



T R A N S F O R M E R S

PLAY SALO AND SPACE TRANSFORMERS – GAME BASED EXPLORATION AND MAPPING AS A SITUATED LEARNING PROCESS CONNECTING UNIVERSITIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Jens Brandt

(Higher) Education often has the collateral damage of abstraction, where students learn about the world, and fragmentation, where the learning process is divided into separate disciplines. While this is an obvious problem - maybe even one of the wicked problems of our time - universities also have a possibility to address the problems of abstraction and fragmentation by taking a more proactive role in urban development that goes beyond the current concept of the "engaged university."

This article reports on the EU funded Urban Education Live research project, which had the aim of developing a new educational link between universities and local communities that fosters place-based urban development. The experimental approach to urban development, involving higher education institutions and their students in urban regeneration, has a background in the two networks: CiTyBee and Supertanker in Copenhagen and in my own practice. The overarching interest is the urban as a socially produced space and a source of political transformations, inspired by the work of the French urban philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre.

Play Salo was a game-based learning process with the focus on active citizenship and urban development. It was a collaboration between Tampere School of Architecture, City of Salo, Finland and the high school in Salo. Since the beginning of 2017, several different pedagogic experiments have been conducted. In April 2019 it involved a weeklong game: “Space Transformers” where 35 students from the university and school took part. The focus of the project was the educational benefits involved with the development of learning processes that are situated in local communities to give students a more hands on learning experience and allowing the local communities to benefit from urban capacity building.

City of Salo and the link to the university



For the high school students in Salo the main symbol of the decline was that McDonalds not only closed the restaurant, but also removed all buildings – but left the shrubbery.

Salo is not well known outside Finland, but as the home of Nokia mobile phones the pedagogical experiments took place in a community deeply affected by the boom and bust of this company’s rapid expansion and subsequent contraction. The town of 50, 000 inhabitants and the Nokia factory with a peak employment of 5000 persons both in production and R&D had the highest income per capita in Finland during the boom years.

In 2017 when our experiments in Salo began, the Nokia factory had been completely closed along with shops and shopping centres in and around the city. Nokia had been a big source of tax revenue for the town and beside the many empty shops were still state of the art public infrastructure such as a theatre, library, all kinds of sports facilities and the high school where we would work (with a fully equipped theatre and excellent art classroom).

The Tampere School of Architecture developed a collaboration with the local high school in Salo that mainly involved the art teacher. The high school itself is a small indoor town with a fantastic public space at its core and a view onto a pristine landscape. But it is also surrounded by big roads that disconnect it from the city. The aim of the collaboration was to develop new curricula with “Urban Capacity Building” as a learning goal, and also to ensure that this curricula functions as an educational link between the university and the local community of Salo.

The Space Transformers game is based on several pedagogical experiments over three years with high school students. These experiments happened once a semester in Salo (2017 - 19) and one time in Venice in 2018. The main goal with these experiments was to develop learning formats that could be used for both high school and university students. Developing learning strategies where the local high school students could have the role as local experts along with the university students using this knowledge and contributing with their more general expert knowledge.

In Salo the experiments happened as part of art education and would often be a part of learning art history - e.g., the Situationist Movement - and working with expressing yourself through images etc. Mostly we worked with the exploration of the local town of Salo and tested how to use the smartphone as the main tool in this exploration and expression.

Introduction to some theoretical underpinnings of Space Transformers

Play Salo is a “Super Site Specific” playful process in the public spaces of Salo exploring and learning not only “about” but also “in, with and for” the city of Salo. The format is an exploration that tries to grasp the complexity of the urban by using the body that adds a new and performative perspective, where the students work as actors that already change and produce space by simply being there. Exploring the notion of public space as both the physical spaces of the city and the public sphere - understood as the political and historical aspects. The overall learning outcome was to explore, learn and act based on the concept of “Transformative Spaces” and thus become “Space Transformers”.

It is based on an experiential understanding of the link between space and transformation: One example from Salo is how engineers from Nokia in the documentary “Nokia Mobile - we were connecting people” described how the company lost the capacity to innovate since they “stopped going to the sauna”. On a larger scale - and central for our project - we have the notion of Athens as the “cradle of democracy” where the transformative space was the Athens Agora.

A: Transformative Spaces - Going forward in history from the Athens Agora and looking at especially public spaces or the cafes, where people would meet and make plans for the French revolution (Peter Hall is relevant here as well as Lefebvre and Hannah Arendt on the

emergence of the Public). Moving forward in time the newer examples such as Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring are examples of transformation linked to public spaces but also to moments when the movements didn't succeed. This points to the question of why movements are prevented from societal transformation: The various types of power and control that have their spatial expressions such as segregation and gentrification.

B: The Space Transformers - Who were the active parties in the transformations that are linked to space? What capacities did citizens of Athens have that made them able to act? What are tools/methods (technological, organisational etc) that made a difference?

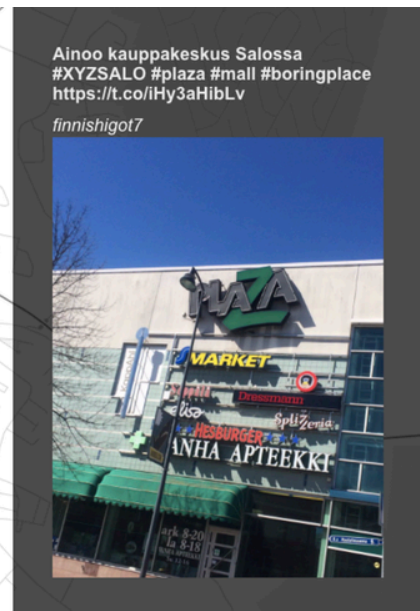
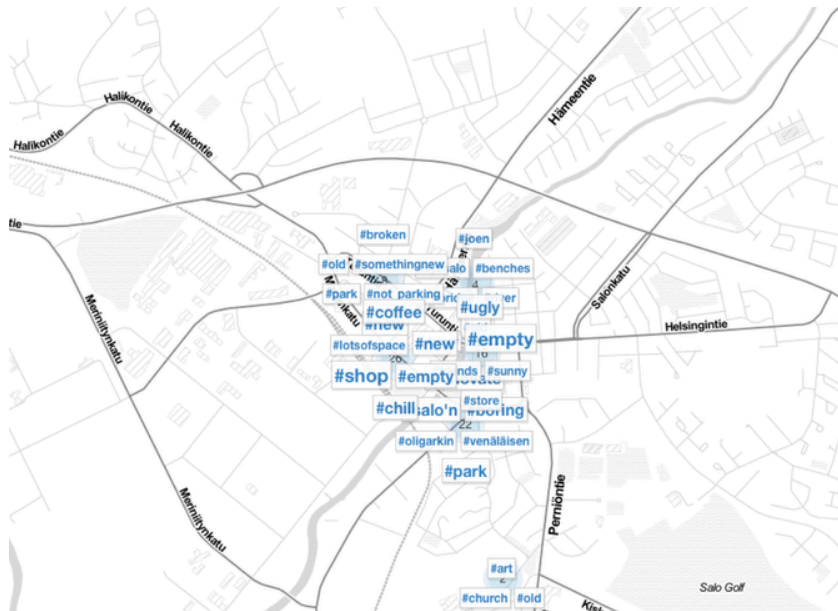
Inquiries were made regarding the actors and methodologies involved in space-related transformations. Specifically, the investigation focused on the capacities of Athenian citizens that enabled them to engage in these transformations, as well as the tools and techniques that facilitated their endeavours. The students were tasked with exploring a range of civil society activism initiatives, including the efforts of John Dewey and Jane Adams at Hull House in Chicago, as well as more creative and playful approaches to space, such as squatting movements and temporary use concepts in urban centres like Berlin. Through this exploration, the aim was to identify the underlying capacities that fuelled these actions, as well as the methodologies and strategies employed in each case.

Salo Stories and pedagogical experiments

The first experiment in Salo had a structure that later was used as part of the Space Transformers gameplay. It was done over three weeks in 3 sessions lasting 75 minutes each week.

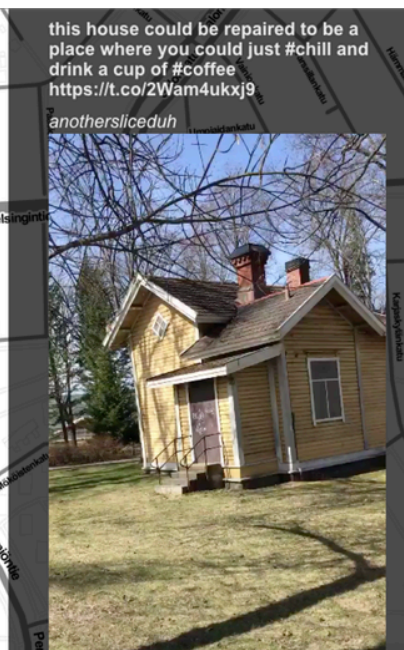
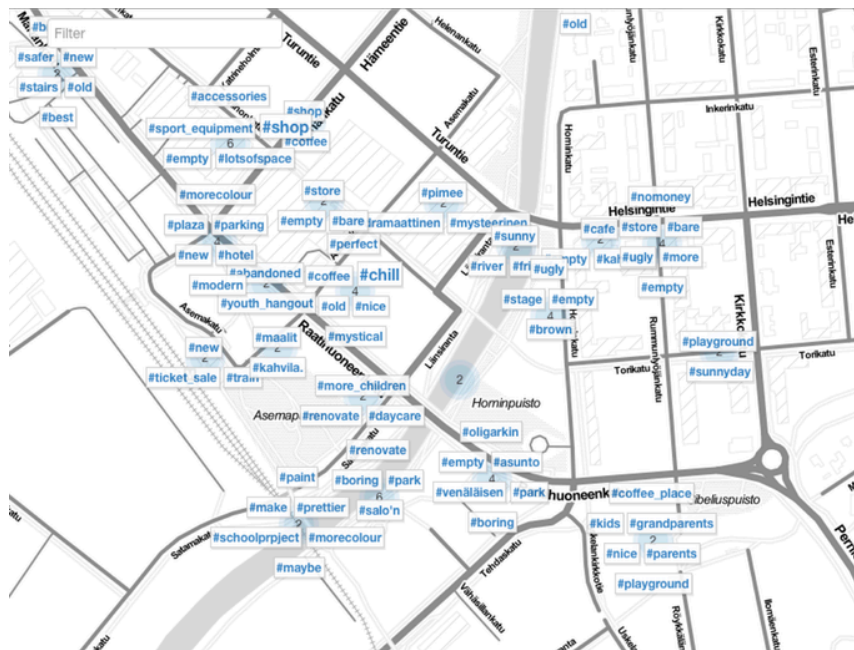
First week: What is there?

