of sword fighting in ancient Japan, written in 1645 by Kensei (Sword Saint) Miyamoto Musashi. The second of 5 books is called 'the Water Book'. *"With water as the basis, the spirit becomes like water. Water adopts the shape of its receptacle, it is sometime a trickle and sometimes a wild sea."*⁴

VOID

Void is the backbone of the Japanese Buddhist culture. Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the sixth century AD, coming from the Asian continent. The 'Diamond Sutra', an important, classic Buddhist text, is about the nature of wisdom and of essential emptiness (śūnyatā). The emptiness has no beginning and no end. *"By Void, I mean that, which has no beginning and no end. Attaining this principle means not attaining the principal. The way of strategy is the way of nature. When you appreciate the power of nature, knowing the rhythm of any situation, you will be able to hit the enemy naturally and strike naturally. All this is the way of the Void."*⁵ The Diamond Sutra contains a theory called 'musō', which states that *"life and death are one and that human beings should not become too attached to any one idea or place but should always remain aware of being in eternal time."*⁶

⁴ Miyamoto Musashi, *Go Rin No Sho*, 1645, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 17.

⁶ William W. Braham, Jonathan A. Hale, *Rethinking Architectural Technology*. Kisha Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Metabolism* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 240.

Metabolism as an architectural movement tells us the necessity on the awareness of our natural surroundings, in combination with the conviction that technology is an inevitable product of evolution. Metabolism stems from the Japanese and therefore the Buddhist culture. The first official declaration of this movement was made in 1958: 'Metabolism 1960 – a Proposal for a New Urbanism'. A key passage in this declaration reads: "We regard human society as a vital process, a continuous development from atom to nebula. The reason why we use the biological word metabolism is that we believe design and technology should denote human vitality... ..First, it reflects our feelings that human society must be regarded as one part of a continuous natural entity that includes all animals and plants. Second, it expresses our belief that technology is an extension of humanity. This belief contrasts with the Western belief that modernisation is a repetition of a conflict between technology and humanity."⁷ One of the elements in Metabolism is the Japanese concept of 'Ma', which relates to en-spaces or in-between spaces. "Ma has various meanings, amongst them: timing, silence, buffer zone, boundary zone, and void. In addition it carries the same connotations as en-space, or in-between space."⁸ This in-between space is found in Japanese drama, when there is a moment of immobility in which change is indicated, as well as in Japanese oriental music, when silent intervals provide the necessary moment for adjustment. "The same thing applies to calligraphy. The written ideograph is itself real, but it is the spatial proportion and balance of single ideographs or groups of them that give the ideograph power (...) Thus the philosophy of en-space, nurtured and developed in all of the fine arts, in the performing arts, the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and also architecture and city planning, is well established in Japanese society. It is also thought to be effective as a philosophy for today, as it enables the peaceful coexistence of the individual and the whole, or of contradictory elements."⁹

It is these en-spaces, or in-between spaces, that water has the power to provide for us in a most poetic way. It forms the natural boundary, the natural pause, which is reflected to our minds and makes us tranquil. It gives us the opportunity to disconnect from the surroundings and our hectic, everyday life.

⁷ William W. Braham, Jonathan A. Hale, *Rethinking Architectural Technology*. Kisha Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Metabolism* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 233.

⁸ Ibid, p. 242.

⁹ Ibid



IMAGE 4 // COUVENT SAINTE-MARIE DE LA TOURETTE // LE CORBUSIER

A perfect example of an architect, who had tranquillity running through his veins, is Le Corbusier. It goes without saying he has been a great influence and example for many others, including architects of the Metabolism movement.¹⁰ Although he didn't believe in God, he was quite a spiritual man. To get into a spiritual state of mind, he felt there's a need for a related space filled with tranquillity and thus simplicity. The last years of his life he spent in a newly built convent he designed himself, Couvent Sainte-Marie de la Tourette (IMAGE 4). A truly astonishing place. Here he had the chance to define the values of simplicity in a building. And simplicity is Le Corbusier without a doubt. He was against any form of decoration and wrote critically about Rome, the city where traditionally young architects were schooled. *"The Lesson of Rome is for wise men, for those who know and can appreciate, who can resist and can verify. Rome is the damnation of the half-educated. To send architecture students to Rome is to cripple them for life. The Grand Prix de Rome and the Villa Medici are the cancer of French Architecture."*¹¹ From time to time Le Corbusier over-reacted to achieve his desire for simplicity. After finishing Villa Savoye, France, he reacted with indignant dismay to Madame Savoyes wish to place an armchair and two sofas in the living room. He thought the contemporary daily life is paralyzed by the unfortunate idea that we cannot do without furniture and this concept should be eliminated and replaced by the term 'material'.¹² Without any doubt, if it's up to Le Corbusier, void is the key to happiness. In general, he made a good point. The in-between spaces are the spaces where we can free our minds. The bigger your physical space, the bigger your mental space. A bit like a tidy house provides a tidy head.

