

*Three-Tier Garden:
More-than-Human
Choreographies in the
Post-COVID City*

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Introduction

The Three-Tier Garden is a more-than-human design research project exploring shared urban gardens as places for healing and recovery from the traumatic ruptures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It builds on the rapidly growing interest among urban residents in engaging with natural environments, particularly during the period of restrictions. It explores design opportunities for individual and collective post-traumatic growth by strengthening the sense of belonging and grounding, primarily through what we call mutual choreographies: how gardens and gardeners shape each other's lives through the temporal and socio-spatial infrastructures of the garden.

Lockdown brought a closing down, resorting to the places of residence, being confined to

bubbles. The post-Covid never came; we live with-Covid instead. However, many cities live in post-lockdown and have experienced opening up over the past months. We are mushrooming back into a world of even more military conflict, a cost-of-living crisis, and the immediate effects of global warming, such as record-breaking heat waves and floods. The Covid-19 pandemic is just one layer of a multi-layered crisis and also catalyses other layers: the virus is invisibly tiny, but it rearranges the distance between people, creates new social bubbles and spheres, and makes racial and class divides visible in unequal resilience and unjust access to support. Going 'Back to normal', picking up on pre-Covid paradigms of growth, is not a desirable track. Thinking of a post-Covid city presents us with an opportunity to reflect on and reconfigure infrastructures to enable different types of conviviality and repair, especially through new approaches to public spaces.



The exceptional restrictions during various lockdowns made parks and nature reserves prime destinations for people looking to spend time outside. Local support networks emerged, while internet connections became overloaded with people trying to maintain and nourish relationships with those near and far. In many ways, by focusing on the need to reconnect with nature (grounding) and to connect with other people meaningfully (belonging), the Three-Tier Garden project is concerned with ways of opening up and branching out otherwise. Engaging with urban life, the project's chosen focus is the garden as a place for care and as a pocket for grounding and belonging in the city. However, the Three-Tier Garden project does not seek to promote withdrawal into private spaces or smaller-scale communities, nor does it aim at romanticising nature in urban environments. On the contrary, the project is interested in practices of opening up. It is interested in the more-than-

human choreographies of the city as de-centring from exclusively human perspectives, spatial and temporal scales.

The politics of de-centring is intertwined with the politics of mutual care. Donna Haraway makes very clear in *Staying With the Trouble*¹ that our future depends (as it always has) on interrelationships between humans and non-humans; she speculates about de-centring approaches, especially in 'The Camille Stories' in the same book. Timothy Morton makes the case in *Hyperobjects*² that human lives can never escape the brace of much larger things (what he calls the stickiness of hyperobjects), such as global warming, even when they phase in and out of our grasp and never present themselves to us in full. Both show that mutual-care is intertwined with epistemology: we can only relate to and care for things that we notice, that we can grasp. Hence, the project focuses on developing a grasp of other-than-human beings and more-than-human temporal scales.



In practical terms, the Three-Tier Garden engaged with 't O-tje, a garden in the south of Rotterdam, surrounded by a housing block and creative community and managed by an independent foundation. The community consists of thirty-six apartments that have been steadily occupied by creative professionals since 2007. When part of the housing block was demolished, the empty site was transformed into a semi-public garden with small allotments and a greenhouse. 't O-tje is a garden combining regular gardening activity by the local community (including allotments consigned to individuals, a communal greenhouse, and gardening workshops with local schools), with a vibrant and active artistic scene that includes a yearly music festival and an event space for exhibitions, language classes, workshops and other activities. The choice of 't O-tje as the site of the project's grounding was motivated by two factors. First, the spatial layout of the garden: 't O-tje comprises several zones with various levels of public access, which favours the exploration of

the project's research dimensions of intimacy and openness; and secondly, the personal relationships between project members and the garden's community, which was key for establishing trust and gaining access to the community for the short duration of the project's activities.

This publication brings together project documentation and methodological guidelines with the aim of enabling a wider adaptation of the three-tier garden approach at other locations. We mainly focused on two goals: to practically contribute to the creation of urban sites for grounding and belonging in times of crisis, an urgent need that was highlighted during the most challenging periods of the pandemic; and to contribute to an emerging discourse within design with tools and methods of creating urban instantiations of more-than-human design principles.

In the next section, we present a brief history of the changes that have come to shape the



current state of the 't O-tje garden. We then proceed to present the sense-making and design methods that we used to work on the Three-Tier Garden project. Each tool is presented with a short explanation of its aims and development, a design template, and a presentation of the results we got by testing it with the community. For immediate access to the exercises, we have marked the instructions we shared with workshop participants in a *larger text font*. We hope that in this way they can be easily recognized and eventually repurposed.

1. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

2. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Inside 't O-tje garden

't O-tje means “the little O”. While the housing block currently has a U shape, its name reflects its original configuration. A closed-off housing block with a central, inaccessible green space, managed by a housing corporation. While the transformation from an O to a U came with a series of changes to the population, the layout, and access to the garden, the name 't O-tje remained. Housing corporations, residents and local agents contributed to the various transformations in the design of the garden of 't O-tje and its adjacent apartment buildings.

Back in 2004, the future of 't O-tje, which at that time was managed by the housing corporation Vestia, was uncertain because of the unknown structural condition of the buildings and the complexity of the rental



contracts. The NAC (New Ateliers Charlois) foundation, which had recently been formed in order to provide affordable art studio spaces and guest houses in the Charlois neighbourhood, in the south of Rotterdam, established a new form of contracts and housing regulations that helped the housing complex to overcome these uncertain times. Under the jurisdiction of Vestia Feijenoord, the management of the housing complex of 't O-tje was gradually passed to NAC, and by 2007, the thirty-six apartments were fully managed by NAC foundation. The residents of 't O-tje enjoy a number of privileges: low rental cost, the public and private site of the garden, and the possibility to choose the next tenant in the case of an apartment becoming available. The housing corporation requires 't O-tje foundation to organize regular public creative and social activities, in exchange for these privileges.

After this start the southern part of the housing complex was demolished, forming the current U-shape and leaving behind bare land and damaged pavements. As a reaction, NAC, the housing corporation and the

municipality jointly announced an open call for a new design for the demolished part. In 2009 the southern part of 't O-tje took its current form by establishing De Kas (literally the greenhouse), a semi-public garden space that facilitates a large vegetable garden and a greenhouse available for gardening and other neighbourhood activities. In the years to follow, De Kas became a site of dynamic changes in its use and spatial configuration, for example, the layout of the allotments has changed multiple times, based on the needs of its users; a pizza oven and a treehouse were built, and a compost unit was added. In the following pages, we lay out the three main stages in 't O-tje's timeline, including selected quotes from conversations with the residents that illustrate the site's history.

Now, in early 2023, 't O-tje is once again threatened with demolition due to the housing corporation's changed plans. The garden's future is tied to that of the apartment blocks, and while there are no final plans yet, one thing is certain: the current residents need to move out in 2025.

2003

*'... but the O (shape), which is now cut off...
that was empty.'*

*'In the beginning the garden was only to look
at, so you could not enter it.'*

*'... because we were here anti-squat... and the
houses were still there.'*

2007

*'... that part was already demolished, which
then actually makes actually an U-tje
(because of the shape), because it's not an O
anymore.'*

'We started our own foundation.'

*'... that was the one balcony festival. Where
there was actually music from the balconies.'*

2022

*'What makes O-tje special is that it's like
scenery for so many different activities, ...
but also that people from outside the O-tje
can come and enjoy the space.'*

*'For me it's a community of people who own
shared space, kind of; it's also a platform for
creative people who can live and work here,
but also for a connection between the artists
in the local neighbourhood. It's a project.'*



2003

5





2007



2022





Sense- making and design methods

We must take immediate action to mitigate the effects of a multilayered crisis caused by climate collapse, an ongoing pandemic, ubiquitous conflicts, and increasing inequality. At the same time, the struggle to adopt more-than-human perspectives and to grasp larger-than-human time scales feeds into the strategic agenda of crafting imaginaries to prevent being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. The Three-Tier Garden operates between speculation about shifting perspectives, grasping larger-scale processes and actionable principles for post-lockdown care, groundedness and togetherness in urban life.

Accordingly, the explorations in the sense-making phase of the Three-Tier Garden project included methods leaning on grounded theory, such as interviews departing from questions about belonging, groundedness and ruptures caused by the pandemic, but then allowing topics and sentiments to emerge from the work with the community. The explorations also aimed at activating playful imagination of the garden's future and of the community in and around it, for example, in the Low-tech Augmented Reality exercise that projected future imaginaries onto specific parts of the garden. The sense-making included experimental methods, such as enacting other-than-human beings and re-tracing their movements and choreographies, in order to invite a larger circle of beings and things to connect to in the garden.

The ideas that emerged from the sense-making phase reoriented the project's focus and feature in the design dilemmas we introduced. They were also the motivation for



the ‘treehouse’ becoming a vehicle for imagining and negotiating the garden’s future. The Low-tech AR and Multispecies Mapping carried features of ‘action research’, in that the chosen methods enabled the Three-Tier Garden team to explore the design research questions. At the same time, the activities and the follow-up reflections sensitized the community regarding their views and feelings about the garden’s present and future.



Sense- making

We used three different methodologies to make sense of site-specific aspects of life in and around the garden with two main aims: to map the fractures in the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of the community and understand the impact of the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, and to record temporal aspects of choreographies and processes in the garden. The sense-making activities revealed personal and collective histories of the site and the people living there and using the garden, the relationships between the members of the O'tje community, and finally, particular members' relationship with the garden.



Interviews

In a series of semi-structured interviews, we learnt about the personal lockdown experiences and relationships to others and the garden. Our initial interest in intimacy, openness and various time scales in the garden's life was the basis of the interview questions. However, having provided sufficient time in the one-hour interviews allowed us to adjust the weighting of the initial questions, and for new topics to emerge from the discussion.



First phase (Introduction): The interviewer introduces the topic and purpose of the project. They ask permission to record the discussion in audio or video.