After using the classroom as the site for a sensory exploration and working the smartphone as the tool for exploration (setting up Twitter to work as a mapping tool) the students would explore the town of Salo. The mapping would unsurprisingly show how affected the students were, being witnesses to the decline of the town.



Second week: What could be there?

The students were introduced to various local civic society initiatives and then sent out again to map their ideas for what they could imagine could happen. The disappearance of meeting places such as McDonalds resulted in many ideas for new places to meet.



Third week: How to get there?

The students were tasked to develop their ideas as best they could in the short time permitted. One example was the missing McDonalds, where the students came up with a new concept - Happy

Chicken - located in a partly abandoned grain silo. In addition to the concept, they also designed a logo for it.



The results of the three weeks were exhibited in the above-mentioned grain silo. The work of the students was surprisingly precise and varied given the short time they had. This was important for setting the level for how far we could push students of that age in going out and acting in public spaces in the further experiments and the final test of the Space Transformers game.

The following experiments were shorter and more specific. One tested how the students could be “citizen Journalists” and tell stories about their everyday lives. Another experiment developed the game structure that would form the base for Space Transformers game with the three elements: Explore, Challenge and Engage.

ACCITI - Active Citizenship in Venice: Interventions in public space

An education reform in Italy (aimed at introducing high school students to concrete work experience) allowed us to design a workshop for two full weeks that was chosen by students at the

arts high school in Venice. This enabled us to work much closer to the final format with enough time to explore, map, develop ideas and build physical interventions in public spaces. It goes beyond this article to describe this workshop in detail except for the result - interventions in public spaces. This experiment showed that high school students were perfectly able to prepare and carry out interventions in public spaces.

The students would in the process of preparing the interventions get a lesson in the (more or less) hidden power structures of public space. One example was to write and call the police and municipal authorities to get permission for the actions in public spaces – they never got the permission, but we did it anyway. The other was to learn about the ownership of an empty shop the students wanted to use for an intervention - a developer in Milan that never called back.

The first intervention in an underused park was a concrete addition to the park: Two football goals, a graffiti wall and a table with drinks and snacks. The students could see how a physical intervention - especially the football goals - would change the dynamics of the park. And how moving the goals from one location in the park to another also changed the dynamics with the students and increasingly the users of the park having a fun game.



The second intervention was more indirect since the students did not get into the shop that they wanted to turn into a youth club. Instead, they would hang images of their own ideas and references

to how the same ideas had been done elsewhere. The street had many passers-by, and the students would discuss with them to see how their ideas would be received. The whole event ended with the students busking with a guitar and singing.

The many elements of the ACCITI proved very useful for testing new (or new versions of) learning methods. The main point here was to see how a younger group of students could use these methods to work in public spaces. The workshop was especially rewarding in the sense that the students felt free and able to act in public spaces.

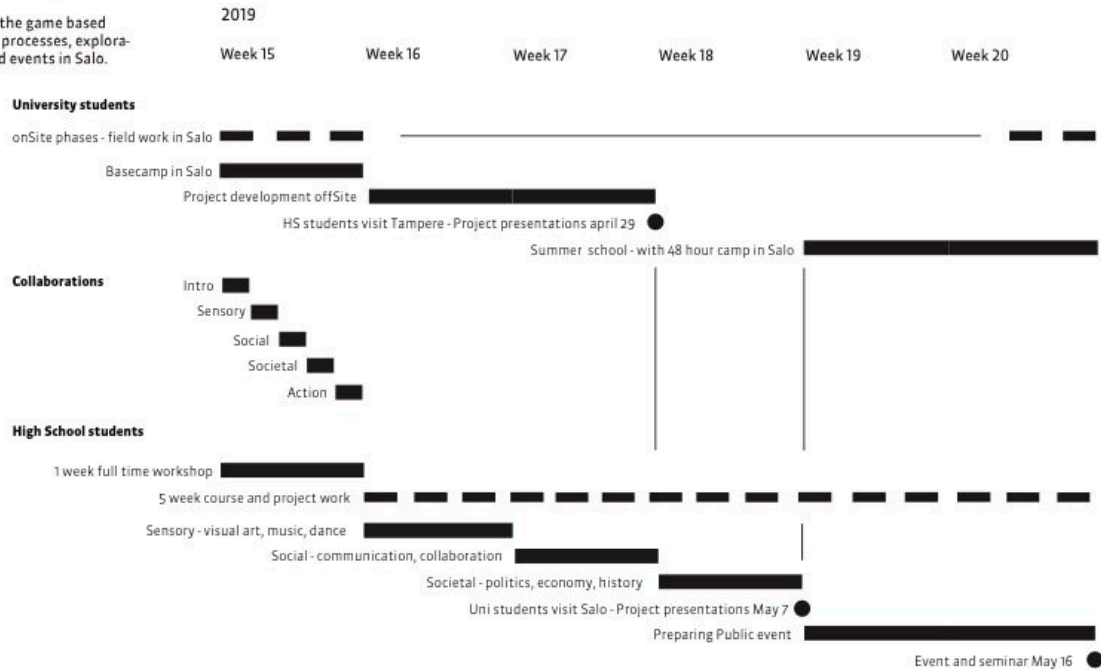


The overall structure of the game

The initial goal of the project was to test a more active role of the university by designing and producing real interventions in public space in the city of Salo based on both an understanding of theoretical aspects relating to space and a deep immersion and presence in Salo.

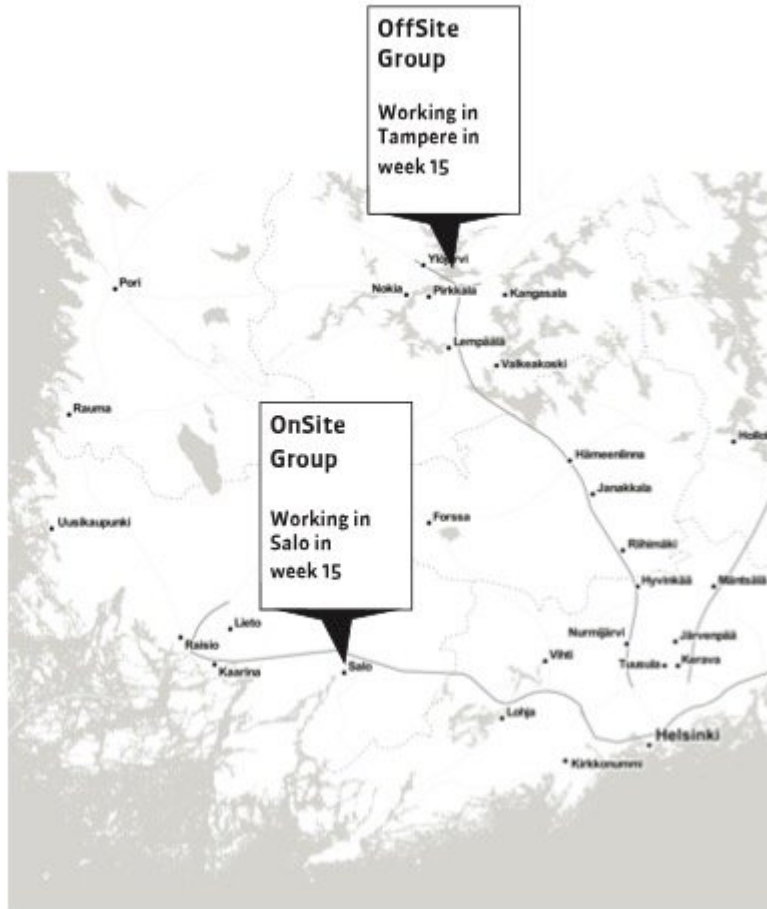
**Play Salo
Active Citizenship and
Urban Development**

Plan for the game based learning processes, explorations and events in Salo.



The original time frame for the final Space Transformers course. It shows how the high school and university students would meet and collaborate several times while working in-between at “home” and possibly in more traditional courses or classes such as design, economy, psychology, sociology and language. The final intervention in public space was not possible to do as was the case in Venice described above.