WIND

Of course it's not just the water, which has this power of relaxation. The invisible void surrounding us we call 'air', has the same tranquilising qualities as the en-space. The fact we cannot see it, does not make it less effective. The air can be experienced when the wind is making it move. And together with the wind, water gets the extra attention it deserves. The wind blows ripples in the water, sometimes as small as goose bumps and sometimes as big as a house. Even though in real life the picture might be as steady as a rock, these ripples – or 'waves' as we call them – make the mirrored world move. At

¹⁰ Rem Koolhaas, Kayoko Ota. *Project Japan, Metabolism talks*. (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), p. 29, *Interview with Arata Isozaki*.

¹¹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Dover: Dover Publications inc, 1985), p. 173.

¹² Notes taken from: Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2014), p. 68.

night the waves make the moonlight glitter in the water. The night lights of the city seem to have a magical impact when they make the dark water shimmer.

The wind has the power to give a poetic touch to the surroundings. I love it when in autumn the wind blows the loosened leaves up in the air, as high as possible. You can actually see the motion of the wind in the way the leaves are sailing through the air. Like the ripples the wind causes in the water, the wind forms a map of its motion on the water surface. The wind makes everything move that is not steady as a rock. It has an uncontrollable quality. It comes and goes, strong or weak, from every possible direction. Although the high skyscrapers of the city may be steady as a rock, they also form an amplifier for the wind and a sensational experience on ground level, like being in an uncontrolled wind tunnel. Although this quality is not meant to do so, it makes you feel even smaller with the magnitude of the surrounding buildings. With the wind blowing, the location of the spot I described, gives the same sensational feeling. The wind, it is the light to the eyes of the skin.

Since the beginning of time, water and wind have gone hand in hand. The combination used to be a big part of the recipe in exploring the world and the main ingredient for trading companies around the globe. Of course I'm talking about sailing. Today, sailing isn't inevitable for the explorers and traders to get around the world anymore. Today, sailing is practiced to forget about the world around us for a little while. It has the perfect recipe.

SOUND

Again taking a look at the quote of Pallasmaa writing about the importance of silence as a quality to focus on our very existence.¹³ This power of silence, which goes for all our senses, is the key to tranquillity. It lifts us to another level, a level in which we enter a void. You enter a space that seems in between the real and the unreal. Churches, libraries and museums are good examples of places where the quality of silence provides the experience of this in-between.

The howling sound of the wind blowing through the skyscrapers and over the open water, which gives an almost fateful feeling; the sound of the water splashing against the pier and the stone tiles at the waterfront; the sounds the seagulls make. They all overrule the hectic sounds of the city. Together with its sound, the city becomes distant. The gusts

¹³ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005), p. 52.

of the wind also make the sound uncontrollable. It comes and goes. The trains, metros, cars, and airplanes give an unpredictable sound performance. With incredible dynamics, but never unpleasantly disturbing because of their distance.

The performance calms down when the wind lies down. Now, only the sounds of the city are heard from a distance. It sounds smooth like a well-oiled machine, low on maintenance, never having to worry about breaking down.

LIGHT

When the water becomes as smooth as an incredibly large mirror, it reflects the view and gives us an extra perspective of the city. It gets a basement filled with light and colour.

Water and light are an amazing duo. They enhance each other visually, like nothing else can. This is exactly what Carlo Scarpa had in mind when he designed the Querini Stampalia Palace in Venice.

"One morning in 1961 at the Querini Stampalia, I asked him to keep water outside the palace.. He looked at me and after a pause he said: "Inside, inside! Water must be inside, like everywhere in the city. We just need to control and use it as a shining and reflecting substance. You will see the light reflections on the yellow and purple stuccos on the ceiling. That is so gorgeous!"¹⁴

Of course he was right. The building loses its solidness and becomes very subtle, with a somewhat poetic touch.

