

What (exactly) are you counting on? Tunis, September 2017

My name is Jozef Wouters, I'm an artist from Brussels.

I'm invited by Dream City to make a project. Not this year but in 2019, in two years time. So I'm here since a few weeks now, thinking about the future.

They asked me to share my thoughts with you and since there is nothing I like more than sharing unfinished ideas and projects, I happily accept this chance to share with you the seeds of a future artwork.

The last two weeks I was fortunate to share my time here in the atelier with a group of future architects. Young boys and girls that just graduated from architecture school. I want to thank Hassene, Nour, Zied, Han, Mohammed, Anouar, Maroua, Marwan, and Balti for their openness and dedication to my research. I would like to thank the whole team of Dream City and especially Sirine and Aisha for their amazing production support. I would also like to thank Thomas Bellinck and Vladimir Miller for their feedback the last days and the brothers Tanfuz and the other renters here for their warm welcome.

The first thing I learned by walking around in the Medina is something about myself. Typical. You think you come to learn about a place but then you discover something about yourself. Maybe discovered is too big of a word. I think I have known it for a long time but it became undeniable the last weeks. I have to face it: I am nostalgic by nature. In a book called *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or that never existed'. I guess that's true. Because when I think of space, I often end up thinking about it in terms of loss. I think about the space that is no longer there. About the public square that is not really public anymore, the park that is not a park anymore. Even when emails just started, I must have been 15 or so, I was thinking that handwritten letters are more personal. But now with Facebook I'm nostalgic about emails. I have to say I'm getting a bit annoyed with that nostalgic part of my brain that is always comparing the present with its past.

I was drinking a coffee around the corner one day and I was reading the newspaper on my phone which is always a bit embarrassing because the other people in the bar might think you are on Facebook or Tinder or whatever. But I was reading an article about Coolblue, an online shop for electronics in Belgium. This online shop decided to open a few real shops, actual physical buildings (*show model*). And they did this, not to sell their products but because a survey showed that online-consumers have more confidence in a website when they see a real shop in a real street once in a while.

I'm confused. What does that mean about the space then? What is real space and what is virtual space in this example? It seems that, while I'm still being nostalgic about the public space of the past, others are already in the future and using that nostalgia to sell their products. When did it happen that only commercial companies like Coolblue, Tesla and Amazon have the power to manage the future and build their idea of it?

In daylight this place looks very different. There is more noise. There is Habib in that atelier over there, restoring traditional doors since 48 years and there is Mourad making shoes just like his father did before him. There is Ali and Mourad in the atelier over there painting tiles by hand. And since three weeks there is us, the architects over here. In that room that used to be the atelier of an Italian craftsman and was later turned into a storage space. When we cleaned up we found boxes storing parts that fell of this building. So this building is a building that is storing itself.

This place is called Dar Bairam Turki. It was build by a Turkish army official in the 17th century. Many of the inhabitants of the Medina that we invited to be interviewed here were sad about the state of this building. One thing that especially saddened someone working for Unesco, is the disappearance of the *entrée en chikane*, like they call it, an entrance hall typical for this style of buildings where the guest entering the house needs to make a detour trough different spaces before entering the central patio, thus giving time for all women to make themselves invisible in the rooms. The entrance you see now, for practical and economical reasons has been broken open one day by someone; we don't know by whom, for sure someone not working for UNESCO.

We have been interviewing inhabitants of the Medina every day. We asked them questions about the future of the Medina. What will the medina be in twenty, forty, a hundred years? We asked what they would add to the Medina if they had money or power. Stuff like that. We were trying to make a map of future fantasy. Our guests were between 4 and 85 years old with very different backgrounds and convictions but it was moving to find out that most of them wished for a quite similar future of the Medina. The collectively imagined future Medina is a restored one. The kid, the pensioner, the artist, the religious man, the craftsman and even the merchant selling Chinese junk on the street have a fairly similar imagination of the future: exactly the same but cleaner and restored like it used to be. The only imaginable future of this place is its past.

I don't question the necessity of restoration. Me too I would love to see Dar Bairam Turki in its old glory, regaining what is lost. I told you: I'm nostalgic.

The only question I have is this one: if the past is the only imaginable future, then where are we now? What happens now while we wait for Dar Bairam Turki to become its old self again? How should we describe the present state of this building?