About 20 students from Tampere School of Architecture would stay in a local hotel and use the 5-day exploration and action as the beginning of their design studio (additional students would work “off site in Tampere). Because of inflexible student schedules it was only possible to do this first game-based exploration onsite, and instead of material interventions in public spaces (as was the case in Venice) the students would reproduce representations of ideas for interventions in public spaces. The high school students - around 15 - had to call the week of participating in the workshop a study trip. In a way it underlined that while they would explore a well-known territory, they would do this in a way to experience it anew.



The Space Transformers course was designed to be flexible geographically so the hands on and place-based pedagogy could engage with marginalised communities that included peripheral and shrinking cities. In the case of Tampere, it is one of the most attractive and fastest growing cities in Finland as is often the case for cities with a university. It was our goal both to be able to get out of the comfort zone of the university city and to engage with communities in need.

The workshop was a collaboration with the municipality of Salo and we had succeeded to get a space for the basecamp of the workshop in an (almost) abandoned shopping centre that was a very central for Salo - physically and symbolically. Being a sign of the decline of the town after Nokia closed, the shopping centre was built around and on top of the bus station where many of the high school students would catch the bus to and from school. The basecamp was a beautiful space with a big glass facade with a view to some of the old wooden houses remaining in Salo.

A: documentation/map of the central parts of Salo: Where and what is important – we called them “Spaces of Possibilities”

B: short studies of how the most interesting places were produced

C: Initial ideas for spatial interventions in one or more spaces.

Following the game, the architecture students would return to Tampere and use the intensive onsite immersion to work more traditionally in a design studio. The exception to this was that the high school students would travel to Tampere and give a response to a presentation of the design studio projects and that the finished projects would be exhibited onsite in Salo.

Detailed breakdown of the game

Monday Arrival to Salo and Training as Space Transformers

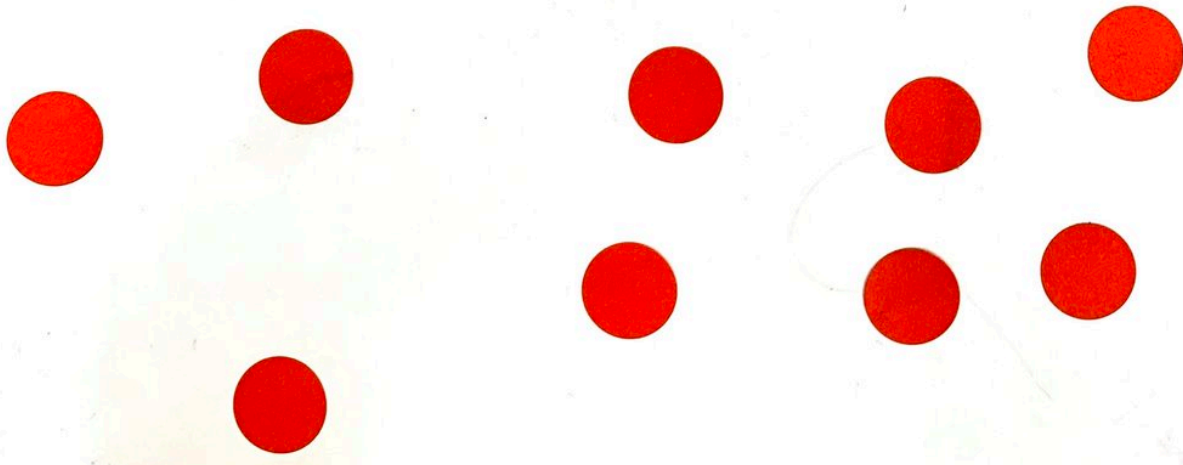
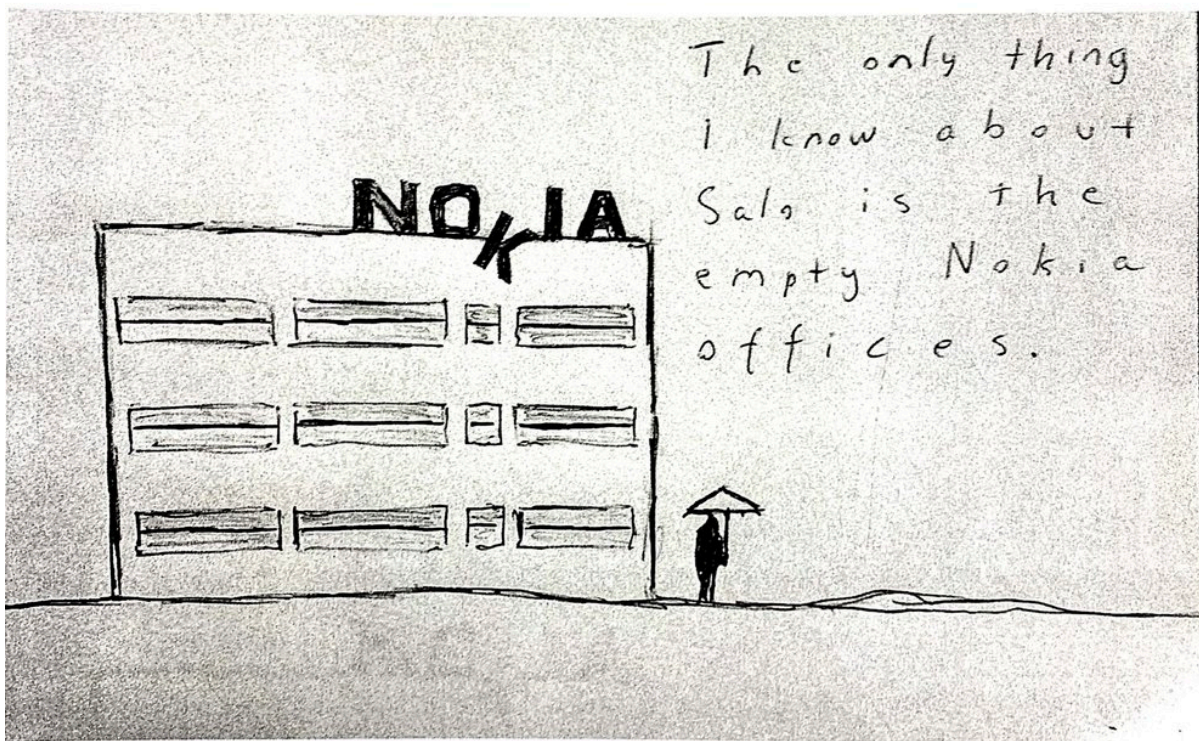


The meeting of the high school and university students took place on the home turf of the high school students. After a couple of exercises that would use the school setting for a critical analysis of the relation between spatial organisation and social interaction, the students would move to the basecamp and use this for the rest of the week.

University students arrived at Salo Highschool and joined the group of High school students there. After a short introduction to the game the students began the training as “Spaced Transformers” . There were a few exercises that addressed the topics of space and the city, where we addressed the questions of; what was space? And how it linked to changed and transformation? The training then continued in Linjuri where the basecamp of the game was situated.

The image/stigma (of Salo, Finland):

Before arriving in Salo, University students were asked to draw their image of the town, even if their knowledge of it was vague . The drawings were then evaluated by "local experts," the high school students familiar with the area. This exercise often revealed biases and stereotypes , and also highlighted the power dynamics between the more experienced university students and the high school students who saw their everyday spaces being portrayed.





The tunnel vision exercise:

The group stands in the space and their hands form like binoculars that you look through. They begin to move around passing the others in the room looking through their makeshift binoculars. This doesn't have to last for more than a couple of minutes and can even be quite silly.

The group then forms a circle, and we discuss how it feels to have a reduced sense of vision. The discussion can also mention that an illness exists called tunnel vision that reduces the peripheral vision. The discussion then focuses on the problem of navigating when suffering from - or just experiencing tunnel vision temporarily. This leads to the link between a dominating focused vision and how it depends on inputs from the peripheral perception - mostly peripheral vision and hearing - to decide where to direct the focused vision.

The takeaway from the exercise is to raise awareness on the role of more intuitive, embodied and less conscious perceptions of space and spatial knowledge.



Spatial organisation and social interaction:

The group of students initially sit in the room according to the pre-arranged seating, typically in rows. We then discuss how it feels to sit in that arrangement. Subsequently, we rearrange the chairs and tables to create a circular seating arrangement, followed by a discussion on how it feels to sit in a circle. Finally, we move the tables into smaller groups, and we discuss how this setup compares to

the other setups, followed by a presentation to the rest of the group. What is usually surprising is how the different setups are perceived differently. Some feel it is more positive to sit in a circle where one can see everybody, whereas others find it more intimidating and exposing. Usually, the small groups have a more positive experience and feel freer to discuss with others.

The takeaway from the exercise is to discuss how spatial organisation influences social interaction and how just being there produces space.

