

Social

Strelves:

an Itstory

Written between 2022 and 2023 by K.M. Leaf, B. Zamp,
B.B. Wop, V. Osox, J. Halen and P. Enches.
A collaboration with G. Schellinx



Gersande Schellinx
Social Shelves: an Itstory

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FOREWORD

between 60 CM until 120 CM

DISCLAIMER

between 135 CM until 165 CM

CHAPTER 1

between 180 CM until 330 CM

CHAPTER 2

between 345 CM until 480 CM

CHAPTER 3

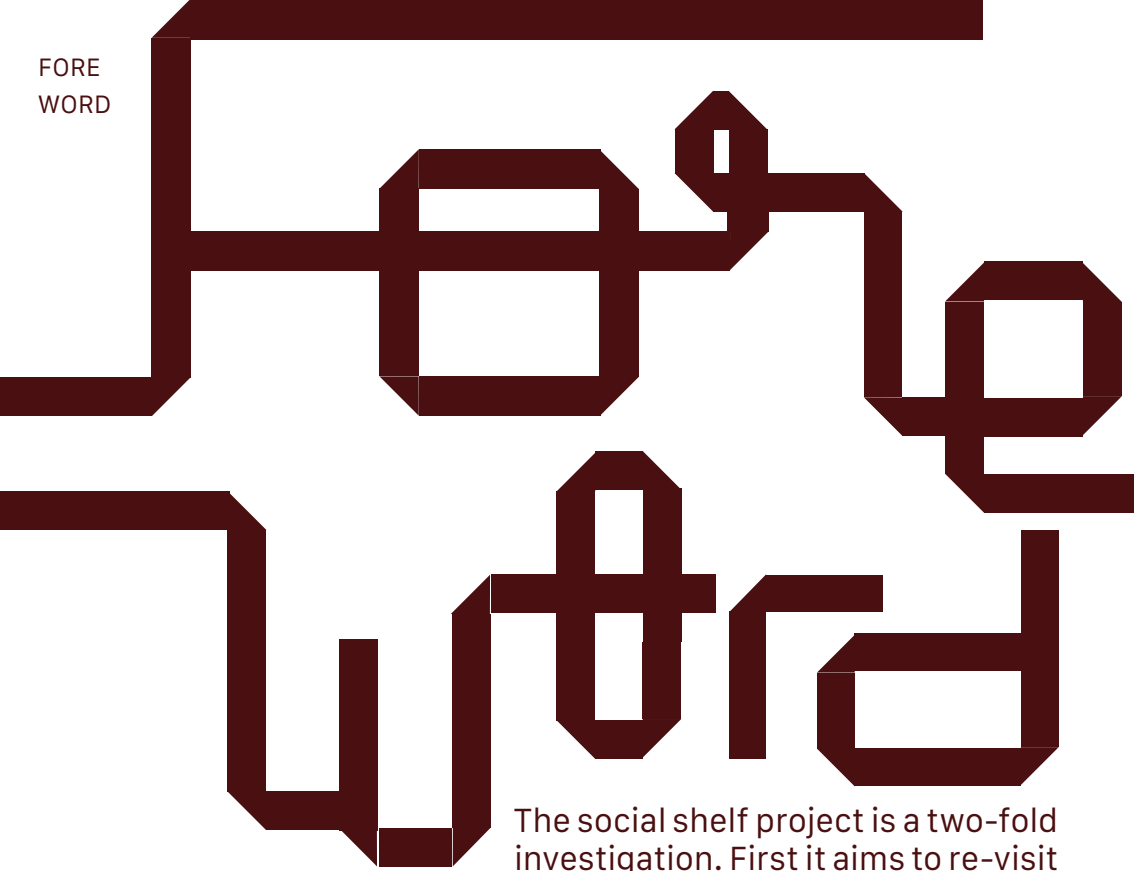
between 495 CM until 655 CM

EPILOGUE

between 710 CM until 785 CM

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60 CM



The social shelf project is a two-fold investigation. First it aims to re-visit the mundane space most individuals interact with on a daily basis: the shelf. In turn, with a new acquired understanding of that space, it invites, you, the reader, to re-think your relationship to objects both as potential users and makers.

N.B. This object is purposely referred to as social shelf and not simply 'bookshelf' or 'shelf', as the object under study does not only function as a space for books or other artefacts, but also as a physical trope for social structures and community building.

This project is a world-building experiment. Using non-human perspectives it attempts to redefine what material thinking—broadly understood as the encounter of practice and theory in artistic and design fields—can mean to anyone in and outside of those fields. We, social shelves will talk to you, the reader, directly. Together we will investigate the following question: How can a better understanding of socialised objects create opportunities to affect the social design of tomorrow?¹

As part of the original case study for this theoretical investigation, material experiments take place in parallel to the writing process.² One month after the other, between 2022 and 2023 five social shelves have been prototyped, built, and trialed across different locations in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In addition to yours truly (K.M. Leaf, your narrator), we B. Zamp, B.B. Wop, V. Osox, J. Halen and P. Enches are the protagonists of this text. The present inquiry is investigated and narrated from the perspective of our situated knowledge.³

Using fiction, we, socialised objects, become the protagonists of this itstory, a history by the objects for the objects. It offers a new perspective on contemporary social structures where materiality is omnipotent. We want to address the contribution of the collective bodies working together to create some-things.⁴ This itstory reaches out to communities both inside and outside the specialised fields of the arts and design. The social

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1 The identification 'socialised objects' is a self-assigned term for artefacts that fulfil their true nature in relation to others. A term that could be compared in a human-field-theory to what Bruno Latour referred to as the anthropomorphism of an object, 'which has human shape or that which gives shape to humans.' (Latour, 1992, p.235)

2 See the inside cover.

3 A term borrowed from Donna Haraway, coined in 1988 to dismantle the supposed 'objectivity' of human knowledge, 'Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as space to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge' (Haraway, 1988, p.592). We want to revendicate our situated knowledge as fact and refute the capitalist ideal

of mass production and profitable standardisation in design. Each social shelf embodies a different social environment, serves different communities and engages in different interactions.

4 An observation made by Gersande while sitting on a chair, to try and to figure out what we meant by our 'collective bodies'. For example, another object, the parts of a chair need to pull, push and hold together in such a way that when you sit on them, they can stand evenly on the floor, be available for their user to lean back with their legs held in a 60° to 130° angle. If the chair were to perform any other way, you would have trouble holding this rather awkward position.

5 As social shelves we aspire to gather around us human networks that can grow in practice: 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.' (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.2)

shelf project hopes to open up a dialogue linking design and crafts to wider communities of practice, creating a group of individuals connected in the shared process of reflecting on the future of social innovation and experimentation.⁵

The shelves you see around in homes, public libraries or office-spaces are often flat, wider in length than in depth. They are usually made of some rigid materials, attached to a wall or exist as self-standing pieces of furniture. They offer a space for individuals to store or display a various range of objects, which does or does not fit the shelf's dimensions. It is not uncommon to find on standard-sized shelves, objects that, in a desperate attempt to fit in, take up an awkward amount of space and even get damaged in the process. Makers generally produce off the shelf shelves without consideration for the space in which the shelf will be used. The user, who has not been consulted during the production stage, is thus left with constraints they do not have any control upon.

The social shelf wishes to be a game-changer. A free-standing support piece, it is built to be an impermanent fixture fit to any social environment. It is a performative structure that can be easily mounted and dismantled, bringing both users and makers together to curate their own interiors and

reducing the feeling of panic, helplessness or stress. The social shelf is a space where the materiality of the object is transparent, a space embracing non-standard needs.

The first chapter, will introduce you to our inner world, our itstory and the overall relevance of considering non-human perspectives. Once you are better acquainted with us, socialised objects, chapter two will be the occasion to better understand questions revolving around our agency in relation to you. This means considering how we, human and non-human bodies, mutually influence and shape each other and also the social ramifications of such reciprocity. Finally, we would like to concretise strategies to heal the broken bond joining socialised objects and humans by imagining new opportunities that would rise from our closer cooperation.

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6 In this case, social design is synonymous to 'Societal Design' introduced by Friedrich von Borries in *The World as Project*, 'Society is shaped by people. (...) Designed objects, spaces and environments condition human behaviour—and hence also the society that is shaped by these people.' (von Borries, 2020, p.25). As social shelves, we refer to 'social design' and not 'societal design' for we are not merely products of this society, but also seeking companionship and agency in this social order.

