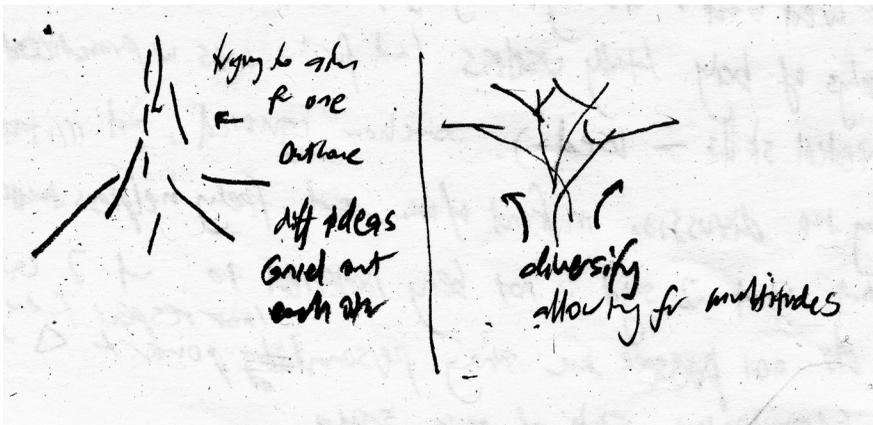


personal observations from

## Building a Proposition for Future Activities 2017



**#3: approaches to participation**

## **What assumptions and hierarchies are at work in the participatory design process?**

### **Who decides what is 'good', for whom?**

### **How do the hosts relate with the participants and their ideas?**

Why did I feel so much more comfortable at Atelier Bow-Wow's table compared to the other groups? What was it about their way of working, that drew me back, again and again?

Bearing my bias towards Bow-Wow from the start, I will reflect on what I had experienced<sup>1</sup>. I will refer to the architects as 'hosts' and the others 'participants'.

### **Goals/Values**

There are two tasks in collaboration/participatory practice:

1. The goal/task: What we are trying to do here?
2. How do we go about achieving the goal, with the specific people and available resources at hand?

Normally a design process aims to narrow down the range of design options in order to decide upon a single and supposedly superior solution at the end. If we see the city as a resource—in other words, as a space that keeps open future opportunities for action—it is not expedient to decide on a single design option at an early stage. One

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<sup>1</sup> Note on the method: I was a participant-observer in this situation, focusing on lived experience, subject feelings and atmospheres. I used my body, my social interactions and the act of drawing/spending time as an instrument of feeling out the situations (instead of quantitative data). I believe that human is at the center of design: design is not just about objects, but how they relate with other beings.

alternative is to work on many designs at the same time, before comparing them with one another and fixing on the best solutions at the latest possible stage.<sup>2</sup>

From what I could perceive, Bromsky and Assemble's self-defined goal for the week was: to come up with a winning design as close to completion as possible (aiming for closure/resolution). Valuing: convincing design.

For Bow-Wow, it was to explore with the people here, understand their ways of living and come up with as many designs as we could—an opening up of possibilities. Valuing: human diversity.

Tomatsu's initial question, 'how to feel comfortable in a new place?' reflects a distinct line of inquiry. Here is an attitude of humility: I am not the people who will be living here, therefore I do not know what would be comfortable for the future residents. Perhaps we could use this opportunity to learn from them, and understand their ways of living and their needs here?

This attitude opens up the participatory process to everyone involved. Anyone could contribute from their specific background (regardless of specialty for architecture), simply because we all have lived experienced with built spaces, in a convivial setting.

As it is more about opening up (brainstorming) than closing down (editing), they had oriented the week towards the earlier stage of creative process, leaving the (more specialist-oriented) editing debates for later.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Kretschmann, Tim Rieniets, 'Designing Openness: Urban Design Options for the Re-use of an Airfield: a Project in Dübendorf' p 83, in *The City as Resource: Texts and Projects 2005-2014*, Ed, Tim Rieniets, Nicholas Kretschmann, Myriam Perret; Chair of Prof. Kees Christiaanse, ETH Zurich, jovis Verlag GmbH, Berlin, 2014

Goal affects what is valued in the process, how the human beings related with each other, how the available material is utilised, and the process of work and its atmosphere.