Introductory questions: Getting to know the interviewee and general discussion about living in 't O-tje.

What is your name?

How long have you been living in 't O-tje?

Do you live here by yourself?

Describe your general experience of living in 't O-tje.

Second phase: Focus on the residents' experiences during the pandemic and the interactions between them.

What's your relationship with the rest of 't O-tje's residents? Do you interact with each other regularly?

What did your life look like last year?

How did you experience the pandemic and the lockdown period?

Third phase: Focus on the relationship with the garden and moments of care.

What's your relationship with the garden?

This questionnaire was designed to contribute to the sense-making phase of the project. It was used in semi-structured interviews with some 't O-tje residents. The goal of the interviews was to reflect on the project's concepts and missions, such as the need for belonging and grounding; mental, emotional, or physical fractures; temporality, openness, and intimacy.



Are you actively involved in the garden's activities? In what way?

What is the most memorable moment that you had in the garden over the years? Could you describe this moment? What's your favourite spot in the garden?

What's your favourite activity in the garden? Please elaborate.

Was there a moment of care between you and the garden? Could you describe this moment?

Did something change in the garden during the last year?

Has your relationship with the garden changed?

Fourth phase: Cooling off questions and ending

Are you looking forward to spring, when everything is blossoming in the garden?

Do you have any plans for the garden in the upcoming period?

Thank you for your time.



Talking to some people in 't O-tje revealed two unexpected but important aspects that challenged some of our initial assumptions. First, the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on the daily lives and wellbeing of the community was much less severe than we anticipated, and second, while the sense of connection and belonging to the community is quite high, the external pressure to be a point of reference for the wider neighbourhood creates a feeling of demotivation among the community members.

At the beginning of the Three-Tier Garden project we expected that fractures in the mental, emotional, or physical wellbeing would be prominent as a reaction to the traumatic experiences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, such experiences were rarely explicitly mentioned; mostly, they were only implied in some answers. There appeared to be no deep mental, emotional, or physical fractures, although there were some tensions or discomforts that emerged in subtle ways in

our conversations. However, the pandemic did cause some changes in people's attitudes, particularly in the way they connected to 't O-tje both as a garden and as a community. For example, one interviewee said: *'[earlier,] I felt O-tje was a place to live but not the community to really connect to, or I wasn't attached to it, and that has changed. [During the lockdown], I became far more local.* Others noticed that people were using the garden much more during the quarantine, such as one person who that said that *'with Covid, in the beginning, it was really strange, because everybody was also a bit scared, and suddenly, everybody was using the garden'*. One person explicitly recognized the value of the garden as a coping mechanism: *'what I was trying to say about Covid: like this amount of space we could have for ourselves was what made it tolerable, so yeah, I had the feeling that the garden took care of me also'*. In short, the garden of 't O-tje did play a positive role in helping the residents to cope with mental and/or emotional



wounds, even though these were not as prominent as the project had initially assumed.

From the interviews, we learned about the strong sense of belonging among the inhabitants of the housing block, as well as with the surrounding neighbourhood, especially when someone is in need. The development of the garden itself was a collective venture, but this feeling of connection is also manifested in smaller instances, such as chat groups among the people who share a staircase in the building, spontaneous gatherings, the possibility for people from the neighbourhood to throw parties in the garden, or the joint organisation of other activities.

The 't O'tje residential complex operates as a foundation managed by its community of creative practitioners. The reason for this is, on the one hand, that a foundation provides a better representation of the inhabitants and enables them to self-organise, and on the other hand, that organising social and artistic activities and engaging

with the neighbourhood is the precondition for the privileges granted by the housing corporation. This form of coerced belonging is visible in some responses, which described a feeling of obligation for the residents to organise, facilitate, or participate in events in the garden and general surroundings of 't O-tje, for example, during the garden days, or in small festivals and workshops that take place in 't O-tje. Although this type of forced belonging eventually creates conditions for building and strengthening social bonds, it also generates feelings of discouragement and demotivation among the residents. These feelings often translate into negative effects; instead of setting up conditions for initiating social relations, they end up repressing creativity, spontaneity, and pleasure.



Multispecies mapping

More-than-human design for affective connections between human growth and garden growth helps address the complex relational aspects of intimacy and openness. For the gardeners, the ability to attend to other gardeners and the garden with care is rooted in becoming intimate with patterns of interaction in which humans and other-than-humans co-evolve. The most tangible manifestation of the connection between garden and gardeners is the way they choreograph each other by giving each other's movement direction and quality through paths.

In the Multispecies Mapping exercise, participants are asked to enact another species inhabiting the garden. They move and make sounds like that of their chosen species. Adopting the perspective

of non-human beings comes with obvious epistemological challenges, as human bodies have a different constitution and sensory setup than, for example, a worm or a bird. The smaller the similarity between the situated experiences of human and other-than-human bodies, the bigger the weight of human imagination in this activity. The invitation to visualise what the garden is like for a non-human species aims at strengthening the ability to imagine. Also, noticing these patterns and choreographies makes it possible to negotiate and re-negotiate them over time.



We are not alone. The garden has people, plants and critters of all kinds. We do not always notice each other, even when we are very close.


What animals or plants - or any other creatures - have you noticed around the garden? It can be as big as a giraffe and small as bacteria. Where was it? Let's go there and become that creature! What would it be like to be that creature? What would you love? How would you move? Where would you hide? What would you eat?

Go around the garden, find your favourite spot.

Come back to the table, write down who you are and make your flag. Draw your creature on the blank side of the flag. Go back to the spot and plant your flag.

While you move back to the spot, move like your creature. Make a sound of how your creature moves.



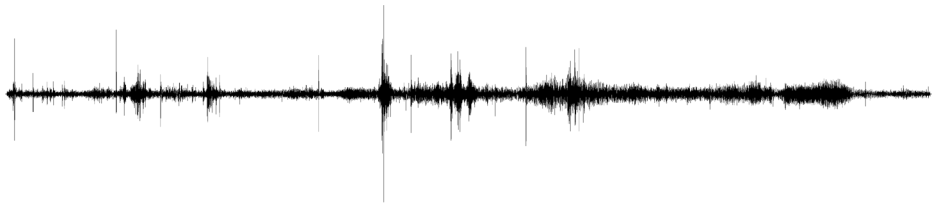
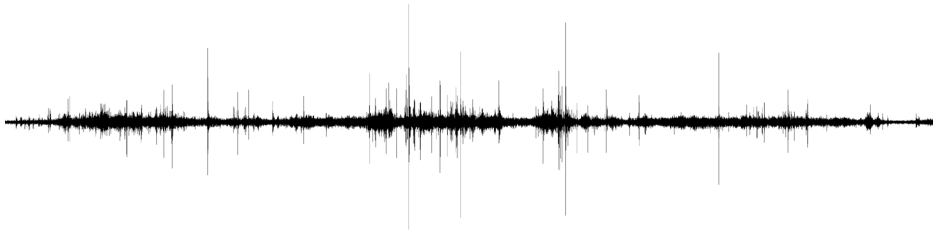
If I would be
a squirrel. 
this would be
my favourite
spot.

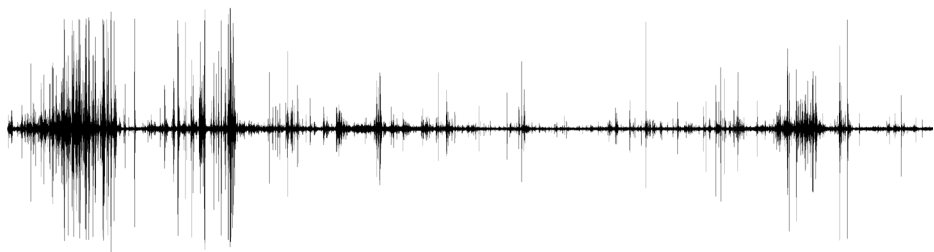
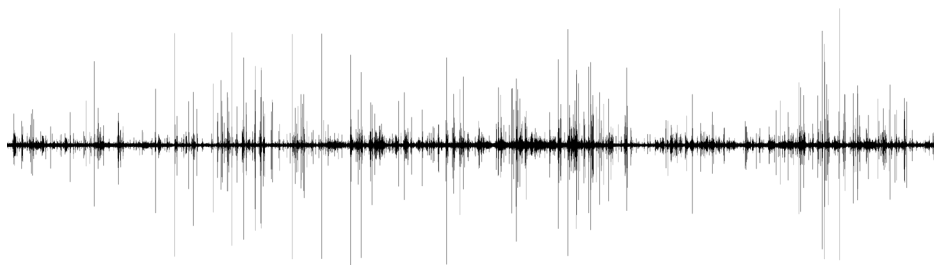
If I would be
a MUS

