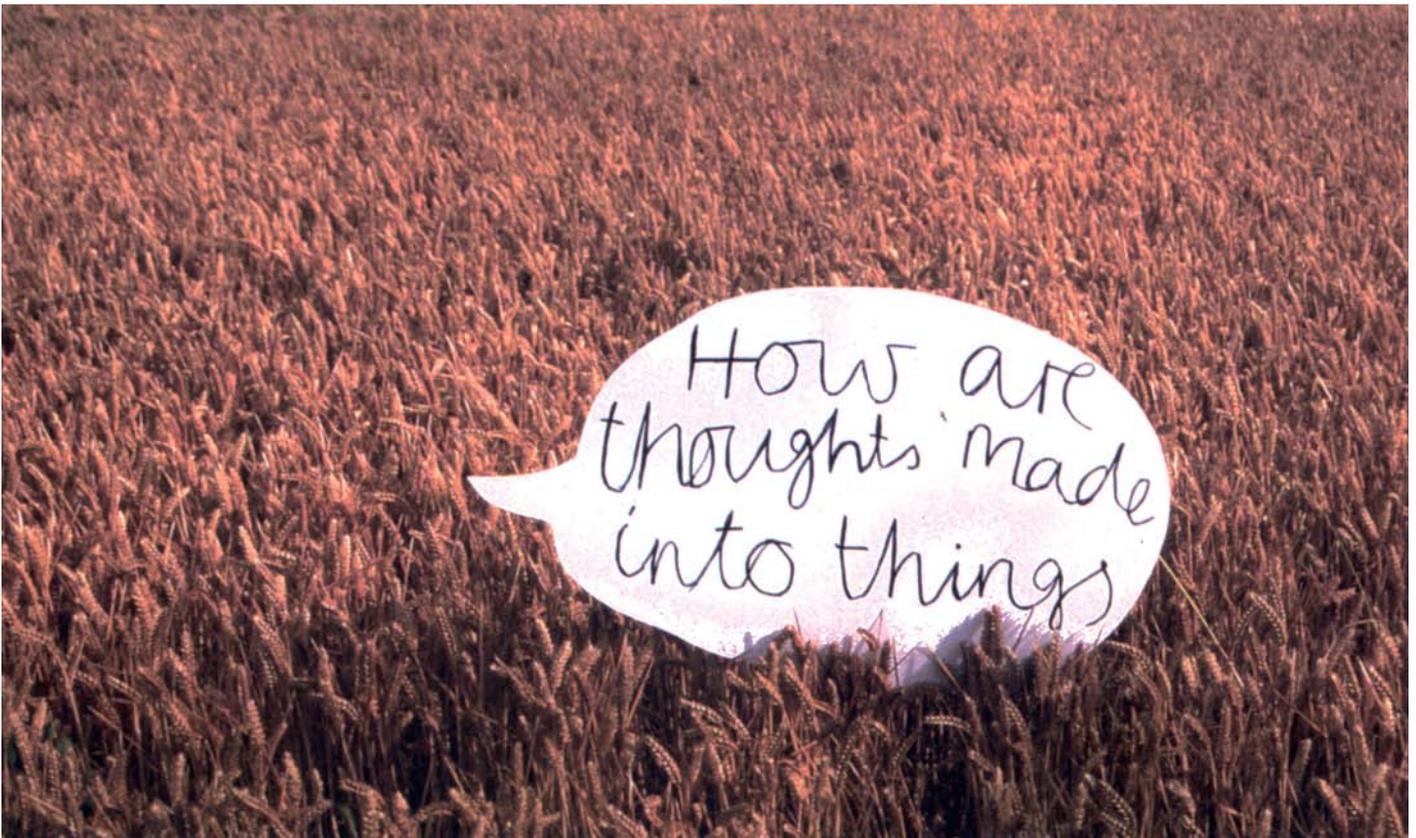




muf

architecture / art

Profil



ON THE BUSES
2000

Every child knows – a baker bakes bread, you cannot buy pickles at a bookstore and architects build buildings. Right? Well, only those who cast the net of definitions far wider will catch a big fish, like “muf architecture / art”. Since its foundation in 1995, the London-based studio has only realized one “real” building. It has even recommended its clients not to build anything on several occasions when the architects were of the opinion that the task could also be solved without new buildings. Yet, it is one of the most imaginative, radical and humorous architecture studios that exists at present and just recently, its very complex projects have finally also been receiving international attention. In 2008, the architects received the European Prize for Urban Public Space and as the curators of the British Pavilion they have become something like the official national representatives of England at the 2010 Architecture Biennial in Venice. But, muf is still no normal architecture studio – and, after all, architecture can be so much more than just buildings.