This amazingly subtle play with light reminds me of one of Le Corbusiers churches, Saint-Pierre in Firminy, France (IMAGE 5). Despite Le Corbusier is widely known for his, more or less failed, utopian ideas of "the new city", he had a profound sense of beauty.

"The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he give us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our

¹⁴ Quote taken from: Giuseppe Mazzariol, director of the *Fondazione Querini Stampalia* (http://www.querinistampalia.org/eng/the_mark_of_carlo_scarpa.php)



IMAGE 5 // SAINT-PIERRE // LE CORBUSIER

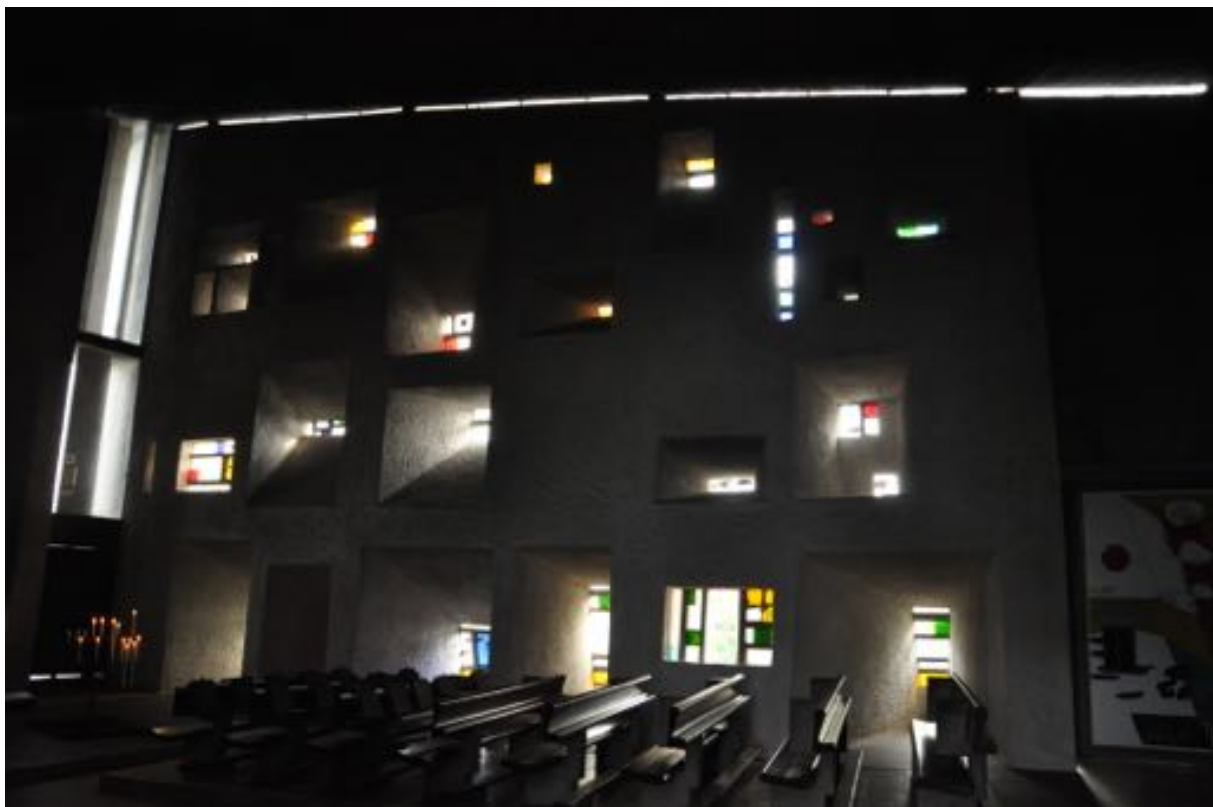


IMAGE 6 // NOTRE DAME DU HAUT // LE CORBUSIER

understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty."¹⁵

Like the Saint-Pierre and the more widely known church Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France (IMAGE 6), Le Corbusier certainly knows what is meant by the aesthetics of a building and what light does with its interior. When you see the church Saint-Pierre from the outside, you cannot foresee what experience you will get when you enter the building. The light from the outside seems to be blocked out almost completely, except for a few, with coloured paint highlighted light inlets. They are not windows, as they don't actually give a view of the outside. They are purely designed to indirectly let in exactly enough sunlight, on exactly the right spots to lift the building up in the air. I was fortunate enough to experience this last year, during a Le Corbusier field trip through the south of France. I still remember Henri Snel, head of the department Inter-Architecture of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy asked me what I thought of this building. I told him it was the most beautiful building I've ever seen. Of course I had to return the question. Without any doubt he had to agree. With the notion that, since he's an experienced architect and in age only a few years older than me, it's a pity I already had this experience at the age of 34. It's a shame Le Corbusier never had the privilege to witness his church himself, as it was only finished in 2006, 41 years after he passed away.