this would be
my favourite
spot

If I would be
a ... Biji

this would be
my favourite spot



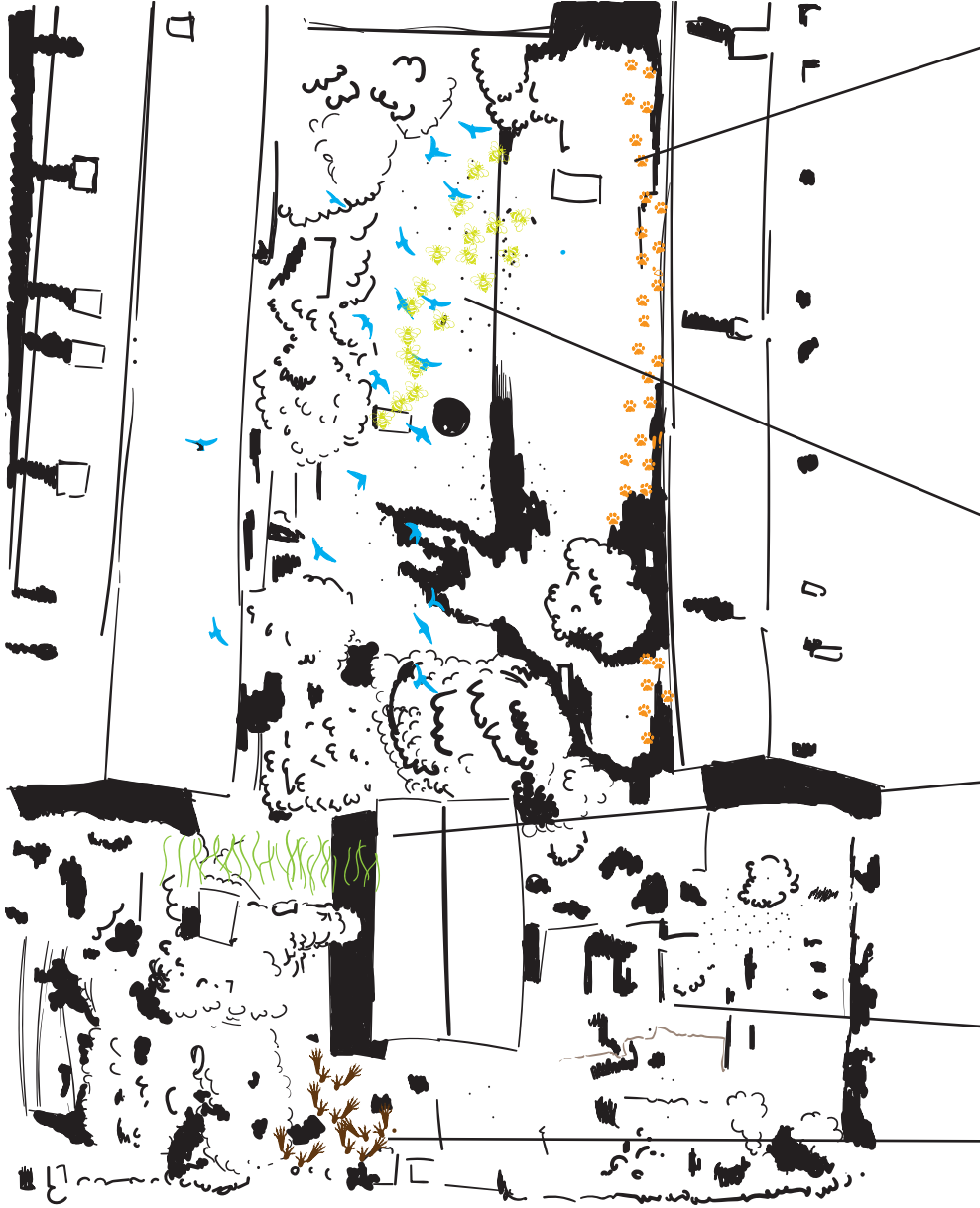


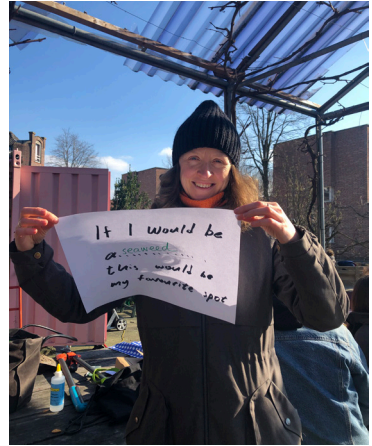


If I would be
a PLATO THE CAT ..
this would be
my favourite
spot

If I would be
a SNAIL ..
this would be
my favourite
spot

If I would be
a seaweed ..
this would be
my favourite spot







The participants of the Multispecies Mapping activity enacted a squirrel, a cat, a sparrow, a seaweed, a bee, and a snail. Some of the participants were more open to letting their bodies participate in the process, while others focused only on imitating the sounds of their species. The person who enacted a squirrel, for example, stayed close to a tree and made her body tiny, recreating the figure of a squirrel. Meanwhile, she engaged with the ground, the leaves, and the tree, trying to intensify the sounds created by her interaction with those. Another participant recreated the route of a cat that she used to host at home: she imitated the cat by crawling between the bushes and next to the building's wall to find a sunny open spot to rest. The person enacting a bee followed a haphazard route which reflected on the bee's up and down moves, while making buzzing sounds. The sparrow-re-enactor made delicate movements and sudden changes on her route, and when she found spots in which to pause, like a shrub or the top

of a bench, she whistled, trying to imitate the bird language of a sparrow. The seaweed enactment was static and focused on wavy movements, using the sounds of a paper against the wind. The resident who enacted the snail had a silent and slow movement, once in a while making sounds resembling the substance and the nature of a snail.



Low-tech augmented reality

Low-tech AR is an exercise which uses a transparent sheet to augment the garden with future imaginaries. Participants are asked to select a viewpoint and draw their ideal future of the garden on a transparent sheet. This exercise aims to project the future directly into the garden and through the eyes of the community.



Please grab a transparent foil, a transparent plate and a pen.

This sheet of transparent foil is your window into the future. It also allows you to share what you see in the future garden.

Find a spot from where you can have a good look at a corner or patch of the garden you would like to Hold the transparent plate with the foil in front of you and look through it.

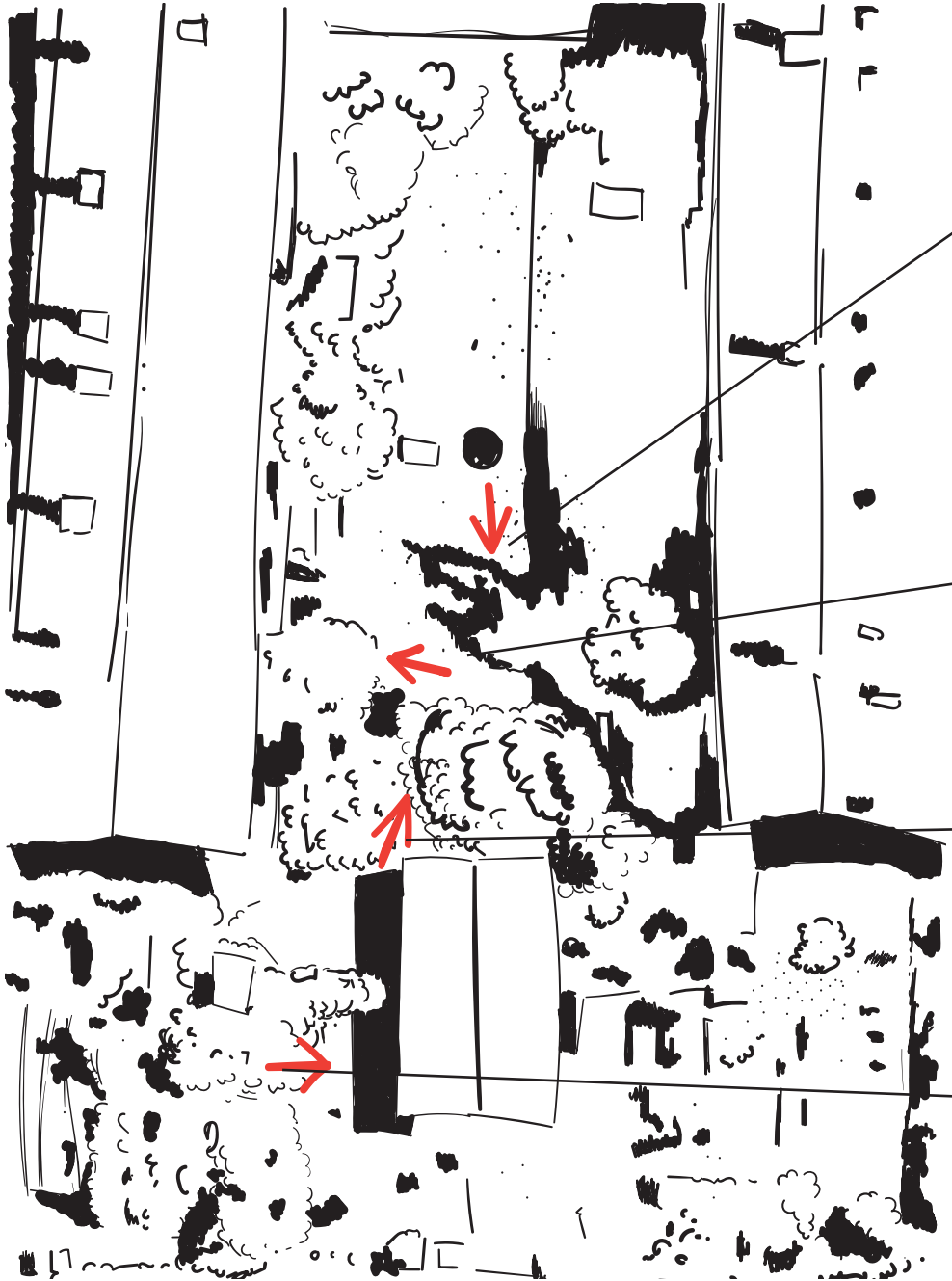
What would you like to see there in the future? What do you believe will be there in the future?

Place the future things or beings into that spot in the garden by drawing them on the foil.

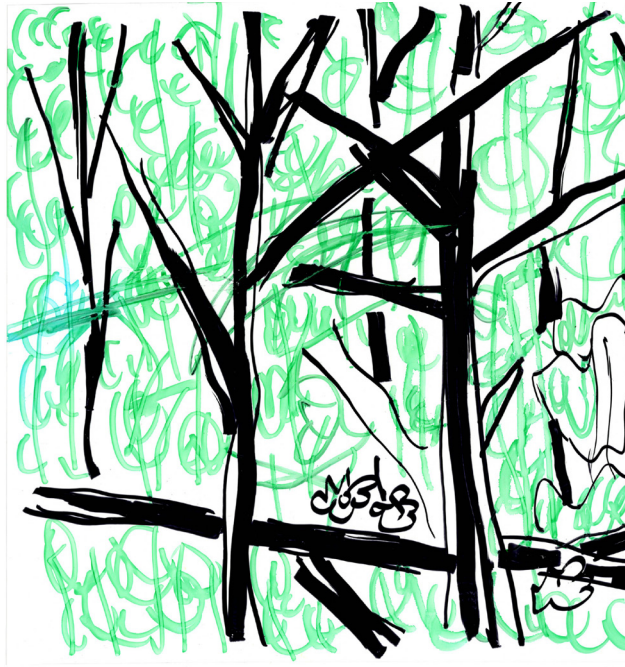
Mark the spot where you are standing and the direction you are facing with an arrow on the ground. Now others can see through your window to the future and see what you have seen.