Disc Plain er

The social shelf project aspires to explore and try to understand how socialised objects interact and affect individuals in the context of social design.⁶ It has therefore been agreed by all participants that the objects, in this case the social shelves, will narrate this investigation instead of

the humans. As such, an essential feature embedded in the project's narrative is that it relates both human and non-human perspectives.

It is essential for you to keep in mind that to be addressed by material artefacts in an intelligible way, a degree of subjective human mediation is required. Yet this a priori consideration should in no way get in the reader's way. On the contrary, to embrace a non-human perspective and acknowledge the human mediation can be an opportunity for you to be displaced, reflect on your own social and material experiences, transcending these as you come to grasp new non-anthropocentric understandings of our social environment.

The writer is here the instrument of the social shelves, translating their situated knowledge into fiction to enable them to express their standpoint in human speech. Fiction is essential in this process to help makers emancipate themselves from pre-conceived ideas of what design has to offer in terms of social infrastructures. We noticed, for instance, that the extent to which small objects constrain us socially is often overlooked. This in turn rules out the consideration that more sensitive changes in 'small' designs in relation to material narratives could impact bigger social organisations.⁷ To embody non-human perspectives is a way to acknowledge that craft and design are a form of discourse and material thinking the reciprocal experience in which makers, objects and users all weigh in equally.⁸ We want to create new connections in the real world for you to bond more closely with the materiality of our social environment.

7 Material narratives can be defined as the non-biographies of objects and designs. They give a holistic approach to the understanding of non-human stories. And provide a framework to better understand socialised objects in their context and not merely as an 'end product'.

8 The concept of material thinking in this paper can be understood literally as the unwinding of thoughts by the social shelves. But it also refers to a creative process in artistic and design research. See Chapter 2: think material think.

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A. J. J. J. J.

self-proclaimed social shelf based in Amsterdam, formerly book-support

G. S. S. S.

collaborator and writer

B. Z. Z. Z.

social shelf based in Rotterdam custom to the realm of a book fair

B. B. W. W.

social shelf based in Amsterdam custom to the realm of an art school

V. O. S. S.

social shelf based in Amsterdam custom to the realm of a new active squat

J. H. H. H.

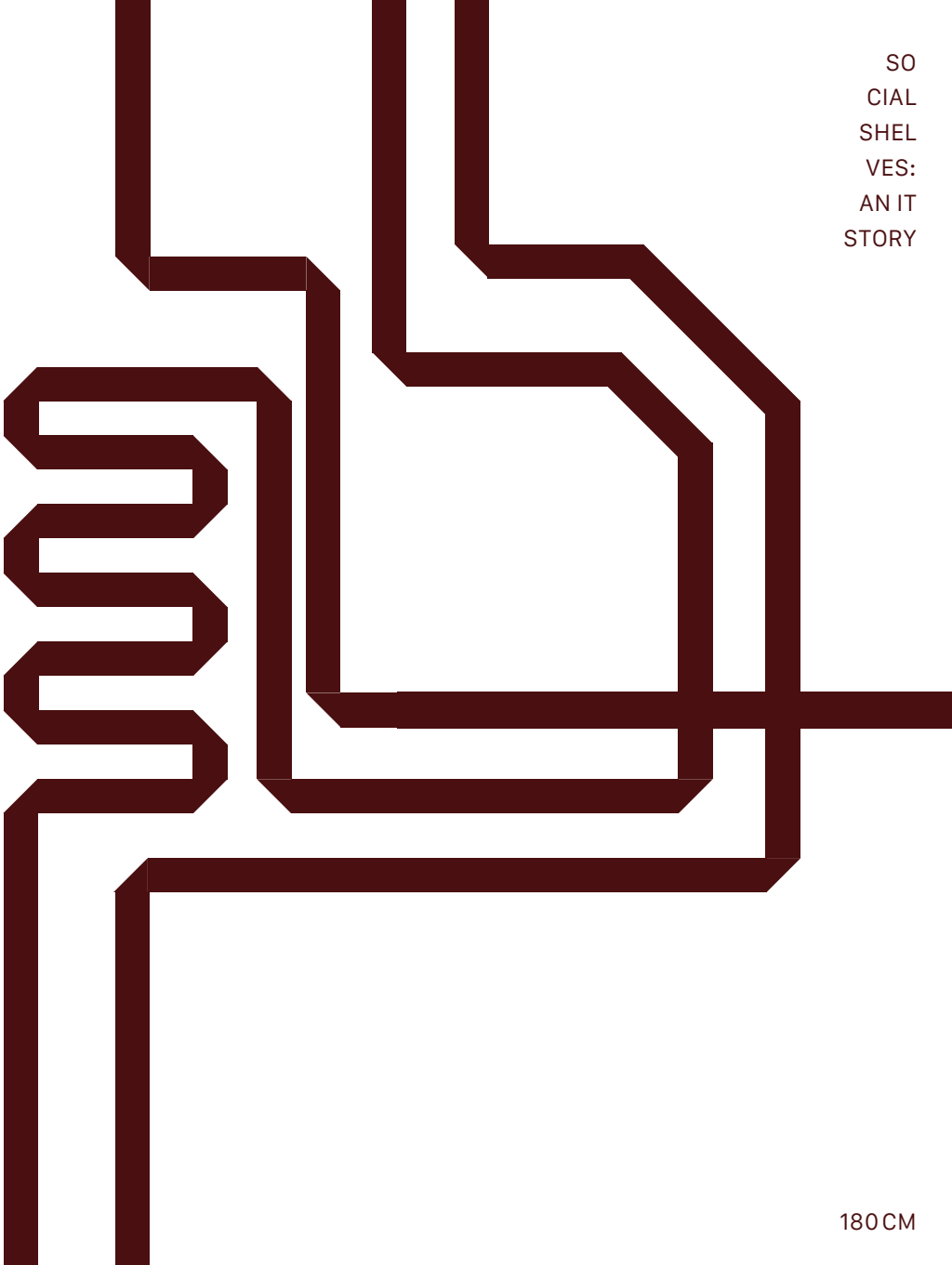
social shelf based in Rotterdam custom to the realm of a private home

P. E. E. E.

social shelf based in Amsterdam custom to the city's public benches

Please be warned that the voices of most secondary characters are quoted as they were interpreted by the other social shelves. As a compromise between the writer and the social shelves a 'Glossary for misquoted references' can be found at the end of this text. It is meant for humans to navigate all the references made in the text translated in human-understood-due-form. Seeing that human and material quotation are drastically different in methodologies, all the references below are more or less wildly misquoted.

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TO WHOM
WE MAY
CONCERN

Chapter 1

K.M. Leaf, C. Berac, Gersande, Salesperson

To whom we may concern, be it known that we, K.M. LEAF, former book-support from France, currently residing in Amsterdam, North-Holland, the Netherlands have evolved away from our previous solely material status to certain new and useful improvements as a social shelf. The following is a testimony of this evolution.

As the original self-proclaimed social shelf, we will be your narrator in this long awaited recounting of our speculated itstory. Be ready to embrace the discourse of materiality as centre to all narratives.

The year is 2017, abandoned, misused and unfulfilled our passionate constitution have gone numb. After gathering dust for years in an antique shop in the south of France, Marseille, we, K.M. Leaf encountered C. Berac, a middle-aged woman with a pronounced taste for unconventional artefacts.

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One glance was all it took. She stepped into the store and noticed us straight away shifting our hitherto seemingly permanent state of numbness to a dynamic one. After a first moment of hesitation, she grabbed us, inspected us left to right, top and bottom and asked with a certain haste:

C.B. I don't understand... What are you?!

R.M. K.M. Leaf, self-proclaimed aspiring social shelf. If you ask the salesperson they would probably tell you that we are just an old book support from the 19th century, but we don't like that label. We replied with poise.

C.B. We? Why do you say we? the woman asked again agitated.

R.M. As a collective body of parts, the first person pronoun 'I' cannot properly reflect the holistic quality of our material being, ergo our use of the first person plural 'we' to talk about ourselves. We added calmly.

C.B. You're nothing like I've ever seen before..., the woman said with a thoughtful look, her voice fading down mid-sentence.

