

"PLAYFUL VACANCIES"

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OVERALL SUMMARY

In my research paper “Play outside the playground” (2022), I investigated an extended understanding of what the notion of “play” could embody. I found that play has potential as a radical spatial action when understood beyond its conventional boundaries and can be used as a method to “claim space” in the city (Rørvik, 2022).

The research field one could call “play-urbanism” draws on ideas experimented with in the mid 20th century in the crossing fields of art, architecture, and politics, such as the Situationist movement (ibid). For them, play was considered a catalyst for a new type of society, and a desire to “re-claim play” emerged as a counter action after being held down by war, fascism, and capital (Shepard, 2011).

We are now in the middle of a global climate- and environmental crisis, in which the building industry plays a huge part. Vacant buildings are facing demolition on questionable grounds, with many being replaced by new construction projects.

The shadow of the climate crisis stretches further than the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, during the pandemic years, the world united and proved that it could act quickly when there is the willpower behind it.

Copenhagen is the World Capital of Architecture this year, which means that there is a lot of eyes on the Danish architectural scene right now. The occasion makes for a situation where radical actions to alter ongoing building practices can be actualized. The question remains, if an architectural conference is enough to do so.

The concept of play challenges our imagination of what urban life is, and what it could, and should be. The environmental crisis calls for other ways of thinking within the industry.

With this thesis project I seek to explore a possible urban future that could draw on ideas of playful occupations of existing and coming vacancies.

SOMETHING TO BE ANGRY ABOUT

The building industry is responsible for almost 40 % of carbon emissions worldwide (Architecture 2030, 2023). Nevertheless, critical questions towards the industry's huge responsibility in the environmental crisis remains unaddressed, as professor at Harvard GSD Charlotte Malterre-Barthes draws focus to in her recently published article (2023).

According to Malterre-Barthes, there is no such thing as “sustainable construction”. The building industry is destructive, and urbanization consumes enormous amounts of unbuilt land every year (Harvey, 1969; Malterre-Barthes, 2023). These damaging processes are instead concealed behind so-called “greenwashing”¹ (Malterre-Barthes, 2023), by for instance leading the focus to one specific aspect of a project, without considering the broader environmental and social impacts. Malterre-Barthes also claims the construction industry take part in the on-going exploitation of the Global South, through processes of raw mineral extraction for building materials.

Back in the day urban planner and critical theorist Peter Marcuse critiqued the whole notion of sustainability and claimed that promoting “sustainability” may often mean the sustaining of the “unjust status quo” (Marcuse, 1998, p. 103).

In “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), scholar and feminist theorist Donna Haraway criticizes “the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture” (p. 292). This appropriative practice is destroying microclimates and biodiversity and affects the lives of the most vulnerable population on the planet. As Malterre-Barthes (2023) points out, this way of sustaining an economic growth model is certainly global neo-colonial extractivism.

To avoid being reduced to “static form and technical manipulators in the name of efficiency and progress”, one must recognize these social, environmental, and global networks - and architecture's place in it (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011, p. 30).



3) Photo from the construction of the modernist housing estate Urbanplanen in Copenhagen.

RESISTANCES AT PLAY

However, many are screaming for radically alternative pathways. Through activism, groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain, and Fridays for Future are fighting against the “unsustainable status quo”, by taking their agenda to the streets. These groups are creating furor and disrupting the everyday usual. I call the examples “political play” because the creative and appropriative nature of play is used as a means for expressing political views. Moreover, many of these actions have proved to have the power to transform the city, temporary during the action, but also with permanent after effects, such as the playful action “Picnic the Streets” (2013) in Brussel.

In line with what Marxist-sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre emphasizes, these activist groups are manifesting the city as a place for expressing “jouissance” and “lived moments”, through opportunities for free movement, carnival, strikes and actions (Merrifield, 2002; Shepard, 2011). As a part of having a “right to the city”, Lefebvre asked for the citizens themselves to improvise and claim city spaces as a part of the right to urban life (Shepard, 2011).

The World Congress of Architects is a conference held every three years with speakers and participants from all over the world. The event seeks to center the role of architecture and urban design in sustainable development (UIA, 2023). The event is scheduled to take place in Copenhagen this summer, which also includes a year long program of events in the city.

Although the conference is well meaning, I am questioning the impact and the vigorousness of the conference. The actions mentioned on this page, however, are “front page of the New York Times”-material and have accomplished immense support from a great variety of groups and people united in common intent and desire.



4a) “Insulate Britain” pressures the UK government to take action on climate change by insulating all homes in the country by 2030.



4c) SLA's proposal for “Earth overshoot day” is to stop all construction and use the assets to create green spaces all over the city (SLA, 2023).