Blindfold:

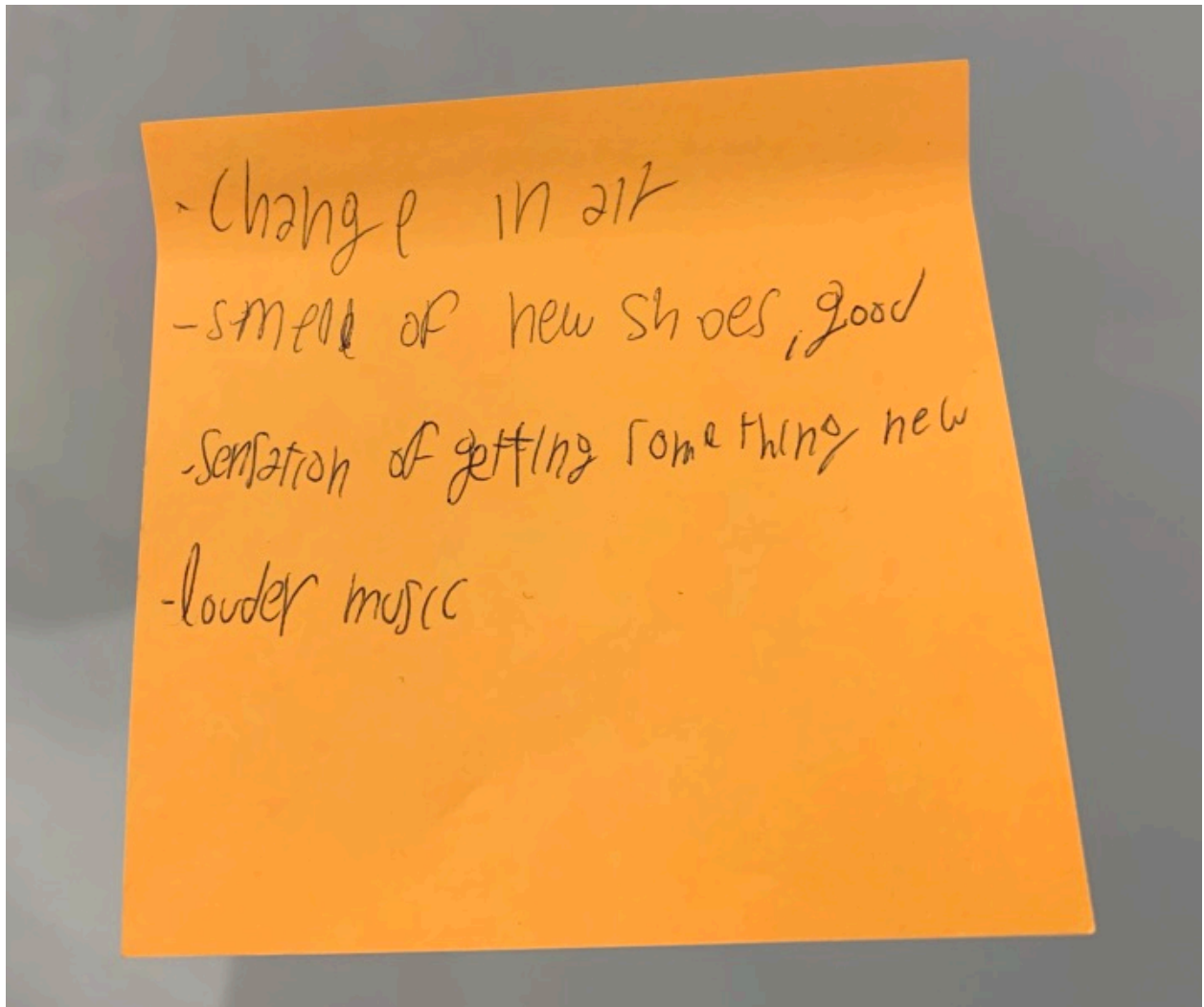
This exercise can be done in several ways. Most often it is done by forming pairs where one is blindfolded and the other is a guide and notetaker. In the case of the Space Transformers the guides were the local high school students, and the blindfolded “sensors” were the university students - playing with the power relation between the younger local students and the older university students.

The guide makes sure that the “sensor” feels as safe as possible and gets to explore the space or area that has been agreed. The sensor tells the notetaker how it feels in the spaces they pass: the smell, sense of cold air, the sounds and acoustics, sense of touch, the sense of moving up the stairs - everything except what can be seen. The notes are written on post-it notes and stuck on location.

The sensory phase is usually followed by a quick vote where sticky dots are stuck on the observations that feel most important. Based on the vote, the group has a discussion on the observations that felt most relevant.

The takeaway from this exercise is a very direct, rich and sometimes unnerving sensory experience that is often overlooked (literally).



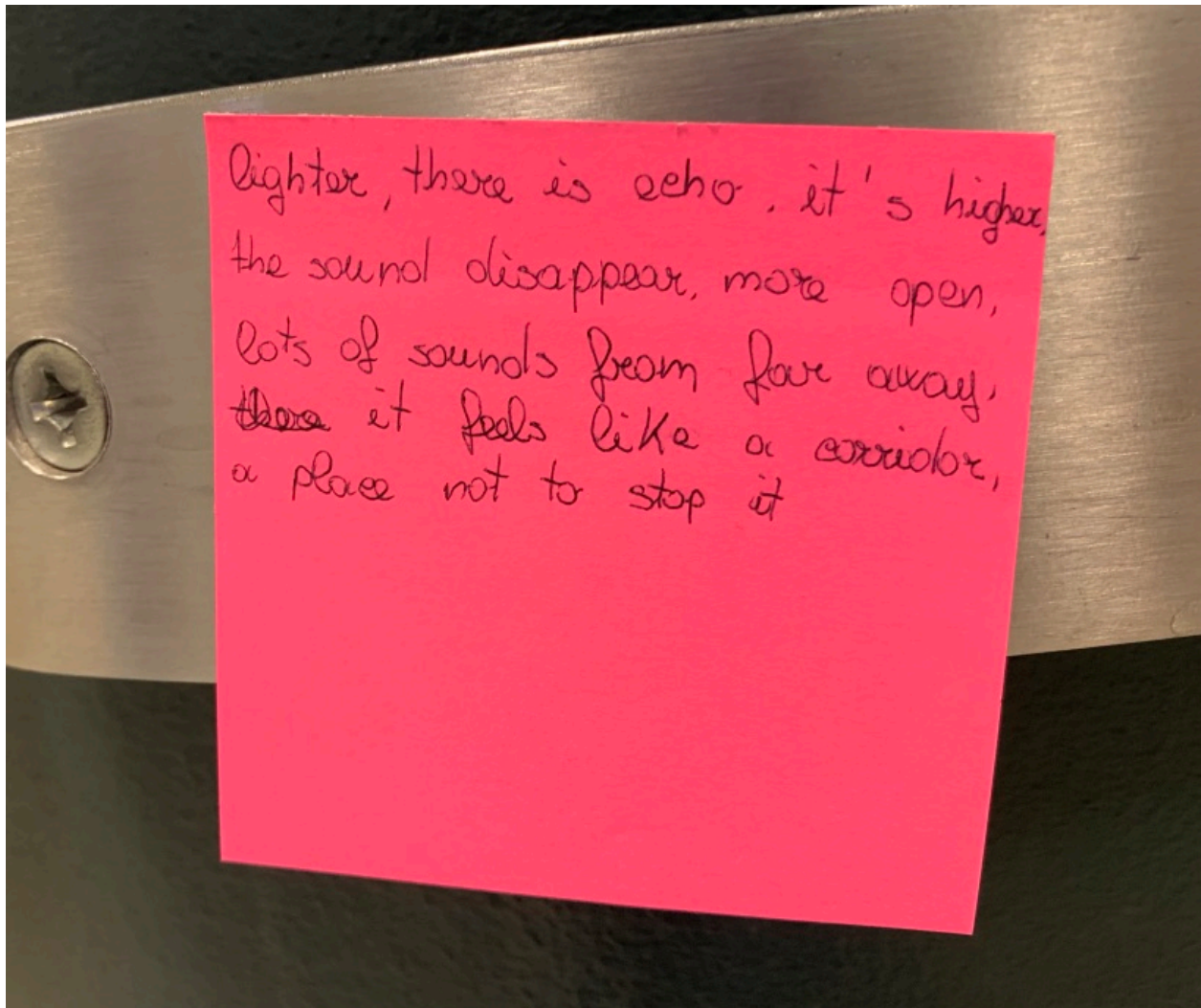


-Change in air

-Smell of new shoes, good

-Sensation of getting something, new

-louder music



lighter, there is echo, Its higher

the sound disappears, more open

lots of sounds from far away.

It feels like a corridor - not a place to stop at

Appropriation and the basecamp:

It takes 40 rolls of masking tape - the rest is up to chance. The rolls of masking tape are thrown onto the floor and the students are told to do whatever they want. After some hesitation the fun begins and only the imagination limits how the tape can be used. Often other materials are incorporated such as post-it notes that are organised in patterns. It can even turn into an embodied experience where students are being taped to the wall - though that takes a lot of tape. The session can be very short, lasting a maximum of 30 minutes.

The goal is to give a concrete meaning to the notion of appropriation. Instead of talking about change, we try to produce change albeit on a symbolic level. As such the students are made to feel empowered to take, change and produce their own space.

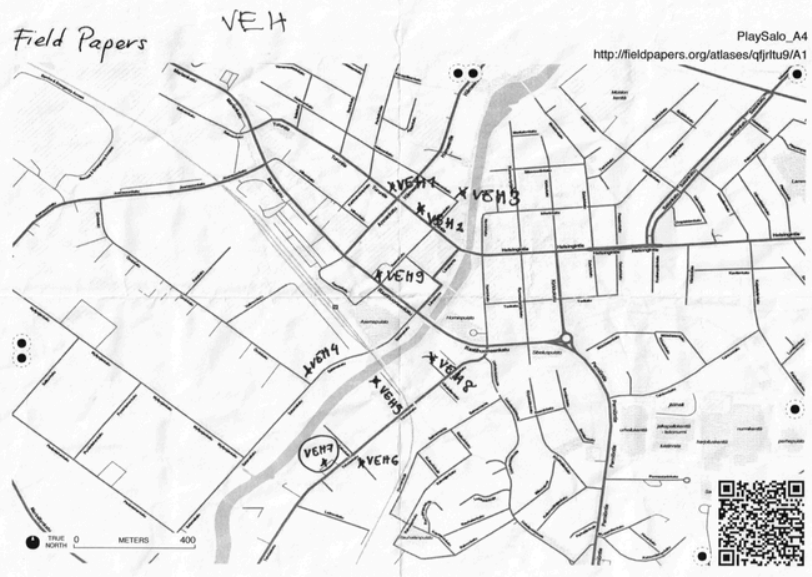


Tuesday – The body as sensor and expression

After the students have warmed up their senses and appropriated their space - the basecamp - they were ready for the game itself to begin. The 3 days of the games followed a daily rhythm with three elements: It begins with **exploration** that feeds into a **challenge** that the participants then **engage** with.