Thus Bow-Wow's goal circumvented the argumentative debates that I experienced in the other teams, where I had felt inadequate, as I lacked architectural background to contribute anything meaningful. It felt to me that the debates over design decisions were mainly based on assumptions and speculation—imagining what would be good from models and sketches, rather than actual embodied experience of the proposed design.

### **Staring the relating/Initiating Encounter**

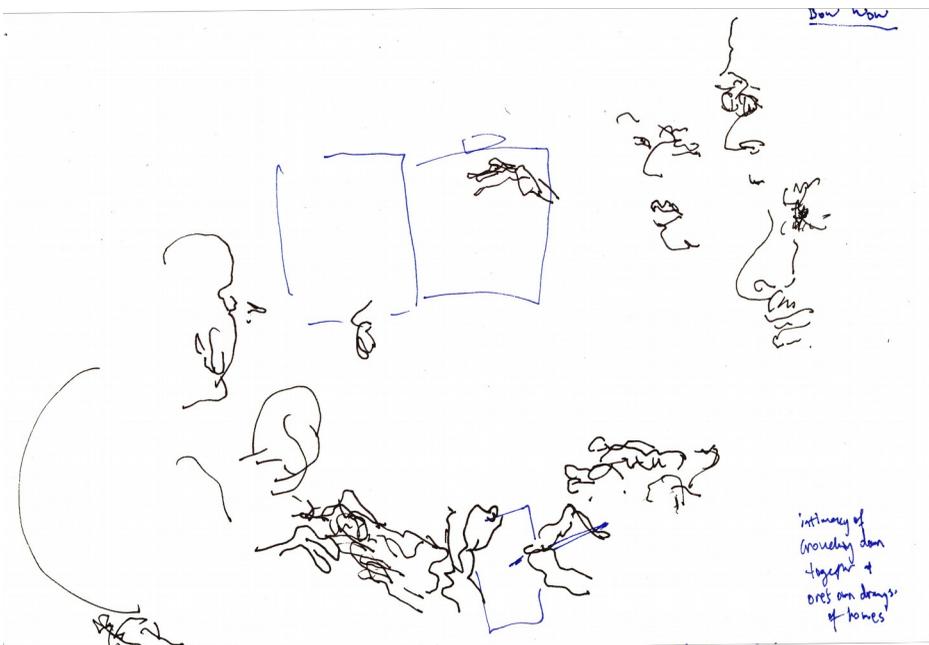
How do we moved from complete strangers to co-creators in a team?

Each group started with a randomly assigned mix of students (design, architecture, building), potential future residents from various backgrounds. With Bromsky, we had a 30 second self-introduction round, and immediately went onto looking at the brief and site-specific facts. The hosts had brought a model of an idea for the design and specific descriptions like a half-sunken workshop to eliminate the need for an elevator, thus reducing building costs. By the end of the second day, the team had made a scale model of the site, with sand matching the slope of the terrain, and blocks of potential spaces.

‘Could you draw to help me understand?’

The Bow-Wow team started with everyone drawing their family, each persons profession or hobby. For example, Tomatsu's drawings shows

that he has a wife and a brother who likes music. There was a shoe-maker in the group. By the end of the second day they had moved onto drawing their homes back in their home countries. When I joined the discussion, through two translations, I heard stories of cultural festivals and how there were separate living rooms for men and women, and often was used for large number of guests to stay. Finegrained details came out as Tomatsu's curiosity probed aspects not show. 'Could you tell me about this?'



Rapport also grew as more stories were shared, crouching around such intimately handmade things, each person is an individual with their unique, valued stories.

## **Roles, hierarchies: how do the hosts relate with the participants?**

The structure of the participatory process meant hierarchies and rules from the start: specialists vs students/apprentices vs 'new inhabitants'; paid vs non-paid; organisers vs participants; who is supposed to guide whom<sup>3</sup>.

However, each person relates to this structure differently. With Bromsky and Assemble, I felt like an (mismatched) intern: I was assigned tasks to do and needed approval before proceeding, while the more important people did their important tasks on the computer.

Clear division of labour based on one's specialization: as I was the social design person, so I should think about the 'welcoming person', Segregated from the rest. Cut up the task and do a small part of it, without the need to understand the rest of the design. My individual contribution was diffused into the 'colletive work'. The same approach can be seen in the assembly line that Assemble formed later, as the team worked on a model for the final presentation. The working atmosphere is of seriousness.