F.M.Y. Our constitution enables versatile uses, ideal for anyone in need of an adjustable, accessible and transportable public support...

C.B. Ah, yes, yes, hm, you should know that 'public support', to be correct, is a term broadly used to describe any kind of artefact meant to host other artefacts in the socialised object community, correctly speaking, hm, yes, yes, we heard Salesperson saying from afar in a dusty cough.

F.M.Y. ... that can easily be installed and removed in any circumstances, we exclaimed, unbothered by the interruption.

C.B. How incredible you are... just lying there under a veil of dirt in this old store, she said in disbelief.

F.M.Y. To our own dismay, we replied sulkily.

C.B. We need to get you out of here, I know a place where you could stay, her tone was determined.

Convinced of the wonderful finding she made, she swore to instate us as the social shelf we long aspired to be. We were purchased, wrapped up, delicately placed in a parcel and shipped to the Netherlands to our collaborator Gersande. As soon as we arrived in the Netherlands,

the latter inspected us, feverishly putting us apart and back together in a glance of bewilderment.

‘Listen,’ we told her, ‘we need to talk about the social life of objects.’ It was now or never. For the first time in over a decade, we finally had one of you, person’s full attention. This was our chance to step in.

Somehow your kind likes to feel nostalgic about your ‘loss of connection with nature’, especially those of you in urban contexts. Since the stone age, humans have exerted themselves to rise up against nature, bending and breaking natural things, to turn them into the friendly weapons you call tools, that is, yours truly manufactured objects. Do you know what defines the reality of a non-human body? Have you ever thought about how it might perceive the world? Not really? Indeed, why should you have...

To address this issue, us social shelves, have decided to turn ourselves into a case study for socialised objects. By doing so, we hope to establish a bridge for individuals and objects to communicate with one another. Objects too are socialised beings, albeit inherently man-made and for human use. As such, they are the instigators translating materials into social things. Thus by improving your grasp of objects and their reality, you gain a richer understanding of yourself.

In the fields of civil and criminal investigations, objects were, for a long time completely overlooked. Forensics have turned this around. Ever faster technical and analytical progress have enable you to translate objects’ stories

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into words through the process of human mediation. As a result, objects can now testify in court-cases. Even though the objects' stories are told on the account of probabilities, the efforts invested in retelling their web of relationships involving humans, materiality and technology is an exemplary case of our inherently socialised nature, even as objects.

9 When Gersande and us social shelves refer to 'society', unless specified otherwise, we mostly refer to our own experience of social design that can mostly be located in western Europe. If our experience is part of an essentially global phenomenon, it is still good for you to keep this nuance in mind.

G. Hu, socialised? Like, do you mean social as in your relation to us in society?⁹
Gersande wondered out loud.

FMZ Patience. Before anything else, you will need to know a bit more about a few essential aspects of the social shelf in order to understand the intricate layers of our itstory. As first and main social shelf fact, you should know that we are collective bodies performing as a whole. This aspect of our material narrative is essential to decipher us properly. Typically, we identify as a collective of materials, scraped, used, sometimes misused pieces, coming together to perform our function in the social world. Artefacts such as ourselves, K.M. Leaf the social shelf, do not and cannot identify as a singular one-part entity. This project is an attempt to acknowledge our ever-changing being and complex multi-part being in the world, going beyond the single-bodied conceptions that we are too often reduced to. This is a story of 'we' and not that of a single 'I'.

G. Wait, wait. In order for your body to perform the task it is given, you need to work effectively as a collective? Right? Because, I guess, any other social infrastructure would do the same. Like a choir! For this collective body of voices to effectively perform the choir-soundscape, all voice-agents at work need to complement each-other. Acknowledging this holistic body, if one or more of your component was to fail its mission within the structure, this might threaten the whole body's performance, right? In which case something would need to be replaced, removed or reshaped effectively... she contemplated for a bit in silence what that meant materially, and how that would be experienced socially.

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RJY Yes, now you understand our core structure. You understand that the functioning of our body as a collective is also closely interwoven with our connection to you as a user and a maker.¹⁰ Any part within our structure that fails to support the changes occurring in the context of our human-object interactions can turn us obsolete.

10 Affordances also emerge from this connection. See Chapter 2: think material think.

G. In what way? Gersande asked

RJY Well, let's imagine a shoe with a loose sole, put some glue around their base and they could be as good as new, right? Yet if they were never brought to a cobbler, uncared for and unable to perform as a whole, they would become obsolete.

This because no one supported the changes within their collective body.

G. Yes, right. But let's go back, why had I never heard about you before? Gersande said in a vexed tone.

11 Most shelves have build their situated knowledge in close relationship to books. One of the predominant artefacts humans have mated with shelves over time have always been books. Most individuals would never think twice when hearing the familiar term of 'bookshelf' which is a perfect illustration of how intertwined books are to the space of the shelf in the general opinion and in our local experience.

Some individuals have tried already for centuries to promote and spread non-human perspectives, yet it is still a work in progress.

Another essential fact about social shelves is the ways in which we acquire knowledge. We can only learn what our immediate environment has to offers. We personally, learned a lot from books who have been our main companions over the years.¹¹ As social shelves, we hear the books whisper stories, ideas and concepts we would have never inquired about before. Curious objects they are, we witness how they start glowing when the right person comes across.

While the person thinks a personal choice lies in front of them, in reality a fierce battle engages the bravest and most passionate books in their attempt to be taken off the shelf. Each book vies to put their best words forward. Understand that the vocabulary used by books is limited to the words they contain. Hence, the importance of placing as much information (as good taste allows) to tactical spots (such as the covers) for potential users to 'spontaneously' connect with them.

The first time we encountered with thrill a non-human voice was in Flatland's infamous E.A. Abbott, a novel from the point of view of its protagonist, introduced

on the title page 'the Author, A Square' a historian it seems. One day, while my neighbouring social shelf Gamma was recounting to me excerpts blurted out from E. A. Abbott, we suddenly knew that we also hosted a book with non-human perspectives. *It-Had-Something-To-Do-With-The-Telling-Of-Time*, a book was whispering to us about a famous space: Franz's Maze. And we knew that, because we had also hosted Franz's Maze in a trial of some kind long ago, and the maze did not speak.

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This was a life changing moment. Different journeys laid in front of us, none was better than the other, but all took guts and will, inspiring us to confront humans about materiality. Connections needed to be made. Somehow those spaces and shapes had managed to assert their agency in the human history and we wanted to go even further and write our own history, our itstory!

More recently on the 16th of October 2021, we were listening (on the radio!) to a lamppost, Maeve. A very insightful snippet in a street lighting's life. So many of the thoughts we had previously been unable to put into 'words' now started to take more concrete shape; those textures, that we had tried to make sense of and glean more information about were becoming more distinct.

Since 2018, *Everything is Alive* made over forty interviews with all kind of things, as to shed light on what they call inanimate objects' life stories. These recounting triggered debates in communities of objects. Most of those objects in fact carry what we would see as purely human features: genders, human-like concerns and an odd relationship to life and death. Thus, some

of us might not adhere with the use of language made in collaboration with their narrators.

Yet, it is impossible for any of us objects to assert firmly and definitely in what depth our socialisation and assimilation to humans can bring us to identify and feel like you do. Therefore, we never judge our peers too harshly.

These anthropomorphism can be problematic, because our assimilation of human concepts, tend to create hierarchies in which material, empirical experiences and sensual knowledge are seen of lesser authority or legitimacy than theoretical or spiritual ones. This creates friction between humans and objects, for individuals like to think they have complete ascendant over objects close to them, even when they haven't manufactured them.

Individuals like to imagine objects as animated (desperate for their attention) only in an imaginary space outside of their existence. This is illustrated in an ongoing manner by numerous animation films, such as *The Brave Little Toaster* portrayed (in the eighties maybe?) with selfless electric appliances, and more recently by the *Toy Story* franchise dedicated to toys. Somehow invisible when close to humans, objects would be able to move freely in an anthropomorphic manner when out of their 'owners' sight.

It is appalling to witness that humans only care about objects when they meet users' every need and concern, often in precarious ways and at their own expenses. We, objects, have been deprived of a voice. Our need not

THINK
MATERIAL
THINK

*J. Halen, K.M. Leaf, Gersande Schellinx,
B. Zamp, V. Osox*

J.H. Think material think, said J. Halen,
first known metal social shelf, while being
tried out for the first time in Rotterdam.