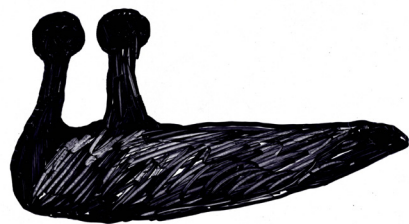


Four residents carried out this activity. Two of them created designs based on material arrangements: a swimming pool in the middle of the private garden and a treehouse in the tree behind the glasshouse located in the middle of the garden, while two others focused on living entities, such as a slug in the garden and an area of wild, forest-like vegetation in the position of the organised plots for gardening.











Design

The initial focus of the project was framed by three time scales: 1) temporary elements such as seasonal plants, casual visitors and passersby; 2) the semi-permanent, spaces that can be reconfigured based on changing publics, functions and social conditions; and 3) the permanent, those elements that are designed and fixed – trees, paths and plot boundaries. These three tiers would form the basis for the design activities by examining each tier against the principles of intimacy (new ↔ familiar) and openness (private ↔ public).

The sense-making phase rearranged our initial dimensions of inquiry, and while still considering time scales, intimacy and openness, our focus shifted towards an – at times ambivalent – feeling of belonging, which we captured in the concept of ‘forced belonging’. We translated the learnings from

the sense-making phase into design dilemmas, the first of which negotiates the temporalities of the garden and the community. The principles of intimacy and openness remained, and a fourth dilemma, the nature of belonging, was added based on the specific conditions of our work at the O-tje garden. The design dilemmas were the point of departure for participatory concept prototyping of the garden’s future.

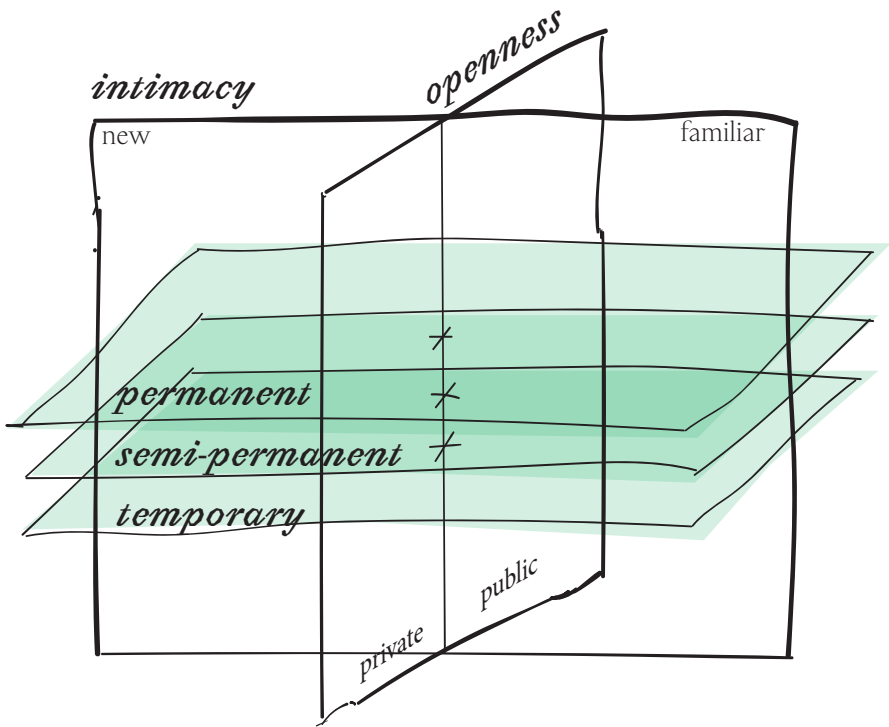
To ground the participatory shaping of the garden’s future, we chose to use the trope of the treehouse as a vehicle for principles and mechanisms of relating, meeting, connecting, belonging to and with the garden, other humans and other-than-humans. Stories of a treehouse, which had once been erected in the garden but later had to be taken down due to severe storm damage, featured heavily in the sense-making phase. The treehouse was deeply embedded in the garden’s identity, and was repeatedly mentioned either as a social structure or as a physical arrangement. Also, the



idea of rebuilding the treehouse in some form was a recurring topic. Consequently, we used the treehouse as a point of reference in illustrating the design dilemmas and negotiating future life in the garden.

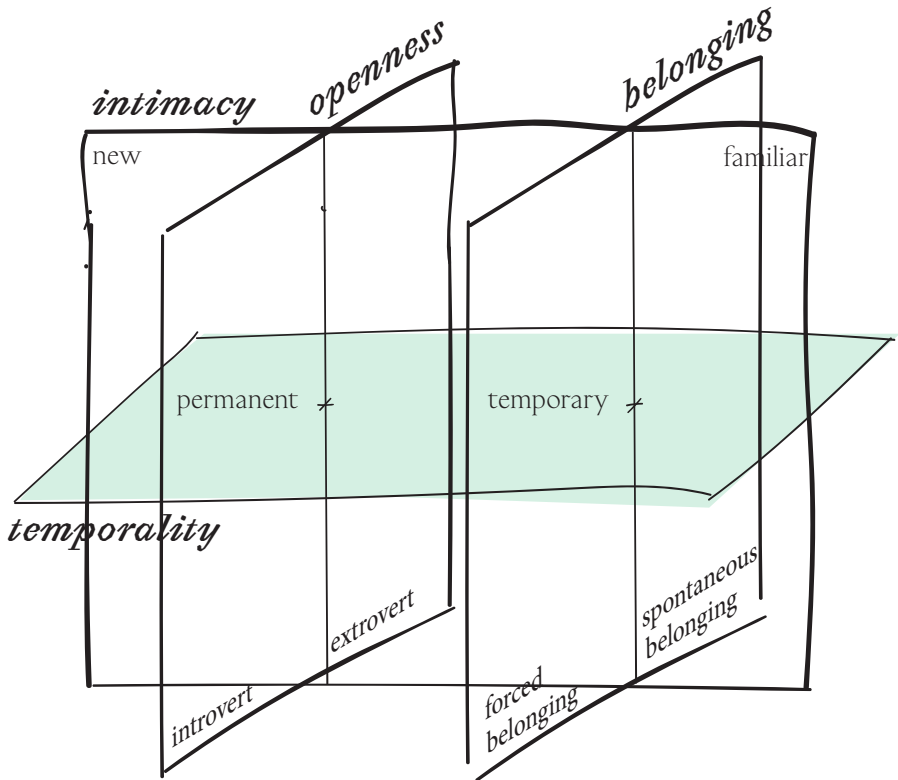


Initial conceptual diagram of the research design, where three time scales focused on permanent, semi-permanent and temporary, examined against the principles of intimacy and openness.





The same diagram as it was adjusted after the sense-making activities and eventually applied during the design phase,



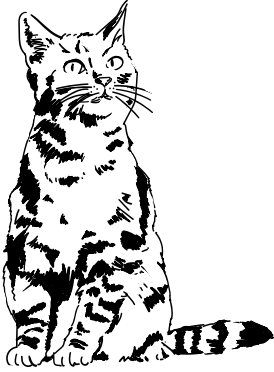


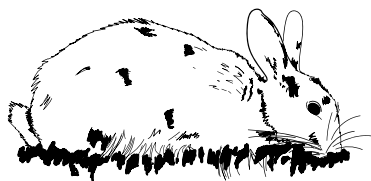
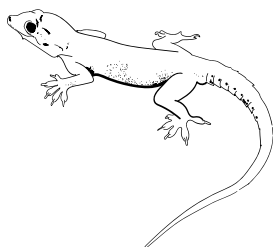
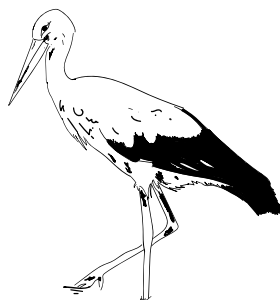
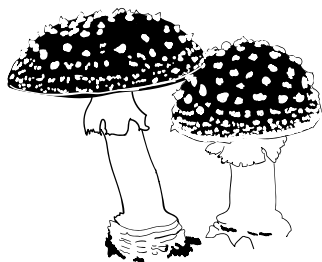
Postcard from the future

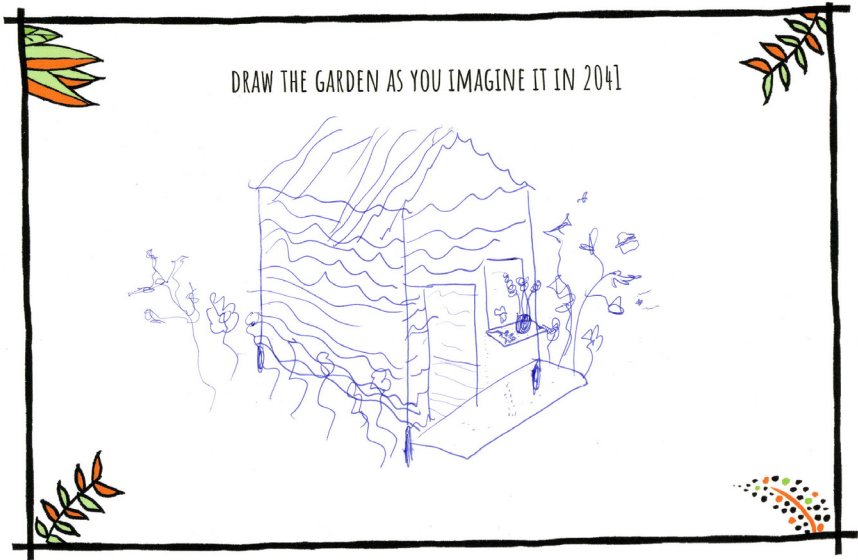
We used the Postcards from the Future exercise as a low-threshold activity to trigger imaginaries of the future garden. We asked participants to sketch a treehouse in the garden in 2041. We chose the temporal horizon of approximately twenty years so that it would be distant enough to trigger more speculative imaginaries, but not so distant as to produce fantasies that are completely detached from the present lived experience of the garden.