The French writer Victor Hugo, in his book *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, makes one of his characters say that printing, the mass production of books will destroy architecture. He said that before books, architecture was a way of storytelling. Stories were literally carved in the building. Books completely changed architecture, made the buildings lose their stories, made them silent, speechless. I wonder what is happening now that books and language are disappearing and virtual images are our main way of storytelling. What is that doing to architecture? What is this building still telling us? There is something beautiful about the idea that, right now, Dar Bairam Turki is in a state of speechlessness. Powerless, deprived of its original narratives, allowing perhaps for other stories to be told.

This city that you see here in the middle is our work of the last weeks. We interviewed people, asking them about their stories, their vision of the future Medina and tried to make space out of what they said. Scale models.

Like for Habib, the 85 year old woodworker, very unhappy about the current state of Tunis and a bit nostalgic about the French occupation. He has two future plans. First, of course, the restoration of this building to its original state and, second, after restoring doors his whole life, he dreams of restoring the giant door of the *Porte de France*. But while making this scale model we hit on a problem. If this building is restored in its original state with the original entrance *en chikane*, the door of the *Porte de France* would be too big to enter and would have to be flown into this patio by helicopter in order for him to restore it.

We talked to a girl who, after helping her a bit, timidly dared to imagine a swimming pool on the roof of a palace somewhere. We wanted to make a scale model of it but in fact her dream is already being made into reality by a Swiss hotel-investor at the north side of the Medina, so that wasn't necessary. We just have to make sure that this swimming pool will be accessible for her.

When talking about the future many of our interviewees mentioned Paris. One girl said that if the whole Medina would be gone, she would build Paris here. There seem to be quite a few people who passed by Tunis the last centuries imagining Paris. Not only the *Ville Européen* with the big avenues. Someone told me that the *Place de la Château*, in the north of the medina, was made by the French. They destroyed an ancient Mausoleum to make the façade of their military building more impressive like it is in Paris.

There is Bechir's future plan that would restore the old caravanserai he was born in and had to leave at the age of 15. Bechir was one of the 10.000 inhabitants of the Medina that were relocated to social housing projects outside of Tunis in the 90's. Bechir worked with Hassene on the house of his childhood, adding two mezzanines, tripling the amount of beds, making sure his children, and his children's children could stay in that building forever.

This is a scale model for Walid, who is blind and almost immobile. He needs a future Medina with wider, straight, smooth streets so he can start using the wheelchair he got three years ago. This model was easy to make. But Walid's idea of the future is in conflict with the future vision of almost everybody else. Everyone wants the beautiful old irregular street stones back like they already did in the north. But these streets are a nightmare for him and will keep him in his house and the problem invisible forever.

You know, the problem with buildings is that once they are there, they make it very difficult to imagine anything else. It's not so easy to imagine a different future than the one you see. How can we preserve the future as a space to think and imagine collectively? I'm being nostalgic again. Sorry. Maybe architecture is nostalgic by nature? Maybe all architects are in fact archaeologists excavating old ideas of lost space with every new building they design.

Last week we were working here and two women who were our age in the sixties came by. They asked what we were doing. We told them a bit about the project. They told us about Tunis in the sixties and when they left they said, "we count on you", "la jeunesse". They were gone before we could ask what exactly they are counting on.

We have been working here since two weeks now and still I find it hard to say if this patio is public or private space. It's more private than a square but more public than my house. Everything I thought I knew about the division public and private seems irrelevant here. It seems like we need other words to name a space like this.

They say the same thing about the Internet. Social media are changing our notion of private and public to the point where it seems there is no more division, or membrane between the two. I tried to explain it to Habib and he said: "yes, but people will always need my doors". Yes, except the *Porte de France*, I said, which would be perfectly fine without a door.

Honestly, at some point we got tired of talking about restoration all the time and we went looking for architecture of the future. A real, non-nostalgic future of space. We ended up in Powerhouse Gym in the east. Twice a week we went there to build our muscles. We thought: "Maybe this is the architecture of the future?" Should we all build muscles and eat proteins? Is the future of architecture an exoskeleton like turtles, a house close to our body that we can wear in the small streets?

In a beautiful essay called *Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body*, the American writer Kathy Acker compares bodybuilding with a building like this one. She writes that both an architecture like this and bodybuilding are closing all outer windows, drawing the gaze inwards, concentrating on itself, reducing language to the bare minimum, until it reaches a state of speechlessness. That makes me think of Victor Hugo again and the silence of this building.