muf projects always focus on the public space, even if they are about one individual building. For muf, every building forms part of a complex network in the spatial, economic and social fabric. In order to identify all these interrelations, every project starts with almost obsessive analyses: There are interviews and conversations with residents, users, passersby, clients, associations, institutions, and politicians whose wishes, requests, opinions, and interests are made visible on maps and diagrams. Following the analysis, muf develops a strategy of how it could best preserve strong points, reduce weaknesses and use potentials. It seems that muf effortlessly helps itself to the tool boxes of architecture, art, urban planning, theory and politics. “We are not anti building”, says Liza Fior, one of the four founders of muf in the interview. “As a matter of fact, we have worked on some housing projects recently. But due to the economic crisis, they will not be realized for the time being.” In any case, in the above-mentioned tool boxes buildings are only one of very many tools through which public space can be developed.

BARKING TOWN SQUARE

Arcade

London, 2005 - 2008



No, muf is not a conventional architecture studio. Neither was this the architects' intention when they founded muf in 1995. The four founders were friends and colleagues asked to carry out a study for an art institution. This led to an exhibition, then a competition and their first commission. All of a sudden, they – the architects Liza Fior and Juliet Bidgood, the author Katherine Shonfield, and the artist Katherine Clarke – were expected to be a studio and they did not even have an office. muf was not set up following a business plan. Much rather, the office was an open workspace with people coming and going. This way, a well-networked platform with many contributors developed. Every project produced new constellations and muf always attached great importance to interdisciplinary exchange with external experts. Thus, in the conservative England of the 1990s, muf was a rare exception in every respect.



BARKING TOWN SQUARE

Arboretum

London, 2005 - 2008

At the time of Richard Roger's proclaimed "Urban Renaissance" muf did not want to be the omniscient problem solver, but an advisor and moderator in a participatory process. Many of its early projects look like a purely intellectual critique of the consumption-oriented dealing with public space. Observers who were well-disposed towards muf, often perceived these working methods as bizarre or idealistic. Others, who were less well-disposed, considered the four women radical leftist political activists, eccentrics or feminists as almost all people working for muf were women. Overall, speculations were running wild and every resolved rumor was followed by three new ones. "We refused to talk about our gender and allowed misinterpretations of what 'muf' might mean", is how they put it in their book. "We were complicit in the myth and brushed our hair for photo shoots." At the same time, many observers lost their interest in muf, because they did not know how to label the architects – they did not build anything, did not comment on the role of women any more, and their complex, elaborate projects hardly ever produced any spectacular pictures which would have been easy to sell. Simultaneously, muf became more and more convinced that it was heading in the right direction. In the foreword of the architects' book "this is what we do – a muf manual" (2001), you find the following chapter: "How to have the front to not build buildings but still call yourself an architect". In it, they say: "Buildings are considered to be the target, wherever you are on the trajectory that begins with a kitchen extension and ends with a museum."

Freed from the constraint of having to build something, muf developed alternatives for the public space of English cities by means of artistic strategies. In its "Wide" project (1998), the public spaces in particularly bleak social housing estate were aimed to be improved with artworks. muf, however, started off by inviting artists in order to explore the potential and the history of the spaces: Residents were asked for their dreams, wishes and demands. Dream spaces were projected on large-format photographs in the middle of the brick-colored social reality of England; a flock of sheep grazed on the unused lawns and showed that the customary notion of an idyll was not out of reach. Yes, smirking was allowed, because laughing benefits the patient.

WIDE

South Shoreditch, 1998



More than once muf's thorough analyses resulted in the need to expand the brief or the area. This was also the case with "Shared Ground" (2001): The public spaces along Southwark Street, which are in close vicinity to Tate Modern, were supposed to be redesigned. muf interviewed 100 residents and identified a multifaceted landscape of dreams which extended far beyond the envisaged territory. Subsequently, it realized a series of permanent and temporary improvements, reduced the space for cars, and, in turn, enlarged the sidewalk on the sunny side of the street. The comprehensive the work and the spectacular its content, the unspectacular mufs interventions often look. After thorough analyses sometimes small improvements are all it takes to achieve great effects. It is part of muf's philosophy that it is only through close looking that you can recognize the entire complexity of a situation.