Not only Le Corbusier is a master of the play with light. As well as Carlo Scarpa, Louis Kahn knows how to bring the power of water and that of natural light together. The grand courtyard of the Salk Institute, La Jolla – California (IMAGE 7), is a great example of his subtle touch. The two, mirrored pavilions, made of warm "pozzuolanic" concrete, give a pinkish glow and seem to become an almost natural building material. In between them a grand courtyard made of natural stone, split in half by an artificial stream with water flowing towards the sun, which – when you look at it from the right angle – sets right at the end of the stream. And because it's Kahn who designed it, of course the whole institute is filled with daylight. The slow and subtle shadow play it's performing, justifies the buildings vainglory. Although I've never had the fortune to visit the building, it will undoubtedly be an incredible experience of peace and tranquillity. The way an Italian square can make you feel during 'pranzo' on a hot summer's day when locals rather stay inside. An absolute timeless peace of art and hard to believe this was already build in 1959.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Dover: Dover Publications inc, 1985), p. 1.

The constant change of light on the spot described in chapter 2 is, without any doubt, a spot that has similar qualities. The fact it is not built with these elements in mind, makes it even more special in my view.



IMAGE 7 // SALK INSTITUTE // LOUIS KAHN

CLOUDS

When the clouds are hovering above the water and covering the earth like a blanket, the world becomes as small as your hand can reach. If you've ever been on a ski lift, which runs through thick clouds, you have an idea on how extremely isolated mist can make you feel. Your body is hovering above the earth. You cannot see the ground.

You cannot see the chair in front of you, or the one behind you. The chairs going down come out of nowhere to pass by quickly and disappear into the same nowhere. The snow and the mist reduce every noise to a minimum. The only sound you hear is the squeaking of the rubber wheels as you pass by the poles that hold the chairs up in the air. Because the mist has a white, snowy background, your perception of depth is totally gone. You're not blind, but truly in the middle of nowhere, up in the clouds.

ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

Last but not least, the most influential element of all is of course the location itself. The pier you're sitting on is an essential piece of architecture. It takes you away from the riverbank and onto the river Amstel, as if you're surrounded by water, and disconnects you from everything you can see. In a way, it makes you feel untouchable. You are watching a 360-degree real-life show about life as pure as it gets. It makes me think of a famous work done by RAAAF (Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances). They modified bunker 599 (IMAGE 8), which used to be part of the Dutch defence system, by splitting open the bunker with its massive, thick concrete walls and creating a pier running right through it, ending in a pool of water. Besides the stories of the bunker being out in the open, this pier creates an amazing line of sight and increases the experience of depth and distance.

The city is literally at your feet, when you sit on the edge of the pier. The skyscrapers on the right, with their incredible magnitude almost form a sort of mountain like image. With your eyes almost closed you could imagine you're sitting at the waterfront with a huge cliff 100 meters across from you, with the river Amstel in between. The city becomes our modern nature. When night falls, the breaking of the sunlight colours the sky in all different shades of purple. As the sunlight weakens the brightness of the city, a whole different play of light emerges. You can see the change gradually happening but not as if it were a movement. You can experience the steady rotating of the earth. It makes you think of the speed of living and time as the power that makes all things in life irrevocable. With the city and its sky-high buildings light up, you could imagine a civilisation of cave dwellers making fire in their shelters.

All the elements above seem to have a natural connection. It doesn't seem to consist of loose elements anymore. When you take this point of view, it will help to accept modernisation as not being a conflict between technology and humanity. The pier becomes the stepping stone to acceptance of everything that happens.



IMAGE 8 // BUNKER 599 // RAAAF

DISCONNECTION

With finding disconnection to relieve yourself of the stress caused by the hectic city, you could suggest to stay inside and close yourself off from everything that's going on at the other side of your doorstep. There are two major reasons why hiding inside your 'container' is less effective than you would expect. Your private space is not the only safe place to feel comfortable enough for meditation.

