

DEAF LANDSCAPE

BADIN

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE — ANDREJ BADIN

PROGRAMME — 1) PARK, 2) MEMORIAL, 3) THEATRE

SIZE — 1) 2483 m², 2) 510 m², 3) 493 m² — 3486 m²

LOCATION: HORTUSPLANTSOEN, AMSTERDAM

STATUS — DESIGN STUDY

PROJECT MENTOR — DIRK SIJMONS

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ZEEUW, GABRIELA AND GABRIEL AND TOMÁŠ BADIN

SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE GRANTING OF THE MASTER'S DEGREE
IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT THE AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS —
AHK — ON THE 15TH OF JULY 2021

JURY — JANA CREPON, RUWAN ALUWIHARE

REPLACEMENT JURY — PIERRE MARCHEVET

A PROJECT

We live in a hearing world. Others live in a deaf world. The deaf world has its own language, the sign language, Dutch or English or . . . Frisian. The deaf world also has its memorials, made out of stone. The only deaf memorial in the Netherlands — and likely in the whole world — is in Amsterdam, behind its botanical garden, on an ‘infrastructural’ island of grass. Behind it stands a university — presently the Reinwardt Academy of heritage studies — that used to be a school for deaf children. During several weeks at the beginning of the Second World War, all the deaf pupils were killed.

Today it is some 80 years later and a Jewish Deaf foundation has recently placed the stone before the school in memory of the victims. Yearly, deaf and Deaf Jewish people — and relatives of the deceased — commemorate the horror by taking a short walk from the schools entrance to the memorial stone. Once I was able to join them and long before I’ve decided, that I should make a proposal of landscape architecture at the location where the memorial stands.

This paper presents the proposal in drawings. I attempt to describe it also in words. It is a moving image. It moves, because around the memorial, it would be good to nurture all monumental trees, by trimming some of their branches, allowing growth and letting sun onto the ground. The trees already form a coherent spatial structure, a park. Park = keep.

Inside the park, there is a road. This road must be moved, because it stands in the way of the commemorations, between the memorial and the school. Sign language = visual language. For a sign user, deaf, openness = safety. Light = understanding, resp. more light = more understanding (better visual reading). Deaf communication = people grouped in the form of a circle. The circle, from now on, becomes the main organizational form of my whole proposal. I draw an ellipse on the ground. It begins by the schools' entrance, ends by its corner. It bends around the memorial, tying the memorial and the school together. It encloses them, unites them. It will be a raised, gravel garden through which the cars on the road cannot go. A place of quiet, that houses the memorial with dignity. It will be possible to commemorate by the light of a single lightbulb, that should be placed above the schools entrance — by an existing memorial plaque — in a dim setting. Not everything that will be signed will be understood during the night, something may remain un— Yet, the historic wound is touched. Does it pain you? Good. Most memorial experiences would end here. By the memory, by the touching of it, or by exposing it. The problem is, that rarely does a space allow others to experience memory of an individual. . . and in order for a trauma to heal, the pain should be washed away, or shared.

Personally, I've often felt, that water has a purifying effect on my thoughts. In the end, it is water, that has the ability to purify itself by itself. In the park, it is possible to go sit by a pond. That is nice, I do not propose change there. What I think would be a good extension to the memorial, in the form of a semi-circle, is an other space by the water, but now by a large, open water at a bend in a canal titled

‘Nieuwe Herengracht’ (‘the new city–canal of men’), that is some 15 metres away from the memorial. With a view at the bend, a semi-circular platform of wood and steel should be made, that will transmit tactile vibrations of movement of others, so that movement as a form of expression — sign — will be shared between all who stand upon it, hearing or deaf alike. Leaning against a brick embankment and seeing the waters’ surface only 40 centimetres below, we will be in the presence of water itself.