WIDE

South Shoreditch, 1998

Many muf projects concern spaces in the immediate surroundings of large-scale urban development projects. After Tate Modern, it won the competition for the design of the open space around the Millennium Dome. "We wanted to offer an alternative to the Dome as a singular object and to the purely anecdotal quality of the open spaces – it was a frustrating project", they write later on. The investor already got suspicious because of the conversations with residents, initiatives, politicians and associations; the gathered ideas for ice-skating rinks and playgrounds and an opening in the cupola was the final straw for the cooperation after only nine months. At the moment muf is involved in as many as four projects near the new Olympic Quarter in London. The studio has earned itself quite a good reputation as an expert for these urban "intersections" where it aims to link the great leaps of development with their surroundings in a sustainable and socially acceptable way. In the case of "High Street 2012", money was supposed to be invested in the embellishment of the

Olympic Marathon Route. "Our plan is to create spaces for grace and pleasure. Places that connect with the past and that recognize the street as a social space."

VILLA FRANKENSTEIN

British Pavilion

Venice Biennial, 2010



With its "Barking Town Project", which won the European Prize for Urban Public Space in 2008, muf attracted international attention for the first time. In Barking, a suburb of London, they designed an eclectic square in the best sense of the word, which makes reference to its built, historical and social environment in an imaginative as well as thoughtful and cheeky way. A tiny forest with 16 different types of trees is illuminated gently at night, some remaining bricks of Barking's demolished buildings have been used to build a wall that looks like a ruin and, with the sculpture of a sheep towering on its top, reminds us of Barking's past. On the one hand, an arcade with black-and-white Terrazzo flooring is reminiscent of the Grandezza of Edwardian era in London, and on the other hand it connects the square with the new high street. Here, the arcade is the only one of its kind that does not accommodate any stores – it is simply a beautiful, roofed public space.



VILLA FRANKENSTEIN

British Pavilion

Venice Biennial, 2010

muf respects existing structures and does not predetermine the use of newly designed spaces. Therefore, it is so important to first make existing networks of people, buildings, and the history of a place visible without immediately judging them. The "Villa Frankenstein" in Venice works with these references, too. On the basis of John Ruskin's "Stones of Venice", it shows the transfer of ideas between England and Venice that has been taking place since the 19th century. To reanimate this exchange, muf has cooperated with numerous project partners in Venice, the philosopher Wolfgang Scheppe, for example, and the two environmental experts Jane da Mosto and Lorenzo Bonometto who have installed a fully functional lagoon landscape – even including tides – on the terrace of the British Pavilion. The main hall features a wooden model of London's new Olympic Stadium on a scale of 1:10. Room-filling. In this room, which is called "The Stadium of Close Looking", school children and students can take painting classes – for one cannot start early enough to look at things closely.

Interview



A HORSES TAIL

Broadway Estate, Tilbury

2003 - 2004

“Who is it??”, Liza happily shouts into her cell phone. She is standing on a droning vaporetto, the connection is not good. We have planned to meet in front of the British Pavilion at the Architecture Biennial in Venice for the interview, and Liza Fior, one of the curators of the British Pavilion, is rather busy. Constantly people approach her to ask questions about the exhibition, discuss organizational problems or simply congratulate her on her work. After we have led her to a quiet room, she tells us that she did not want to give the interview alone. “muf is more than just myself! You cannot only speak to me!” Quickly, she calls Alison Crawshaw and Caitlin Elster, who happen to be nearby, to ask them to join us. “Let’s get as much muf together as we can”, she smiles broad and remains happy and jolly, yet highly concentrated, throughout the following interview.



Liza Fior, Alison Crawshaw and
Caitlin Elster within the British Pavilion
at the Biennial in Venice 2010.

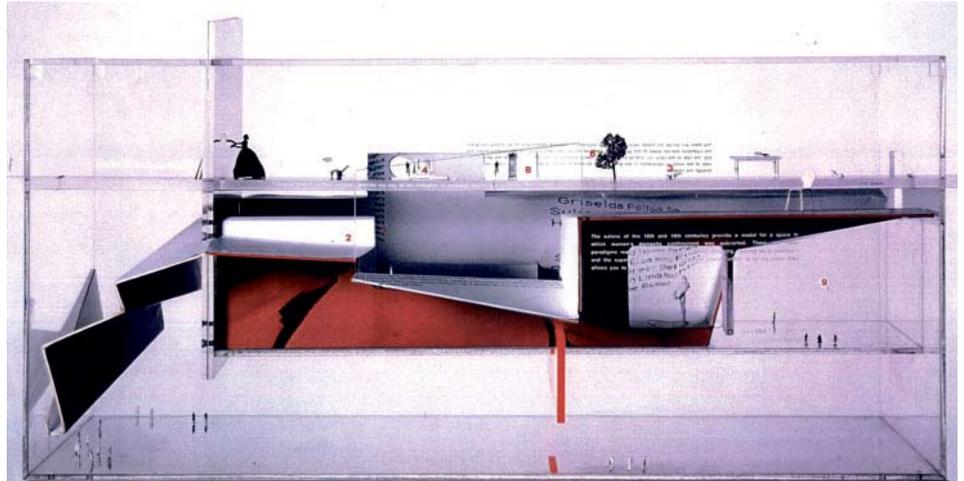
Liza, muf was founded back in 1995 by four friends; why would friends set up an architecture studio together?