4b) “Fridays for future” is protests worldwide demanding action against global warming.

“STOP BUILDING?”

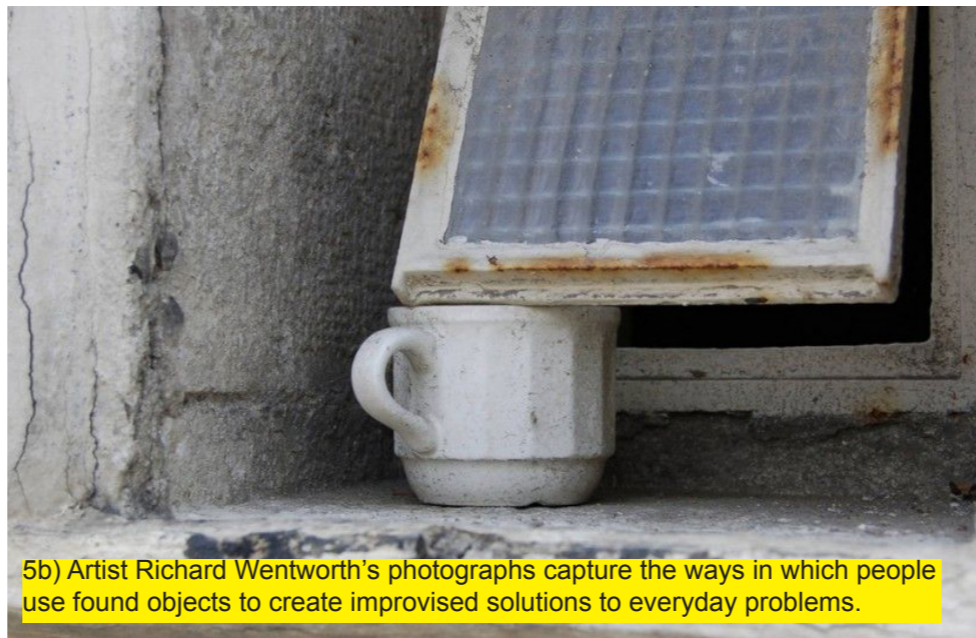
In her provocative article (2023), Malterre-Barthes calls for a “moratorium on new construction”. She writes that this statement should be seen as somewhere between a thought-experiment and a call for action.

Simultaneously, the Danish design studio SLA are proposing a temporary moratorium on construction projects in Copenhagen during “Earth overshoot day” the 28th of March. The proposal challenges the city to take its sustainable visions and strategies seriously (SLA, 2023).²

“MAKING DO” WITH WHAT WE HAVE

There is much to learn from “urban players”, such as artists and activists, when it comes to “making do” with what we already have. Urban players occupy spaces for certain amounts of time and sees an imaginative potential in objects that serve conventional purposes (Rørvik, 2022).

Architects and researchers Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, call for richer approaches to architectural practice. They refer to the British architect Cedric Price and agree with him that building might not be the best solution to a spatial problem. In their book “Spatial Agency” (2011) they present a collection of other methods of transforming space collectively.



5b) Artist Richard Wentworth's photographs capture the ways in which people use found objects to create improvised solutions to everyday problems.



5e) Photograph by Torben Voigt. The early occupation of Christiania (1971-1976). Sign reads: “Occupied. Here comes cafeteria”.



5c) Artist Alex Villar ignores the city's spatial codes in the video performance “Temporary Occupations” (2002). He explores the spatiality of “invisible” spaces in the public sphere (Thompson & Sholette, 2004).



5a) Architect Santiago Cirugeda works with “cheap architecture” providing citizens with guidelines and instructions to create spaces for themselves by subverting regulations and conventions, such as this scaffolding balcony that works as an extended habitable space (Anwar, Schneider & Till, 2011).



5d) Architect Michael Rakowitz' inflatable homeless shelters, ParaSITE. Rakowitz's creative projects agitate the everyday reality, altering social relations, and thus makes visible issues and contradictions that would otherwise go unnoticed (Anwar, Schneider & Till, 2011).

REMINDER OF A PLAYFUL OCCUPATION

Copenhagen already has a history of radical re-claiming of city spaces and “playful occupation” of the existing built environment.

In 1971 a group of squatters took over an abandoned military base in central Copenhagen, now known as Freetown Christiania (Bladt, 2015). The action emerged as artists and young people saw the vacant buildings as possible places to inhabit when they were struggling to find affordable living situations in the city (ibid). Based on their own principals of communal living, freedom, play, and creativity, they created a community that over time developed its own governance and economy (ibid).

Still today, Christiania is a worldwide symbol of alternative living and a popular tourist attraction, although the most radical period of the community was the first decade of its existence (Anwar, Schneider & Till, 2011).