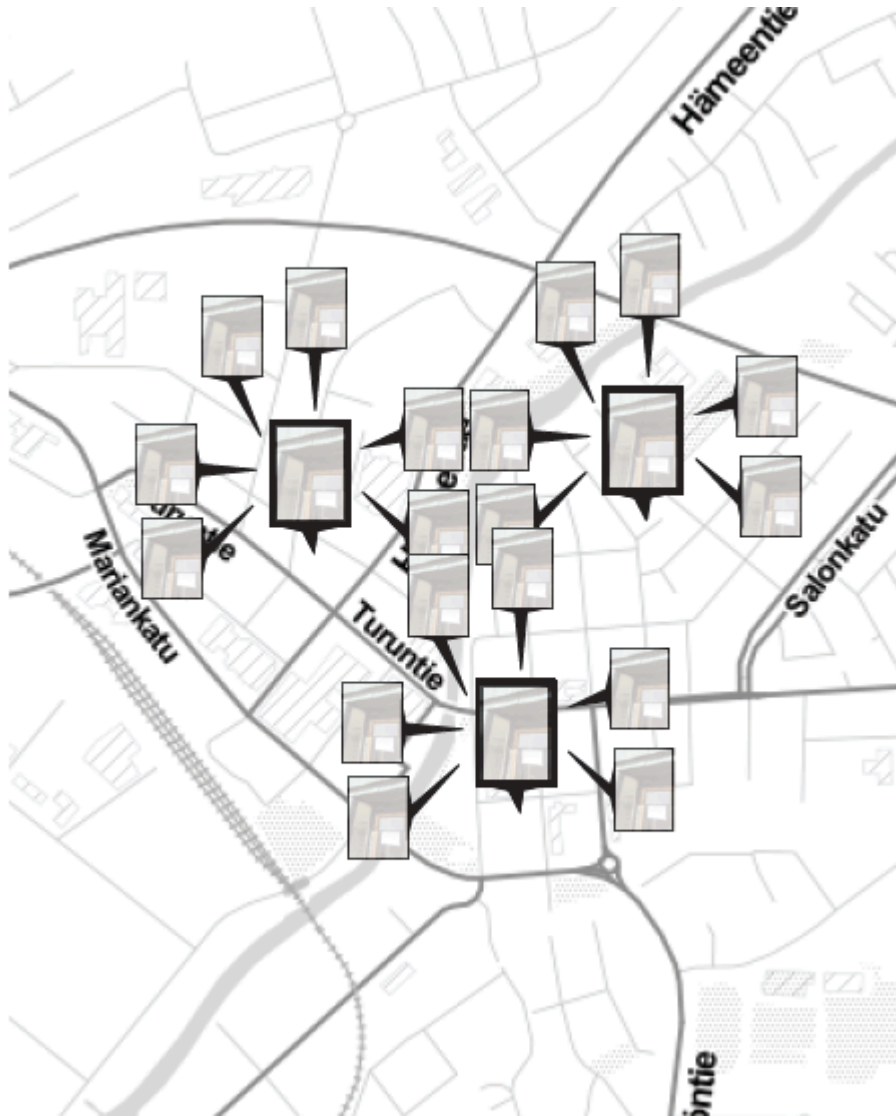
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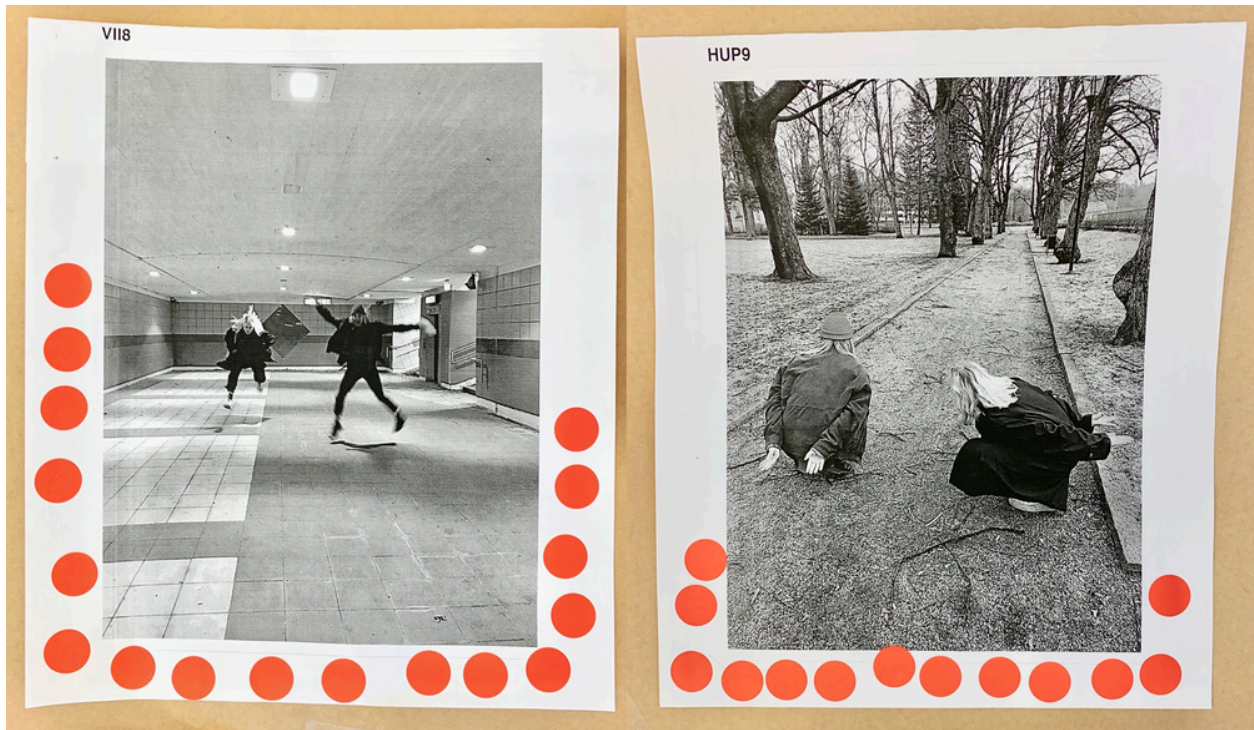


Each Player marks “their” SOP on a collective map that is the base for the game that now has the character of a treasure hunt. Each student is challenged to find the SOPs on the map and take a selfie with a gesture that expresses how that space make them feel.





The players - still playing individually - are now tasked to find as many of the challenges and engage with them by expressing their experience of that space without using words! This can be a gesture/mime, or a small physical intervention captured as an image or video. The photos of the gestures are printed out and added to the initial photo of the SOP to form a collage that grows with the game.



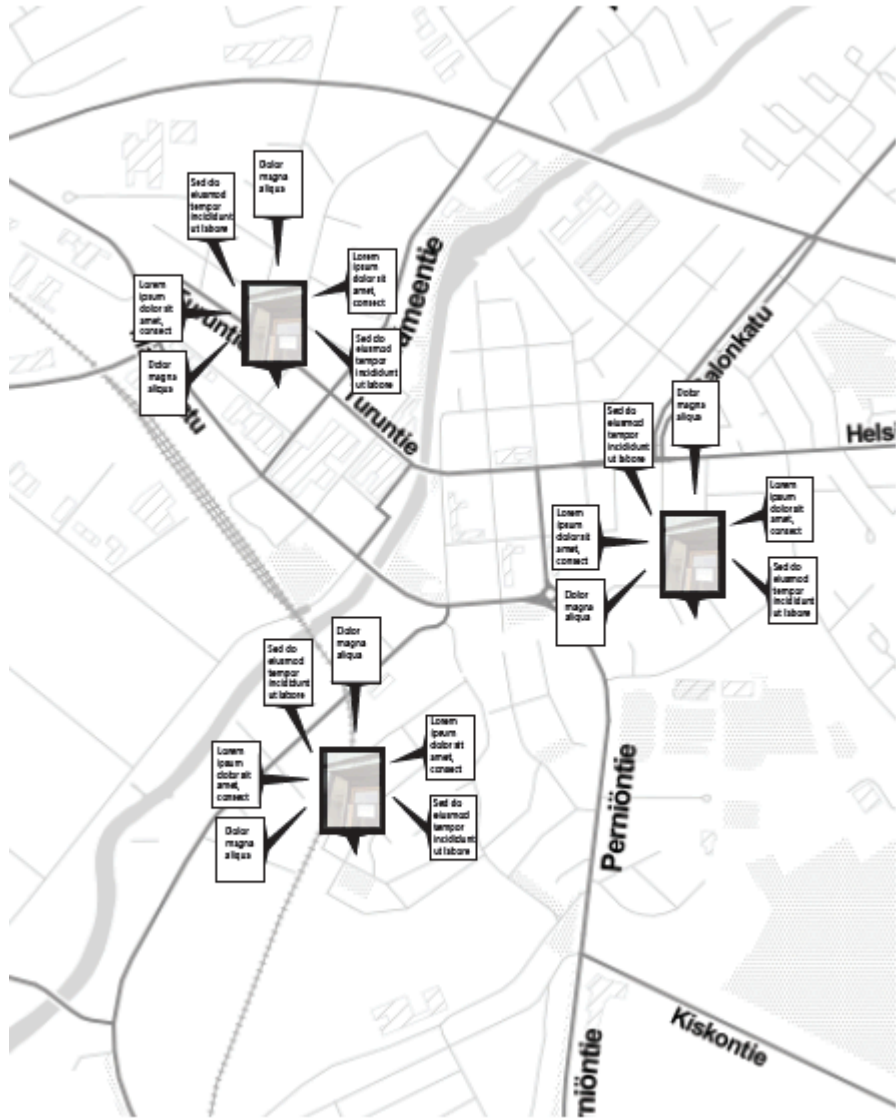
Wednesday - Social space. Naming the world together