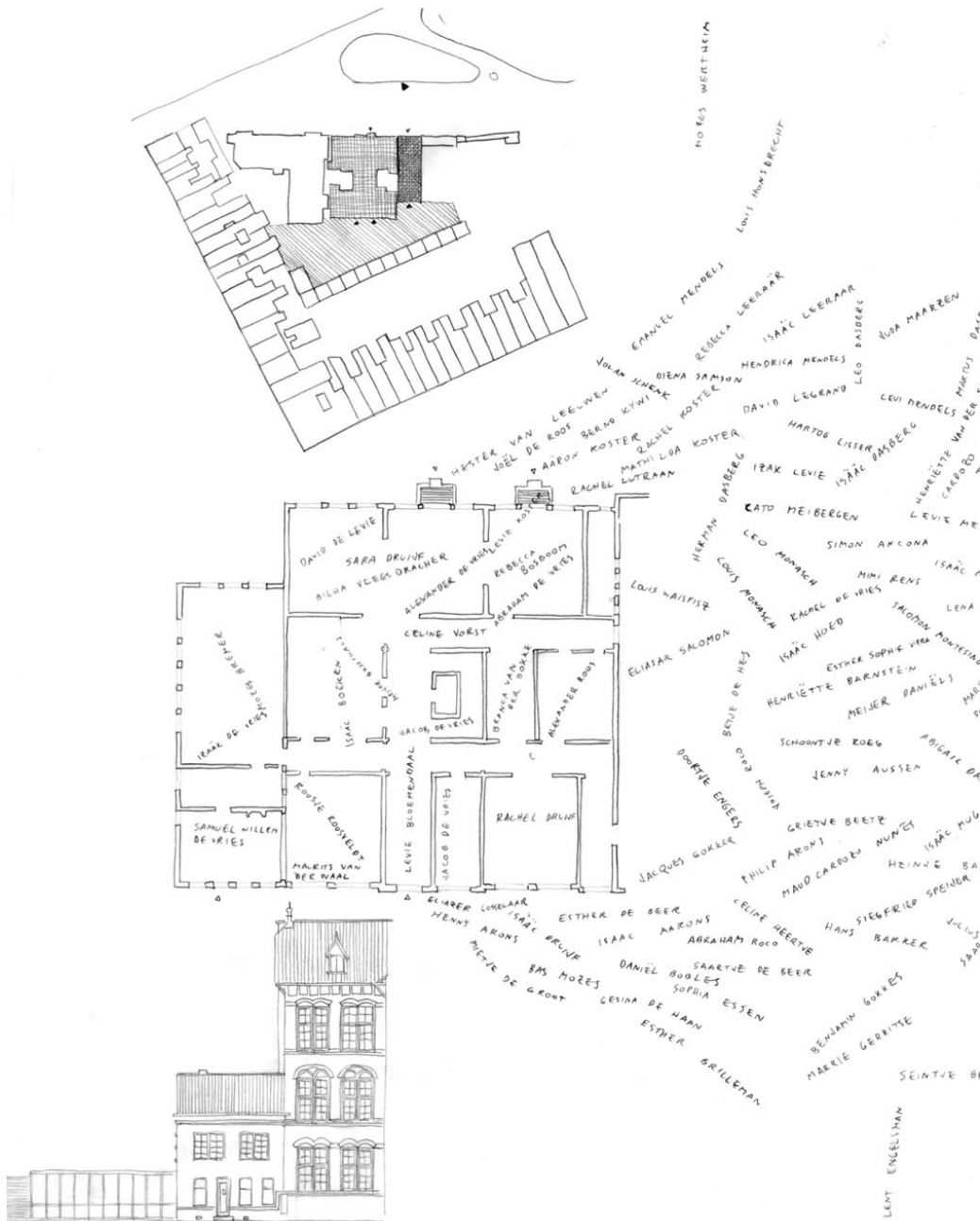


In the former deaf school, named Conrad Amman school after a Dutch medico-scientist who developed oralist methods of education, children were taught how to speak and hear and balance (as the picture shows), tasks that are often impossible to obtain for deaf people and thus traumatizing. Photograph c *Algemeen Dagblad*, printed with permission.



Photo of the memorial, June 2021.

Next spread shows all the names of the children who were taken from the school into . . . never to return. A drawing.





A NOTE

In the introduction, there is made no difference between ‘deaf’ and ‘Deaf’. In the rest of this paper, ‘deaf’ refers to people who do not hear and do not sign. The capitalized ‘Deaf’ refers to those who sign, no matter their hearing.

I am thankful for the book *Seeing Voices* by Oliver Sacks, that I’ve discovered accidentally in the streets of Ljubljana and that, in turn, helped me to discover an admiring perspective on sign languages and Deaf culture. It created a picture in my mind: sign languages being captivating spatio-visual ‘voices’ that I see and that face extinction at the same time. It is Deaf people who make Deaf culture by the use of sign languages. These languages and the culture are threatened into extinction by advancements of technology that ‘amplifies’ deaf genes (prenatally–DNA modification, or during life–cochlear implants) and makes deaf people use hearing languages instead.