Liza Fior:

Well, we did not really plan to establish an architecture studio; it began as a conversation. I knew Juliet Bidgood from architecture school and I had met the artist Katherine Clark when we were both working for the Architectural Association in London. The fourth founding member of muf was Katherine Shonfield, a theorist and writer who sadly died in 2003. She was kind of stepping in and out, coming to see what we were doing and discussing it with us.

THE MUSEUM OF WOMAN'S ART

London, 1994



For some people we were suspicious just because we were women and shared this interest in public space.

If it was coincidental, how did it start?

Liza Fior:

We had begun with a feasibility study to see if there should be a museum of women's art in Britain. But we came to the conclusion that there was too much irony in the idea of taking all the women's work out of the basements where it was, not being shown in the museums, and just putting it into another container. Ricky Burdett invited us to exhibit this work which we did as an installation called "Purity and Tolerance". Then we were suddenly short-listed for an invited competition at an art gallery in Warsaw – again looking at the limits of a cultural institution. We were very surprised, because only six studios were invited and we did not even have a "real studio". So that's sort of how muf came about – all of this happened over just a few months.

Why did you choose the name "muf"?

Liza Fior:

When we were selected for the Warsaw art gallery we needed a name to write on the form. Some male architects had nicknamed us "the mafia", because obviously they found it terrifying that these women were gathering. In England muf sound's a bit, a little ... well, provocative.

SHARED GROUND

London, 1996 - 2001





Liza Fior at the opening of the British Pavilion at the Biennial in Venice 2010.

We believe that buildings have edges that extend beyond their property line, that they are networks of relationships.

VILLA FRANKENSTEIN
British Pavilion
Venice Biennial, 2010

In your short self-description, you write as a ps that “muf does not stand for modern urban fabric”. Why is that important for you to state?

Liza Fior:

Because that name was given to us by people who are uncomfortable with what muf means down in Hicksville, so they were trying to make it more decent. For some people we were suspicious just because we were women and shared this interest in public space while coming from disparate disciplines of art, architecture and urban theory. Back in 1995, during the last Conservative administration, it was super eccentric to be interested in public space. Money was only spent on public spaces if you could prove that you were bringing private investments into a neighbourhood. So muf's early work was a creative critique of that.

And just 15 years later, you are, as curators of the British Pavilion, the national representatives of the UK here in Venice.

Liza Fior:

Yes, and with another Conservative administration, and with a Conservative Minister of Culture opening the pavilion tomorrow. So we have sort of come full circle again.

You have described the “Villa Frankenstein” as a typical muf project – what’s so typical about it?

Liza Fior:

The exhibition focuses on John Ruskin's “Stones of Venice”, which is also why we called the pavilion, somewhat ironically, “Villa Frankenstein”. We are showing how the British have been obsessed with the city of Venice for quite a long time. Our exhibition aims to re-animate this exchange because we believe that buildings – even this one, which is isolated from the city almost like a British embassy – have edges that extend beyond their property line and that they are networks of relationships. Throughout the three months of this Biennial we are contriving the pavilion is a site for disparate encounters - those interested in the fragile lagoon (the scientists) and those representing the fragile neighborhoods of Venice (the schools). But it is of course really difficult to turn this place into a real public space. After all, it is an exhibition and you have to pay to enter the Giardini. We are still negotiating with the organizers to let people enter the pavilion without paying, but I don't know if we will succeed. That process is as much the project as the large model of the „stadium of close looking“.





BARKING TOWN SQUARE

London, 2005 - 2008

We worked hard to create a degree of mystery, a place with many meanings and functions.

BARKING TOWN SQUARE

London, 2005 - 2008

So there it is again, your interest in public space.

Liza Fior:

Absolutely. There are so many public spaces resulting from private investments that are so anodyne because they do not allow room for complexity. Public spaces should serve more than one purpose. We have to make more undetermined spaces.

How do you do that as a planner? Do you have an example of that in your work?