Imagine a future treehouse. How could you see yourself designing the treehouse? How could you see yourself as a non-human species designing the treehouse? Blindly pick a card from the pack to reveal what non-human species you are. Now imagine yourself as that specific non-human entity designing a treehouse.













Design dilemmas matrix

The Three-Tier Garden project aims to disseminate methods and learnings gleaned from working with the O-tje community. We recognize that each garden and neighbourhood is different, and we refrained from amassing a cookbook of design principles or recommendations. Instead, we compiled a set of design dilemmas to catalyse negotiations, design decisions and actions for shaping the garden's future.

In a workshop dedicated to discussing the dilemmas with participants, we played through the dilemmas using the case of the treehouse. This helped to negotiate where community members see themselves in the future, finding consensus in some

cases, but especially noticing diverse interests and sentiments. We chose pairs of dilemmas with the participants, intersecting them in 2x2 diagrams. Participants shared stories, anecdotes, wishes and proposals regarding the past, present and future of the garden, which we captured on post-it notes that we used to negotiate their position on the diagram. The discussions about the first diagram informed the choice of intersecting dilemmas for the next diagram, and so forth. The exercise helped to capture and reflect on the shared stories, and to map out future trajectories along the dilemmas, but also revealed frictions between interests.



Two pairs of eyes meet during a concert. You turn to the bushes; something is moving there. Noticing something or someone takes just a moment, but can change everything. A neighbour or guest spends two hours weeding the garden; the impact shows for weeks. Weeks and months of organising culminate in an afternoon barbeque with a small gathering. A favourite spot for eating together, a space for children to play, the chicken's corner can be observed, negotiated, and marked. With routine, the ephemeral is kept and reinforced in the built architecture of the garden. Some things last a moment, and others need to develop through time. Some things disappear before anyone notices, and others outlive generations of 't O-tje inhabitants and guests.

Permanent ← ————— → Temporary



You step out into the garden; no chickens in sight, just a spider. You walk towards the allotments, open the gate, and pass the communal table, you are at the allotments now. Neighbours tend to their produce; some bees tend to flowers. Will you help them? You say hi to a passer-by. It is up to you. Do you retreat to the inner garden or your private apartment? Or do you invite someone from the outside to stay for a while?

Introvert ← → Extrovert



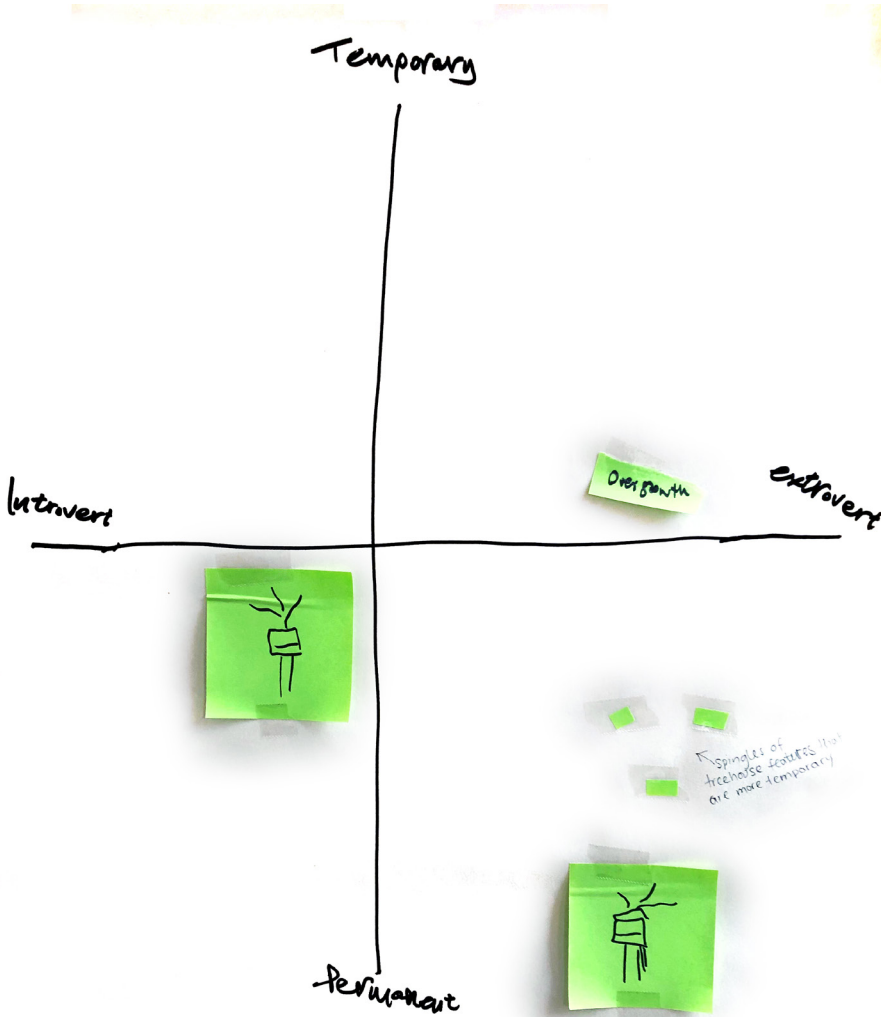
New ←
↕
→ Familiar

For some, the world has become more introverted. For some, the world has been turned upside down. It's not always up to us to set the rules of our own life or our space. Let's not fool ourselves: too much change is scary. Do we adapt to new frameworks? Is this just a passing episode, or is some of this here to stay? It is up to us to start our new routines. It is up to us to envision and set up a new path, and to be mindful of what and with whom our new paths will cross. New friends, anyone? New intimacies?



*Belonging here means being involved.
I will join you on Sunday for the
garden day. I feel like it. But I know
it's expected, and that leaves a strange
taste... We are social creatures, and
committed to organising social life.
Or are we obliged to do so?*

Forced belonging ← ————— → Spontaneous belonging



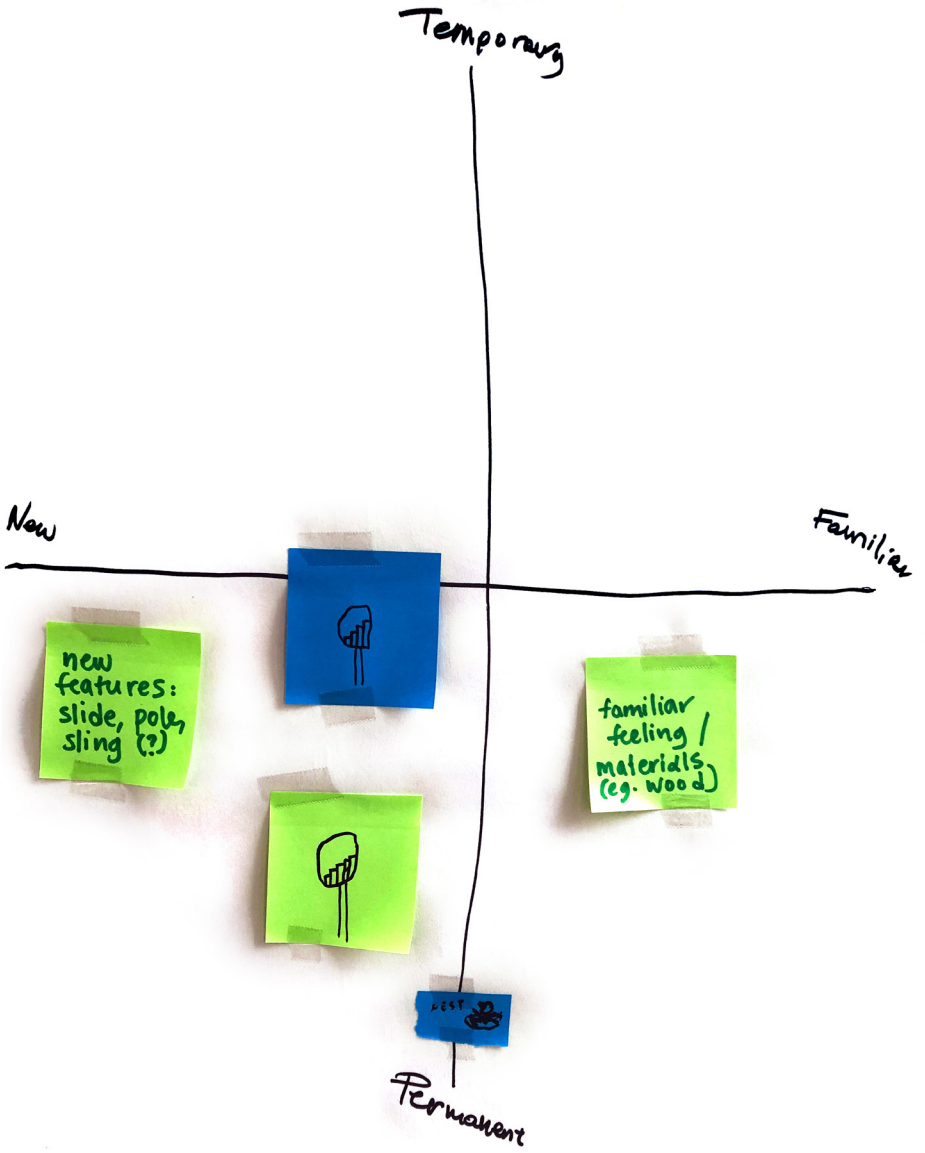


'I would love to have a permanent treehouse, but I think it should also be something that can be a growing work of art, so to speak. That would also make it possible for it to fade away. So it should be changeable in a temporary way, but permanent. The previous treehouse had been overgrown by plants, which was very nice, but of course, it also got too heavy, which is why it broke with the storm. It changed every season, and that was really nice. So in that way, it feels temporary, because it's changing, even though it isn't.'