BUILDING WITH A SOCIAL AGENDA

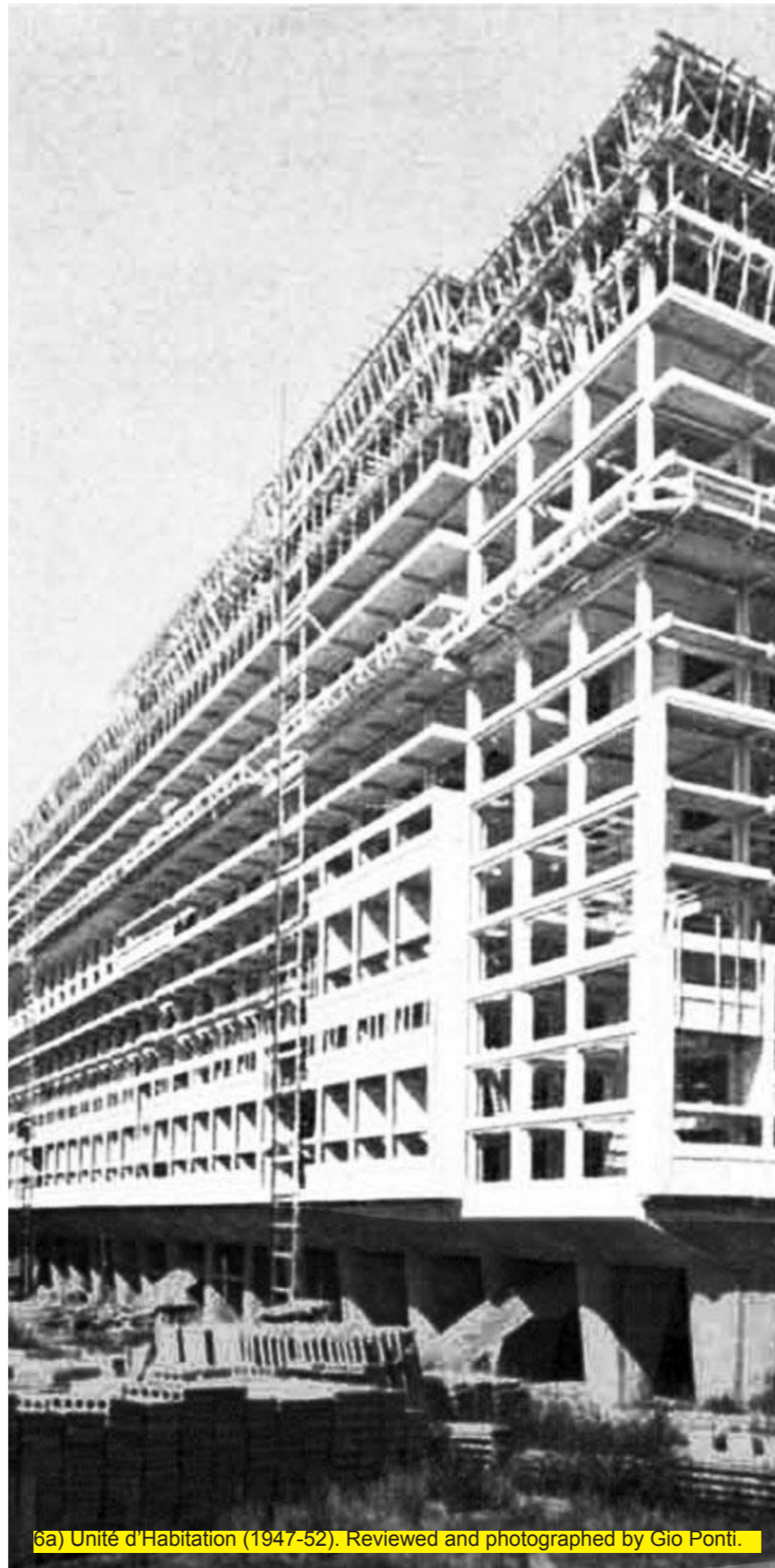
Other countries also experienced a housing shortage in the post-war period – along with an urgent necessity to reconstruct and a wish to “start afresh” and modernize urban living after the war (Avermaete & Gosseye, 2021, p. 192).

Besides squatting vacant buildings, paper design ideas of modernist architects that was formulated during the interwar period, such as Ville Radieuse, was being manifested on a large scale. “The Ville Radieuse” (The Radiant City) was intended as an equal city without classes, where there were no division between rich or poor and the apartments were neither pretentious nor cramped but designed to a human scale (Avermaete & Gosseye, 2021). The principals behind Ville Radieuse also included collective services, such as communal gardens, sports facilities, workshops, and spaces for participatory activities (ibid). Further, a public landscape ran through the habitation area with the intention that residents would occupy it in whatever way they wanted.