Because of our expanding technological civilisation, you could say we should make further use of the virtual world as a replacement for physical spaces to relax. People make use of modern technology in all sorts of ways to find a way to be connected without being present. It's a modern way to take part in the social game. In some cases it will work just fine, but sometimes the physical presence of the human body cannot be replaced. We need the physical presence when we meet our loved ones to begin with. But we also need the wind to blow rain in our face and the sun to burn it. We have a need of touching things and to see it with our own eyes. This also applies to experiencing a feeling. For example: people who are afraid of heights will never have that same experience when looking at a screen. The only way to experience it is to actually see the depth with your own eyes. This tells us we are living in reality and everything around us is real, including ourselves. *"The need for mindful physical presence is by no means geared only to the real, but also to reality."*¹⁶ People still write, "I was here" in toilets. And it's not to leave a message to someone who might possibly know your name and happens to find himself on this exact same toilet, which is situated in the back of a shabby bar, 15.001 kilometres from your hometown. And then still, chances are this person is of the opposite sex and looks the other way when going for a piss. You write the message to make your life real, to never be forgotten. Like your signature on the contract which claims this is YOUR life. We don't want to live in a virtual world. Even 3D virtual glasses can't do the job perfectly. We want to go on a trip around the world physically, not to see it through some techno glasses. Besides, the human body needs to be physically present when it wants to gain stress relieve, which is a result of the on-going fast paced technological progression. For the same reason more and more people are doing yoga, tai chi and some people even suggest 'mindfulness' should be a class taught in high school. The term originates from Buddhism and is translated from the Pali word sati.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gernot Böhme, *"Atmosphere as a Mindful Physical Presence in Space"* (Oase, Building atmosphere, No. 91, 2013), p. 31.

¹⁷ Notes taken from: *"Atmosphere as a Mindful Physical Presence in Space"* (Oase, Building atmosphere, No. 91, 2013), p. 21-32

*"The Buddha himself defined sati as the ability to remember, illustrating its function in meditation practice with the four satipatthanas, or establishings of mindfulness."*¹⁸

*"And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness."*¹⁹

In other words: meditation is hot right now. Of course the reason is quite understandable. In this fast paced, over-connected world, parents know what their kids are in need of because it's troubling to them as well.

The second reason is time. When you lock the front door, close the curtains, switch off the television and close yourself off completely from the outside world, you have no awareness of time. Except if you have a cat that now and then swings its convulsing tale when it's in a vivid dream, nothing around you moves, at all. You will lose track of time eventually. And we all know time is of the essence, time is money and spare time is more precious than ever. Because modern technology is so deeply rooted in our everyday lives, we are constantly on edge to see if someone's seeking contact or if something's happening. When closing yourself off, without any professional training, you will become disorientated and go completely mad before anybody ever noticed you were gone. And that's where this spot comes in. You can see with your own eyes that the world will keep moving without your help.

Everything still moves: the cars, the trains, the airplanes the bikes, and with them of course the people who are using these machines to get somewhere. Think of all those people. It's a great thought to relax with. Where do they come from? Where are they going? What is their purpose? Are they moving with good or bad intentions? And in the end it doesn't even matter at all. The nice thing about this, is that the world is still moving on, even though it has no clear goal. The acceptance of life is in front of your eyes.

¹⁸ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Mindfulness Defined* (2008)

¹⁹ Ibid.

According to Peter Zumthor, framing the landscape strengthens the power of the place. He claims that "frames are nice".²⁰ I both agree and disagree, and not just because I think the word 'nice' is a dishonourable word to describe the beauty of things. It's more for the usual things, which make you feel comfortable, like sitting next to a heater when it's minus 5 degrees outside. It's also not that I plead against the use of framing the outside as a tool to strengthen the view of a landscape. Like the frames, which are used to emphasise the depth in theatre decors. In this case I disagree because he refers to the use of windows to frame the view on the outside. Being out in the open is important to sense the real. Even though you can see through windows what's going on behind them, they form a frame, which makes the scene behind it virtual. Everyone knows what the frame of a car does to the behaviour of its occupants. People who drive cars act as if they are invulnerable to the world. They sing along with the radio, make all kinds of insinuating gestures. The car is their private space in which they are closed off from the world. Riding a bike gives a completely different perspective of the world and because you're more vulnerable, you will act more cautiously. Of course it's nice to sit inside and watch the world go by through a window. Especially during wintertime, when you're holding a hot chocolate with both hands and from behind a glass window, watching people ploughing through the snow. It's like watching a Funniest Home Video show. But this doesn't give you the experience of reality.