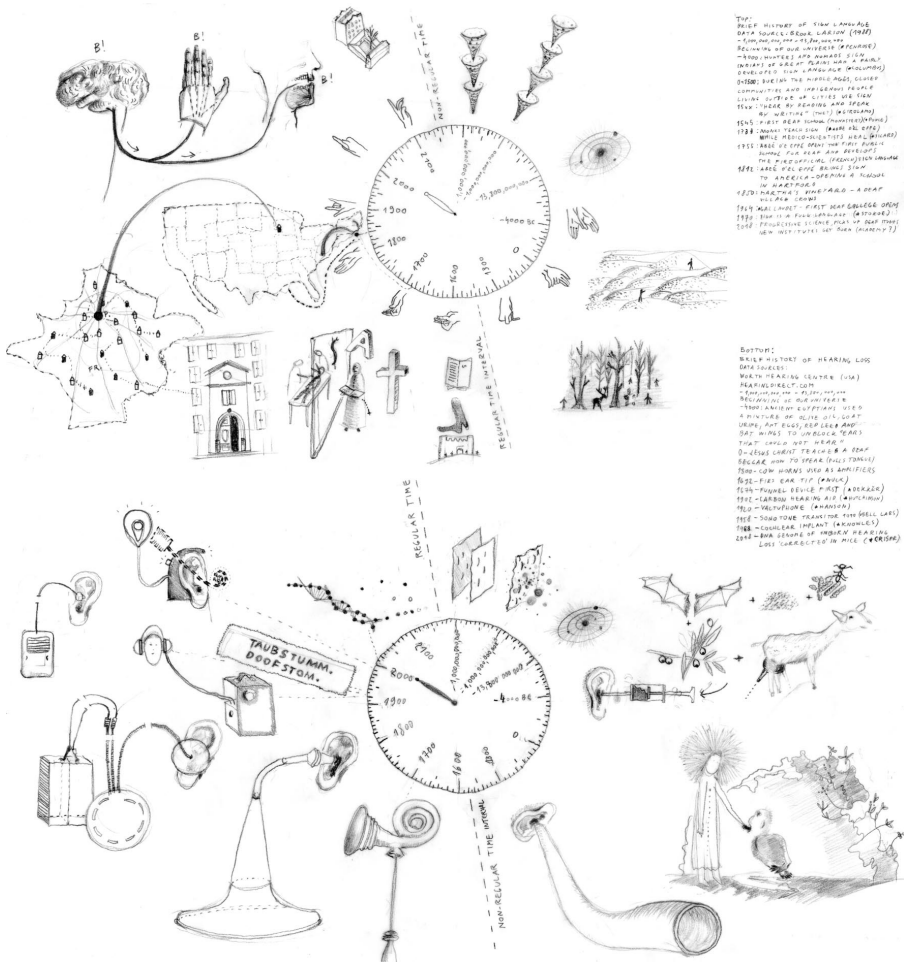
THE PLACE

In the city of Amsterdam, North Holland, inside the historic city centre, there stands a black stone with a bronze statue atop of it. It depicts people dragging themselves somewhere into the unknown. It reads: the world remained deaf. At its place, Deaf children from a nearby university, that formerly was a school for deaf and hard of hearing, were indeed dragged out of this school and into concentration camps, where they've been labelled 'deaf and dumb', rendering them useless for labour and thus, with the exception of a single Deaf survivor, immediately incinerated.

To come to this stone, you can go many routes and no matter the direction, you will experience it (or at least that is how I experience it), as one in a series of open, public spaces with a burdening history, that depict mostly the memories of the Jewish eradication and display collections of colonial origin. As a rule, from all the different directions, the land where the memorial stands is reached by a bridge, with the exception of one tunnel, that leads underground. An isle of the dead, one could refer to. This isle served as a graveyard for children and the poor, who died of pestilence from mid 17th to mid 19th century. It bore the name St. Antonieskerkhof then. Today, it is connected via bridges with the city, logically surrounded by water. From the isle, the view is outwards, toward a Jewish synagogue, behind it two church towers, on the ground a gravel platform bound by trees on all sides, on it a figure of a man with his hands and

palms spread straight outwards, as if unable to change the moment, yet gathering the power to do so, a platform that is often used for public gatherings (J.D.Meijerplein).

The view is defined also by an enormous glasshouse full of exotic plants, the monument of the botanical garden of the city, where trees bend over the surrounding water. The water is rarely calm, it is black, dark gray, purple, green, sometimes white, when reflecting the sun that rarely shines on this land with the black memorial stone, overshadowed by a tall north facing facade of the former deaf school and by a row of five heavy, black horse chestnut trees with twisted bark that winds into thick, low laying branches and their sun shading, palm leaves and sticky chestnut scent. Many trees around here are of old age and of the Dutch Elm species. Their arrangement is striking and intimate at times, the form of their placement (or grouping) is a close triangle, that has an interior. This interior is hollow space, at their roots is grass. The land is rather densely planted, allowing for little to no sunlight to reach the ground, resulting in a patched grassy cover, that has a transitory (temporary) outlook. As such, one could say, that all these large, old trees, precisely planted in groups and rows are the defining elements of this land-scape (their logic of arrangement being the architecture). The strategy adopted on the oldest tree here, an elm of 121 years is to keep it in place as a half-dead, half-living sculpture of 'dead-wood'. That is appropriate for this context. In this project, this strategy is adopted for the maintenance of all other monumental trees here as well.



