Model/City: Architectural Models and the Aesthetics of Playfulness

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Abstract

Between wooden blocks and miniature trees, open spaces and shared pathways, the architectural model of Sloterdijk (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) constructs a vision of green and collective living, which contrasts the lived reality of a neighborhood undergoing a rapid transformation from a largely industrial area to a 'desirable' urban neighborhood marked by luxury residential buildings. Architectural models are situated at a point of in-between, simultaneously charged with planning, representing, legitimizing, and – maybe most importantly – imagining an urban future. This article takes this special issue's call to 'deconstruct gentrification' literally by focusing on the material construction of better green urban futures through architectural models. Simultaneously referencing and abstracting the (proposed) construction sites, I argue that recent architectural models for three (re)developments in Amsterdam – Sloterdijk, Zuidas, and Bajeskwartier – draw on an aesthetic of playfulness to counter criticism raised against the gentrifying effects of 'sustainable' urban planning.

Introduction

Between wooden blocks and miniature trees, open spaces and shared pathways, the architectural model of the luxury residential building VERTICAL in *Sloterdijk*, Amsterdam, constructs a vision of green and collective living contrasting the lived reality of a neighborhood undergoing a rapid transformation from a largely industrial area to a 'desirable' urban neighborhood marked by luxury residential buildings. This tension between sustainability and gentrification has been traced in urban and cultural geography in diverse urban settings from Vancouver (Quastel et al. 2012) and Atlanta (Immergluck and Balan 2018) to New Delhi (Baviskar 2003) and Istanbul (Yazar et al. 2020), drawing attention to both the often economic imperative of residential (re)development projects and the – arguably less intentional – consequences of adding sustainability features like green spaces and walkable infrastructures. While emerging terminologies like 'green gentrification' or 'eco-gentrification' highlight "*gentrification processes that precede, accompany, or follow sustainability planning or urban greening efforts*" (Pearsall 2018, 330), the attention is frequently on either 'abstract' urban policies or their 'concrete' consequences. Rather than (just) tracing these critiques in the urban setting of Amsterdam, I propose to understand the negotiation between sustainability and gentrification as a process of mediation as well. As Michela Pace emphasizes, visual design – particularly images – plays a crucial role in shaping the imagined ideal of the city (Pace 2023), pointing to the ways that media intersect in 'visions' of both sustainability and gentrification. Architectural models, like the one of Sloterdijk introduced above, are situated at a point of in-between, simultaneously charged with planning, representing, legitimizing, and – maybe most importantly – imagining an urban future. This article takes this special issue's call to 'deconstruct gentrification' *literally* by focusing on the material construction of *better* green urban futures through architectural models.

As a medium, the model traverses the line between professional tool and playful representation. Featured in thematic exhibitions like "*Architekturmodelle*" at *Deutsches Architekturmuseum* in Frankfurt or "*Out of Office – Amsterdamse maquettes op reis*" in ARCAM in Amsterdam, as well as represention in historical museums like the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London, the architectural model has long garnered attention beyond the professional settings of architectural practitioners. Architectural writer Jane Jacobs already referred to the increasing popularity – and increasing detailedness – of architectural models as a veritable 'miniature boom' in the late 1950s. And, of course, building models of cities – real or imagined

– can also be practiced in private, as a hobby with fluctuating popularity. What is striking for the analysis presented in this paper, however, is the increasing accessibility of architectural models of current (re)development projects, before and throughout their physical construction. In this article, I am interested in how these two uses of architectural models appear to move increasingly closer together, blurring the boundary between practice and pleasure through modes of play. If the architectural model can be "*sign, souvenir, toy, funerary object, didactic tool, medium, or muse*" (Mindrup 2019, 8), the increasing overlap between these – fundamentally different – understandings takes on a political dimension in the context of urban gentrification. Writing on architectural renderings, architecture critic Mark Minkjan argues that "*in order not to distort this fantasy, the social implications, political dynamics and internal problems of architecture and spatial production are conveniently left out of the picture*". In this article, I analyze how the playfulness of architectural models functions as a counter to criticism raised against the gentrifying effects of 'sustainable' urban planning. By examining the role of models in the presentation of architectural designs to both policy makers and interested publics, this study further highlights the potential consequences of strategically (re) presenting large-scale developments through small-scale models marked by natural materials and playful miniatures.