Jitka

'I would prefer it to be an introverted space. What I really like about the treehouse is that it's lifted into the air. It has this magical element, which is a bit like a fairy tale, somewhere you can sit with other people, but it's not on the ground. I imagine it as an introverted space because for me it is a hideaway in the garden where you can have a private space. And of course, you can invite and share it with people from the outside.'

Bérénice



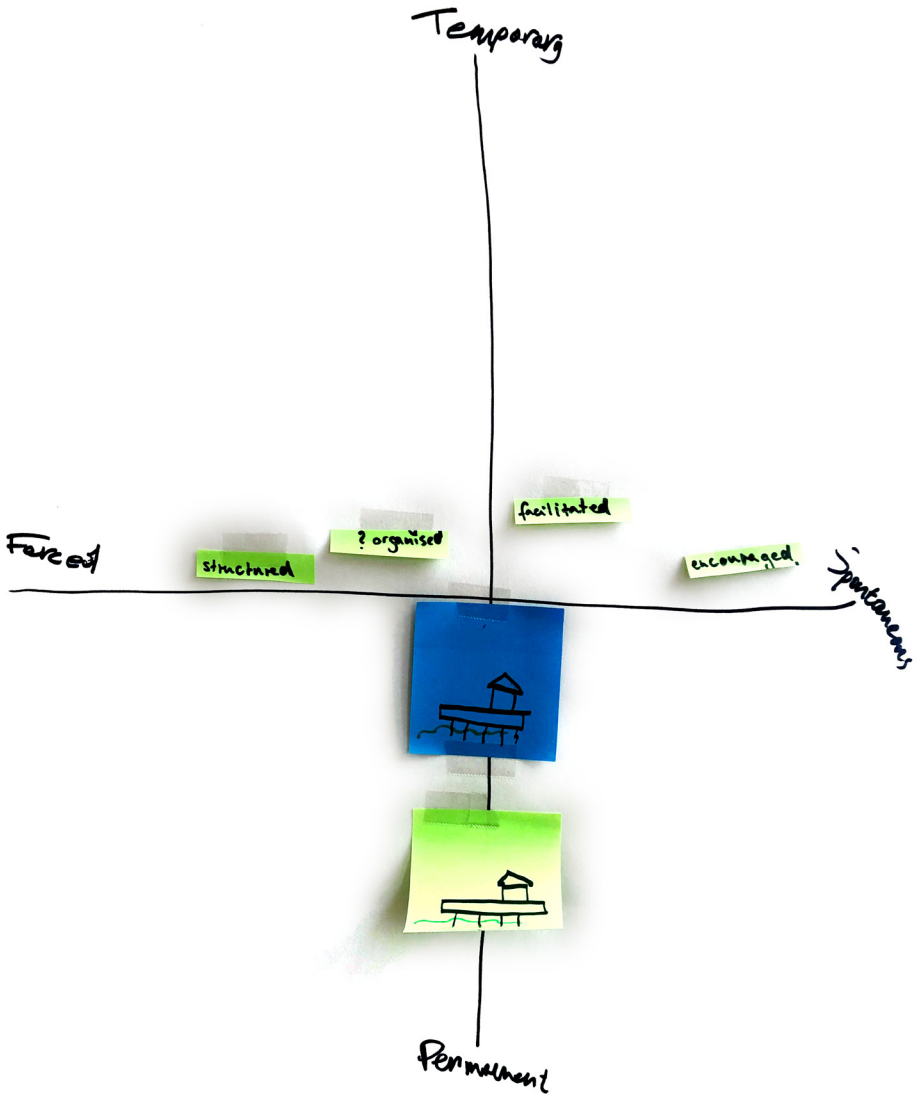


'I would like a mix of new and old things. I wanted to rebuild the treehouse, and to add a pole, like the one firemen go down; I thought that would be really amazing for kids. So it should be different but also kind of familiar because it's made of wood. We still have the whole structure. It was an art project, so I would like to reuse it, but then to make it much better, with lots of extra things, but also to keep it an intimate space. I would love it if it is simple with some extra tricks. If I were a kid, I would love to have some extra features like a slide or a pole or a sling. The idea that adults cannot reach you is really cool. And I love the fact that it's made of wood and it's close to the garden, in the greenery.'

Jitka

'I think that the tree house should have a familiar atmosphere. But then at the same time, it should also be new and surprising. I really like the idea that it's placed on a different level, where you are not on the ground where the earth is, but higher up. But that it's still made of natural materials and other natural elements, whether it's wood or plants. Also, in cities you can have vertical gardens.'

Bérénice

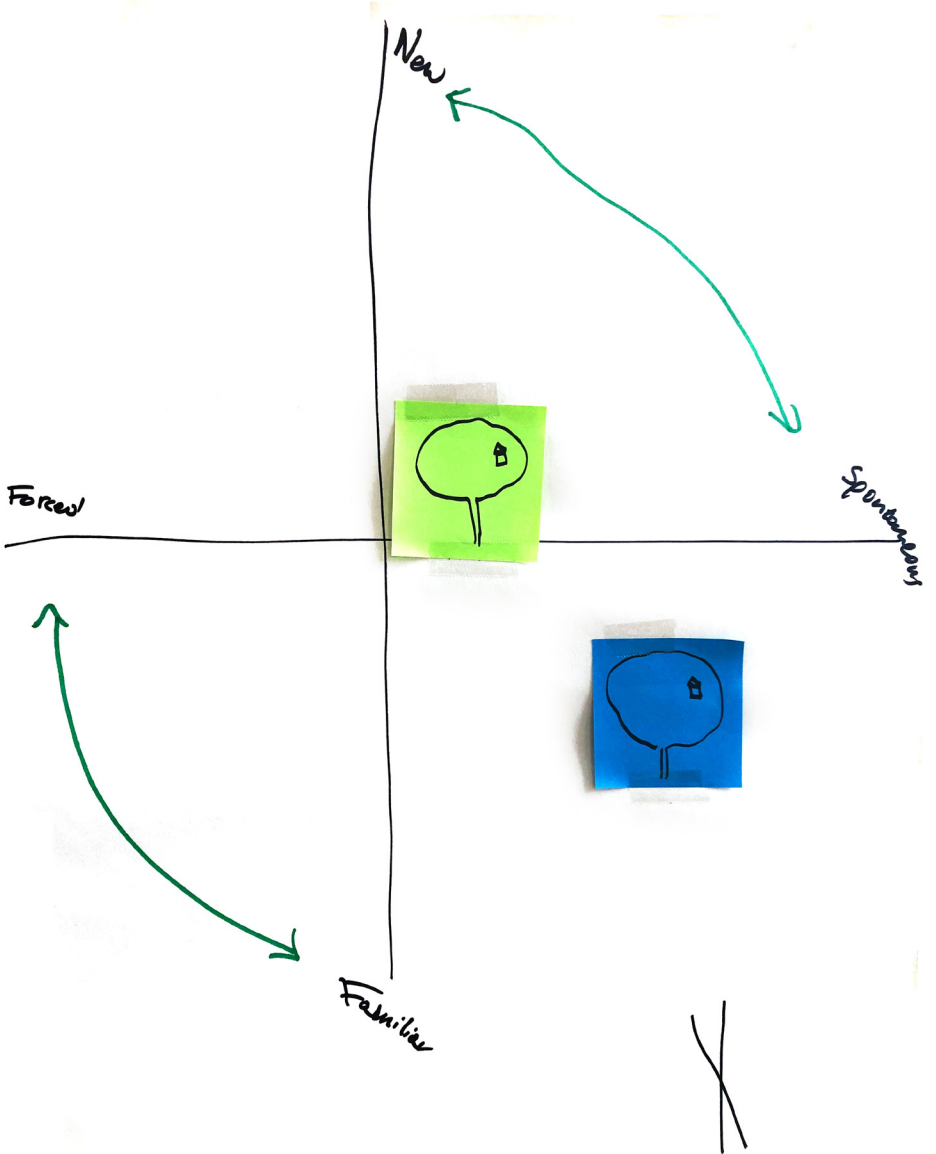




'I'm somewhere in the middle, between spontaneous and forced. I would love for everybody to be oh-so-spontaneous, and for everybody to join in, but I know that there has to be a structure. But you should not be forced to work. Maybe we can replace the word "forced" with "structured" or "facilitated" or "encouraged"?'

'I think it is a really good word, because that's exactly what it is. It mirrors the problem, and it's experienced by some as forced. I also think that to make a change, words matter. It would actually be very helpful to move from "forced" towards "structured" or "organised" and supported by everybody, rather than by one person saying you have to be there. So I think the choice of words is really interesting.'