With Bow-Wow, I felt much more fluidity in-between the roles in the team. Tomatsu's self-introductory drawing immediately positioned him at eye-level with the participants: 'I am a human being with families and their own interests, just like you.' When Momoyo arrived later in the week, she spent the morning cutting foam-board into the

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<sup>3</sup> In this particular situation, the architecture studios were paid 2000Euros for the week, and if they win, for the design. It is a competition so there is a lot at stake for the architects. The participants were either here for the summer school, as interested students, or as future residents, to gain some experience with the potential to apply their specialist knowledge. There is a meagre monetary reward from the jobcenter, free food and sometimes travel allowances.

required size, so the rest of the team could make models from them. I was also impressed that both them and ConstructLab took the time out and got their hands dirty preparing food for everyone, where the organisers had suggested that the architects nominate a recipe to be carried out by the cooking team of 'potential future residents'.

'Fahim is good at ...'

I felt that Tomatsu and Momoyo's words of appreciation, encouragement and support, helped the participant to feel comfortable to develop ideas. Atmosphere of care and conviviality and appreciation/valuing/celebration of surprises and unique individuals, diverse ideas. As the week progressed, I observed things made out of self-initiated agency: participants made things because they wanted to try out their ideas, not because they had been told to complete a task. eg. Saad's house.

In their final presentation, one could sense the value the hosts feel for their participant's unique contributions, where names proudly displayed with cartoon depictions of each member. Momoyo said 'each one of us had very different backgrounds, that is very important'.

### **How do the host relate with the ideas generated?**

What kind of initial ideas are there, and how tightly do they hold onto it through the process? How willing are they to appreciate and improvise with the surprises, misunderstandings etc?

Assemble and Bromsky both relied on the information generated in the previous week to work out the functions of the space: space for theatre, cafe/cooking, craft workshops. Initial ideas persisted in the final result: e.g. chimney of the bakery as symbol of the community, use of a grid system.

Appreciating and valuing contributions, and surprises

Bow-Wow on the other hand, drew on the particular participants in the group. For example, the shoemaker's presence inspired the idea of bazaar: small stalls where local makers could trade. When a larger table was called for, Tomatsu was impressed by the makeshift trestle legs Saad made. Encouraging words: Saad is good at making... a house... a full scale model. All due credits were given to everyone, participants proudly signed the models they had made... In the final presentation, Tomatsu drew cartoon portraits of each team member.

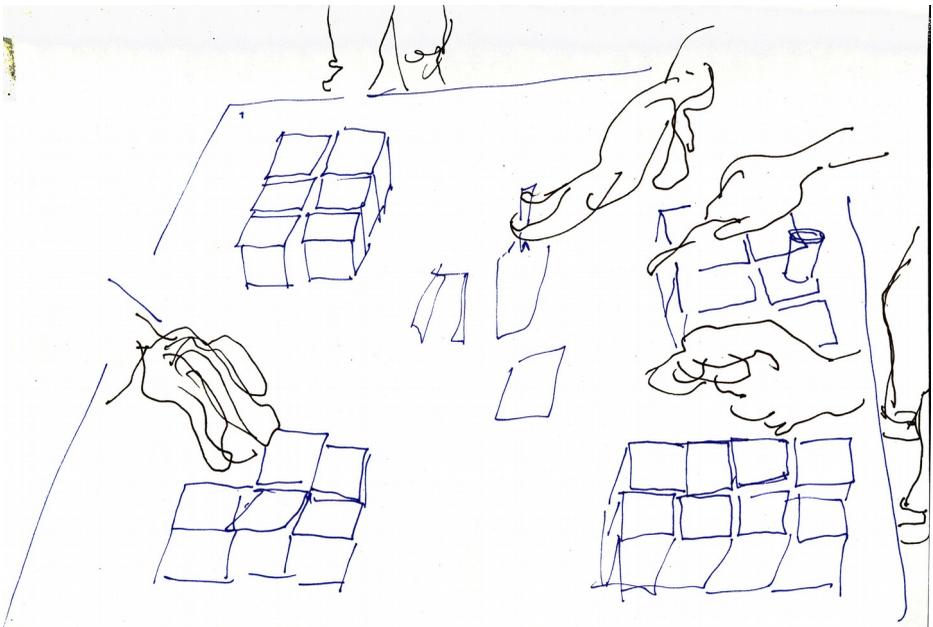
Yet, it was not all chaotic play– there was gentle guidance in Bow-Wow's process. e.g. the idea to use containers as the base unit for building, to use wood as the main building material, at a scale that can be built easily, and enjoyed for multiple purposes. 'Let's draw as much as possible.'