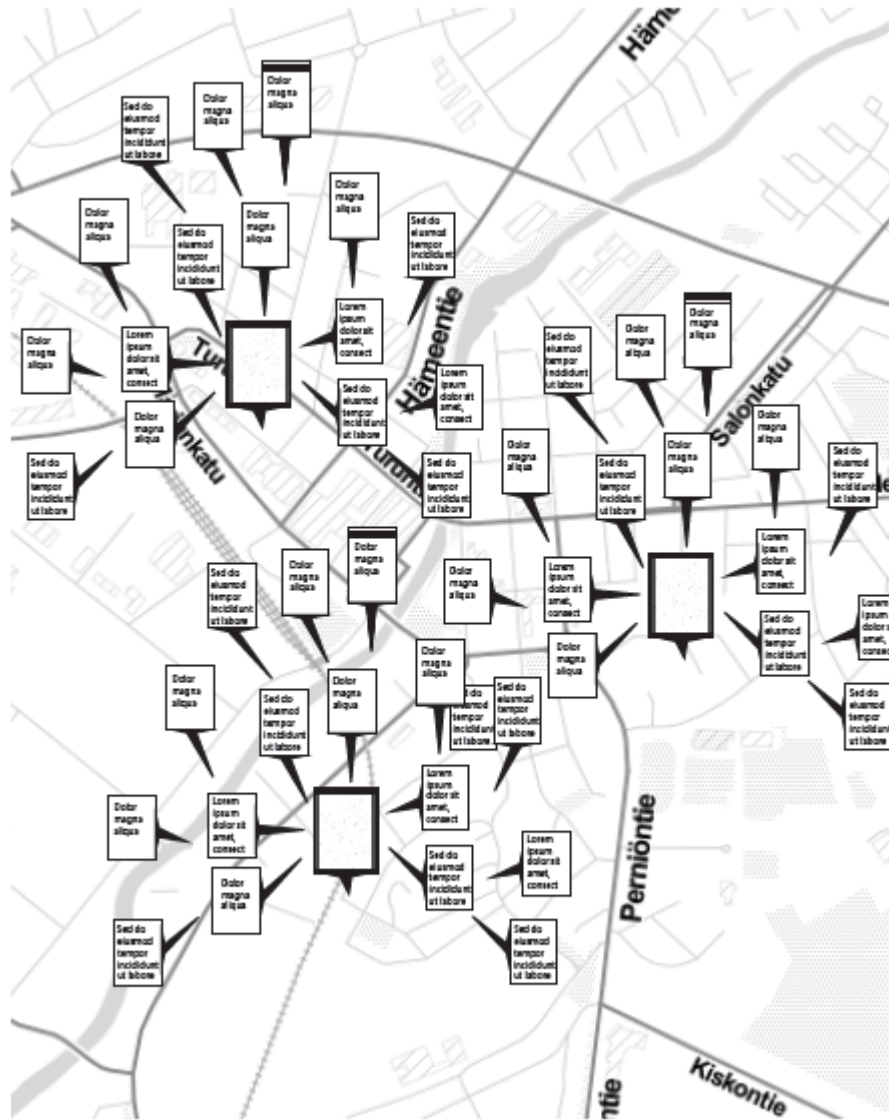
The players now form groups, and they first revisit the challenge of each of the players from the day before. Here the groups discuss what keywords or - #tags – can describe the SOPs. The group build a common vocabulary.



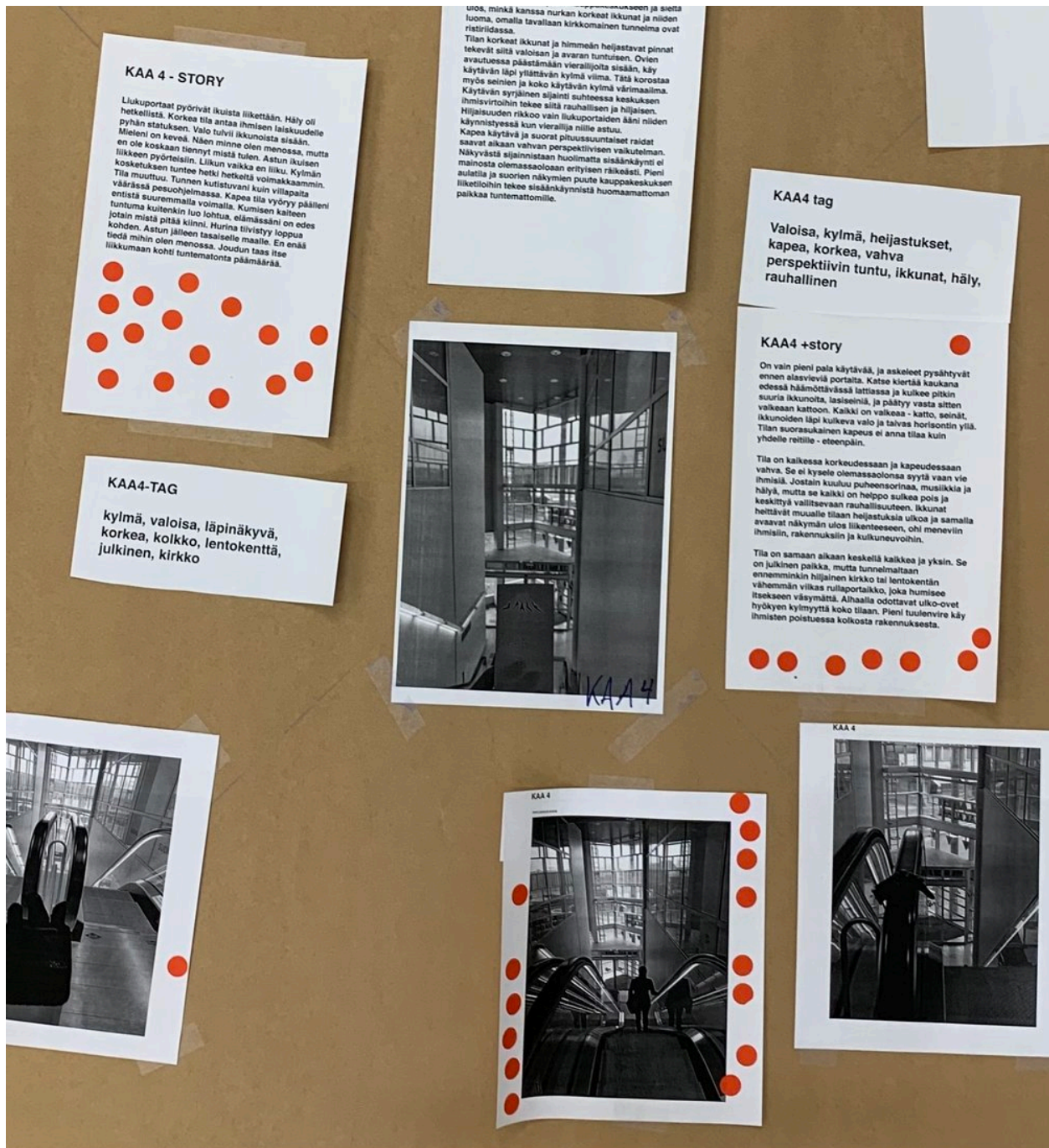
Tags for KAA4: cold, bright, transparent, high, corner, airport, public, church



The groups chose one SOP that they find the most important and like the day before creating a new collective map with the 4 most significant SOPs including the words/tags associated with them for the other teams for find and engage with.

