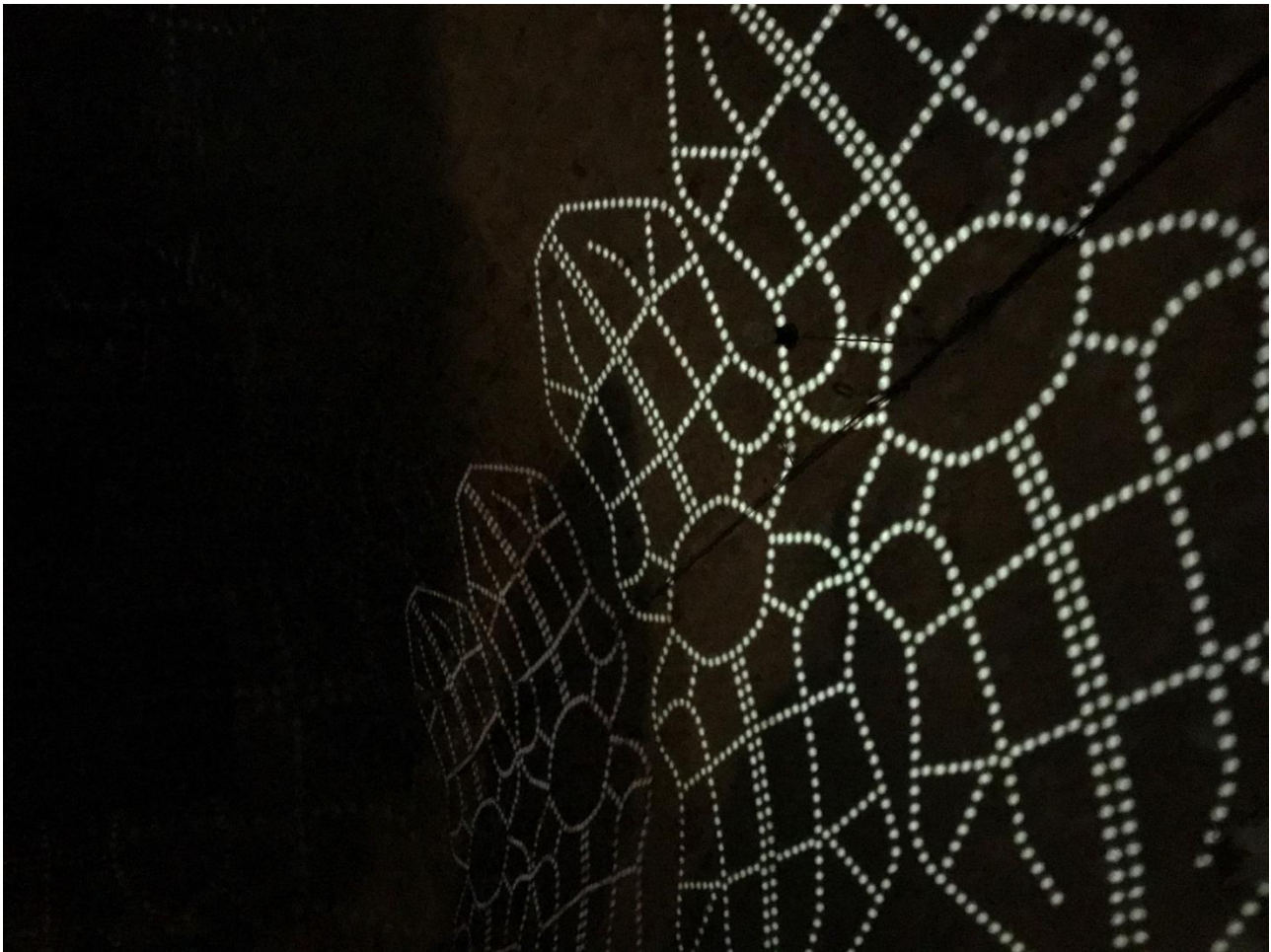# Extremely Vast and Incredibly Close Future

T-Lab 3 Kaunas – Digital Placemaking Probe report

AIP Kaunas – 10/11/21

"What would you do if you had an enormous empty space to fill in your city? The Extremely Vast and Incredibly Close Future workshop invites inhabitants of Aleksotas and Kaunas in imagining together how to use in the close future the site of the ancient military base that will host the Kaunas Innovation Park. The experiential city-making activity will guide participants in discovering the area and voicing desires and challenges to ideate uses serving the community in the meanwhile time until the finalisation of the Innovation Park.

