

## SITUATIONAL MATERIALS

A project by INSIDE (master interior architecture Royal Academy of Art The Hague) at the Floating University Berlin, a project by raumlaborberlin guided by Jan Körbes from REFUNC and Benjamin Foerster- Baldenius from raumlaborberlin september 2018

Floating University is set up by raumlaborberlin at the site of the former Tempelhof Airport Berlin as a visionary and temporary inner city offshore laboratory for collective, experimental learning. The site is an almost forgotten place in the center of Berlin: an old concrete rainwater basin next to the airfield with a landscape on the verge of disappearing. How can practices be adapted to the rapidly changing cities to keep the water affordable and abundant? These were one of the many questions raumlabor poses within their search to experiment with utopian water fantasies and re-envision an urban water infrastructure that invokes public participation.

From April 2018 onwards gradually The Floating University campus was built up at Tempelhof test site with temporary structures like a discursive kitchen, a bar as a protest generator, classrooms for workshops and a performative laboratory tower for experimental water filtrations systems. Besides the nurturing of plants, mushrooms, mussels etc. the water of this system is reused and separated in four different types for experimentations: rain water, basin water, grey water and black water. Numerous universities and academies, INSIDE being one of them, were asked to participate in the Floating University campus to challenge the routines and habits of urban practices.



At the start of the 2018-2019 academic year, INSIDE students worked at Floating University with Jan Körbes from REFUNC and Benjamin Foerster- Baldenius from raumlaborberlin. In its curriculum, INSIDE emphasises the cultural and social challenges in interior architecture and places its thematic focus on socially relevant spatial assignments. INSIDE students use their position to shape the relation between the space that relates most directly to people and the world that surrounds them. The basis of every design lies in observing, researching and analyzing a situation. When designers research a situation that is about to change, they gather as much information as possible about the characteristics, histories, use and potentials of that place. This knowledge they gather is never objective and of a general validity but situational by definition.

When starting to research the Floating University site, the attention of the INSIDE students was drawn towards the storage of the materials that were left behind by earlier projects and workshops on the site. These materials captured knowledge of the site and the events that took place there. Students started to research these SITUATIONAL MATERIALS by implementing one of the main rules that REFUNC uses in their work: there is no such thing as garbage. Materials are always in-between functions. They have a past use, a current state of function (or disfunction) and a potential future function that you only need to discover and reveal - which means re-activation of the material. If you 'listen' to a material hard enough, it will almost automatically 'tell' you what it wants to be. And for realizing this metamorphosis you mainly need to facilitate the next function of it. You need to provoke that the next user wants it, that they need it, and thus provide the material with a new context.

INSIDE students researched various SITUATIONAL MATERIALS they found in the storage corner of the Floating University. Materials like plastic barrels, disposable flower pots, textiles and rope, amongst others, that revealed unexpected future functions.

## BARRELS

These about one meter high 80liter plastic barrels made of HDPE, or high density polyethylene, are a super-high-quality and very sustainable product. They are not recycled on a consumer level because during the process they get mixed with plastics of a lower quality and subsequently burned. The barrels-group researched the great material potential these barrels have. This strength is captured in the shape of the barrels and its round reinforced parts made of high-quality plastics. The group first studied the force of the material by creating various forms of suspension for imaginable practical uses. By playing with its strength they discovered the possibilities to reshape the material into parts of a modular construction system. This modular system opens up various possibilities of multifunctional re-use, enabling the barrels to considerably grow above themselves.

A practical by-product was a coat hanger that had kept itself hidden in the barrels all the time.





## ROPE

This hard orange-coloured rope is made of PP, or polypropylene. This plastic rope is neither beautiful nor soft but extremely strong. It is often used in fishing purposes because of its ability to not absorb water even when it is used in extremely wet circumstances. The rope-group unraveled the rope and discovered that it consists of three cords each of which is composed of about a hundred fibers. The group encountered the harshness of the material that at first could only be overcome by melting whole ropes together into constructive parts. They decided not to tie or knit the rope into new shapes in a traditional way. After further research, that started by completely unraveling the rope to the hair-like fibers, the material turned out to be extremely moldable. Through applying a combination of force and temperature, by heating and pressing, the material could easily be shaped into prototype-volumes like plates, lampshades and necklaces. Thus showing a new application of a known product without having to add another material.

A welcome bycatch was the sensitivity of the rope to sunlight. By exposing it to the sun, the outside cords turned pale while the inside cords kept their intense orange colour. When unraveling the cords this effect made a beautiful and unexpected patina visible.



## TEXTILES

Many soft plastics, like reinforced and non-reinforced PVC foil, were found on the site. Since these materials behaved just like textiles the textiles-group started by treating these patches of plastic just like that, weaving and hanging them. By doing that they discovered the refraction qualities of this material. The plastics created fascinating patterns on the floor while catching and breaking the sunlight. The search for creating volumes of these materials that capture this effect led to adding new materials for construction. 'Bones' were created from the lids and clamps of the refunc-ed barrels. Normally the only function of these lids and clamps are to seal off volumes and prevent air and fluids from entering or leaving these. Now the lids and clamps created light-volumes that catch sunlight to pass that on to floors and walls to provoke patterns on their surfaces.

Once developed the volume constructions turned out to be multifunctional. Also lamps and even dirty laundry bags spontaneously appeared.





## POT - DEPOT

Garden centers and graveyards are full of these disposable flower pots. These of PP, or polypropylene, made pots are superthin and fragile and are extremely suitable for single use. The exploration to re-use the flower pots as an object soon turned out to be not very fertile. Until the flowerpot-group started seeing the pots not as objects but as a set of materials. They turned out to be made of three components: a reinforced neck, a soft skin base and a permeable bottom. By dissecting the pots, the components turned out to have very different characteristics. The soft skin base was cut and turned into bristles that were held together in the permeable bottom. The whole construction was strengthened and stabilized by multiple reinforced 'necks'. Thus the basis for combs, brooms and brushes appeared without having to add another material.

The brooms that appeared from the flowerpots even proved usable as decorative flower pieces themselves.



## SOUND

Instead of researching multiple characteristics of the left behind materials the sound-group immediately focussed on only one aspect: sound. They started by exploring the sounds that were hidden in the materials by operating the corpus of the materials and listening to the resonance of these. By scratching, blowing, shaking and beating they helped the materials to reveal the sounds and discovered ways to design these by manipulating the objects. The group created a rest-material-orchestra. Not aiming at imitating known sounds but designing new ones. Sounds from the SITUATIONAL MATERIALS with that they captured the situational sounds of the location and shaped these into a soundtrack for the Floating University. Thus opening a world of possibilities of creating situational soundtracks on every site you explore.