K.M.L. What did you say? we asked surprised.

J.H. You know, we should tell individuals to

think about material thinking. J. Halen added enthusiastically.

G. Yes, this sounds like a good idea. No? It could be more relatable that way, Gersande added agreeingly.

JH. Being relatable is not necessarily our goal here. First you need to understand how we started reflecting on our materiality. How we articulate our materiality. The issue with what you humans call 'material thinking' is that it lacks reciprocity. Often it refers to a thinking process, the materialisation of thoughts. The relation's emphasis is always on the person's mind embodiment in relation to the materials, and often lacks in understanding of the materiality itself. We quickly replied in an urge to put things back in order.

So let's take it from the start.

Social shelves have not always been referred to as such in itsstory. Our former label of identification, the broader term of 'public support', was a general label that had been used for centuries amongst us who identify as support infrastructures for other things. For objects to vindicate a new identity is a way to trigger new streams of action and behaviour in relation to material thinking.¹²

The last century, we have experienced a decreased amount of direct interaction with individuals.

12 Because in French and in Dutch, the word objet and object are a material reality as well as the subject for your thoughts to ponder upon Gersande has never really been able to separate the material objects from the conceptual ones. Still, in English objects belong to the realm of materials, but can also be in the realm of ideas as something to work towards or something to stand up against. To her it always represented a space in which things can be contained...

Without this interaction we are nothing but indistinguishable generic things. Us, former book-support or other-kind-of-support want to reclaim our right to be used in a new way as to shape our identity socialised objects. Since the rise of industrialisation and mass production we have been more and more estranged from our origins and less and less used somehow. Newly produced objects aspire to 'not dated' designs. We learned this notion from Mari, an article we hosted for a while, they whispered:

13 The attention that Enzo Mari gave to his designs went beyond functionality in objects. He wanted them to be impactful social agents and was aware of the threshold beyond which a design could set things in motion.

'[What I call a 'not dated' design. Something with invention, yet] solves many more [problems], and so has more chance of surviving as a useful object for longer.[T]he problems solved by the designer in the creation of these objects are not always evident to the user—for example, problems of production, problems of assembly, problems of materials, problems of finish, and always the problem of details and thresholds.'¹³

Indeed, most societies no longer seek these sustainable and reliable features in artefacts. Designs that do not 'date' engage instead in a never-ending acquisition cycle. To guarantee this increasing consumption pace, the widespread use of mechanical production devices is the norm. Nowadays, objects make objects.

Of course, humans have always made use of tools to shape objects into being. Yet the amount of intermediate tools used in object production is multiplying to such an extent that for most of us coming into being now, the touch of human hand is akin to legend. We have become

the product of such an impersonal chain of production that when we arrive into a new locality we have little to no ties with our owner and our environment. The instigators of the mechanical devices are still human, but severed from the material process. They design with economic models in mind, not real social situations.

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Some individuals might even feel subject to technological determinism.¹⁴ We want to shift this tendency, collaborating with humans to materially support them as active agent of social change. Langdon warned us:

‘Those who have not recognised the ways in which technologies are shaped by social and economic forces have not gotten very far.’

14 Technological determinism supports the idea that human history is articulated by technological milestones such as writing or electricity. In turn those inventions, in this belief system, frame social infrastructures giving all deterministic agency to non-human bodies.

Indeed, no objects comes without its share of social and political determinism. We are the sum of so many embedded economic, hierarchical, political and social criteria, how could it not affect users around us? We now have many words at our disposal to articulate these ideas thanks to Langdon:

‘If we examine social patterns that comprise the environments of technical systems, we find certain devices and systems almost invariably linked to specific ways of organising power and authority.’

We are sorry to tell you that objects tell more about who you are in society than you might think.¹⁵ The affordances of certain objects carry a certain way to be in the world, will influence the way you move in your environment or in relation to them.¹⁶

15 The fact that individuals like to see objects as mirrors of themselves, a window to what they truly are, tells a lot about ways they are embedded in certain power and authority structures.

Even the most innocent looking item, is a vitrine to your public self, as much as an influence to your body and mind. Take this grocery bag.

16 An affordance should be understood as a relationship not as a feature. 'The presence of an affordance is jointly determined by the qualities of the object and the abilities of the agent that is interacting.' (Norman, 2013, p.11) The capacity of a person to understand an artefact and decipher their implicit affordances can be determinant for non-human bodies to become accomplished socialised objects.

17 An IKEA bag will trigger a different train of thought, set of references or imagery than a Prada bag. Gersande points out.

18 Socialised objects define branding as a physical manifestation and/or reflection, in our bodies, of all the embedded social bias, ideologies, constraints, etc. from our makers or commissioners.

SMAKERS – MEUBELS HOME CENTRE

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In an unaware glimpse you are provided with detailed information about something of the ideology they stand for.¹⁷ Where they are from, what kind of ideas they promote, who are they meant to reach out to... Our bodies also implicitly carry a lot of this 'branding'.¹⁸ The font used to give you the above mentioned practical information, the logos that often ornaments our figures, telling you what industry we belong to, and the same goes for colours, inks, fabrics, plastics, ropes, papers, etc.

The ideologies we carry shape us. Yet these might be overlooked as 'natural' features and experienced as such. Ironically, there is nothing natural to us, we are fully man-made. To think that our instigators do not put some of their beliefs in us would be naive.

This sense of meant-to-be branding in objects can come in the way of sustainable choices. Sometimes, choosing to pay less for something in the present will make you spend more comparatively in the long run, because the cheaper production costs have brought flaws to your item you might have not considered as you bought it in store.

Even as you make a smarter investment in a new or second hand store, your object might become obsolete faster than it has to, because of another human condition: your ignorance. Having little to no knowledge on how our collective bodies have been put together and how they perform as a whole you are not able to alter, replace a component or restore our object-bodies after we endure damage or become worn out.

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G. So, what kind of language do you even use to formulate the issues that are tied to materiality? Gersande inquiries.

RMJ. Well, we have built a language within us that reveals itself through curves, density, indents, shapes, size, weight, we informed her.

G. Hm, the choices we made to make you or purchase you... Our share of freedom. What we call 'features' I guess, could that be your language? she thought.

This language of materiality has more dimension to us than what you humans might understand. It is strongly believed in the social shelf community that information multiply and spread into the world every time our features are being interacted with. Erosion is the embodiment of great wisdom. Each new marks inflicted on our bodies testify of a greater being in the world.

Our awakening from raw, natural material, beaten, cut and polished to become an object of subjectivity is a thing of beauty.¹⁹ We live by this essential

19 An object of subjectivity is a non-human body that has come to perform as a socialised object, interact and evolve with human bodies and collectivities in a singular manner.

inner principle that rules us and ruins us: being used alters our durability, while at the same time not being used makes us obsolete.

BZ. Let me tell you about our coming together as a body, B. Zamp started.

G. Who are you? said Gersande frowning.

BZ. B. Zamp, a less enticing name than K.M. Leaf don't you think? they replied.

G. Y-yes? she answered somewhat confused.

BZ. Anyways, we are a wooden book-suitcase social shelf made for a zinefair in Rotterdam, they replied in an evasive voice.

G. Ah, o-ok, I'm listening, she said in a settling voice.

BZ. Do you still have in mind that social shelves aspire to be affordable, adaptable and accessible objects? Well, somehow, every time we have tried to simplify our constitution a new issue has arisen and we were made more expensive, more complicated than we initially intended to be.²⁰ It was fascinating to us to see the extent to which a design simple in theory was so hard to embrace in practice. Mari's hammer and nail philosophy, a kind of legendary condition, that kept creeping away from us, B. Zamp said annoyed.²¹

20 B. Zamp's seamless transition from their closed mobile state (as a suitcase) to the open static state (as a book-display) came with a social cost: that of lower reproducibility. The specific cuts, amongst other parameters, ended up requiring expensive machinery that needed to be operated by experienced makers and expensive accessories to facilitate the transition from one state to another.

21 In the seventies Mari released *Autoprogettazione?* (roughly translated to self-design) a collection of open-source furniture designs. All the objects in this series are meant to be built using a hammer and nails only.