Instead of focusing on fictional, far away futures that can spark imagination but rarely lead to applicable results, the workshop focuses on the close future, seeking to capture community demands. The data resulting from the workshop will be utilised for designing multiple digital models of the area that will illustrate the ideas that emerged and make it possible to integrate them in regeneration plans."

(workshop communication text)

Background

The Kaunas coalition has identified Digital placemaking as a meanwhile activity strain. Indeed, the site configuration (vast space with few, not secure infrastructures) and the lack of local legislation of meanwhile spaces make digital means a promising tool to build the site identity and kick-start onsite activities. In calls between Kaunas KTU staff and T-Lab 3 lead Marta Arniani it was agreed to utilise the digital modelling tool Space Syntax as a mean to model meanwhile uses and make them more tangible (hence actionable) by both the Municipality and citizens.

The November 2021 probe was the first excursion by T-Lab 3 to touch base in Kaunas and start collecting inputs to feed the digital modelling platform. It was organised piggybacking the T-Factor Urban Origami Forum, where Marta Arniani presented the main insights of the probe.

The probe was designed and facilitated by Marta Arniani (Futuribile, T-Lab 3). As a curatorial choice, the workshop focused on the near future, since because of their disconnection with the immediate reality, speculative futures can lead to engagement fatigue. Moreover, the local coalition is seeking support for organising real activities as soon as possible. In light of this, the second curatorial choice was to provide an experience and not only an ideation workshop. In this way, the probe could contribute to building the aesthetics of the site and lead participants to appropriate it.

The local support - including site visits, participants' recruitment, workshop logistics and workshop artefacts fabrication was ensured by KTU staff:
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Objectives
- first networking with local coalition and stakeholders;
- first experiential and performative site visit;
- collecting expectations and ideas of the participants regarding near future meanwhile activities to be used in digital modelling.

Activities
The probe took place on Thursday 10th afternoon. It was titled "Extremely Vast and Incredibly Close Future", referring to the vastness of the regeneration site and the intention to activate meanwhile uses in a near future and not in a speculative one. The probe was made of three parts:
1) visit of the site
2) Dream Room to spark imagination and reflection
3) brainstorming workshop

13 participants attended the event, including a representative of the municipality, Aleksotas inhabitants and land owners, students and KTU staff.

1) Site visit

The visit was guided by Egidijus Bagdonas, president of Kaunas fortresses association. From the fortress' roof, the group passed by the perimetral wall and moved to the centre, where the helicopter landing fields are located. From there, it took the road the runs along the hangar until the old station. Once participants had seen these landmark places, they were given 20 minutes to explore the site as they wanted.

On the fortress roof
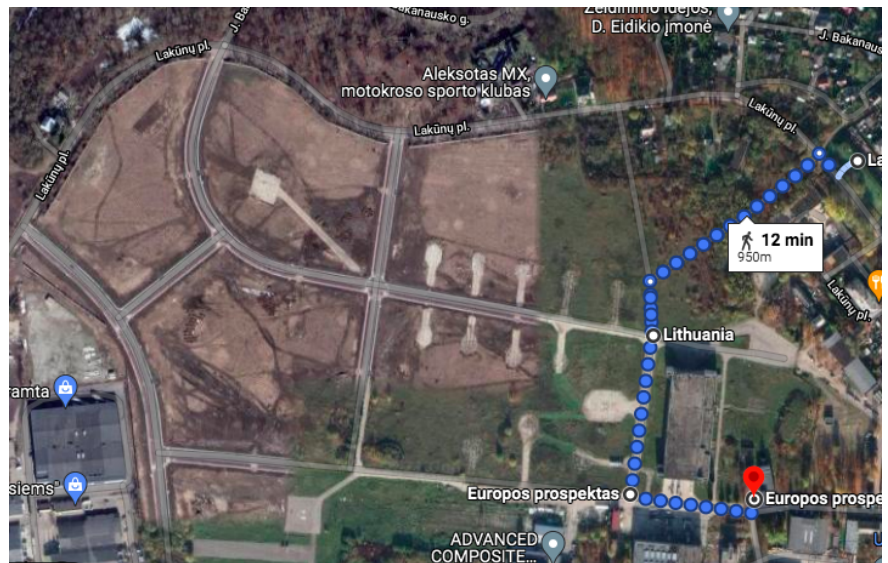
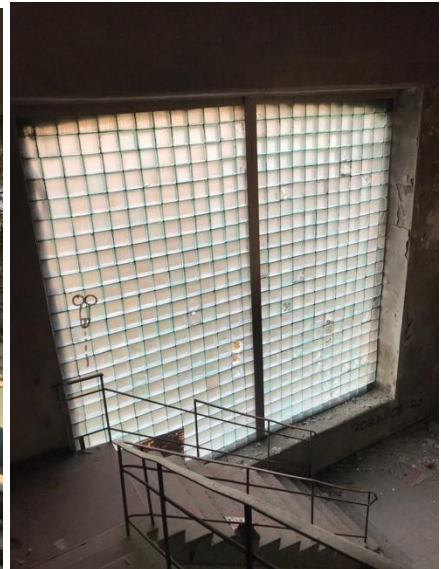*Route of the guided part*