Reading about BowWow's past projects, I realised their initial idea was more in the way of an approach, a practice of laying down a platform and garden bed. e.g. focus on neighbourhood typologies and how people live on the streets from different cultures, as springboards for imagination and the yet-un-known to flourish.

**How are materials utilised to facilitate the creative process, and communication between everyone there? How did the working atmosphere feel? How are the decisions made?**

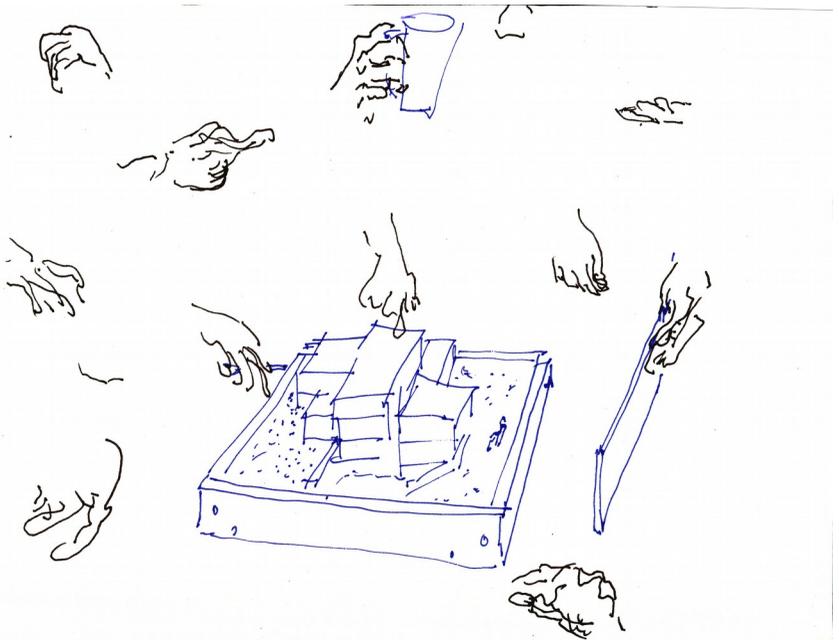
Each team had access to the same materials on site: wood workshop, paper, pens, foam and foam cutters. Yet diverse approaches occurred in how materials facilitated the creative and discussion processes.

Assemble and Bromsky both made a singular scale model to work with. 'we propose something and we can change it later.' Assemble had blocks. Everyone worked on one design at the same time. Thinking through the design/playing meant lots of discussions/design via discussion: how much space to allocate to the toilets, where the kitchen should be etc. As someone who is introverted and do not know much about architectural design, I felt timid and useless in these discussions - since I had no expert opinion to put on the table.



Moving blocks, waving hands.

I was also frustrated by the non-fine-grainedness of the blocks, and their blocky shape. In Bromsky's discussions different ideas cancelling out each other, because there was only one model to build from: 'You don't think this is good?' 'No I'm just asking.' Atmosphere of debate, seriousness.



The argumentative debates over design decisions were based mainly on assumptions and speculation (imagining what would be good, rather than embodied experience —note the presentation: BowWow's 1:1 model gave everyone a concrete experience of how it might feel like, embodied): Which idea is the best/most convincing/winning design? Who decides what is 'good', for whom? What information do we use to