Time is something elusive. Nice things seem to slip by at a glance while shitty stings seem to last forever. From my memories I recall that sailing makes you forget everything that's got to do with time. The purpose of sailing is not to get somewhere. In fact, the purpose is to get out in the open and go nowhere. The only thing that matters is the wind. This is a completely different experience of time, an experience that I sense on this spot too.

Being busy with not being busy. Thinking of things that move around you.

All those elements give this spot an unforgettable experience. But that is not why it's unique. There are numerous places in and around Amsterdam that share the same qualities. There's got to be something else. Something, which is striking more than anything else. It's something more obvious than you could imagine. The spot is located exactly where you can oversee the river Amstel at its best. You're actually sitting on the throne of Amsterdam at the very beginning of the river Amstel where it's entering the city.

²⁰ Peter Zumthor, "Concentrated Confidence" (*Oase, Building atmosphere*, No. 91, 2013), p. 61.

You can see as far as the eye can reach. And with the city flanking on the left and right side of the river, it's even better than a clear view onto the sea, where the occasional ship of unknown size is your only waypoint. The buildings now function as a gauge. This gives an indication of the actual distance you can see. This distance goes beyond imagination. Which is exactly what strikes me most. There are things you can imagine but there are also some things, which just too beautiful or too big for your mind to imagine. Quite often I have vivid dreams, which are set in imaginary spaces. Those spaces I cannot recall when I'm awake again. The spaces are constantly shifting and changing faster than the scenes in a movie trailer. This goes beyond imagination, even though you have a strong feeling you've experienced it for real. The dynamics on the spot at the Amstel also go beyond imagination. But since you know it's there it's maybe even better than a vivid dream. Reality becomes relative.



IMAGE 9 // DE OMVAL // REMBRANDT VAN RIJN

CONCLUSION

During my research into this location, I found out this exact spot at the river as it enters the city, was reproduced in an etching by no one less than Rembrandt van Rijn (IMAGE 9). Maybe this seems irrelevant, but on the other hand it endorses its uniqueness. Today, the tallest building of Amsterdam is standing in front of you. Of course it's called the Rembrandt Tower. But, as if nothing has changed, here the river Amstel still is the natural borderline between the city of Amsterdam and its south-side countryside. And to soften your possible sentiments about the loss of the windmill you see in Rembrandt's etching, the high skyscrapers of today bring extra dynamics to the viewing. The power of all the elements above makes you realise you're not having in a vivid dream. You can see it with your own eyes. And seeing is believing. It's something real, unlike the special effects used in the increasingly popular virtual world. It's like watching shooting stars. About the joy of the moment you cannot get from a 2d image or a computer animated 3D picture. The irreplaceability of the moment due to your physical presence becomes more important than ever. There is no novel writer anywhere on earth capable of describing spots like these as if you are actually there. Those experiences make you obliged to go outside. They should be an accelerator to your quest to find more spots that give you a similar experience.

I could think of creating a similar experience at spots, which seem to be the exact opposite of this one and don't have anything in common, by introducing these core-elements. But trying to find an (all-round) architectural addition as a solution for unpleasant spots seems not only impossible but also a bit disrespectful to this location. The replica of Venice in Las Vegas is a perfect example. Its uniqueness should be untouched and cherished. Like a poem cannot be reproduced using different words.

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IMAGES

- Image 1 *De Omval*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Picture by Thijs Verster.
- Image 2 Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Falling Waters*, Mill Run, USA.
Picture by Paolo Ermano (www.divoti.it).
- Image 3 Scarpa, Carlo. *Querini Stampalia Palace*, Venice,
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- Image 4 Le Corbusier. *Couvent Sainte-Marie de la Tourette*,
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- Image 5 Le Corbusier. *Saint-Pierre*. Firminy, France.
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- Image 7 Kahn, Louis. *Salk Institute*, La Jolla, USA.
Picture by Andy Kenelly (www.andykennelly.com).
- Image 8 RAAAF, *Bunker 599*. Zijderveld, The Netherlands.
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- Image 9 Rijn, Rembrandt van, *De Omval*. About 1650. Museum
no. CAI 609. Etching (Bartsch 209, State II).
Bequeathed by Constantine Alexander Ionides.