View from the fortress roof

The fortress

The hangar

Inside the station

The group split and met again at the central crossroad. The objective of this part was to give participants a sense of the space and its vastness and support their ideation process by providing time for free exploration and appropriation instead of overloading them with too much information. Half of the participants decided to explore the station; the others split between exploring the hangar and walking on the central route.

2) Dream room

The Dream Room was a light installation inside one of the fortress tank garages adjacent to the workshop room.

Once their eyes were accustomed to the darkness, participants could see an abstract form projected on the walls. Here they had a physical and mental space with soft, evocative music in the background to think about what they saw in the visit. The silhouette projected was an abstraction of the site aerial view. It had a connection with reality, but it was evocative and openly interpretable: some saw in it an emblem, others a heart. The room's objective was to provide participants with an intimate experience to build a connection with the site and gather their thoughts in a cosy chapel of lights and sounds before moving to the collective workshop.

We asked two questions:

- How did all that space felt
- What would you do instinctively with all that space?

3) *Workshop*

The workshop started with individual answers to the Dream Room questions, posted on a board, and read aloud. In this way, we valued individual contributions as starting ground for collective creativity.
Participants split in two groups, each given a printed aerial map of the site. One group was working in Lithuanian, the other in English,

Under the open question "What is missing in Aleksotas and Kaunas?" we opened the collective part of the workshop introducing its objective, to design meanwhile uses for the near future, utilising two time horizons: the coming spring and in two years. Ideas for the following spring demand no infrastructures or very light/portable ones and can be implemented by existing organisations or individuals; those in two years can be more ambitious since they can rely on more preparation time.

Each group's task was to discuss ideas and draw or write their wish list of activities that can be activated quickly (next spring) and soon (in two years). Each group rapporteur expressed the group ideas in a plenary discussion.

After this initial brainstorming, groups were asked to be more specific and choose their lighthouse project between the ideas that emerged and detailed it. Guiding questions were: Why did you choose this one? When does it open/start? Who goes there? How do you go there? How big is it? What's inside/how is the space configured? What is the programme? What added value do you think it would bring to the community? Who could help build it? Who should be involved? Each group present their lighthouse project in a plenary discussion.

Sense-making

Individual brainstorming
Individuals instinctive answers ranged from green areas, to novel uses (public purpose spaces, music and design hub, wind sails, light installations), to novel buildings (tower, information point) and events.
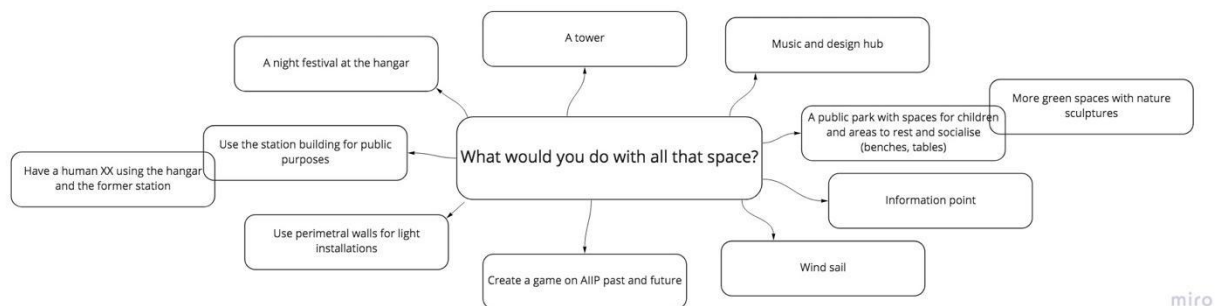
The space was characterised for its size ("voided as the sea"), which made them feel lost and little.