Alison Crawshaw:

One of the most recent examples would be the Barking Town Square. We worked very, very hard to create the square with a degree of mystery, with the possibility for escape. It is meant as a place with many meanings and functions.

Liza Fior:

We had this ambition to make a multi-functional space and it is now actually being used in that way. It is not a one-liner, not the manifestation of just one story. Each time Alison goes there, she comes back with a new tale to tell.

Alison Crawshaw:

They have CCTV surveillance there, which is very good for us because now we have complete documentation of everything that goes on: People doing karate on the stage, climbing the trees, reading books, having picnics, taking wedding photographs. People are really making use of the square.





Liza Fior:

Along with the building programme, we draw in the complex client developer, local authority and found ways into the neighborhood itself, working with the master bricklayers from the local building college for example.

You always try to form networks with the local communities?

Liza Fior:

And with experts from other fields. For the British Pavilion, we invited the philosopher Wolfgang Scheppe from Venice, for instance, and the environmental scientists Jane da Mosto and Lorenzo Bonometto for the design of the Venetian lagoon. People from different disciplines are working at muf, like Caitlin here, who studied fine arts and is now working as a researcher for us, so we just continue this interdisciplinary cooperation with other people outside of muf.

So what do you do at muf, Caitlin?

Caitlin Elster:

Each project starts by analyzing the different people, initiatives and interests in the given situation. I do the research including the interviews with the landowners, politicians, schools, residents, the client. Often we find common interests just by talking to the people first. Then we bring the project together spatially.

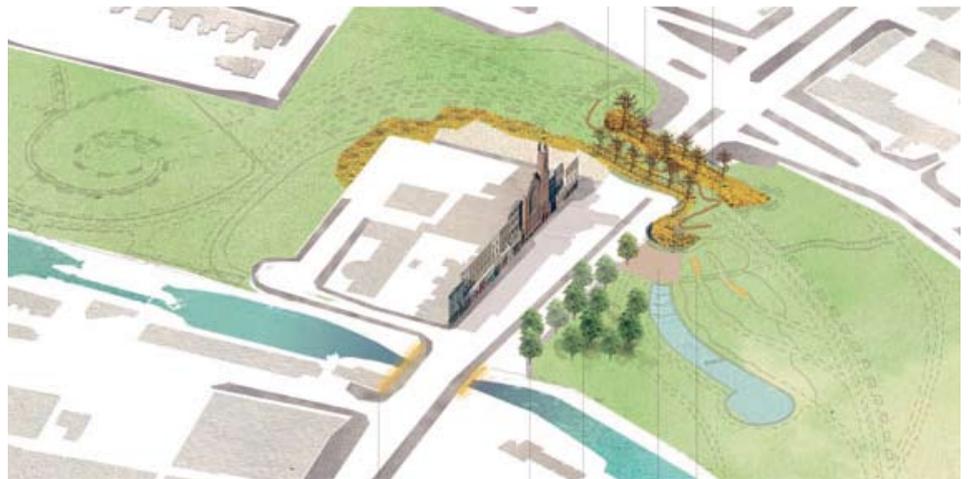
Liza Fior:

The stadium of close looking is the proposition of this Venice Pavilion: Any meaningful strategy for development can only come from a deeper understanding of a place. Only by looking carefully can you reveal the complexity of the situation. Once you have understood this complexity, your proposal gets much stronger and more accurate. Of course, it also makes the project much more complicated, because instead of hovering on your cloud above a situation now you have to work with all these little bits and pieces.



PLAY

Claybury, 2010



HIGH STREET

London, 2012

So the time you spend on analysis pays off in the end?

Alison Crawshaw:

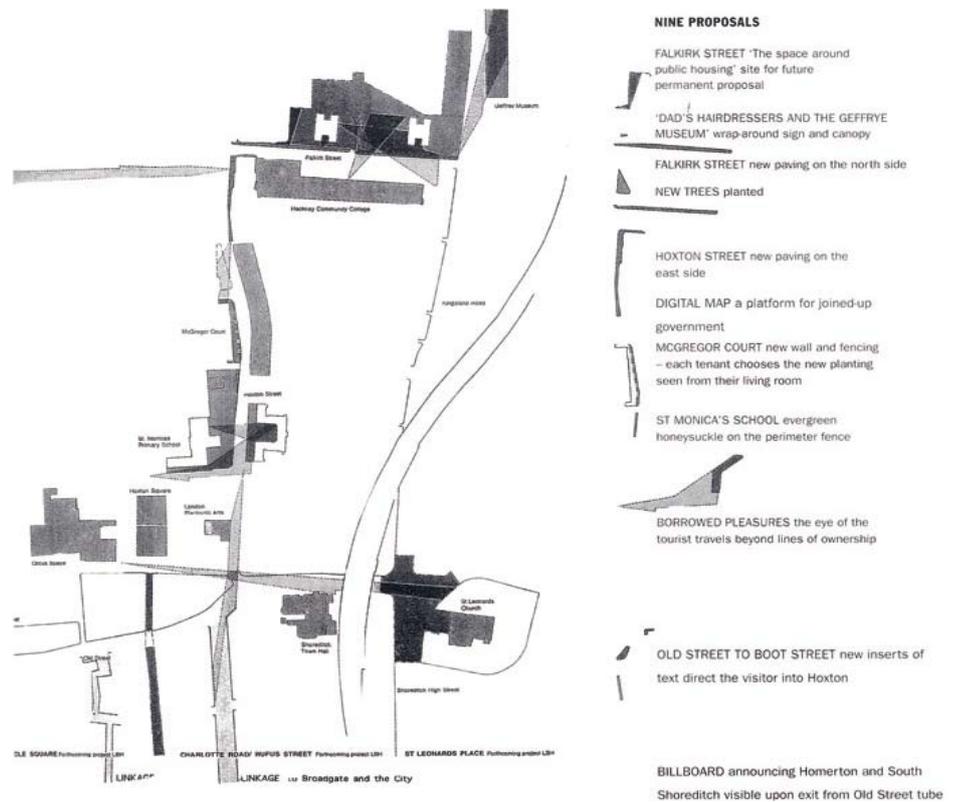
I would rather say that muf simply does what it likes to do – and sometimes it pays off. (laughs) What I really enjoy about working with muf is that we always take the time to think of something that clients or politicians would otherwise not think of doing. We invent projects.

BORROWED PLEASURES

North Hoxton, 1996

Liza Fior:

Simply if you value what's there it is easier to demonstrate what is missing. This goes for the current projects around the London Olympic park where we are able to challenge existing projection and master plans for the area by demonstrating both what is there and how it can be amplified and how choices about how money is spent can be both political and creative. This was first played out within the project „Borrowed Pleasures“ in the mid 1990's when we were invited to propose decorative paving to entice an intrepid tourist through a run down neighborhood to a newly renovated museum in North Hoxton. We responded with a diagram showing that the 60 degrees cone of vision of that fictional tourist of course goes beyond that footway. This then became the justification of spending the budget within school playgrounds and open spaces along the route- revisiting budget and the brief became one.



We are double agents, we have a foot in both camps.

Redefining the brief and questioning the budget, looking for alternatives, analyzing the given situation – that all sounds very brave and idealistic.

Liza Fior:

That's why I always get very nervous when I meet younger architects who see us as role models. muf is not a replicable business model, because we always do about quadruple the amount of work that we are asked to do. We always extend the brief and we have no justification to ask for more money because it is always our own idea. But this makes our work much more interesting, valuable, and kind of sustainable. If you identify existing initiatives and interests and bring them into your project, it becomes a real, viable long-term investment in public space.

So you obviously define your work as architects and planners as political work.

Caitlin Elster:

I think it's impossible not to be political in this context. We work with public authorities like the London Development Agency, we talk to businesses, community groups, charities ... well, you can't get a more political context than that.



MUSEUMS PAVILION
St Albans, 1999 - 2004

We are not anti-building. It is just that we always like to look beyond the building as a single, autonomous object.

MUSEUMS PAVILION
St Albans, 1999 - 2004

Alison Crawshaw:

I guess the privilege we have is that we can feed the information we gather back into the strategy level. We talk to people who are only in this microcosm of micro-activity. We are able to connect the microcosms with the macrocosm. We are double agents, we have a foot in both camps.

Your full office name is “muf architecture / art”. We have been talking now a lot about strategies, art, cooperation, and the public space – what about buildings?

Liza Fior:

For most people, architecture is just about building. We have quite a mixed portfolio with public spaces, strategies, master plans, exhibitions, interiors, and also a few buildings. But that is not so important as we do not really make distinctions between buildings and public space. With every project, we attempt to expand the opportunities available in the public realm. The project for the British Pavilion brings together children, scientists, neighbourhood, lagoon, craftsmen, artists, and the edges of the building itself with the city of Venice. We are not anti-building. It is just that we always like to look beyond the building as a single, autonomous object.

Thank you very much.