At the top, brief history of sign language. From being desert warriors and hiding in the forests with animals, we've recently come to acknowledge Deaf people as gifted instead of disabled. On the bottom, brief history of hearing amplification. From injecting goat urine into their ears, to prenatal genome modification. On the next page, photo of the project area.





A GATHERING

One evening in November I was lucky to be able to join a commemorative event, organized by a group of Deaf people, some of who were relatives of those Deaf and Deaf Jewish victims of the Holocaust (the number of people, that I was able to find, is 141 and still counting, subject to ongoing research) that the memorial remembers. We've gathered by the schools present entrance, that faces the memorial, where people greeted one another. From there, we've walked across a road and over a low fence to the patch of grass, where the black stone stood. Naturally organizing into a circle, we stood there, some people signing, some listening to an interpreter (who interpreted Dutch sign language into spoken Dutch). A lamp lit, it was 6:30 pm. This provided enough light for the whole group. The event was timed, so that the lamp would light up when we were at the memorial. It is often said that architecture is about sculpting light and when thinking from a Deaf perspective, it is especially about sculpting light for different occasions, so that people can communicate in a setting, that suits the level of understanding required.

No matter how functional the present lighting was, I have found it hard to be moved by the space where we've met and been standing, even though the event itself and the sign language that made it were beautiful. Furthermore I have felt (from a very personal view) a great sadness, or perhaps a tension that arises from a division (or a paradox) about commemorating the death of Deaf people, in sign

language, while that same sign language itself also faces a threat of extinction in the present. That threat comes from hearing implantation and prenatal deaf genome modification being forced upon deaf babies. According to the Polish-Jewish philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, reason is at the root of the Holocaust and I would dare to make the jump here, that reason is also at the root of threatening sign language into extinction these days, just by other, more invisible means (hidden technology). That is the question hanging above the memorial: how can one remember Holocaust when still threatened by the same danger of 'improving' human beings? Wasn't this very 'improvement' the basis for eugenics as well?

With the passing of time, helped by reading of the history of Dutch Deaf culture and its theatre, I came to understand, that the emancipatory strife Deaf people wage is an act of its own and thus unrelated with the memorial as a structure in space.

THE DIVISION

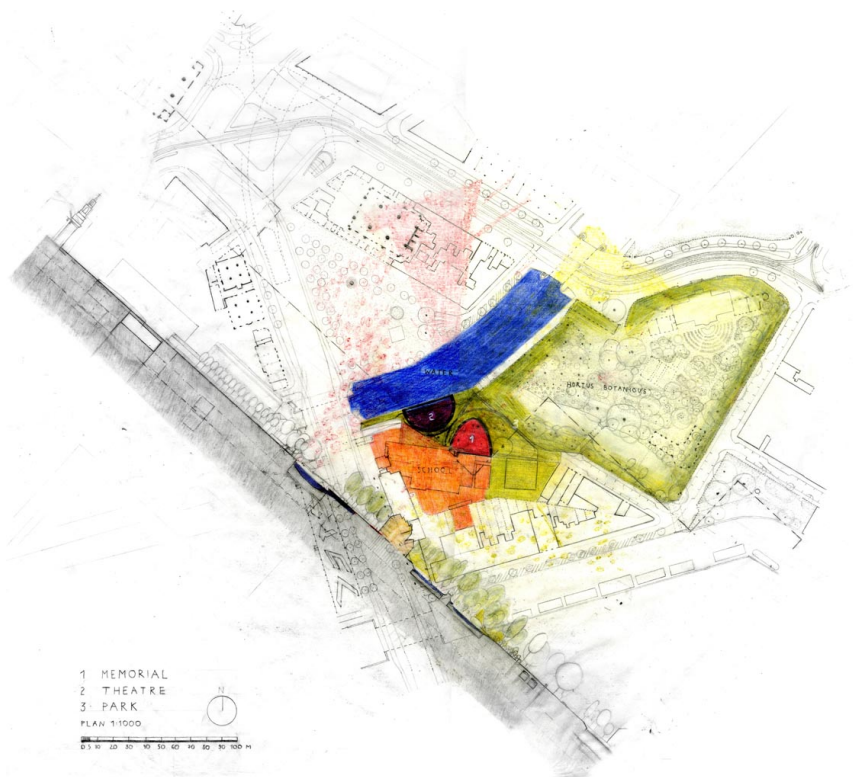
Looking at the history of the memorial and at the history of the school I wanted to shout, but by which horror to begin? And where, and how, at this already haunted place, with all its dark trees, dark waters and behind them the glimmering colonial relics and monuments, memorials and statues that tear ones inside apart? How not to add into this maddening place another memory of just pain and how to enlighten and make accessible also to those outside of the Deaf community this place of quietude?