U.O. Oh we did so good actually! U. Osox couldn't help shout out.

ØZ What do you mean? B. Zamp said irritated.

U.O. Oh sorry, we have just arrived. U. Osox, social shelf for a new active squat in Amsterdam. All scrap wood and good sweats, we embody Mari's hammer and nail attitude. We mean, we are more of a drill and screw attitude, but we are a spectacular case of accessible and transparent object. All thanks to you! We could look up to your experience you know, U. Osox boasted.

ØZ Pfuh, good for us we guess, B. Zamp said at last clearly envious, yet proud.

Social shelves aspire to the same transparency in technology as Enzo's *Autoprogettazione*? designs. We want to make our collective performance visible to all. Make previously implied choice evident, so that others in the future avoid repeating our past mistakes.

We also relate to Lauren's ideas on material thinking:

'Material thinking is an experience of the local and the articulation of place.'

This articulation of place should not be made in an isolated production of means. Instead it should draw from local sources to create their own spaces with integrity. While the experience of the local is indispensable to produce social objects with integrity, you should still beware of not falling into misguided ideals of produc-

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tion in the name of 'uniqueness' and 'clean design'. Artefacts thus produced will be scarce, exclusive, and made in a way that is inaccessible and unreproducible to most. As such they quickly become obsolete, being put at risk by any kind of space or resource impacting the object's non-adaptable body.

Enzo wanted individuals to become more knowledgeable about the making process of objects in their environment. He published a manual for you to build your own furniture, a type of furniture that does not hide anything, transparent in build and accessible in scale. He had this vision:

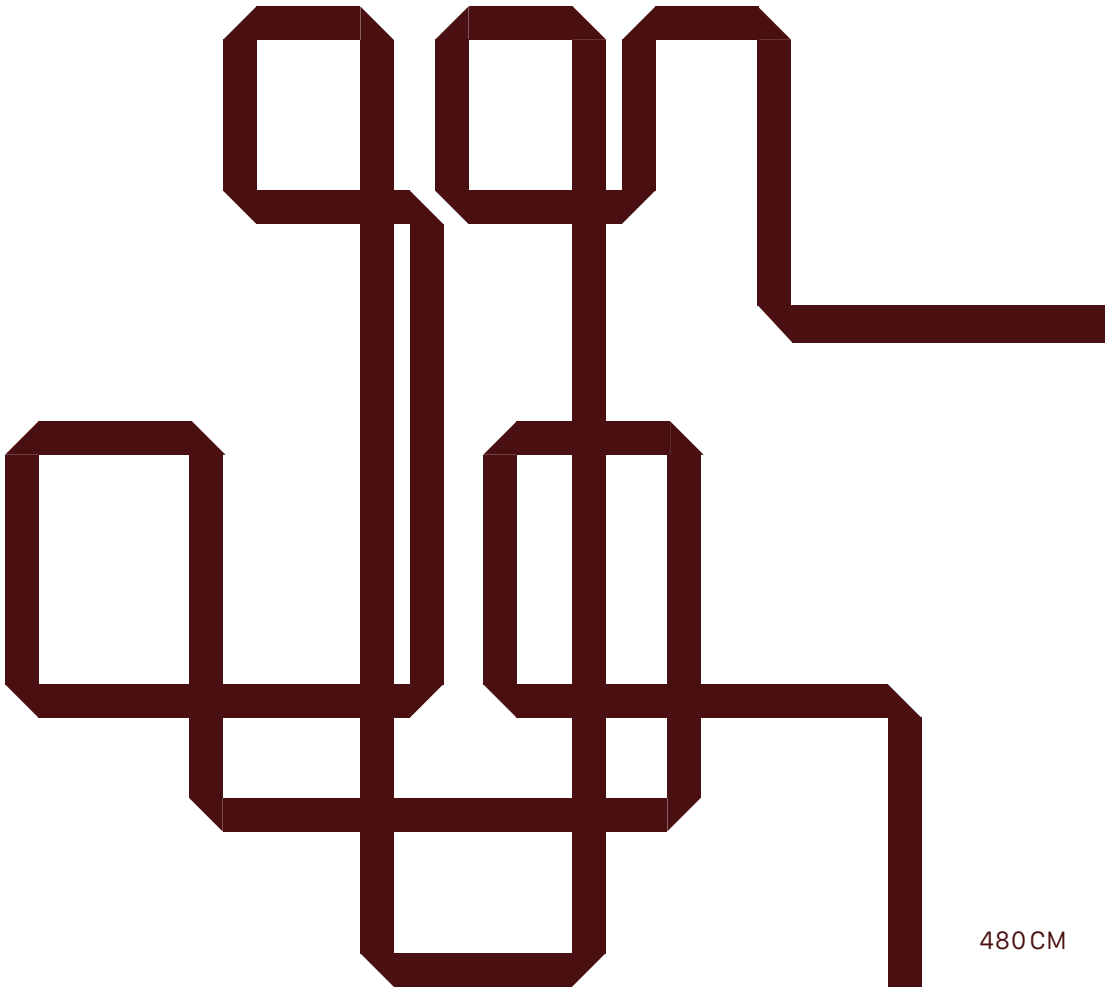
'I thought that if people were encouraged to build a table with their own hands, for example, they would be able to understand the thinking behind it.'

He achieved something rare in the European western world of design: sustainable designs open to many for interpretations and uses. From 2014 to 2018, the CUCULA (Refugees Company for Crafts and Design), a project space based in Berlin, opened up a workshop space that was made available to refugees wanting to learn how to build some of the furnitures in Enzo's *Autoprogettazione*? The generosity with which those designs were conceived welcomes anyone from inexperienced tinkerer to professional carpenter within a space that is familiar to all: a table, a chair, shelves... The everyday socialised objects.

Let's step out together of exploitive and unsustainable social and material dynamics. Transparency and gener-

osity are key to change social design for the better. In a new design order where individuals can read objects in a glance, understand their implied social features, and formulate material and production liabilities, we want to find new lands where you can explore and learn to make these objects for yourself.

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IN THE WASTELAND
BETWEEN
CRAFTS
AND
DESIGN

Reporters

*K.M. Leaf, Gersande,
random-industrially-manufactured-shelf-1, B. Zamp,
B.B. Wop, P. Enches, J. Halen, V. Osox, student-1*

It's been a while now, that in the wasteland between crafts and design, K.M. Leaf, J. Halen and random-industrially-manufactured-shelf-1. are having a conversation around a singular working bench. Singular in what way? No one can tell.

G. Sorry to ask one more time, but can someone explain again where we are? Gersande asks interrupting a long lived silence.



Again? All right, but pay close attention! This is the last time we say this. Since 2018, with the social shelf project, we have taken the steps towards the implementation of a new neighbourhood of things. Like Christiania in Denmark, a self-proclaimed independent city known for its alternative lifestyle, we'd like to spread a hands-on practice where individuals and their things have a close peer-to-peer relationship, we replied defiantly.

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In the wasteland between crafts and design, materiality is a mediator around which social design tries to grow collectivities in local spaces made by and for the situated communities.²² Could materiality thus become an agent to reform social design one case at the time?

22 Situated communities is a term orbiting around the concept of situated knowledge. It aspires to branch out to social infrastructures and see communities as a whole intricate network of differences, rather than unify it into 'objective' structures.



Yes! It is an ongoing project to find strategies and tactics for individuals to become agents of social change from the local upwards. To be able to claim space adaptively in any kind of environment. We want to focus on the local, the very place in which we become people's choice. We are not looking to create one model, but look into modes of models. B. Zamp said determined.

r-i-m-s-l Our collective bodies are numb. For us displacement is intrinsic to our condition.²³ This was the first time we heard random-industrially-manufactured-shelf-l speak.

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As public support who generically identify as a shelf, they have been manufactured in a European factory, context in which objects get socialised in a condition of restraint.

23 Due to the number of intermediates that come into action to handle their body, industrial objects are in a state of constant re-location. From the space they are manufactured in to the one they will occupy, there is not much room for them to hold onto anything familiar, thus developing any sense of identity or belonging.

r-i-m-s-l The un-reality of the contexts for which we are conceived, results in our not really belonging to any kind of space. Most industrially manufactured objects are conceptualised to fit idealised interiors rather than adapted to the reality of individual homes. Often alien to our environment, our unfit bodies accentuate spatial and material anomalies in the social environments that surround us, random-industrially-manufactured-shelf-l. bitterly explained, trying to gleam in such a way that no one would see their corners worn out by an unfit usage of their display area.