Interview: Florian Heilmeyer

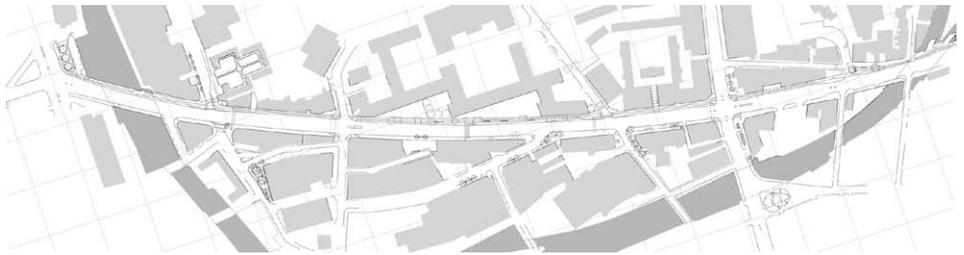
Florian Heilmeyer has no fixed place of residence or work, but since 1978 has mostly lived and worked in Berlin. He works as a freelance journalist and editor for BauNetz and as contributing editor for MARK – Another Architecture.

project management: Andrea Nakath / Rahel Germershausen

Arbeiten

SHARED GROUND

A pilot scheme for one kilometer of street in South London close to the Tate Modern. The principle of the scheme makes shared ground between public and private interests. Consultation with local residents, retailers, developers and businesses established the brief for a scheme that realigns the road to shift the priority from the car to the pedestrian and widen the pavement on the sunny side of the street. London, 1996 – 2001