Quietude. I think that is the expression I was searching for in this context. That may make this place a whole.

And so, not as a strife for emancipation, but as a gesture of culture in respect with the cultural programme of the place, I've studied what landscape typology could highlight the beauty of sign language and bring a diverse use to the park, so that mourning may be accompanied by being, crying or smiling too. The catch here is not to make the space a permanent joke. Furthermore, this typology had to come from Deaf culture itself. There is one that meets these requirements and that is the Deaf theatre, that can potentially take place outdoors in public space and knows both tragedy and comedy. Could a sign language theatre take place here, would that be possible?







Project plan, scale 1 to 1000.

Previous spread shows an impression of the proposed project, viewed from the Weesper-
straat — bridge over the Nieuwe Herengracht.

SIGNS OF A HEARING PERSON

To express the beauty of movement of the human body a resistance is needed - a counterpoint, Adolphe Appia wrote. I interpret this as descriptive geometry. When Deaf people communicate, they do so in a circle, so that eye contact is kept for all. The park around the memorial is overgrown by clumps of trees, arranged in triangular position. The circle (Deafness) and the triangle (the memorial place) are the organizational forms that define the newly proposed geometry of the site, that remains a park. Proportions are taken (copied) from the surrounding landscape - everything that is here, that matters as landscape architecture - the canals and their excavated bottom, their embankments, can be made using the measurements of 1,3,5,7 metres. The missing rhythmic value is always two (2 m). This is the used proportional system of the design. Axes of the design follow the placement of existing trees and around these axes, three spatial gestures — or signs — are made.