Dialogue fragment between workshop participants





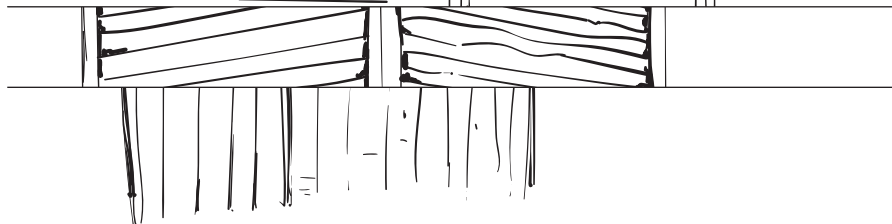
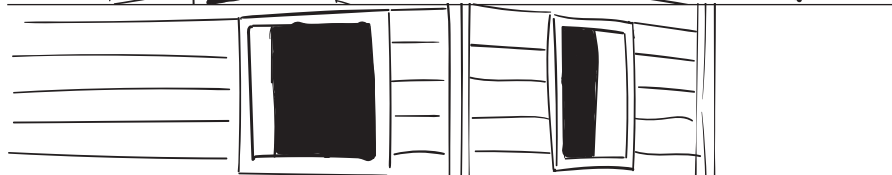
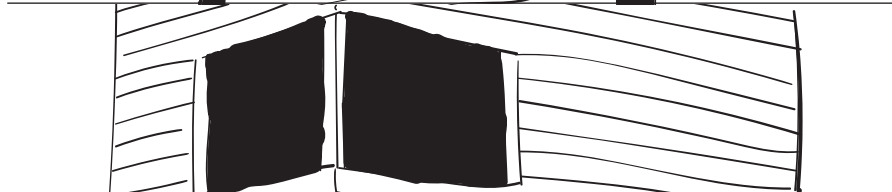
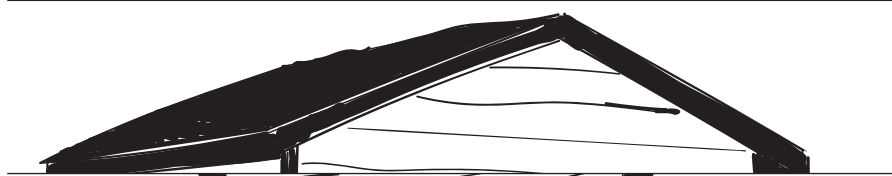
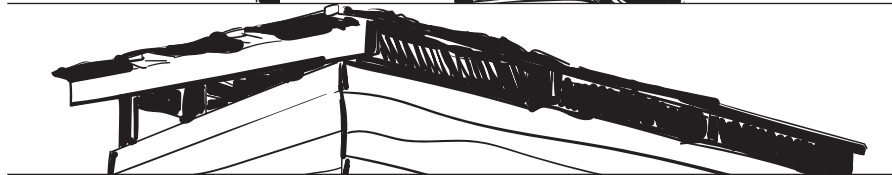
'So from what you say, it feels that the two axes should be closer together, closing like scissors. if you're in the space between forced and familiar, you feel that it's quite institutionalised, that you already like how things work and you like this specific routine that you follow. And at the same time, in the opposite space, you accept being spontaneous, and having your own input, which is not coming from outside.'

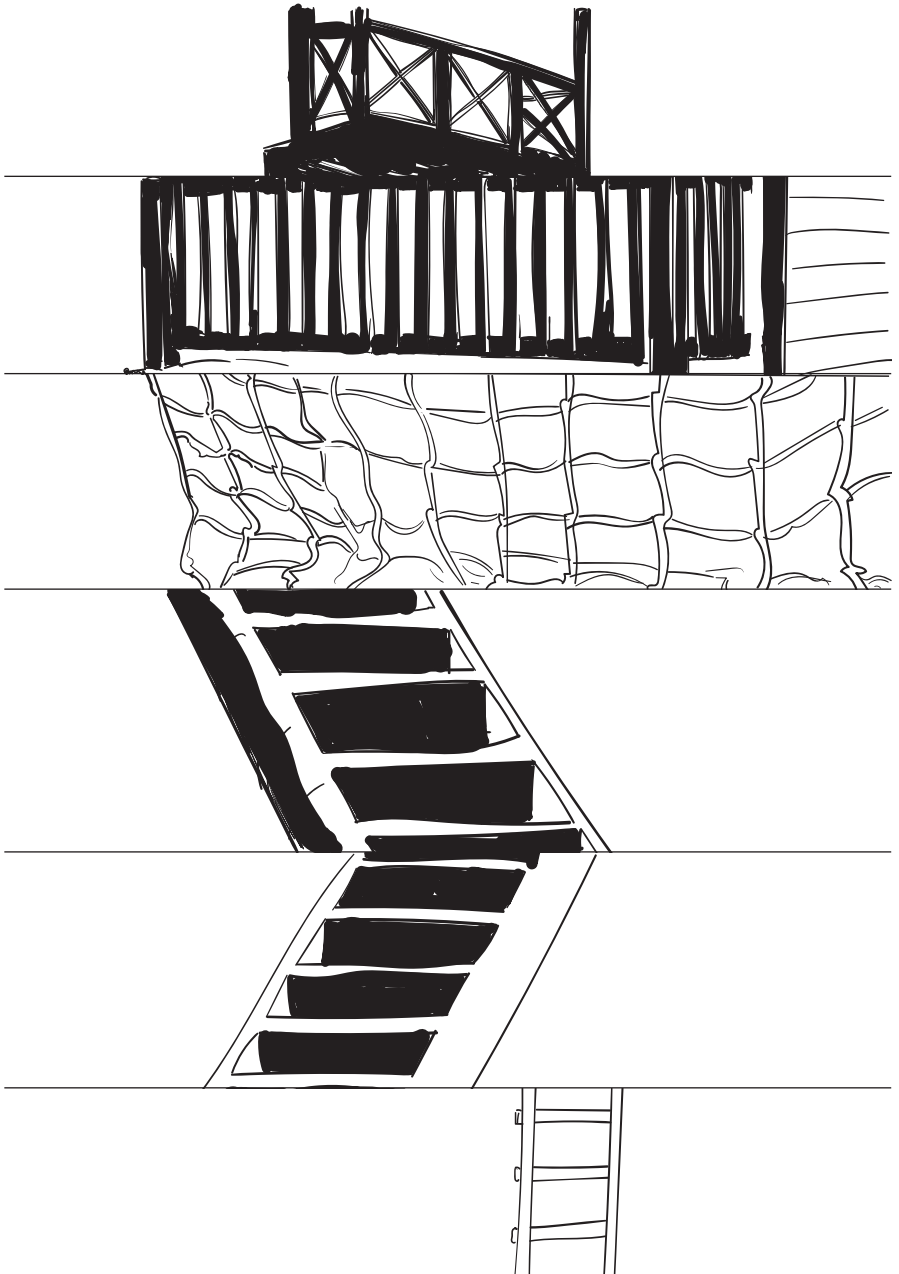
Ektor

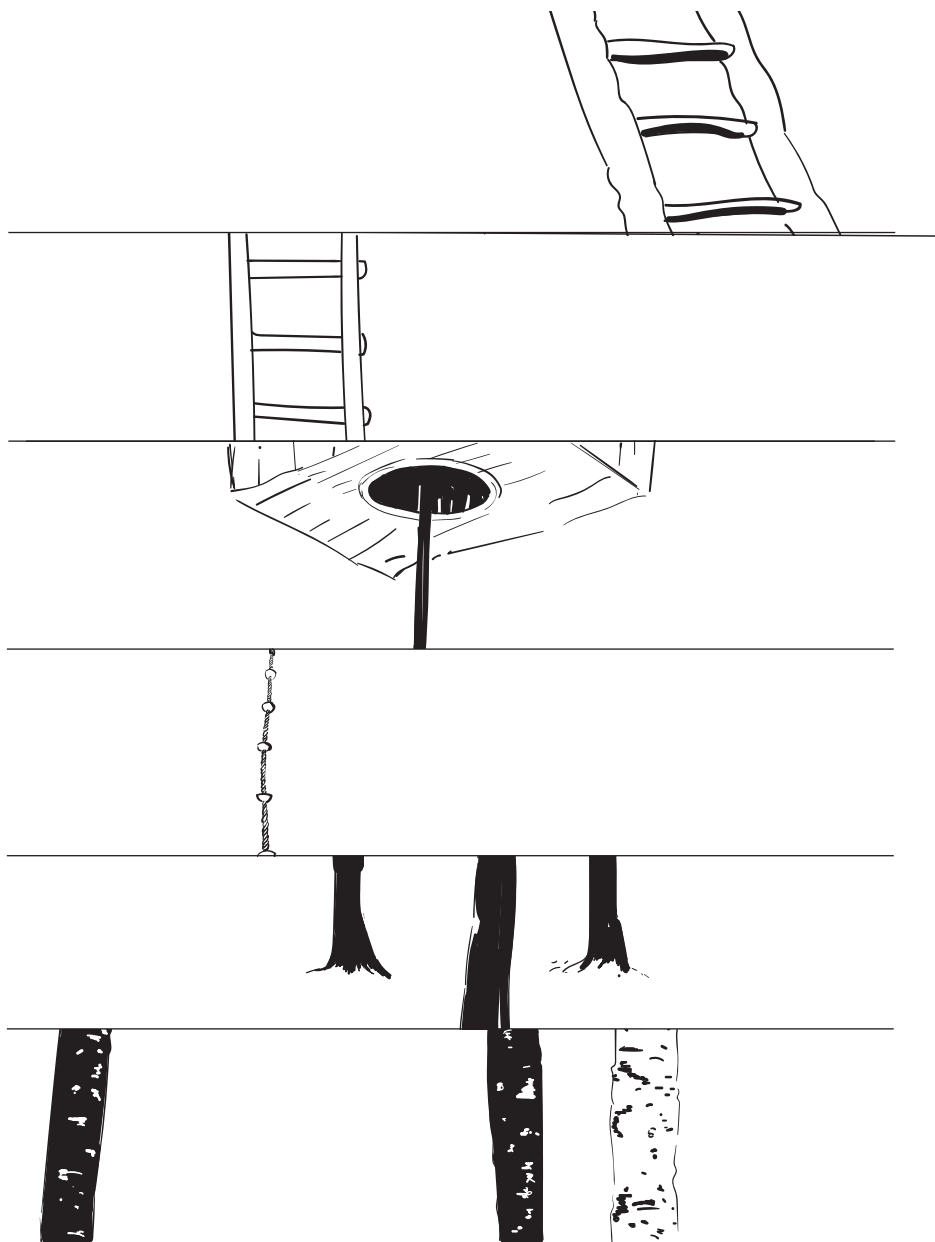


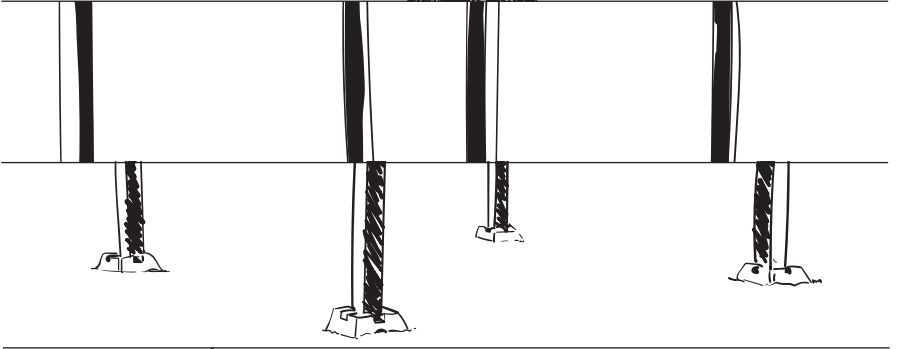
Making a collage of the tree house

The final workshop exercise focused on translating the insights gleaned from the dilemmas into spatial elements of the treehouse, such as the desired height, the shape and size of the windows, ladders, poles or ropes, and additional elements to host other species, such as a bee hotel or a bird feeder. The exercise followed the ‘exquisite corpse’ principle: the design team provided a set of predefined elements that participants could combine in a conceptual sketch of the treehouse while discussing their choices.





