

26.08 - 23.10.2022

# Table Setting #3

## Sophia Holst



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In *Table Setting #3* architect and researcher [Sophia Holst](#) takes the sculptural roof terraces of De Singel as the starting point for a series of ‘Thought-images’ on the design and use of public space. Holst is the third participant in *Table Setting*, an exhibition series organized by the [Flanders Architecture Institute](#) and [De Singel](#) for young architects from Flanders and Brussels. Each designer gets the forecourt of De Singel at their disposal, along with a set of tables and attributes designed by Laura Muyldermans.

The roof terraces of De Singel are a public secret. Although they are rarely visited, their spatial character testifies to a seemingly forgotten ambition as public space. The terraces wind around the iconic concert hall and theatre of the arts campus via gentle slopes and low-rise steps. Contrasting with these huge volumes, the roof terraces are home to a range of architectural elements on a human scale, such as a floor covering of rough concrete tiles, a succession of massive stone benches, and a generously proportioned parapet. In the original vision of Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer, visitors would look out of the city from this public platform into the hinterland. Over the years, this dream image was cut short by a railway line and eight lanes of the Antwerp Ring. Half a century of Ring developments later, De Singel as a public place lies on a kind of urban island, with the roof terraces as a seemingly unattainable ‘summit’.

In all their ambiguity, the roof terraces of De Singel form the welcome starting point for the *Table Setting* of architect and researcher Sophia Holst. They carry some recurring fascinations in her work, such as public privacy, unintended forms of spatial usage and unprogrammed public space.

Her portfolio dances across the borders between artistic, research and design practice 'to reveal, question and test', from a layered perspective, 'the political or ideological positions behind urban developments and architectural forms'. Her projects always engage with concrete spatial situations, playing on different registers depending on the context and location of the project. Besides the specific space itself, the actual subject is the life that is projected onto it and that takes place in it: use vs design, public vs intimate, spontaneous vs thought-out. *Table Setting #3* is no exception.

For this exhibition, Holst made a series of fifteen 'Thought-images' of the roof terraces of De Singel. Her multifaceted gaze appears in the making of the 'Thought-images'. The experience of the space itself, initiated by the (re)discovery of the roof terraces during a walk through the building, interacts with the representation of public



### **Table Setting #3 - Model**

Sophia Holst  
Brussels, 2022

space. 'Representation' here is to be understood, on the one hand, as making images of the found architectural space (documenting fragments of the roof route, in close collaboration with photographer [Illias Teirlinck](#)). On the other hand, by drawing, she represents scenes and transformations that further elaborate on the public ambition and architecture of De Singel. In the 'Thought-images', the photographs and drawings come together as collages, in various degrees of (visible) processing. A winding composition of tables and benches raises the stream of thought to a spatial level. The tables and benches form the support for the exhibition, but also act as public furniture on the forecourt of De Singel. In contrast to the roof terraces, this asphalt surface is extremely accessible, but hardly designed. Here too, Holst suggests public space, while drawing with tables and benches.

In addition to the installation on the square, Holst wrote the essay 'Public Thought-images' (p. 7). As in the photographs, the drawings, their montages and the installation, she takes the reader on a walk through the public space and the thoughts that play a part in it.

- Petrus Kemme (curator of the *Table Setting* series)

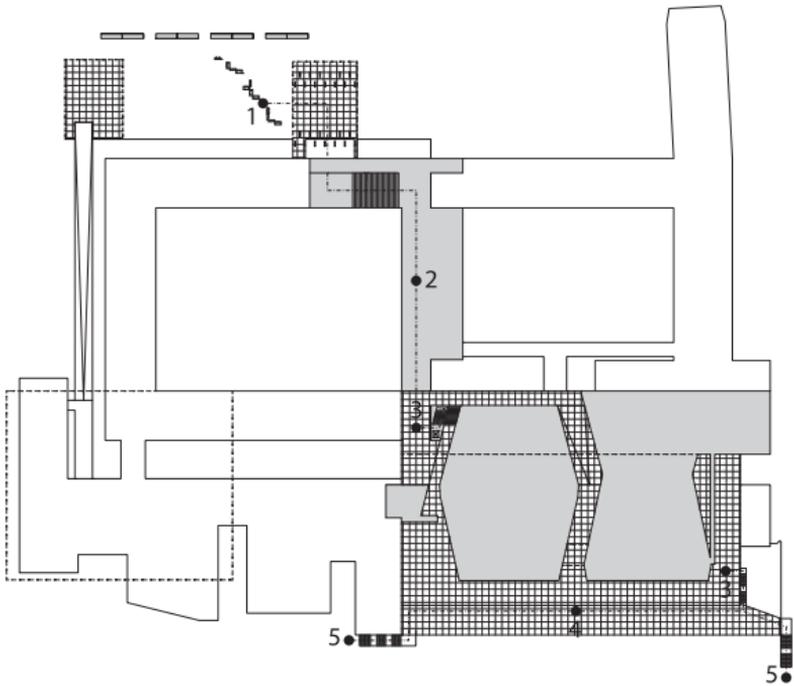
Cover Image:

**Forms of Public Privacy: Palace of Justice, Brussels**

Sophia Holst, 2019 - 2020

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# DE SINGEL



1. Table Setting #3. Sophia Holst (26.08 - 23.10.2022)
2. Public corridor: reception and cloakroom (level 1)
3. Roof terrace (level 2)
4. Roof terrace (level 1)
5. Access through logistic driveway (level 0)



## Public Thought-Images

Anyone who wanders through the buildings of architect Léon Stynen will undoubtedly notice the grandness of the architecture. Rhythmic façades, wide staircases, large terraces, sculptural volumes and an abundance of space adorn the buildings and their users. This grandeur is also visible in De Singel and it gives the building a public face. After all, it is a building where the public visits the theatre and exhibition spaces and where artists, architects, dancers and musicians prepare for the interaction with the public.