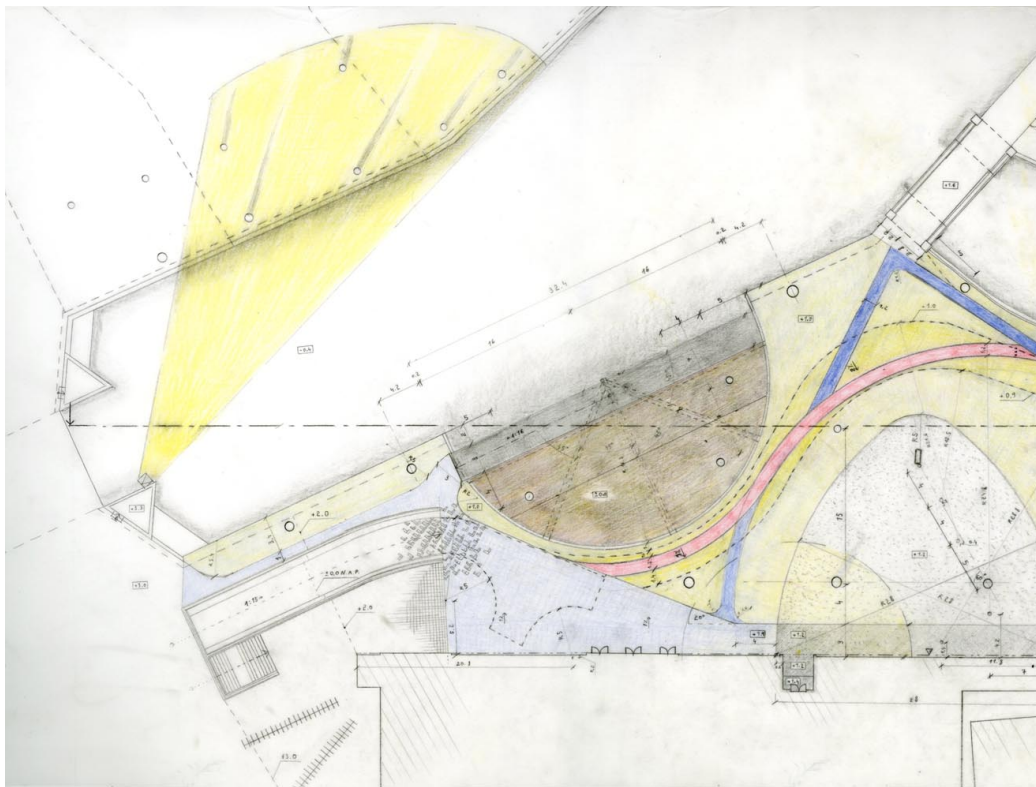
SIGN ONE: MEMORIAL PARK

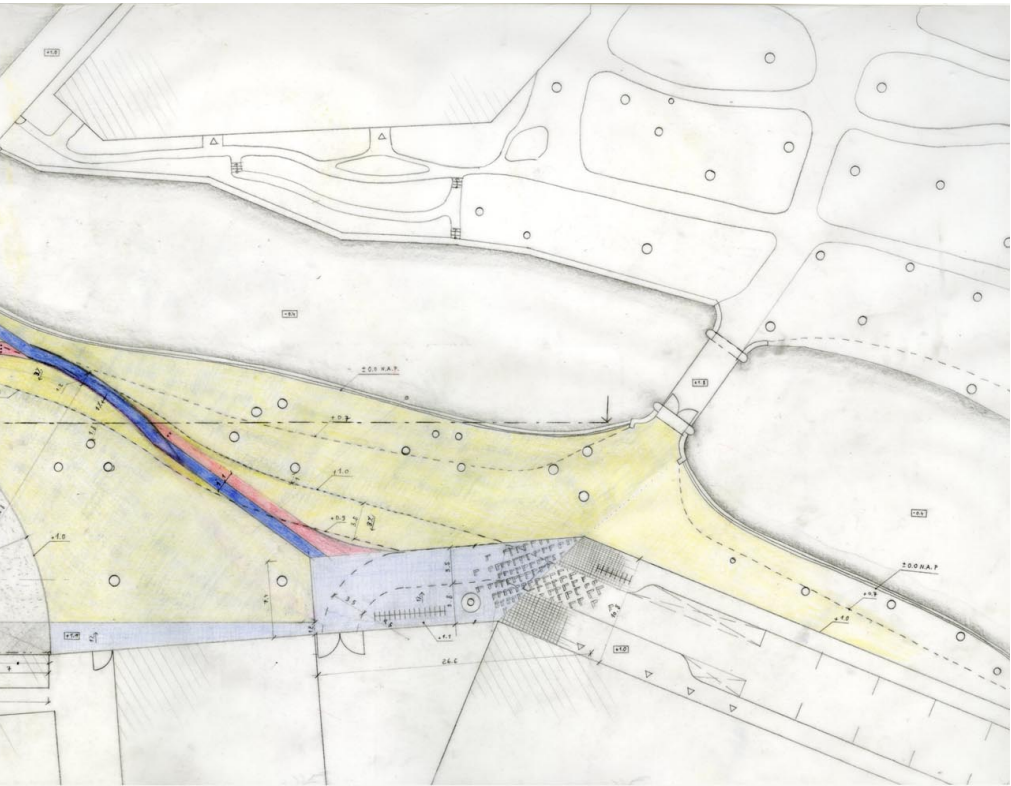
Presence of trees and a direct bridge towards the botanical garden, together with two of its largest ponds, are clear signs of the past, when this presently public park used to be the botanists back garden. The appearance of the gardens glasshouse that is so close to the memorial, divided only by the pond, is extravagant: green and purple lighting in the night, flower meadows in front, concrete embankments with sharp edges, winding paths, benches, rock lanterns . . . its glass structure reminds of a turtle's shell. To bring a bit of quiet to the memorial and at the same time to respect the unnamed graves of those that were buried here during the graveyards service, a single weeping willow is planted at the public embankment of the pond, between the memorial and the glasshouse, so it can grow over the water as a solitary tree. At that place two black elders grow now, that are replanted to the sides of the private bridge to Hortus Botanicus, where the undecidedly private/public path is removed and grass allowed to grow.

The memorial finds itself in an infrastructural island cut away from the school by a road used for collecting the schools garbage and in cases of emergency at the underground metro station. The surrounding park is seen as more suitable for the memorial occasions than its present infra/garbage condition and the only way to achieve proper placement of the stone within the park is by shifting the road to the periphery of the site.

SIGN TWO: GARDEN PLINTH

The ground where the memorial rests is raised one step higher in a direct extension of the schools plinth. This garden-plinth is high enough to define a longer and slower traffic direction of the road and low enough to provide access through the existing entrance into the school. It is given the form of a semi-ellipse, that frames the building, the memorial stone and two monumental horse chestnuts on a single plateau of bright gravel. The ellipse is centered on an axis between the trees and defined by the buildings edges (entrance/workshop) where two 28m long strings are attached, that delineate the shape of the garden at their 28 metre radius until they bend around the memorial, where that radius is shortened to 5 metres. The gesture here is to union the school and memorial into one, allowing pedestrian commemorations to take place uninterrupted from traffic. The main view from the memorial used to be outwards from the school. By rotating the stone 65 degrees counter clockwise where it stands, people depicted on the statue will be dragged in direction away from the school and facing the memorial, one will see the edge of the park, where land meets water and the schools entrance, from where a lantern will throw a shadow towards the memorial.