As Avermaete and Gosseye (2021) points out, these lines of thinking were contradicting the modern capitalist society that was dominated by logics of productivity and efficiency.

Perhaps kickstarted by Unité d’Habitation (1947-52) in Marseille, a large wave of post-war social housing was built after comparable principals in several parts of the world. Using this planning model as a universal tool to change society united the world in a shared seeking for “a new beginning” (Yde, 2009, p. 25).

In Denmark, large non-profit social housing estates were established such as Gellerup (Aarhus), Vollsmose (Odense) and Urbanplanen (Copenhagen). The industrialization of the building industry together with an economic growth made it possible to build more for less (Yde, 2009). In total more than 200 000 affordable housing units were built during a 20-year period in the 60s and 70s – which equals approximately 38% of all social housing in Denmark (Kristensen, 2007).



6a) Unité d’Habitation (1947-52). Reviewed and photographed by Gio Ponti.



6b) Urbanplanen, Amager, is an example of building with a social agenda. This photo is from the construction period.

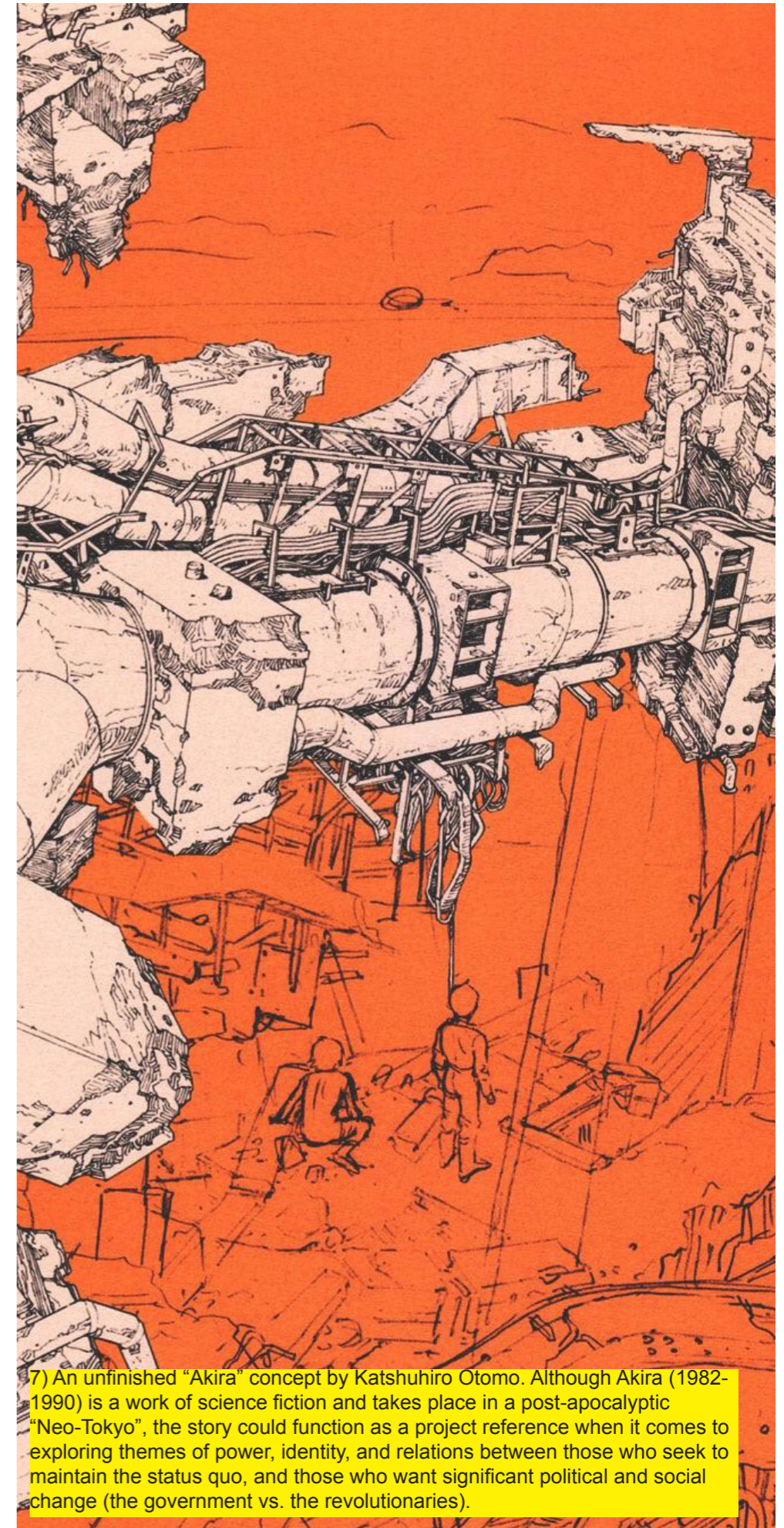
This typology is now in danger of being demolished because demolition is seen as a way of addressing social issues in the housing estates.