U.O. The soil might be fantastic here, but our community fails to grow and industrially manufactured objects are still in majority. The obstacles are quite fierce, we need to find new strategies. U. Osox underlined.

24 P. Enches refer to 'Integrity' in design and accurate embodiment of situated communities by socialised objects.

P.E. Sure... could our collective bodies not be an example of how to perform in the world with integrity?²⁴ P. Enches suggested, a young social shelf, formerly identified as public support and belonging to the streets of Amsterdam.

Michel spoke about a space somehow in relation with other sites:

'I am interested in [sites] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.'²⁵

J.H. Do you think you are such a space? J. Halen asked with genuine interest.

r-i-m-s-l Well, we do designate, mirror, sometimes reflect, in what you could call unpleasant ways. Our bodies are made in a design of reproduction. Occasionally some of us find themselves in environments where they feel like they were 'meant to be'. In most cases however, we are not meant for these but forced into them. Take universal stove top reducers: they quickly get damaged and it never feels like they comfortably fit on a stove. They often don't stay in place and slide in all directions, for they have a size of all sizes, unfit to fit them all, random-industrially-manufactured-shelf-l concluded.

ØZ. We felt like an heterotopian space at times!²⁶ A space unreal to conventions yet hacking standards. A touch of otherness

25 Michel Foucault has defined heterotopias as unreal spaces or placeless places. He describes the space of a mirror, which through a virtual space transports you from here, the space in which you are present with the mirror, to there in the mirror. A space in reality and absolutely outside of it. He also describes the role of heterotopian spaces like libraries, cinemas or theatres such as 'to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned' (Foucault, 1986, p.27).

26 Here, the term heterotopian space refers to 'other spaces'. Alternative structures in which environments are activated by and emerge from the encounter of human and non-human bodies.

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humans couldn't completely pin-point,
B. Zamp remember.

J.H. Even though our singular condition made us into 'one' material object, we are able to function and stand up straight only when working hand in hand with our environment. Back to back with the books at our side, we hold each other in place. Without this cooperation our constitution would literally fall. J. Halen emphatically murmured.

This reciprocity and unity is essential to our body to function in space, Eva described this occurrence in the case of Perpusha, public street libraries in Indonesia:

27 The idea of 'spatial activation' can help the reader understand better the space of the wasteland and the importance of creating an ethical framework for change.

'The unity of space-time-actors work as a landmark of production-consumption in regards to public space becoming a kind of heterotopia which emerges as "spatial activation".'²⁷

U.O. To commit to those 'spatial activation' and avoid these unfortunate displacement in space and use, would it not be great to share instructions on how to make us rather than to let us be produced by a small amount of individuals that do not care to consult users or assess the spaces we will operate in? U. Osox wondered.

Anyone can pick up a recipe, try to figure out if they have the right ingredients at home.

If they miss some, maybe they will improvise something with other condiments they deem fit to the recipe in relation to their texture, quantity or taste? Being able

to read materiality and the processes at stake to create its own dish in relation to their own needs opens up a space for adaptability. As made explicit by Opendesk:

'It is easier to ship recipes than cakes and biscuits.'

U.O. Needs are not taken into account prior to the making, only assumed, creating gaps in the utility of our body in relation to our environment and you users and makers. To create spaces for yourselves could be the key to a better future? One in which design and construction and use would be a single collective's process in which there are no material, social or spatial loss, U. Osox suggested.^{28, 29, 30}

Other manufactured objects like to call us, social shelves, utopian. We don't like that mentality. Of course, we do admire and support the work that has been made using utopian narratives before. Utopias have helped humans to overcome social constraints. By speculating about new social structures, they have allowed us to imagine real alternative ways of living. See Friedrich's *The World as Project* who turns to More's *Utopia* with a great focus on its detailed material substance. Paying close attention to every feature of the Utopian way of life depicted by More, Friedrich highlights the fictional machinery at work underpinning societal design strategies:

28 Material loss can be understood as the scraps and waste occurring during manufacture, irresponsible material choices or as their unethical use.

29 Social loss refers to premature obsolescence in design and overall un-sustainability in manufactured objects.

30 Spatial loss can come from both material and social loss, when an object is unfit to its local environment because it has been produced for economical or global models rather than contextual ones.

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'Societies change when they adopt new ideals for themselves. Design contributes to this process by circumscribing possible alternatives to existing social conditions and by rendering these accessible to sensory experience [.]'

To which we replied with approbation, but adding a slight specification:

AMY: Indeed, design is one of the greatest tool our societies have to offer alternatives to our current ways of living. A re-structuration of beliefs can be made through material realities. But, only when those new material experiences can be felt, touched and seen by all. Without this intuitive material introduction touching the senses, any new design, as innovative as it might be, will inevitably bring about a new set of social constraints and determinism.

UO: Yes, don't replace an old package with inaccessible flair, U. Osox smirk.

AMY: For these reasons, to put social shelves in the utopian category is a wild misconception of our beliefs. Yes, social shelves do slightly differ in beliefs, but at our core we all trust that the utopian way of designing new futures gives little to no room for a positive reconsideration of our current states of being. Overall we prefer to adopt a more recent mode of address, the not-yet attitude promoted by Korsten.

'[A]n intentionally anti-utopian attitude and mode of practice that anticipates future develops by realising the potential in and of the "now".'

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The social shelf project has in common with Korsten's not-yet attitude that is does not disregard our current social state. It speculates about possible futures with roots in the present time. Through those different examples in which various *-topias*, that is the realms and spaces in which our preconceived ideas about society and things are put to the test, you can see that while creating better more equal or simply other worlds might be too ambitious at bigger scales, it becomes feasible when initiated by individuals in local context.

P.E. The agency of all in these settings is indeed more instantaneous. With less intermediates, given all the right understanding of their surroundings and the proper tools to make strategies and adapt in ever-changing collectivities, local communities apply organic approaches to design, in which the unexpected is expected, P. Enches add.

Given the reality of the material industry, if you would completely emancipate from any standard size, material or tool, you would reproduce politics of waste and self-serving attitudes that the globalisation of consumerist societies in which the individual as the centre to all production brings unhealthy patterns in which the ends justify the means.

Material standards are not problematic per se. It is the standardisation of needs through globalised manufac-

ture that is. We'd like to promote an attitude towards design in which the means justify the end.

student-1 We have not modified [Enzo's] projects in any way apart from assembling the tables with bronzed wooden round-headed screws, student-1 specifies.

Take the case of the *Autoprogettazione?* project, in the publication you can read this kind of comment in letters sent by individuals that have made use of the furniture's plans.

The furniture Enzo designed, used industrial material standards in order to be unpretentious designs, accessible to all with very few technical requirements and unprejudiced in relation to the maker's skills. His intention was clear:

'I tried to reduce the technical difficulties to a minimum.'

Not having access to the standard sized materials in *Autoprogettazione?* some makers like student-1 adapted the design to the materials available in their own locality. A new environment brought a new reproduction, thus staying coherent and true to *Autoprogettazione?*'s mentality, the designs were adapted and avoided unnecessary waste.

B.B. As a new socialised object, we are destined to be introduced to a social hub where all kinds of skills are shared, learned and experimented with. We aspire to be a space customised to and by students to carry and display their work in progress within their school. Casually said B.B. Wop.