PARK PROPOSAL AT THE HORTUS- PLANTSOEN IN AMSTERDAM

SCALE 1/200

0 5 10 15 20 M



MEMORIAL

FOOTPATH

EMBANKMENT

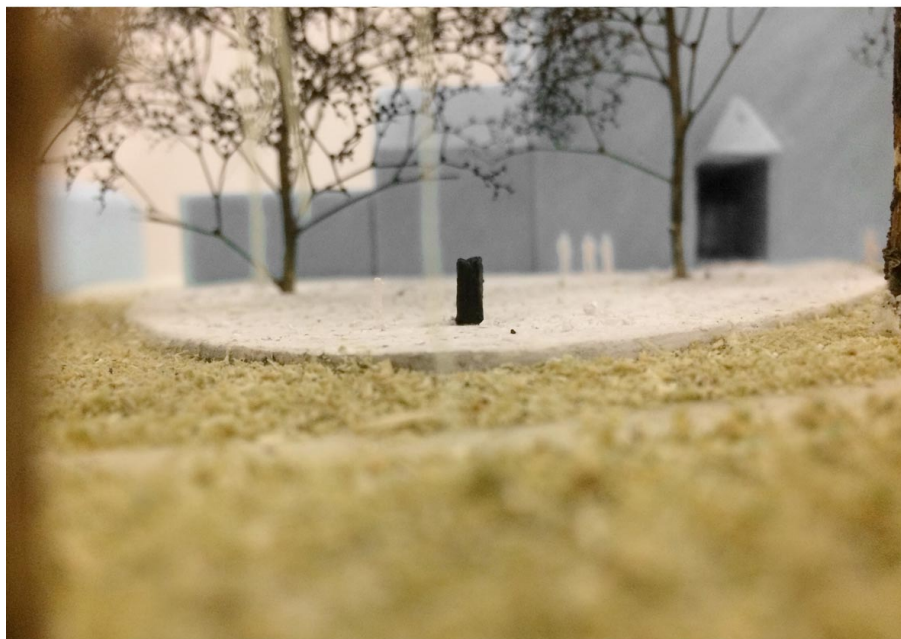
MAT. SCHOOL

BIKE-PATH

THEATRE



The theatre, lit.



The garden is made out of light grey gravel stones, the memorial is a black stone.

SIGN THREE: SIGN LANGUAGE THEATRE

Let's go back to the notion of the park being an urban isle, cut off the surrounding land by canals and the underground metro line. To respect the programme and setting of the memorial, the theatre requires a place of its own. Being close to the edge of a large water body has the effect of transporting one into an open, endless space, somewhere else; the zone where land meets water is a landscape of its own. There, the theatre is set. It is close by the memorial, separated only by the shifted road. To accentuate the difference in use and setting, three elms are replanted from the park into the theatre, to shift the axis that was along the embankment into the park, in between the memorial and the theatre. An entrance into the theatre is from the edge of the park and leads 1 metre below existing terrain into the theatre. Being inside, the view shifts outwards, on the openness of the water. The memorial is now at the backside.

A SPECIFIC

Perhaps there is still a question that remains unanswered: how is theatre for sign language different from a traditional theatre? During a play, sound (orchestra) is what sets the 'time' for actors in a hearing theatre. The rhythm. The actors play, dance and move by music which is their theatrical time. In a Deaf theatre, time and rhythm are obtained through visual and tactile clues. The play is more or less silent, as the sound of sign language is very subtle. Stage design for Deaf play has been scarcely touched upon from the point of its architecture, wrote the Dutch group of Deaf theatre makers (Handtheater) in one of its archival reports. So, what to do?