Anyone who wanders further through the building, and leaves the main paths, will also notice the smallness of the architecture. Wide balustrades become high tables to put your bag or book on, musicians gather between the columns to practise. The low buildings around the patios provide a sense of security. And, on the large terraces – which are publicly accessible via two small stairs for passers-by – you will find a path that takes you to various little squares and hidden places on the roof. Air shafts form the furniture of these outdoor areas and are spread along the route as robust tables and benches. Public space is thus literally woven throughout the building. Grand geometric architectural forms alternate with small asymmetrical spaces. Thanks to their grandness and smallness, openness and intimacy, the spaces seem to invite people to come together, to linger, to be – in various human constellations, with various human relationships. In this way, the building seems to have been designed with two measurements, for two different bodies: the large public body and the small private body.

With these two bodies in mind, I walk onto the square with the canopy, tables and benches. Bonnie Honig recently made me realize how important



'public things' are and, by extension, public places.<sup>1</sup> Infrastructure, libraries, schools, buildings where people come together, which people care about, all exemplify the art of 'pursuing in common the objects of common desires', as Tocqueville put it so beautifully.<sup>2</sup> They are places and objects in transition onto which we can project what kind of society we believe in and want to live in, places and objects that make us aware of our 'public body'. At the same time, they are places where people with different perspectives come together, where discussions can and may arise. A healthy democracy, according to Honig, would not be possible without public objects, infrastructure and places. Perhaps for this very reason, the building of De Singel is a source of inspiration for me. Besides the architecture of the building itself, it allows me, as a young architect, to imagine what public architecture can be, and it also makes me dream about the kind of society in which that architecture is designed and experienced.

I walk up the stairs, along the street, past the open fish stall that puts the fish out under the awning on Mondays and Fridays. The street always smells of fish on those days, and I admit on those moments I usually walk by faster. Straight through, left around the corner and up the long gallery. Put my bags down on the balustrade and kick my boots off under it. I walk in, fall into the couch and stare outside. A few years ago, I travelled through Arizona, in the US, and passed by Arcosanti, an urban laboratory in the middle of the desert initiated by the Italian architect Paolo Soleri. One of the ideas behind the city was to implode the urban circuit, countering the urban sprawl of the States. Stairs, paths and public terraces function as roads, with small dwellings directly around and under them.



The ingenious, complex density blurs public and private boundaries. For example, the front garden also functions as a public playground or vegetable garden, and front door steps are an extension of the amphitheatre. I still wonder to what extent this dense environment influences everyday social relations. Is the environment a catalyst for valuable social contacts? Or is it a recipe for social control and communal frustration?

The front door slams shut with brute force. The wind. And my bags are still outside on the balustrade. I sit down on the wide edge of my front door, put my boots back on, grab my bags and walk on. This time I turn left, past the old lady and the terraced gardens, across the bridge in the direction of the canal. I cross this bridge daily, a valuable piece of public infrastructure. For others, it is a place that can be appropriated and offers shelter. According to Wim Cuyvers, 'real public space' exists precisely in places where no one takes responsibility, where papers are tossed away, where plastic cups accumulate. <sup>3</sup> Where there is no programme and no social control, rules and accepted norms can be broken. Just as Honig focuses on public objects onto which we can collectively project our social ideals, Cuyvers points out the importance of forgotten and hidden places that, as public space, sometimes also need to fulfil individual and private needs – precisely for those people who can't find a place within the prevailing norms of society. Slavoj Žižek also refers to the value of functionally empty spaces, which, as by-products of buildings, are open to adaptation. The space between the columns of a bridge, for example, can be used by the homeless to sleep in, even though such a space was not designed as a shelter. 'The struggle is open here, the struggle for



who will appropriate them.<sup>4</sup> According to Žižek, it is precisely these interstitial spaces, void of political content, that are open for utopian dreaming. They remind us of the great political-ethical responsibility of architecture. Besides public objects, are then public and hidden residual spaces valuable as a public good as well? After all, public ideals, desires and needs of our unfinished and imperfect society can also be projected onto them, also by people on the margins of our democracy.

I sit down on one of the platforms in the little square on top of the theatre. Perhaps precisely because it exists without a programme and out of sight, the forgotten public path on the roof of De Singel is also open for adaptation. Like a white clad model, it forms an ideal canvas for further reflection on and discussion about the public good. I slowly walk back to the forecourt with its canopy, benches and tables.

#### Notes:

1 Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

3 Jantine Claus and Mieke Prinse, *Homoseks in Maastricht: een Interview met Wim Cuyvers* (Maastricht: Mosaiek, 2006), [https://archived.janvaneyck.nl/0\\_4\\_3\\_publications\\_info/cuyvers\\_interview.html](https://archived.janvaneyck.nl/0_4_3_publications_info/cuyvers_interview.html).

4 Slavoj Žižek, 'Architectural Parallax: Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Struggle' (Lecture at the Tilton Gallery, New York, on 23 April 2009), [https://www.lacan.com/essays/?page\\_id=218](https://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218).



**Table Setting #3**

**Sophia Holst**

26.08 - 23.10.2022

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**Composition**

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## Table Setting #4