In addition to harming the environment, the demolition of these building blocks is also removing an important social part of architectural history. Modernism emerged as a reaction to social injustice (Yde and Juul, 2009). The historic role of these building blocks makes it especially controversial for them to contribute to contemporary displacement of residents. Displacement affects both social networks and the cultural identity of the residents, which can result in exclusion and marginalization (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, & Lees, 2020).

SUMMARIZING STATEMENT

The urgency of the environmental crisis that we are facing today, calls for a redefinition of ways of dealing with urbanization (Ellefsen, 2021). Decarbonizing the building industry is urgent. The industry must prioritize preservation over destruction. What would happen if we do as Maltherre-Barthes, SLA, Awan, Schneider, and Till among others call for, an erase “building” and “new construction” as solutions to spatial problems? The business of building would have to radically re-think its core economic motivations. Likewise, we also have to think differently about what it would mean to “do architecture” going forward.

With a starting point in the urgency of the environmental crisis and the notion of “play” as a method to generate change, I seek to investigate how one could kickstart alternative building movements, and investigate what spatial landscapes that could emerge when we must “make do” with what we have, organizing and occupying the city’s spaces differently than we do today.



7) An unfinished “Akira” concept by Katshuhiro Otomo. Although Akira (1982-1990) is a work of science fiction and takes place in a post-apocalyptic “Neo-Tokyo”, the story could function as a project reference when it comes to exploring themes of power, identity, and relations between those who seek to maintain the status quo, and those who want significant political and social change (the government vs. the revolutionaries).

SITE(S) AND PROGRAM

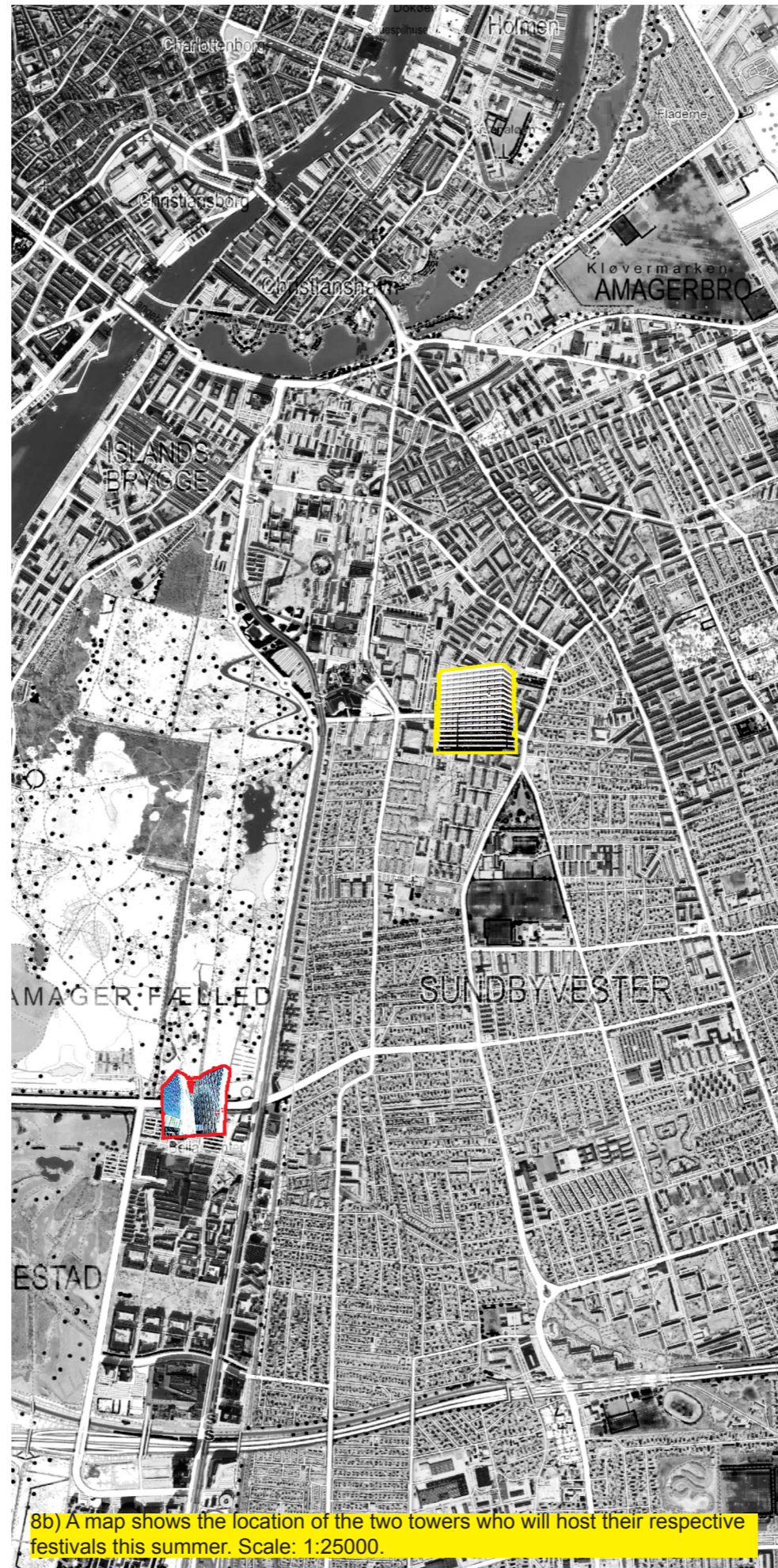
As a site of departure for this thesis project, I plan to work with Peder Lykke Tower, in Urbanplanen, Copenhagen. The tower is still standing (as of February 16 2023); however, the residents have been moved out and there are plans to demolish the tower sometime this year. Meanwhile, it remains vacant.