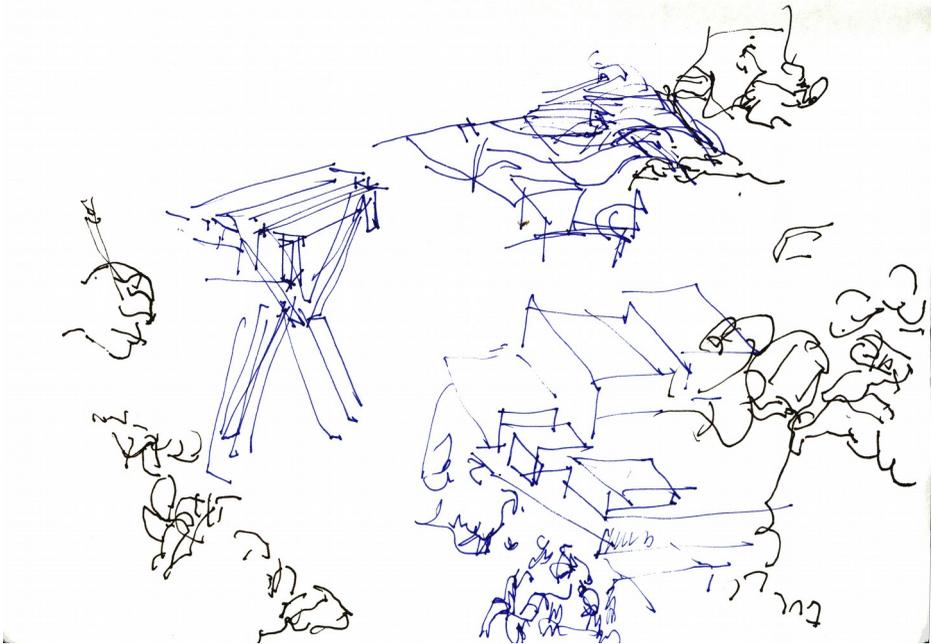
make the decisions? Which design detail looks/feels best (for me as the architect/specialist/authority)?

Bow-Wow gave everyone their own pieces of paper, and later modeling foam to play with. Multiple ideas growing simultaneously alongside each other, co-existence, garden of multitudes. Their table had an atmosphere of gentle and individual making, absorbing in their own imagination. Spacious enough to help each other with gluing. Convivial. Spirit of play and personal stories and quirky details e.g. Afghanistan well. This peaceful, gentle process allowed one's interests and speciality to emerge, follow one's instincts, a slow growing, building and bouncing of ideas, care and friendship.

Diversity and cross-pollination. 'Let's draw as much as possible...'

Gentle activities of drawing, making dreaming sharing, fine grained conversations between small clusters of people. A certain cordial atmosphere/room formed that allowed gentle conversations.

There is space for each person to explore their budding ideas, to play and reflect and for new ideas to form (instead of exposing them to rationalization, arguments and speculation over their pros and cons).



Their table had the appearance of garden of multitudes, I felt nourished by its sense of play and creative freedom. Social reflected in the spatial...Feeling of a kindergarten playroom or art studio, rather than the streamlined seriousness of an architectural office.

In a small room one does not say what one would in a large room.

Enter your room and know how personal, how much you feel its life. In a small room with just another person what you say you may never have said before.

It is different when there is more than just another person. Then in this little room the singularity of each is so sensitive that the vectors do not resolve. The meeting becomes a performance instead of an event everyone saying their lines, saying what they said many times before.

Human Agreement is a sense of rapport, of commonness, all bells ringing in unison – not needing to be understood by example but felt as an undeniable inner demand for a presence. It is an inspiration with the promise of the possible.<sup>4</sup>

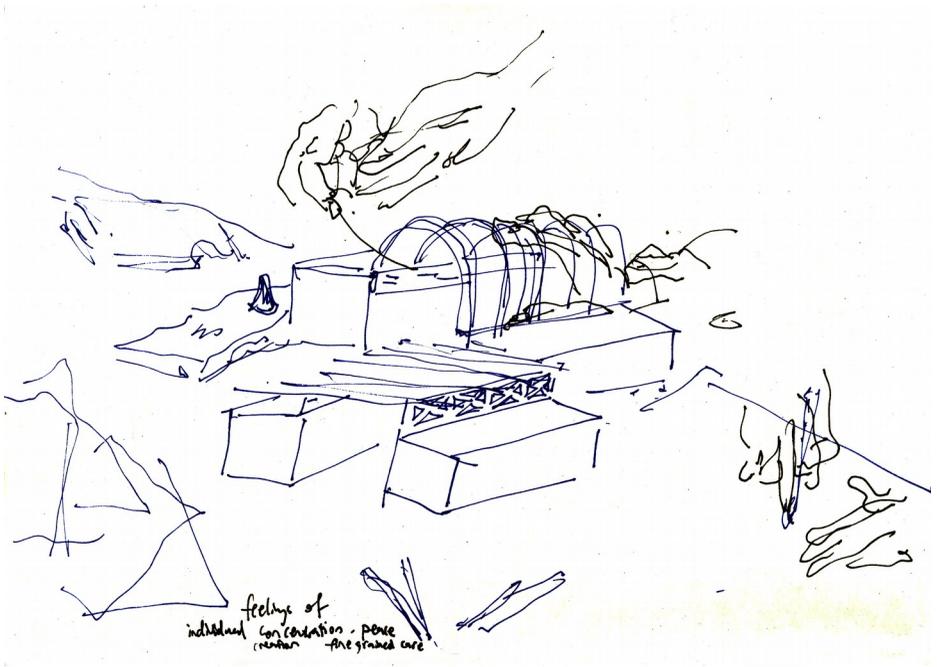
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<sup>4</sup> Louis Kahn, <https://www.japlusu.com/news/room-street-and-human-agreement>