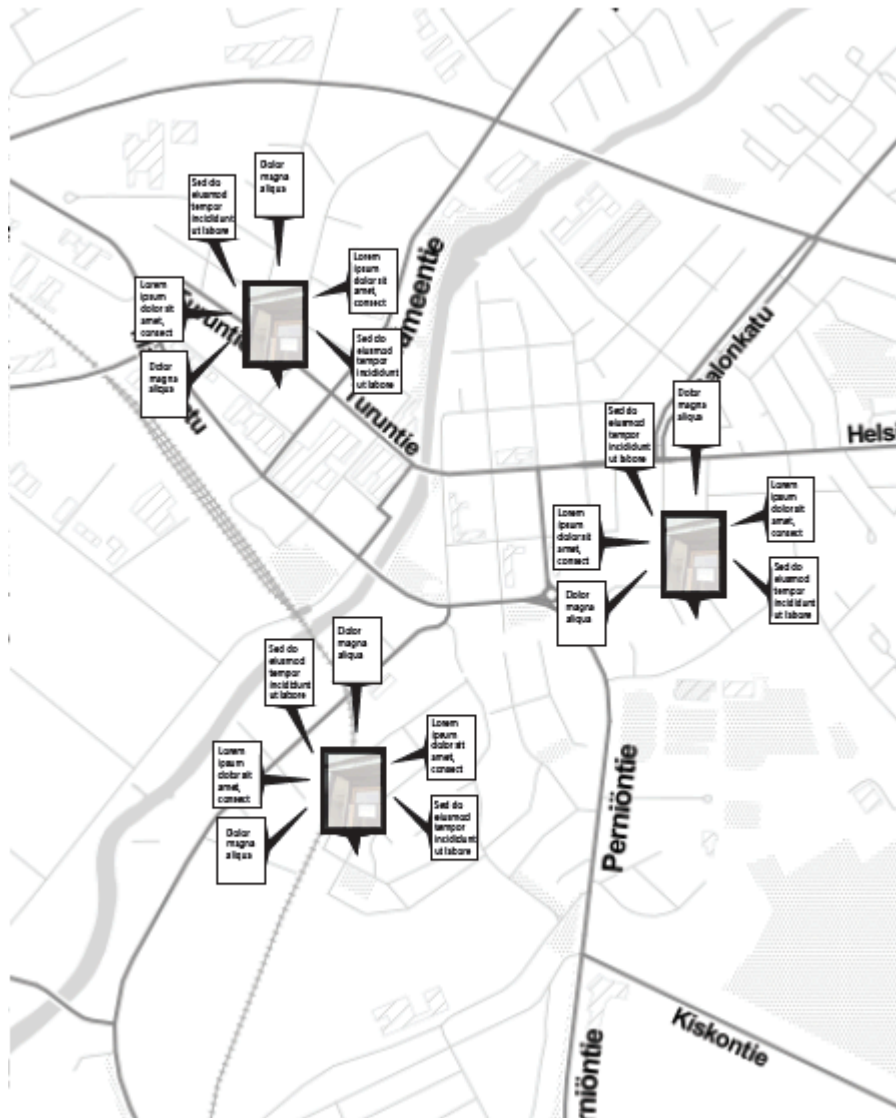


The teams search for the challenges of the SOPs on the new map and discuss the keywords. Based on this they write new short stories associated with the SOPs

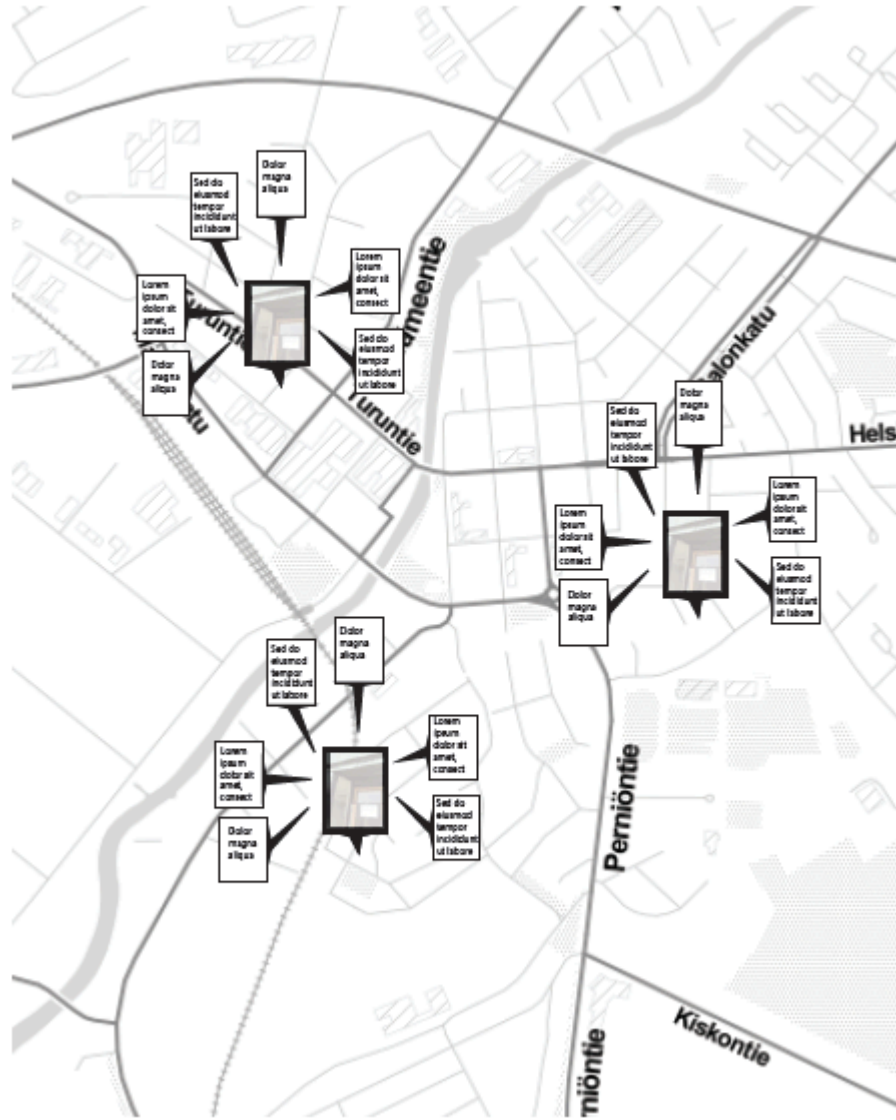


Story: The escalators spin forever. There was noise momentarily. The high ceiling gives laziness a sacred status. Light floods in from the windows. My mind is light. I see where I'm going, but I never knew where I came from. I step into the eternal movement. I move even when I don't. Moment to moment you feel the cold touch stronger. The space changes. I feel like I'm shrinking like a sweater in the wrong washing program. The narrow space collapses on me with greater force than before. But the rubber railing brings comfort, something to hold on to in life. The buzz intensifies closer to the end. I step onto the even ground again. I do not know where I'm going. I have to move myself again towards an unknown destination.

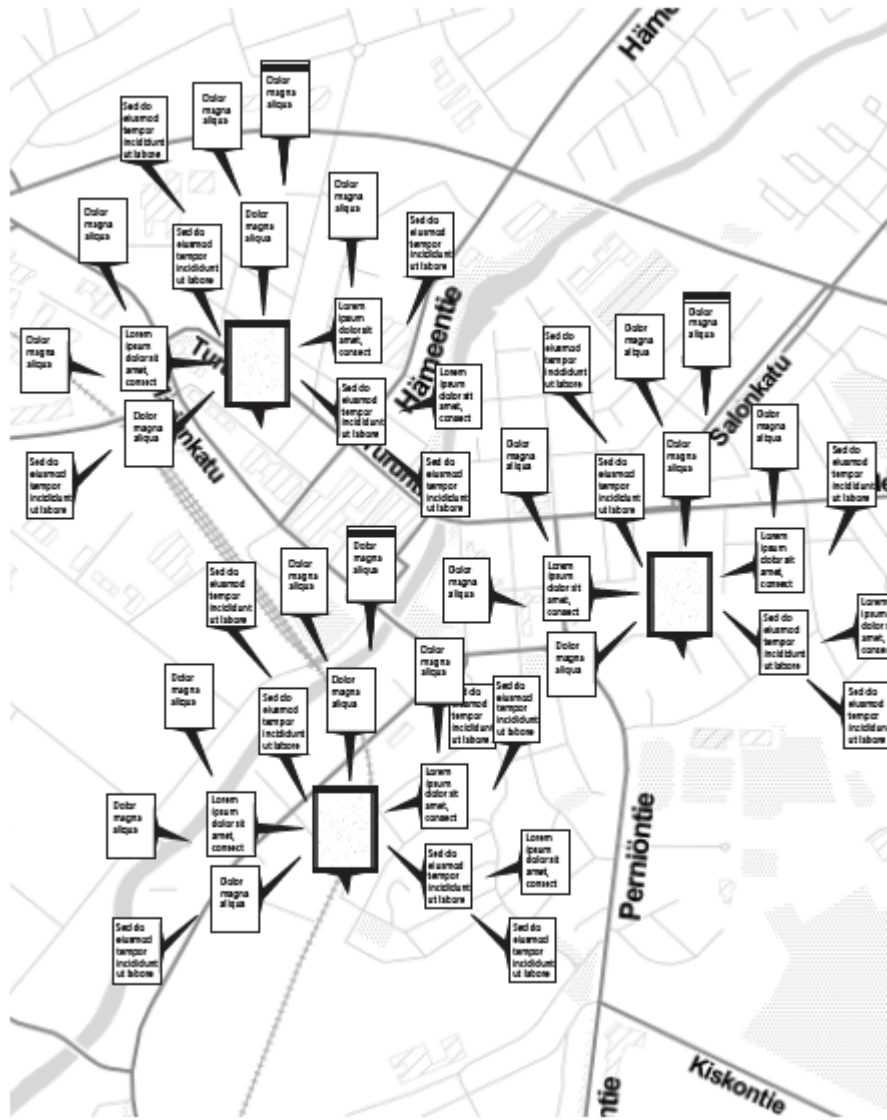
Thursday - Societal space and Time machine



Each group selects a couple of SOPs, researches their history and the process of urban development that led to how they felt when they initially were chosen. This can be done both by going into online archives and interviewing local citizens.



Each group selects one SOP added to a new collective map for the other groups to engage with. This SOP is now composed by research related to the public space along with images and text from the 2 previous days - the personal and collective spaces.