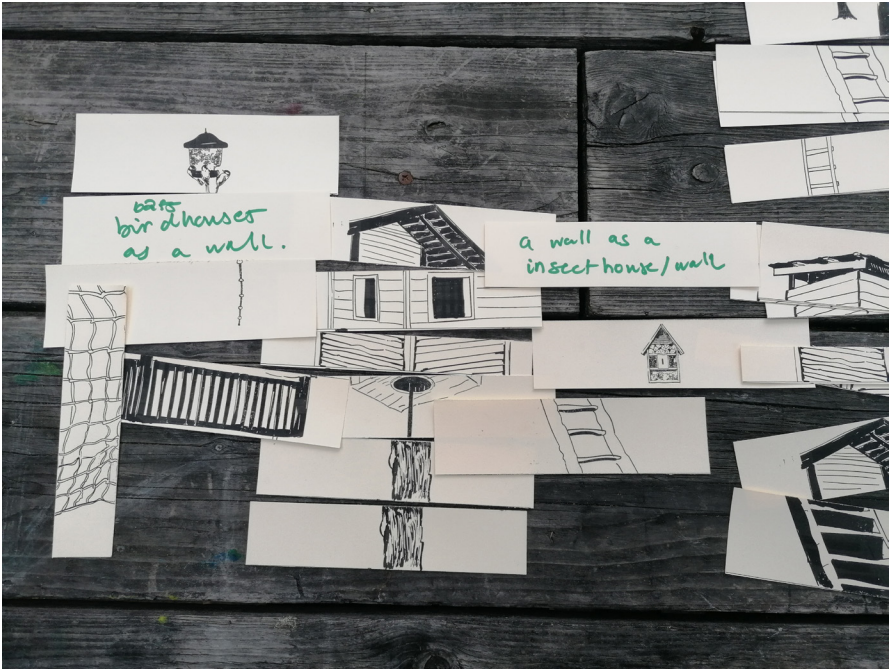






‘My tree house should have a simple but solid ladder. On one side it should have something that makes the house open. Or maybe a net where people can lie or hang or jump from? It doesn’t take up a lot of space, but it’s open, so plants can also grow behind it. Or you use it as a wall; it needs to be safe of course. I like the pole, but maybe not under the house, because then you don’t have much space. There should only be one, because I think even though three might be better, it would no longer look like a tree house. It should be high, so an adult can stand under it, and I’d like a balcony too. It would be nice not to have a separate insect house, but for one of the walls to be the insect house, and there are bird and bat houses on one side. I don’t often see bats anymore; I’d like them to have a place. The roof should be green and full of plants. I think the tree house should be inviting for people to come in, but also a place where you’re hidden, so it becomes your place. It should be big enough for a few people, but small enough to be intimate. And there should be some elements that are only for kids. Something that adults cannot do, but the kids can. The tree house should also be inviting to insects, butterflies, and plants; a combination for everyone, nature and people.’

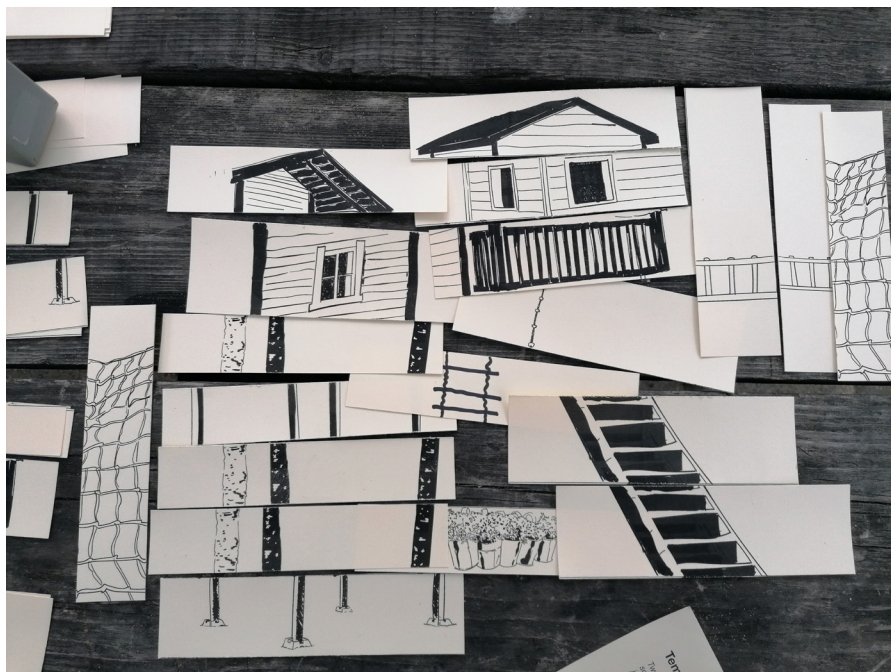
Jitka





'I wish our balconies were three or four times as big as they are. For me, that links to the playfulness of the tree house, because I think it would be nice if we could have something like a bridge between the private garden and the other garden, so that unexpected meetings could happen when people move between these two spaces. I really like that one side is really steady and closed. And that there's a staircase that would give older people comfortable access to the tree house. There should be many playful ways of entering both slowly and fast. Another side of the tree house could have a more open structure, where the wind and animals can come in too. When upstairs, people would have the possibility of meeting each other, but there should also be an intimate space below. I think it's nice if it could extend over several trees, because this would define the space a bit more. I like the natural materials, but at the same time, I also like the urban quality of the poles, which could be used in construction, so I would like to have both. It's great to have a terrace that would work as a lookout point to check who is coming!'

Bérénice





Lessons learnt

The Three-Tier Garden project started from the premise that grounding and belonging are particularly significant during the lockdown periods of the pandemic. The project strived to re-imagine the garden as a place, process, and community for grounding and belonging, a unique technology of sociability, care, long-term thinking, community building and healing. Our point of departure was to explore the metaphoric connection between the growth of plants in the garden and post-traumatic growth involving healing and grounding, considering that certain things need more time than others, and growth happens on multiple time scales. We addressed these matters through spatial and sociotechnical design experiments involving humans and other-than-humans.

Working with the residents and gardeners of 't O'tje changed the initial focus of the project in several regards. We learnt, for example, that mental and emotional fractures caused by the pandemic were less prominent than expected, partly due to the existing access to the garden during the lockdowns. People spontaneously started using the garden more frequently and acknowledged its value as a coping or healing site. We also learnt about the ambivalent feelings regarding social activities, which we captured in the concept of 'forced belonging': the feeling that many people expressed in connection to being pressured to perform as a local social and artistic reference point for the neighbourhood, in order to retain a set of privileges related to their rental conditions and the coherence of their community. While the intrinsic feeling of belonging to the community appeared quite strong, this external 'coercion' to showcase the community through the organisation and facilitation of activities proved challenging at times.



We adjusted the sense-making and design activities in response to the community's specific relationship with the garden, as it has been shaped both by the history and institutional organisation of the housing complex and by the impact of the pandemic. The methodological commitment to allow for these shifts in focus constitutes one of the main lessons of the project.

Instead of offering design principles, we decided to formulate design dilemmas that help to reveal and negotiate the perspectives of multiple individuals (in experimental settings, those of other-than-humans too). The project's adjusted focus primarily manifests in the design dilemmas addressing the dimensions of:

temporary ↔ permanent

introvert ↔ extrovert

new ↔ familiar

forced belonging ↔ spontaneous belonging

As the dilemmas capture dimensions that are never entirely unrelated, the sessions for working with the dilemmas are built on noticing

interrelations between them by using a series of 2x2 diagrams.

Centring the treehouse as a design vehicle was another context-specific choice. The treehouse emerged as a significant topic in the sense-making phase and was relatable to the community, both as a landmark artefact and as a social institution. The treehouse prototype we co-created in one of the workshops is a hybrid between a concept carrying the imaginaries of the future garden and a sketch of an architectural artefact that can be built in the future. As such, it manifests design decisions of the co-design process (with 't O-tje residents), building on the community's discussion of the design dilemmas above. This way, the treehouse is a future artefact that captures the community's imaginaries, and its design process is a blueprint for shaping other features of the garden.

Mapping other-than-human choreographies and noticing potential intersections with human choreographies in the



garden was the most experiential activity. Playfully enacting the movement and sounds of non-humans, and reflecting on their paths, favourite spots and interests worked very well. The experience of the enacting exercise influenced design decisions and discussion in the co-design process in subtle ways, such as in remarks about providing space for birds, bugs and bats in the treehouse. It is hard to identify a more explicit transfer from the exercise into the design process. It remains to see how the experience of redirecting attention to and considering the perspectives of all kinds of creatures in the garden guides the community's commitment to shaping life in the garden.

Finally, we have to note that the Three-Tier Garden is a highly context-specific project, where we worked with a small group of people and their individual experiences. While it is difficult to make generalizable claims about the broader social significance of the project, it is our hope and aspiration that other designers

find these methods valuable and inspiring and can adapt them to different projects and communities. If you are one of them, please let us know!





Editors

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