The location of the tower is in short distance from Bella Sky Center, where the Congress of Architects will be held in the beginning of July. Therefore, it could be a fitting site for launching a movement against current building practices - for instance through an Alternative Architecture Festival, held simultaneously in and around Peder Lykke Tower. The two (almost) neighboring towers would then be opposing each other this summer, as the festival at Peter Lykke Tower would function as an anti-dote to the Congress of Architects.

We are at a critical moment and the alternative festival would be a (re-)action against current leading practices.



8a) The two towers are opposing each other



8b) A map shows the location of the two towers who will host their respective festivals this summer. Scale: 1:25000.



8c) Site photo showing the vacant tower as of February 16, 2023.

I imagine the program to incorporate both temporary and more permanent inhabitations of the vacant structure and the public spaces around it.

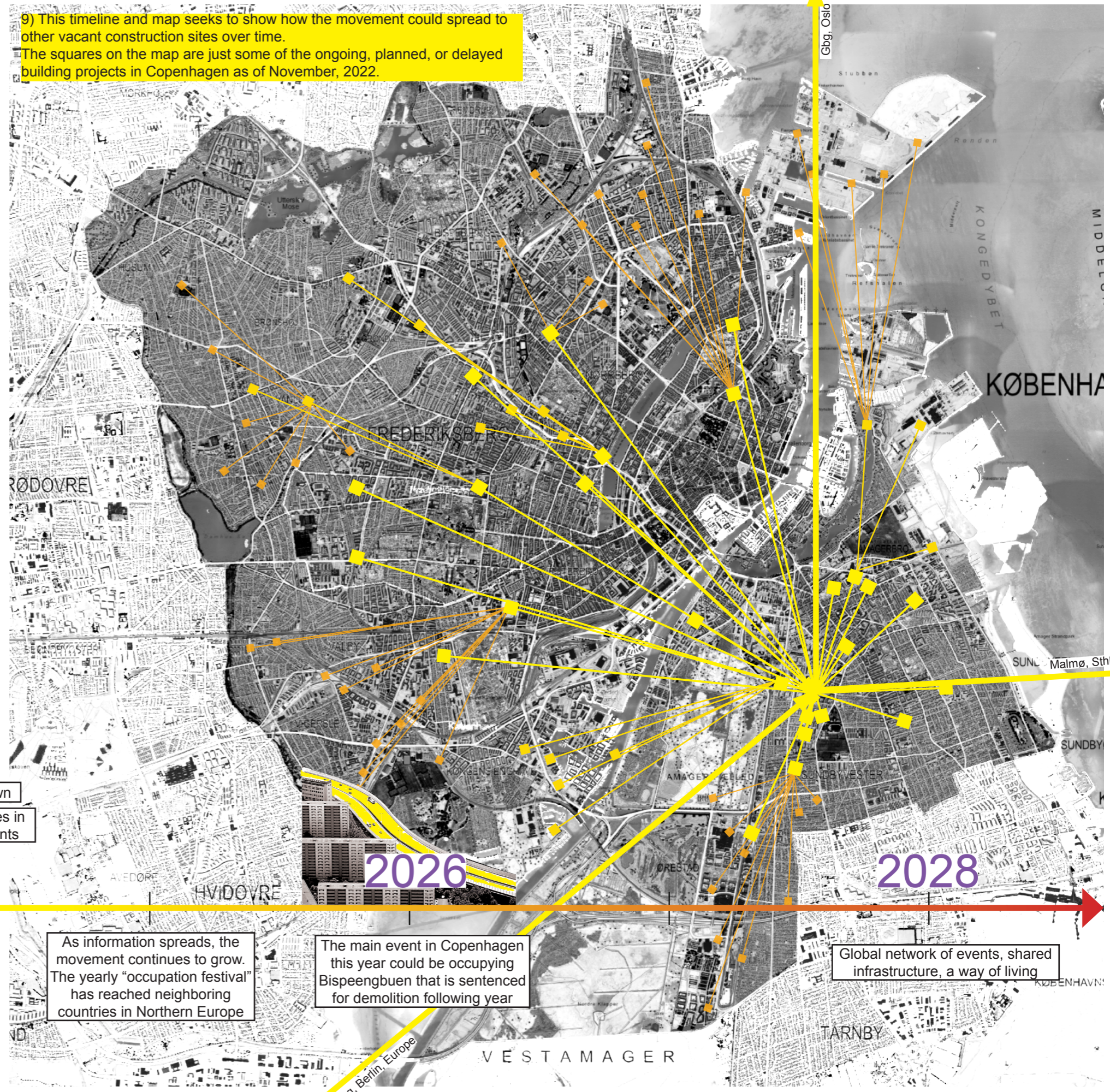
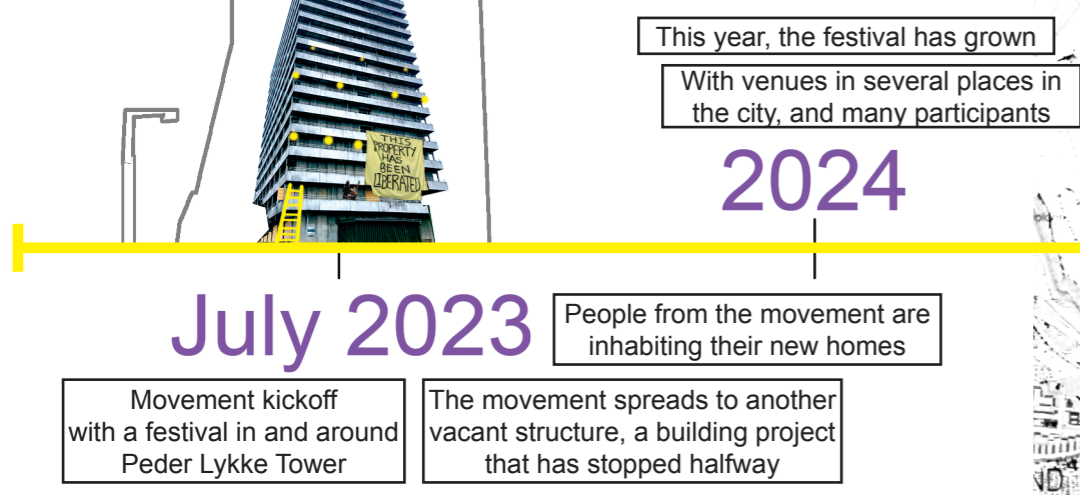
The community of the movement could over time develop homes in the vacant structure, share ideas and details of how they are inhabiting the different spaces and what they are learning in the process. This knowledge could then spread on both virtual and physical platforms as “cheap architecture” in the lines of Cirugeda (see figure 5a).

TIME AND SCALE

The festival would work as a kickstarter for a growing popular movement. I imagine the project to gradually inhabit other vacancies in the city of Copenhagen. Over time the movement could develop as a global network of “playful occupations”, almost a community of alternative living and dwelling in city spaces worldwide.

As a way of working this program, I intend to act in three different scales: a scale of iconography/manifesto, an architectural scale that would mainly focus on the habitation of the festival, and a strategic scale of the city and beyond.

9) This timeline and map seeks to show how the movement could spread to other vacant construction sites over time. The squares on the map are just some of the ongoing, planned, or delayed building projects in Copenhagen as of November, 2022.



