

# Activating Environments

## Critical design for transitional everyday life

I will give insights into case studies to visualize my practice and theory of *Activating Environments*. I am aiming to transfer knowledge, and I propose and contextualize a design practice to possibly overcome "de-futuring ways of knowing, being, and doing".

## Activating Environments

My concept of activating environments is based on the observation that the way environments are organized, and addressing its users tremendously influences their expected self-efficacy and therefore the way humans behave in and possibly interact with each other and their environments.

*Activating Environments* address their users as capable, accountable, actively world creating, themselves changing and (possibly collective) part of the situation.

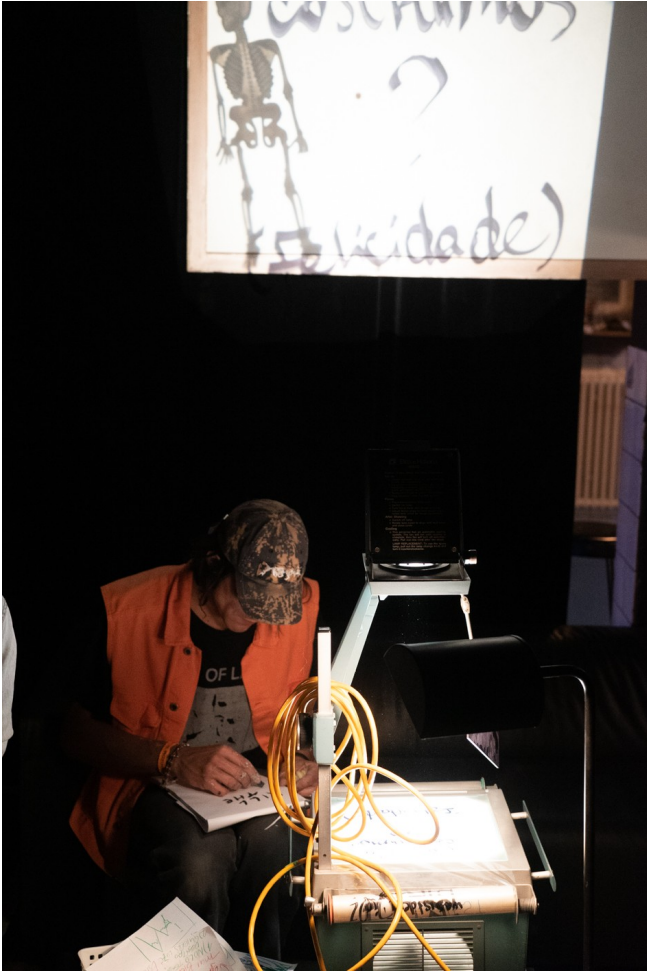
These research insights and the experienced agency of *Activating Environments* relate to Christopher Alexander talking about of *the living thing*<sup>1</sup>.



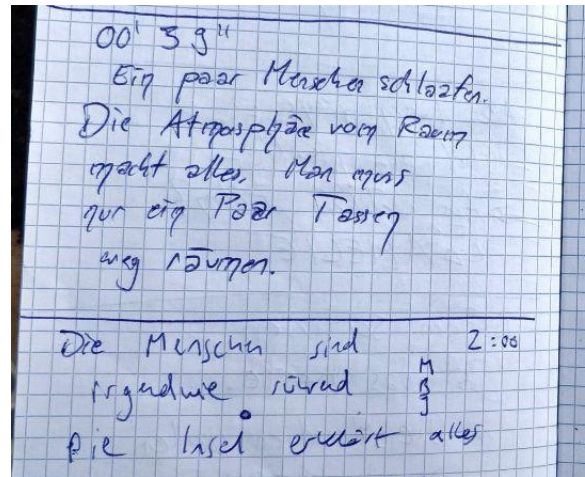
**Image1** *The coffee island*, centered furniture with options to craft coffee or tea, space and tools to organize food.

**Image1+2+3 Case:** *NEST*, Rhizom Festival, Zurich, 2019 **Mission:** Construct a "Backstage for everyone", recreational, not explicitly programmed space to self-organize and/or prepare, without access control. **Duration:** 90 hours.

**Image2** A Part of the *Nest*, the playground in use.



**Image3** Excerpt from *Welcoming Notebook*, installed at the entry and dedicated to the position of welcoming and inviting people into *Nest*.



00:39 A few people are sleeping. The atmosphere of the space is doing everything. One only needs to care away some cups.  
02:00 The people are somehow cute. The island explains everything.

## Objects and space

Designing a space means to tell a stories of possible (inter)actions.

### Here is a simple example of how light can have activating potential in a space:

If you imagine to enter a room that has one top-light, the environment tells you that there is one big space. If Instead the environment offers a number of smaller lights, it tells different stories of you using the space ( e.g. a reading lamp, a long hanging light bulb to sit around on the floor, lights to take with you, turn on/off). Instead of just proposing to move into one possible environment, the smaller lights address you in a narrative of being able to decide about possible (inter)actions.



## Poor materials and editability

By making the tools used to produce an environment visible and accessible, a space communicates itself to be open to a user's impulse. A high visibility for the functionality communicates editability of an environment and implements a narration of a user, capable of understanding, interacting with and possibly advancing this environment.

Using materials that are often around, reminds its users that they have everything at hand to shape their environments.

### A Game:

Use paper-tape and a marker to (re)frame an office environment as a pirate-ship by marking areas. Place the tools to edit the environment visibly for future *users* (as in: *users\*x?*). The tools in this case are the tape and the marker.

A design proposal is to connect tape and marker with a rope to avoid it falling apart and losing its communication as 1 tool to be used together to create world.



**Image4 Toolery/ 1tool Case:** Friction Fiction Festival, University of Art and Design Offenbach, 2020

**Mission:** Workshops and curated material for co-creating an activating festival center **Duration:** 7 days.

## The power of language

Environments are also strongly shaped by language. We are under influence of the implicit and explicit narratives that are constantly produced and re-shaped in communication.

**A very clear example are the following sentences:**

*The human is riding the horse.*

*The horse is allowing the humxn to sit on their back while running.*

## How to future

Understanding the impact of environments in the current *state of world* I want to promote a radically process-focussed artistic practice, that is actively designing environments in architecture, language and virtual space in-process and in-the-making to implement narratives of the empowered user(s)/ix, the possibly else and the diversity of realities and skills. As in: *Queer-Feminist Cyborg Utopianism*.

I contextualize this practice between concepts of Critical Design<sup>2</sup> and Transition Design<sup>3</sup> with a radical approach to practical knowledge transfer in everyday life.

*The (A) revolution will have been spacial.*



**Image5** Excerpt from *authren.games*, **Case:** Artistic research *Space & Play – Activating civic society through games*, University of Applied Science Hamburg, 2020 **Mission:** Development of an activating virtual environment that enables participation for *forschA* and is object of research itself, **Duration:** ongoing.

**Kathia von Roth, A. E., April 2021**

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<sup>1</sup> [Interview \*Nature, life and self: Christopher Alexander after a pattern language\*, 1995, min 1:18](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Talk \*Utopian Design? Feminism and Critical Design\*, Shaowen Bardzell at BCRW, New York, 2013, min 00:10 – 07:30](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Article \*Design for Transitions – from and to what?\*, Cameron Tonkinwise for CRITICAL DESIGN CRITICAL FUTURES, 2015](#)