Scale:

Saad's 1:1 model gave everyone a concrete experience of how it might feel like. Possibly the process of making formed a criterion for later decisions on the final design for Bow Wow. The sharing of where one came from and the ideas that flourished would have helped to form an understanding of the future residents' ways of living, their needs in a new place, and what might support these culturally-specific ways of living together.



## Summary

There could be more considerations to the 'How' of participatory design: How do hosts (organisers and the experts) relate with the different gifts of each individual participants? How do we co-create platforms that open out the possibilities?

<p><b>Opening:</b> to explore the possibilities with the participants, to understand 'how to feel comfortable in a new place?'</p>	<p><b>Goals</b></p>	<p><b>Closing:</b> to come up with a winning design, 'good' according to me</p>
<p>Human diversity: experiences, skills, ways of living</p>	<p><b>Valuing</b></p>	<p>host's aesthetic/design standards, 'it would be nice to...'</p>
<p>With the people here (e.g. they ways of living in home country), and mapping of the local neighbourhood</p>	<p><b>Sources of research</b></p>	<p>From the previous week, as given by the organisers</p>
<p>Relate as human beings, at eye-level-e.g. self-introduction drawings. To understand and know each other and to make friends.</p> <p>Distributed and fluid roles (e.g. cooking together, big boss doing small jobs)</p> <p>Hosts suggests and encourages, space is allowed to follow one's own instincts and desires Participants feel like valued creative individuals. Contributions credited.</p>	<p><b>Relating between humans: roles, labour divisions</b></p>	<p>Relate as co-workers: only know as much as necessary</p> <p>Hierarchy 'I don't get my hands dirty...'</p> <p>Participants feel like interns, ordered to do things. Sense of obligation.</p> <p>Their contributions diffused into the group.</p>
<p>Many co-existing, individual ideas, tested out at different scales</p> <p>Designing through dreaming (individually), sharing, being inspired by each other, and making at different scales: 1:1 offers embodied experience of the design</p>	<p><b>Materials facilitating communication</b></p>	<p>Singular model</p> <p>Designing through debate: talking, hands waving, speculating (not material experiences)</p>
<p>'Let's draw as much as possible.'</p> <p>Garden of multitudes, platform for playing, imagining and sharing, fine-grained conversations</p> <p>Surprises welcomed and appreciated</p> <p>Final editing/selection left for later</p>	<p><b>Working atmosphere, process of design</b></p>	<p>'You don't think it's good?' 'No, I'm just asking.'</p> <p>Seriousness: debating, argumentative</p> <p>New ideas treated as conflict with existing design</p>

## personal observations from

### ***Building a Proposition for Future Activities 2017***

At the start of September 2017, I joined the summer school '*Building a proposition for future activities*', organised by the HafenCity University at Poppenbüttel, Hamburg, Germany. A design experiment where five architecture studios were invited to set up studio for a week in a large tent the size of the final project, each randomly assigned a portion of the participants from diverse backgrounds: architecture/design students local and from around the EU, craft/building students from Hamburg, potential future inhabitants with relevant skills (engineering and architecture) in exile from their home countries, some interested local residents. The goal was to come up with a proposal for building a community house, to be self-build by the future users.

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