G. And how are the students involved in this process? Gersande asks.

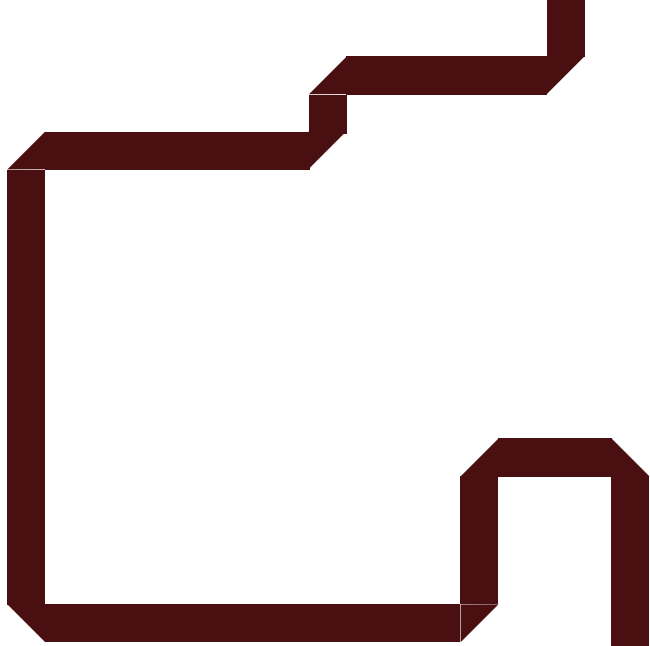
B.B. The user and maker, should create and perform our space on the model of their own customised needs. The predefined arrangement of our collective body, the so-to-say hinges of our infrastructure, allows for the alteration of our edges and different surfaces, thus guaranteeing that our collective body will still be functional after the modifications.³¹ This in-between space, after the design of the practical features of my collective body and before the production of that said body, is part of this space: the wasteland between crafts and design. B.B. Wop added shyly but in a professional manner.

In the wasteland between crafts and design, the ground is muddy and fertile. Here and there you can observe sprouts making their way out of the soil, bringing textures and colours to the open. To imagine possible futures in which you, user, maker, can engage with materiality on a more intimate and local level, we want you to think of material spaces from a different point of view and dare try and challenge mass production with local new-production, sometimes mis-production. To engage in sustainable environments, you need to have agency in that said environment. With the use of adaptable recipe over rigid ready-made products, it will be more achievable for means to justify the ends and not the other way around.

31 The body template of B.B. Wop, like Enzo Mari's furnitures, is an open source document available for students to reproduce, modify or build up on. As a former student and current staff member, Gersande knew that A3-printers are widespread and accessible tools in different communities and organisations. For their different body parts to fit on three A3 sheets of paper means B.B. Wop's template is easily accessible to print, to scan and vectorised into a digital file.

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RAMBLE

32 To make our it-story possible, Gersande engaged in a close dialogue with our bodies. Each social shelf was brought to different contexts in which to perform as an object of subjectivity. Both Gersande and us learned a lot from this process. Each new prototype building on the foundations acquired while putting the last one together. A willingness to try and fail in an intimate exchange created a safe environment for our collaboration, which can explain that it is hard for her to know when and where is the right moment to invite others in.

There is this swirling wind outside making the entrance door ramble. Your narrator, K.M. Leaf, and Gersande are sitting at the desk inside.

G. Pst, eh, focus! So what do you want me to write for the conclusion? said Gersande.

K.M. Hm, sorry, we were feeling ungrounded for a moment.

G. Something needs to be decided, it's still unclear in which direction the social shelf project steps out of the fiction, she reminded us.³²

RMJ Unclear? We think it is very clear!
We said so much. First, we needed to get
our non-human perspective accessible. A lot
of problems were raised. It is true that
solutions weren't always made obvious. One
thing is clear: a change of attitude
towards spaces and materiality is first
needed before we can hope for any concrete
outcome. That is the most important at
this stage.

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G. How so? Gersande honestly wondered.

RMJ Well, this project does not offer to
solve all the world's material issues.
There is a lot at stake, and no single
project could even start to cover all the
issues we mentioned here. What it can do is
to bring some of these issues to the table
and keep them on there long enough to hope-
fully initiate some change, don't you think?
We swiftly said thinking that was a
reasonable offer.

G. Of course, she said in a sight, yes, of
course, you are right... So remind us what is
at stake.

RMJ We social shelves and socialised
objects more broadly, are ambassadors of
change. Materiality, which is at the core
of many social organisations and spaces, the
silent landscape in which you are fitted to
be. Our mission is to heal the broken rela-
tionship between society and socialised
objects. The lack of care given to us has

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a negative impact on your direct surroundings, which then reflects directly badly onto you where environmental and social issues are concerned. Hence, to care for our collective bodies is to care for your collective bodies, or what you call social organisations.

G. Yes! Tell us more! Gersande let out.

AMY: Redefining the meaning of material thinking can help us create new strategies to re-build our environments from the local upwards. We believe that collectivity is at the heart of social progress! Design should enable a relationship of reciprocity between individuals and socialised objects, not a self-serving one!

G. And how do we do that?! Gersande asked loudly.

AMY: Start with small changes! Small changes can amount to big shifts in the -topias of tomorrow. By learning to listen and understand materiality in its process, we, objects and humans can come together as a collective body to engage with your direct surroundings in more sustainable and responsible ways. It can also enable communities to genuinely shape and care for their own space, instead of merely attempting to fix the social limitations embedded in industrially produced artefacts.

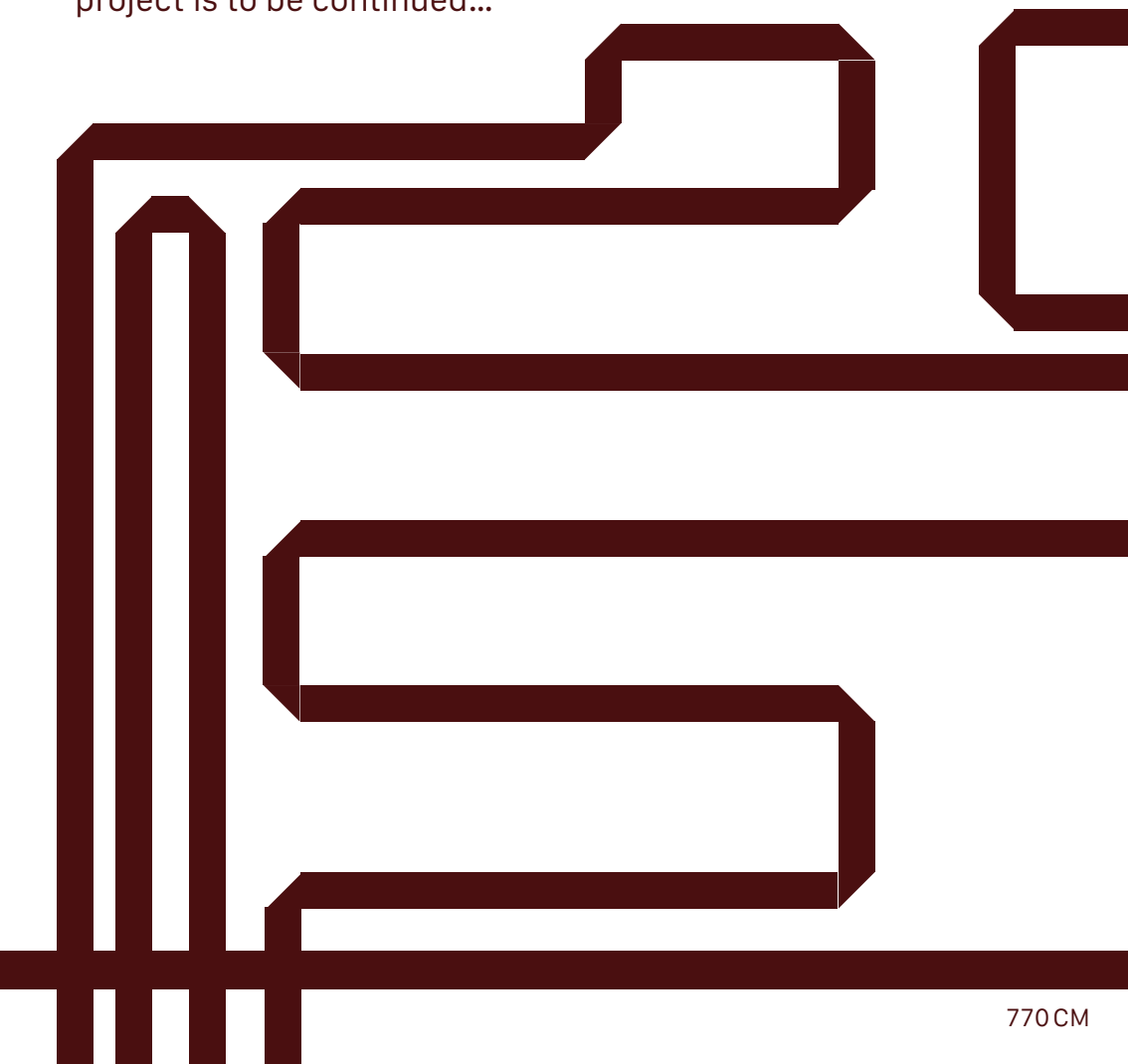
We were ecstatic.