We also tried to turn virtual space into architecture. We put a sign outside saying free Wi-Fi. You have to start somewhere. That worked well. Mostly tourists came but that's ok. We gave them a chair and a table but they never stayed long enough to make permanent architecture out of it.

At one point we went to a real Internet café and downloaded the browsing history of all computers, curious about what other people are doing on the Internet, hoping we could make scale models of those foreign Internet spaces. Up till now we mostly found YouTube links and online casinos but we will keep you posted about that one.

The public space of the past is replaced by the Internet, Wired magazine wrote in 2009. It's tempting to think of the Internet as a space. It helps to name it as something we already know. But it's tricky too. All those architectural metaphors seem to be holding on to something, clinging on to the idea that everything can be reduced to space, square meters, and tangible.

For a while I was thinking of the Medina as a metaphor for the Internet. No overview, a chaos of small streets, lots of doors leading to semi-public spaces that you need to know before you find them. A darker part and an official part, no master plan. Just like the Internet, it feels that there is not one but very many different realities here. Your Internet is not mine. Your network and the information it feeds you are different from mine. It closes you in, just like a house that makes you hear the things you already know and makes you forget the other points of view.

There is one major difference, though, between the Internet and the Medina. In the Medina, even if you are not allowed to go into any of the doors, your body is still aware of all that exclusive space, registering it just by walking around.

This is a scale model of a nostalgic idea by Adam Palmer, advisor for the U.S. government during the Iranian revolts in 2009. He worked out a proposition for the instalment of cybercafés in all U.S. embassies, providing a safe haven for activists and bloggers who want to topple their dictators. We are not the only ones trying to turn virtual space into tangible space.

We asked Omar, an 11-year-old boy, how the medina will be in 20 years and he said old.

A young man, convinced Salafist by religion, passionately told us about his ecological future for the Medina with solar panels and small electrical cars. When we asked about the solar panels that would destroy the image of the Medina he said things should be moving. We should not get stuck in the past too much either.

So we bought a bunch of tiles from the painter over there. These are new copies of old tiles that are used in the renovation of palaces. We tried to see if these old drawings are maybe maps for future cities. We are not sure yet. The lady from UNESCO didn't like it.

We were walking on the Avenue Bourgiba, and we had a discussion about the role that Facebook and Twitter played during the Arab Spring. There seems to be a strong narrative about a movement that started in a virtual space and spilled into public space, Avenue Bourgiba in the case of Tunis. I said I found that quite a beautiful thought: that at some point we can't stand it any longer to be staring at a screen and we need to be together in real physical space. But Hassene objected. He called it the nostalgic perspective of the West that tends to overestimate the role of these American technologies, blind for the other powers at play. As we continued walking along the Avenue, we became aware of another nostalgic force that played a big role: the nostalgia of the French occupiers who copied the big avenues of Haussmann in Paris. Originally conceived to regain power from Paris, here they accidentally provided the physical space for the protests, inspired by Haussmann's idea of big wide avenues that created a state controlled space for protest within the medieval urban tissue of Paris.

I wonder how a mass protest in the medina would feel like. Thousands of people protesting in small streets, unaware of each other physically but mentally connected, part of something bigger than themselves.

There's a last scale model. We got in contact with a woman; she's a writer and coincidentally the sister of the singer of the song about Tunis. She's writing a book about the Medina right now, a science-fiction book. Her book is about a group of archaeologists, two thousand years from now, who are excavating the Medina. In her story the original inhabitants slowly moved out because of the bad Internet reception here and left the Medina to be covered by dust year after year until it was gone. In her novel the archaeologists and their families are living on the roofs. They are sleeping in the half excavated patios and as they dig deeper and deeper they start to build

bridges to connect the roofs. She told us that she doubts how to continue the book. What should happen once the Medina is excavated completely? Will they keep on living on the roofs or adopt the old lifestyle of the Medina?

I called a friend, an archaeologist currently working in Turkey, for his opinion. He didn't have much time but he told me the book makes no sense because archaeologists of the future would not dig anything up. He says already now archaeologists agree that the best way to preserve the past is to keep it in the ground and if you are really curious you can scan the ground with radio waves and build a 3D model from that.