The groups engage with the SOPs from the other groups and use historical research etc. to go forward in time and imagine how the space could be transformed. Interviewing citizens and possible allies such as local actors, social movements, businesses, institutions.

C. First ideas and sketches for the chosen site, engaging with the challenge for this SOP

A. "Space of possibility" (SOP) - an abandoned factory - chosen as a first challenge to the other participants



A. Using body gestures to express how the SOP feels

B. Adding words to the first non verbal experiences

The collages would document the explorations adding new material during the game. Small dots were used to upvote photos, texts or drawings



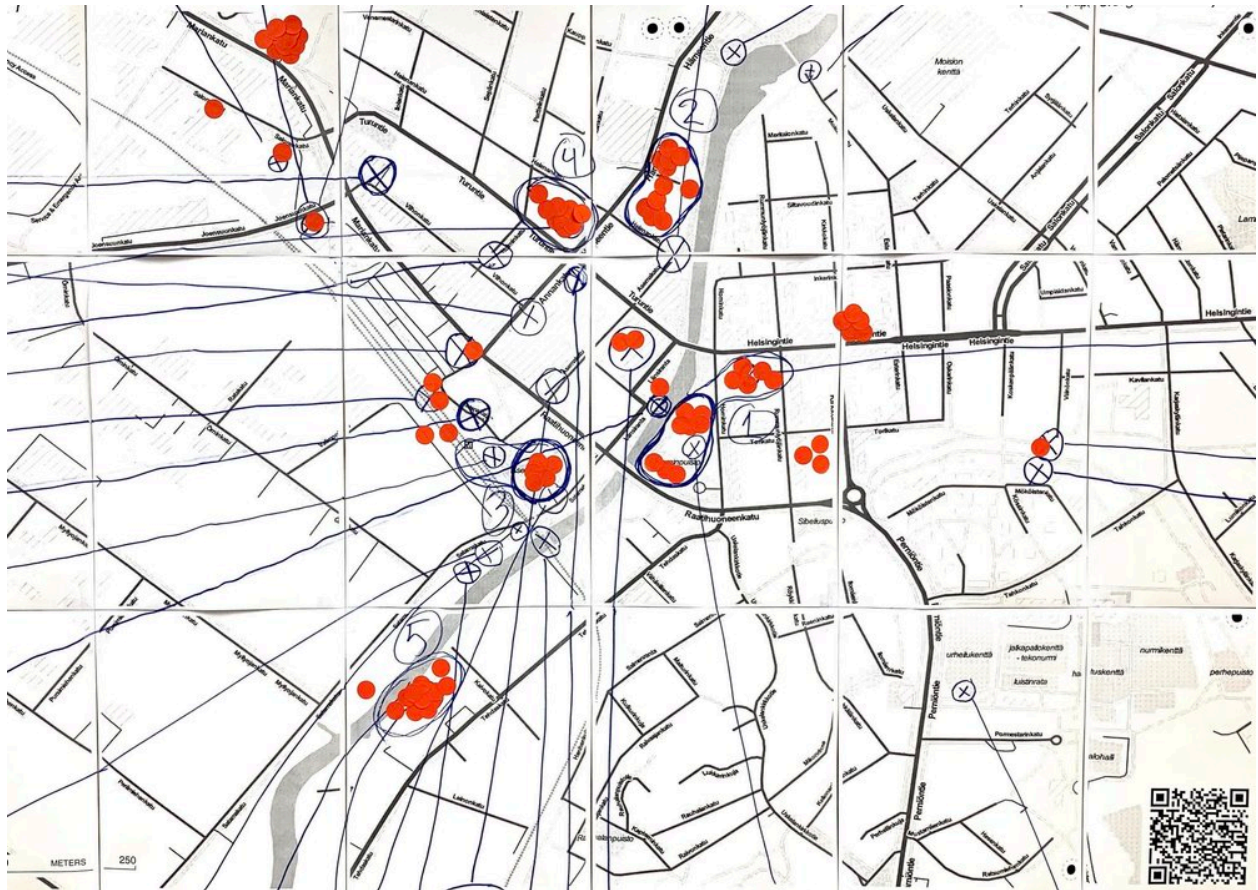
The collages that have documented the explorations, stories and first ideas during the game are now being exhibited in the public space of the Linjuri shopping centre.

Friday – Prototyping spaces. Testing and discussing first ideas.

Preparations

New groups are formed using a big map that the students could put red dots on to show what locations they thought were most important and interesting for them to work with.

There was quite a divide between the local high school students and the university students. The university students seemed to work with less public spaces such as backyards and the local high school students preferred work with more public spaces such like an underused parking lot that was used as a place to meet and hang out. In retrospect it would have been better that the local high school students had the right to choose and therefore also could give better feedback to the university students.



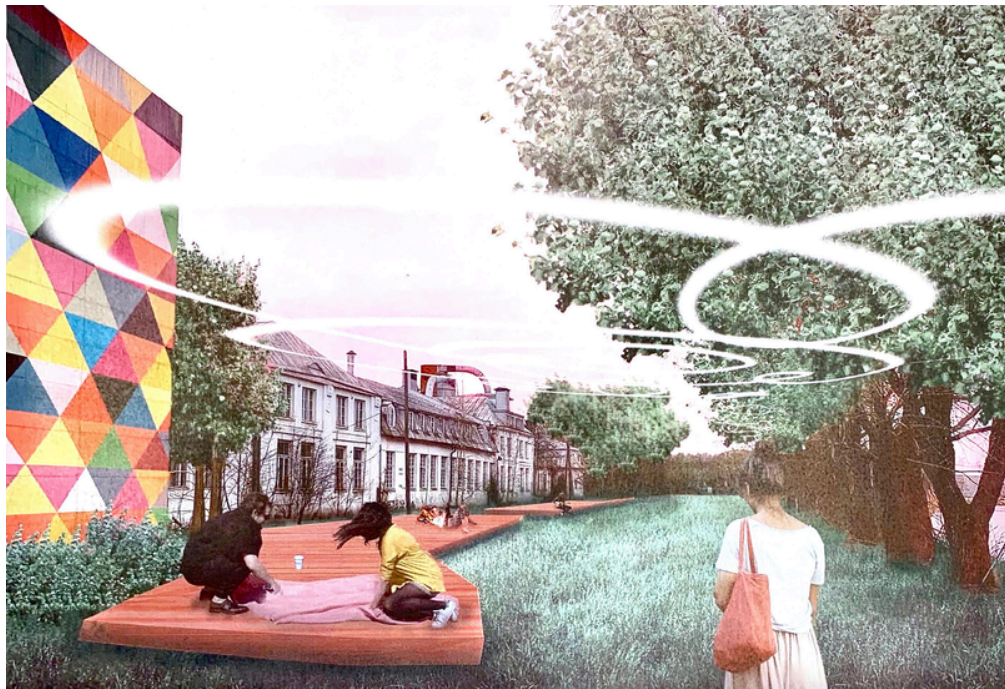
The groups were tasked with producing a performative and interactive public event in the afternoon, which had been previously announced in local media. The groups used this opportunity to both present their first ideas for sites and get feedback from a local group of participants.

The groups were quite successful in making the small events interactive and performative with different ways of involving each other and the local participants. Most performative was a small event on the main market square in town with the participants performed a short dance before ending in the nearby back yard to discuss their ideas. The day and the game were summed up with a discussion in the Linjuri building using the documentation material on display there.



After this the Architecture students would go back to Tampere and work on their projects in a more traditional way. A tight schedule at the university did not allow for them to return to Salo and do the concrete 1:1 intervention such as it was done in Venice.

While this element was missing the local high school students would travel to Tampere and participate with feedback on the presentations of the projects of the architecture students. This was also part of the aim to introduce high school students to the studies in HE - especially relevant for students that is not otherwise exposed to HE through other means e.g., parents.



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One of the projects by the students of architecture. The intention of the course is to do concrete 1:1 intervention in public space as the example with high school students in Venice showed (above). This physical presence in public spaces adds the essential nonverbal elements that a project that is based on representations cannot include.

Summing up:

One can see the glass half empty: Higher Education and universities are producers of an abstract and fragmented space. The Ivory Tower has changed into an Ivory Bubble that is much harder to perceive or escape. An emerging “class of abstraction” can quantify and define everything but is unable to foster transformations.

Or one can see it as a half full glass: The old ideal of the university as a liberated zone for discovery and a setting for unplanned encounters. A space very similar to the socially produced public space that democracy grew out of – the Athens Agora. A space produced by a rhythm between a radical openness and focused action.

The third mission of the universities – the societal impact – can be seen as a two-way trojan horse: The university can be an empowering and challenging/inspiring actor in local communities and universities can be challenged by working “in, with and for” local communities that give an experiential learning process.

A basic condition is that the universities come out of their comfort zone and engage with peripheral (post industrial, marginalised and shrinking) cities that lack the resources but have an openness that is typically lacking in growing cities where universities are based.

An educational link between universities and communities can address the problem of the university as a powerful actor that imposes an agenda on a less resourceful local community. In the case of the Space Transformers game, one concrete example is the younger high school students that are the local experts guiding the older university students.

The game based explorations allow for the unplanned and the complex to be grasped initially as a sensory or affective political experience that is only gradually turned into an operational language. It is here that a radical openness can be found – a transformative space.

Students – local or coming from universities - learn from their bodily senses how they produce space by simply being physically present. The following learning process builds context sensitive capacities in active citizenship and democratic participation that enables them to act and become Space Transformers.

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