Individuals gave also feedback on the Dream Room, describing their experience as "dreamy and calm", "easy as butterfly wings", "relaxed", "cosy and time flowing".

Group 1 brainstorming
Group 1 short term proposal for May 2022 was a festival showcasing the potential of transforming the hangar into a music and design hub. Their timeline foresaw the immediate launch of a call to action to produce site-specific installations for the festival as a hub kick-starter. The installations would be produced in a two-week residency at the fort.
In the longer term, the hub is intended as a creators' space, where creative can meet and produce together, standing at the heart of the innovation district and cross-pollinating with it. Its potential activities include live music, exhibitions, music lessons, design workshops, fine arts productions. The small hangar rooms could work as studios, while the main room could host performances and exhibitions.
Finally, they proposed building continuity with the local aviation history, with large-scale wind sculptures and aerial tours of the area with drones.

Group 2 brainstorming
The Lithuanian group proposal for the next spring was a festival, which was picked up as lighthouse project and will be detailed in the coming section.
In the short term, they propose leveraging the fortress makerspace as headquarter, which would benefit the fortress association by increasing possibilities for funds. Moreover, the helicopter landing fields would be an ideal setting for commercials and dancing performances. A municipality member highlighted the administrative constraints for live events in the AIIP area, which is also at the origin of the idea of working at the margin of it in the maker space.
For the "in two years" perspective, participants proposed different activities:
- Ferris wheel;

- Sports facilities;
- Urban gardening;
- Golf field;
- Object art festival.

Group 1 lighthouse project: AIIP as a stage

Since the area's buildings are not accessible soon, as a workaround to safety compliance, the group proposed using the area as a big stage, animated by 3D images, AR, videomapping, drone shows, drones views, and light shows which can be seen from the borders. The fortress roof would be the main observation point with seating space. Indeed, from it, it is possible to look at AIIP and the city, which opens the way to educational/historical projections (for instance, a view of the city as it was and as it is now). Finally, as an outdoor activity, the group proposed a geolocation game like Pokemon Go, utilising GPS to search for items and explore the area, which could be disseminated with some fixed stations to tell the story about this place. Furthermore, an action RPG (role-playing game) in Minecraft and The Witcher style were proposed as further place-based gaming that could blend virtual and physical environments. The group identified the added value of their proposal in unlocking the area and making it accessible beyond safety problems.

Group 2 lighthouse project: AIIP's TechFest

The group proposed a one-week festival focused on innovation and the arts, taking place not only in the AIIP's territory but also in the fortress and territories nearby. The programme would include laser shows, lanterns show, food trucks, open-air cinema, techno music, helicopter landing space as a performative stage, art exhibitions. The festival would be a way to collect digital information such as routes within the area and attendees' demographics, which could feed the Space Syntax digital modelling. The group identified as added value beyond entertainment: social inclusion; improve public affairs of innovation park; kickstarting urban regeneration.

Scenarios for Space Syntax modelling
1) Fortress roof as observation point of light performances
2) Open-air festival in AIIP
3) Music and creativity hub in the hangar
4) AIIP as GPS gaming field

For each, it is reasonably possible to model people's fluxes, infrastructures, public transports.

Conclusions
The probe led to identifying possible ways ahead for placemaking and the role of technology in it. Although one-time events emerged as the easiest and most engaging way to activate the space and open it to citizens, space accessibility and safety hurdles (which were raised by the municipality representative) make digital and hybrid activities a promising route for animating the meanwhile. From the final discussion, it emerged how physical and digital activities must be complementary and not mutually exclusive. Indeed, any digitally-enabled experience should be seen as a way to augment possibilities and not as a parallel alternative world. We sketched how gaming could lead to experiencing the site through somebody else's eyes (e.g. of another gender, historical period, profession) and hence enhance social inclusion. Another possibility is to create an economy around the place that connects it with the rest of the city (e.g. virtuous actions compensated with tokens to be spent in public services). Finally, digital modelling could be a way to open up imagination (e.g. with Space Syntax modelling infrastructures and activities, their requirements and impacts).

Concerning engagement, efforts should be concentrated in finding the right channels, incentives and storytelling to involve citizens, especially those located at the outskirts of AIIP.

Beyond this report, the immediate workshop follow-up by KTU is the modelling in Space Syntax of some of the uses that emerged. In the longer term, there is interest from both T-Lab 3 and KTU in exploring digitally-mediated activities (gaming and lights/AR shows) as placemaking ones.