DELIVERABLES (GUIDING)

Iconography and manifesto

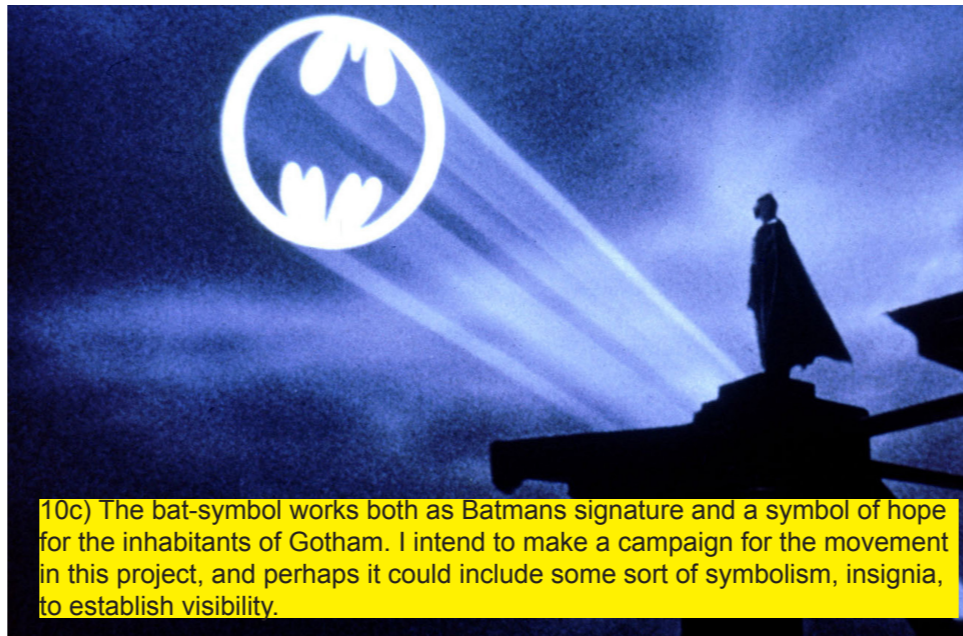
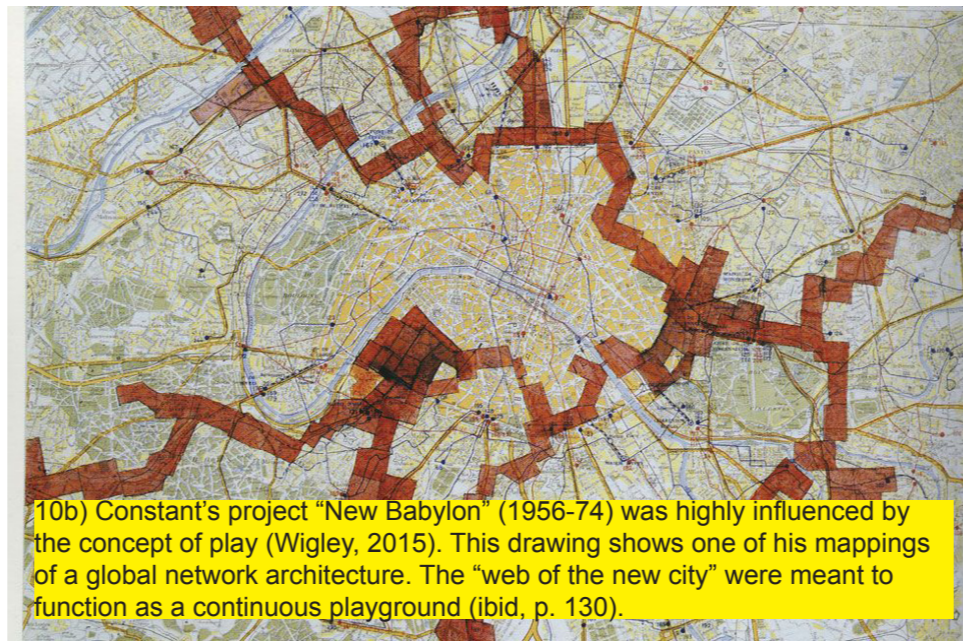
* Marketing campaign for the movement. Could include a publicity medium, such as film or animation. Could also include protest objects, stickers, flyers, webpage, etc, to establish a platform.

Architecture

* Moments of habitation in model and/or drawing
* An occupation manual that could consist of detailed drawings (1:5/1:50) of how one were to safely inhabit the structures.

City and beyond

* Mappings on urban/national/global scale, that could show a speculative formation of the movement in different time perspectives of the project.
* Visualize the potential for an extended re-habitation of vacant properties through activism.



10a) British artist Jimmy Cauty makes highly detailed models of dystopian scenarios. I imagine this thesis to incorporate both model and drawing studies of scenes/situations that could potentially play out in the project.



CV

PERSONALIA

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ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AND WORK EXPERIENCE

2021-2023	KADK, Urbanism & Societal Change (master)
2021-2022	Dissing & Weitling (student assistant)
2021	Rintala Eggertsson (internship)
2019-2020	Dissing & Weitling (internship)
2018	McGill University (exchange)
2016-2019	KADK, Architecture & Technology (bachelor)
2015	Krabbesholm Højskole

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