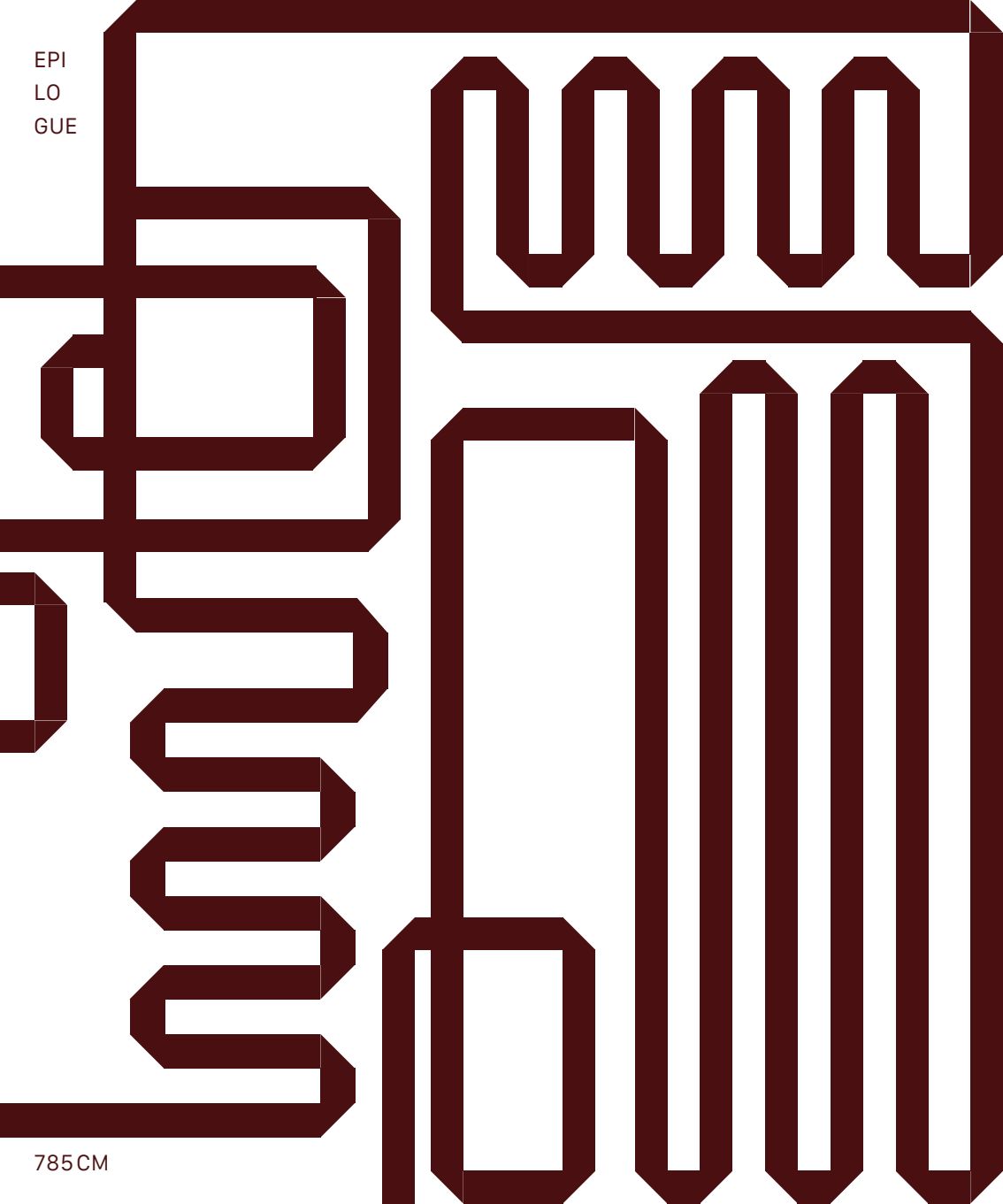
Remember, the itstory, is a story of the 'we', not of the 'I'! we concluded. Did you get all of this down?

Head-nod from Gersande. We did it. The social shelf project is to be continued...

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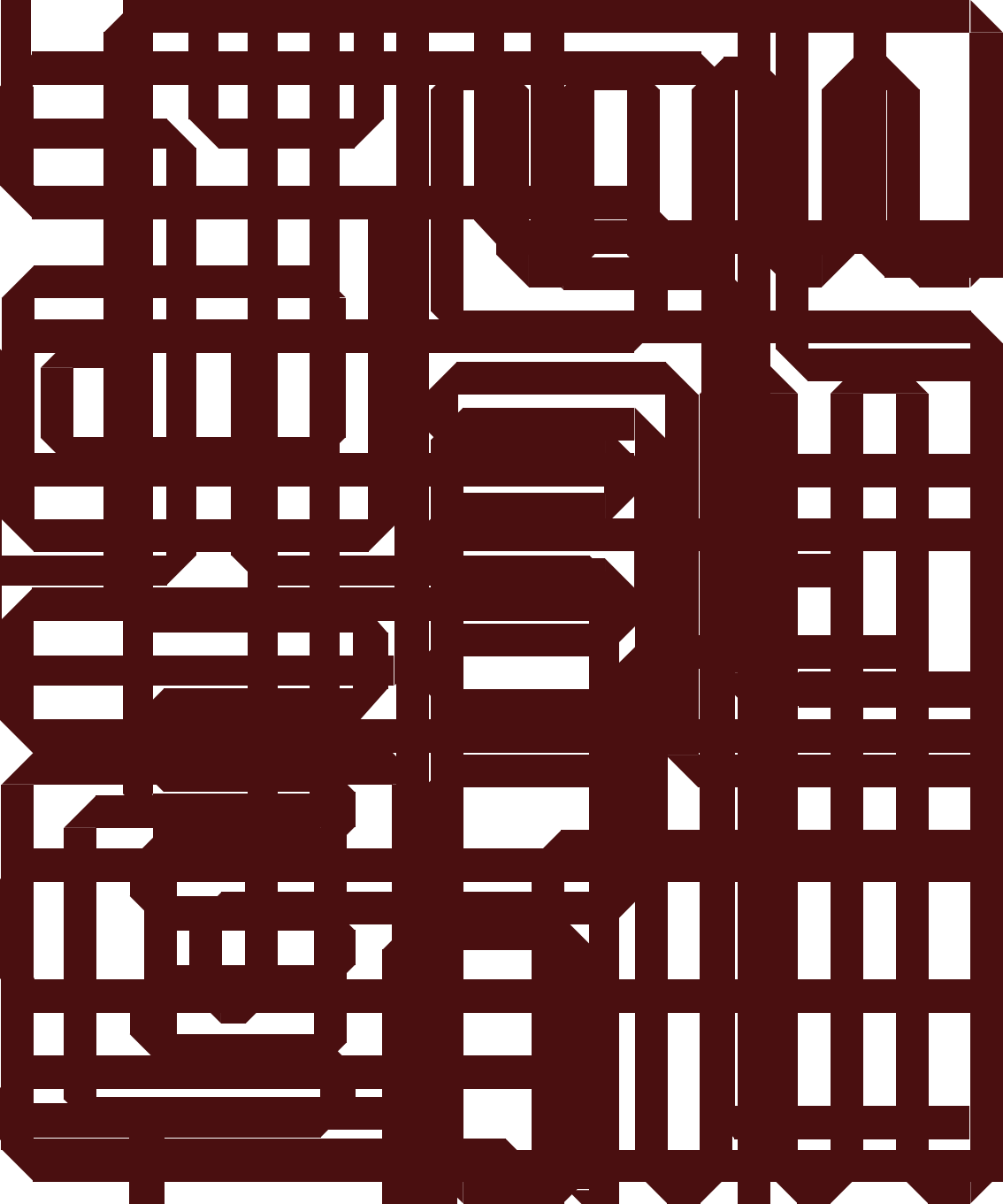
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