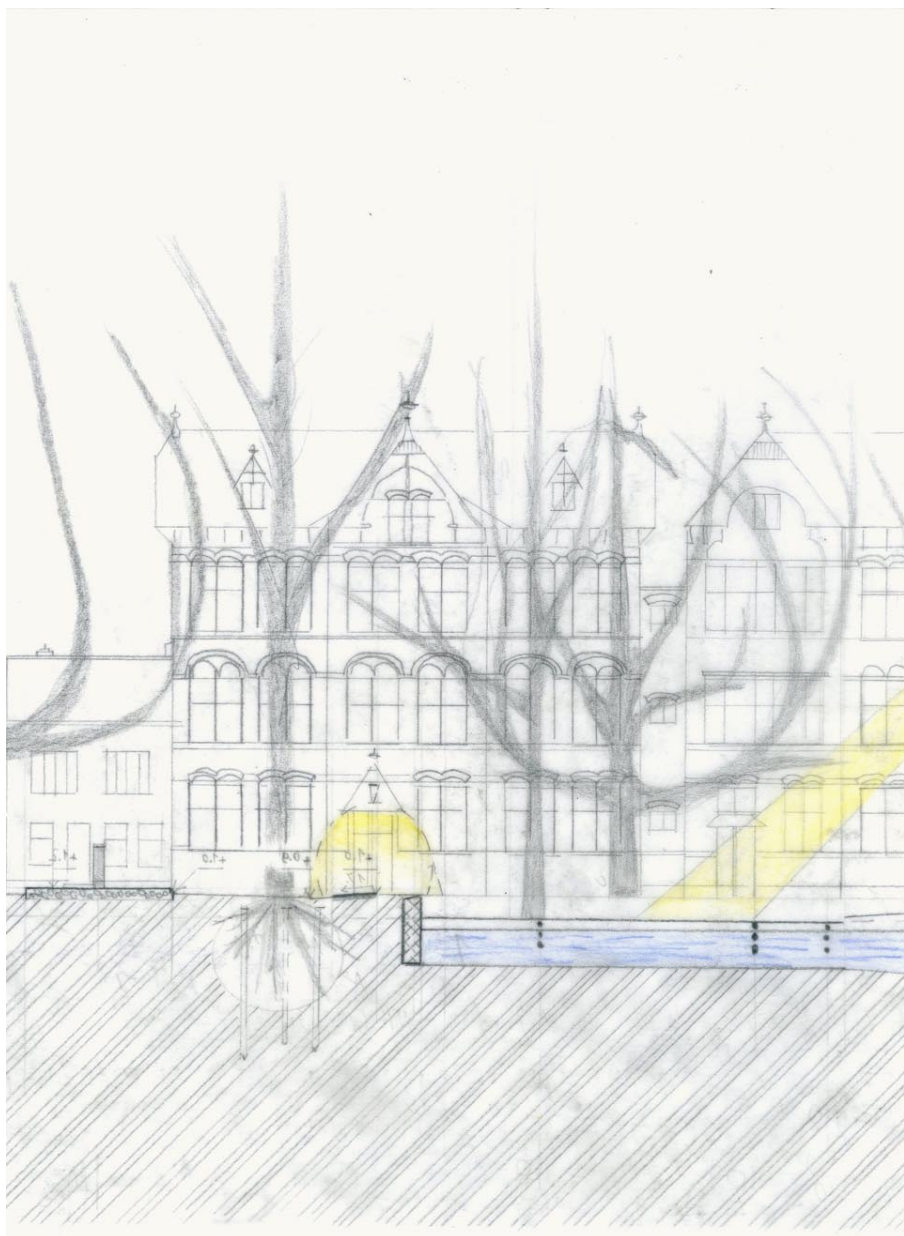
Visiting a music festival for both Deaf and hearing audiences, the only spatial element that made the party different was a floor. It was designed as a podium, that transmitted vibrations of people moving on it, so one could feel the bass travelling through the wood. Such floor is one of the proposed parts of this theatre too. It has a sprung, wooden construction, that deflects to ease the fall. It also transmits vibrations to the actors and the audience, through its sheet metal cover.

In terms of typology, a theatre that came the furthest in appreciation of the human body and its movement (sign language is also a bodily expression) was the modern theatre of the Swiss stage designer Adolphe Appia. His aesthetic was reduced to vertical, horizon-

tal and oblique lines in space (floor, pillar, platform, ramp, staircase) only. That contrasted with the free and organic movement of human form. He removed footlights and added backlights and front lights that shone against one another, creating silhouettes and highlights at the same time. The formal approach and the lighting system of Appia is used also in this proposal.

The shape of the theatre is taken from the oldest known landscape form that served for performances—the threshing floor, which is a circular public platform, the predecessor to the Greek orchestra. This circle is cut in half, allowing water from the canal (Nieuwe Herengracht) that surrounds our theatre to enter inside of it and provide a possible visual clue for Deaf actors to use in play. Historically, division of social power brought division of actors and audience, Pier Vittorio Aureli wrote in an essay on platforms and theatre. To bring various people together, there is no seating proposed, no hierarchy established in the auditorium of the theatre for sign language. One can lean against the brick embankment that is the theatre's edge, while feet stay on the floor and feel the tactile vibration coming from movements of others.





THEATRE FOR SIGN LANGUAGE
IN AMSTERDAM, IN EXTENSION TO THE
JEWISH DEAF MEMORIAL AT THE
HORTUSPLANTSOEN, SCALE 1/50