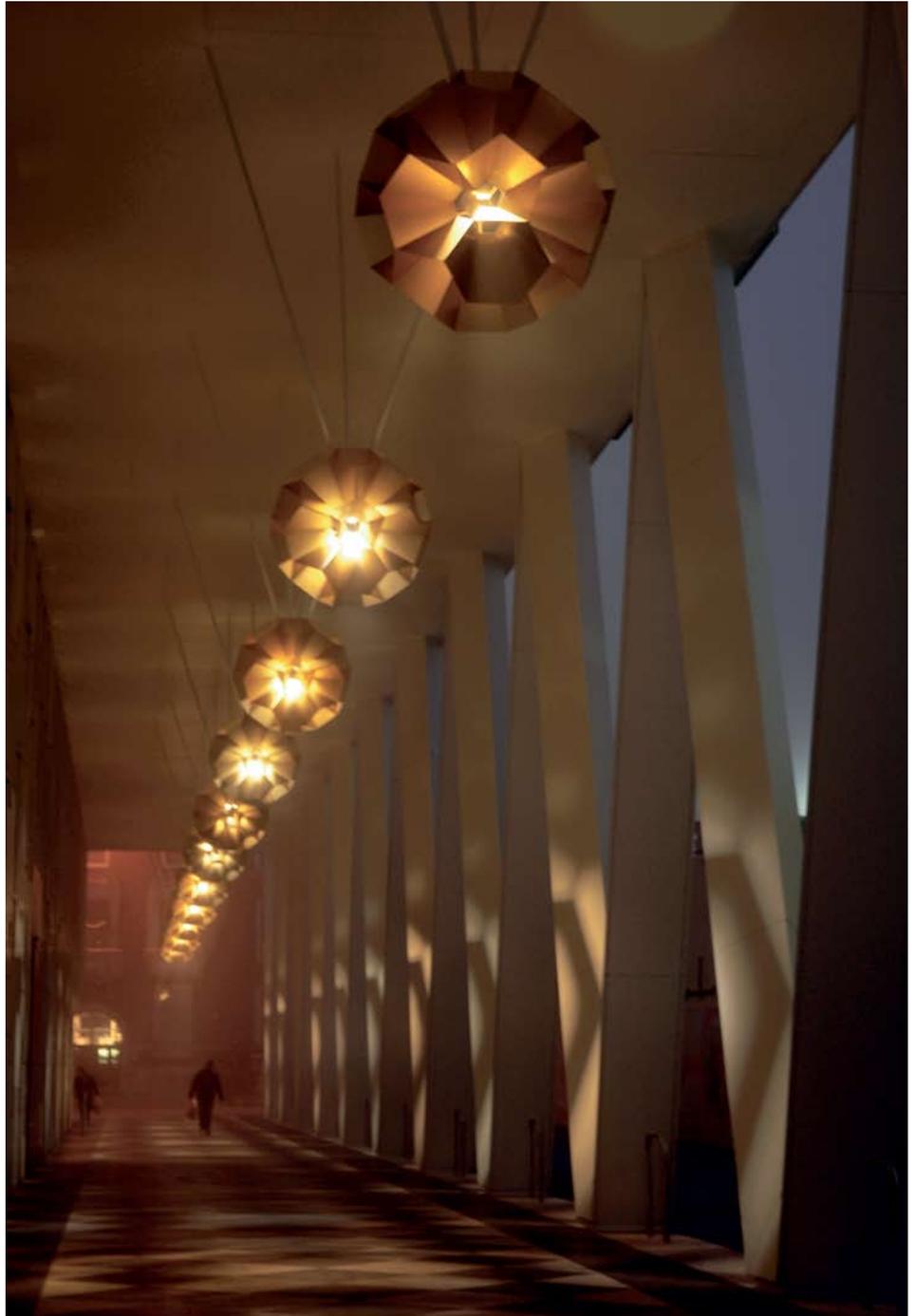
A HORSES TAIL

While the Tilbury community garden was under construction, a local history project was initiated and run by muf with local children. The project investigated on the semi-legal practice of grazing ponies around Tilbury and thus on the cultural and emotional claims to the landscape. Tilbury, 2003 – 2004



BARKING TOWN SQUARE

Winner of the European Prize for Public Space, the square shows muf's capacity to make public space able to host more than one thought. A folly wall of recycled bricks could be a ruin of Barking's past, an arboretum gives space for leisure and pleasure while a public arcade without shops connects the square with the new high street nearby. London, 2005 – 2008



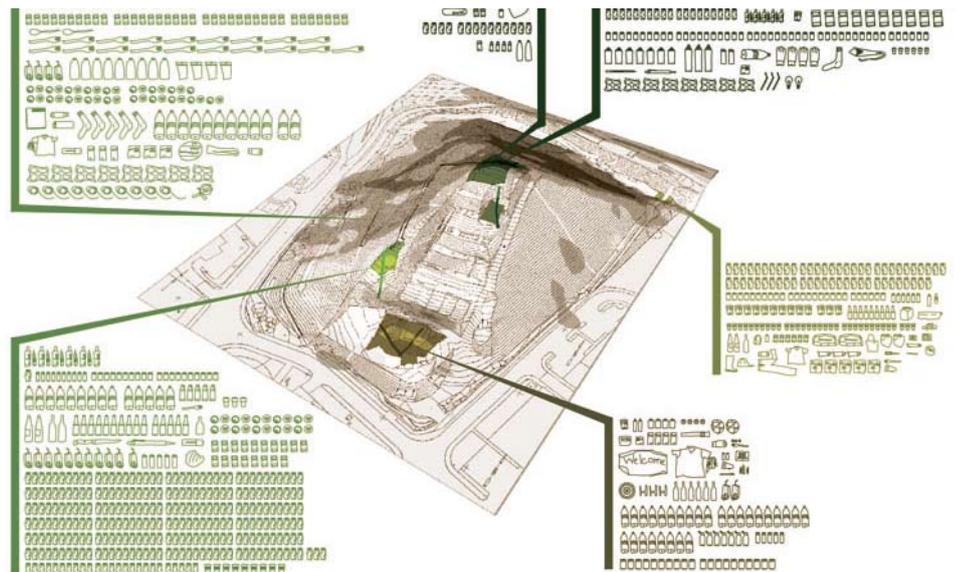
VILLA FRANKENSTEIN

Exhibition on the „obsessive“ relations between Venice and Great Britain since John Ruskins „Stones of Venice“ (1850). A collaboration of muf architecture / art and Atelier One engineers. British Pavilion, Architectural Biennial in Venice, 2010



FERAL ARCADIA - BECKTON ALP

The Beckton Alp is the highest man-made hill in England's southeast and a toxic 19th century spoil heap from a former gas work. Feral Arcadia is turning this into a place of play and repose. muf started the project by staying three months in a portacabin at the base of the alp, observing and documenting „the use and evidence of use, both human and otherwise“. In 50 days, over 300 people were observed revealing that this place is already being valued for certain activities. This will now lead to a master plan for the site during the second phase of the project. Newham, 2010 <http://mufarchitectureart.blogspot.com/>



HIGH STREET

It's the strap line for the ancient road into the city which will be the London 2012 Olympic Marathon route. Along the street are a number of public realm improvement projects and muf are authors of schemes for the neighbourhoods. Each scheme acknowledges the street as a social space and makes room on (and in particular just off) the street for amenity and pleasure; these schemes will endure beyond the Olympic celebrations. Collaboration of muf architecture / art with J&L Gibbons and JMP. London, 2010