Expanding on previous discussions in both urban policies and urban redevelopment, turning to the mediation of green urban planning approaches through architectural models provides a new entry point into the aesthetic, material, and discursive negotiation of what 'greening' the city actually means. In his discussion of architectural models as representational media, architect Alexander Schilling proposes that the model creates a "*sense of space, aesthetic and materiality*"[1] (Schilling 2017, 8). Here, I aim to push this understanding of simultaneously sensing and making sense of urban visions further by highlighting the multiple dimensions of play at work in building, experiencing, and mediating contemporary architectural models. Following the definition of Miguel Sicart, play is a way through which "*we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say*" (Sicart 2017, 5) – pointing to both the imaginative and political potential of playing. Rather than understanding playfulness as opposed to 'seriousness', my discussion of playfulness draws on an understanding of play as contextual, as "*not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life*" (Sicart 2017, 2). Playing, then, becomes a form of negotiating the relationships between the city's past, present, and future. The

architectural models of the three urban (re)developments discussed here are importantly not only engaged with by urban planners and architects but made available to the larger public both physically and virtually. In doing so, the role of the architectural model arguably shifts from practical tool (by and for 'practitioners') to something else: A medium with the capacity for playfulness, for "*an attempt to engage with the world in the mode of being of play but not playing*" (Sicart 2017, 22). This definition as a 'mode of being of play' makes playfulness such a productive conceptual lens to discuss the mediation of urban plans in and through architectural models: Architectural models on the one hand playfully engage with urban plans, and one the other hand – seemingly – invite to be playfully engaged with themselves. At the same time, this engagement is folded back into existing structures of power. Understanding play(ing) as a "*specific relation to the world*" (Raczkowksi and Hanke 2021, 10) points to the political dimension of playfulness in urban planning: In what ways do architectural models shape our understanding of the city – and our place in it? Recognizing "*the materiality of designed things and the material and discursive practices through which they come to matter*" (Kimbell 2012, 129), adds an additional dimension to the entanglement between sustainability and desirability, green imaginations and gentrified realities, as an aesthetic and discursive strategy.

Model(ing) Amsterdam

As exemplary case studies, this article discusses three neighborhoods in Amsterdam currently undergoing – but at different stages of – (re)development: (1) Sloterdijk in Amsterdam-West, (2) *Zuidas* in Amsterdam-South, and (3) *Bajeskwartier* in Amsterdam-East. Rather than discussing these examples individually, this article points to the similarities in the aesthetic and discursive construction of these neighborhoods in and through architectural models: All three models are publicly accessible in specific 'information centers' in addition to featuring prominently in promotional materials. Furthermore, all three models are entangled with the promise of greener, 'better' futures for the respective neighborhoods. My methodological approach for this article similarly brings together the material with the virtual in an attempt to engage with the architectural models in and through their different forms of mediation via *sensory ethnography*, *textual analysis* and *discourse analysis*.

As an emerging form of ethnography, sensory ethnography foregrounds the sensory experiencing body and its interdependency with the built environment (cf. Pink 2015). With an interest in how architectural

models are made accessible for interested publics, I have consciously conducted different types of visits to the three information centers of Zuidas, Bajeskwartier and Sloterdijk. The information center for Zuidas is situated in Amsterdam's World Trade Center, directly opposite the much-frequented train and metro station Amsterdam Zuid. Located on the first floor in the building's Tower 5, the information center is open on weekdays from 10.00 to 16.00 – but appears to be largely passed by. On my three visits, spread over multiple weeks in January 2024 and undertaken on different days and at different times, I have been the only visitor to the information center, with my visits only being interrupted by employees of the adjacent planning bureau taking shortcuts through the exhibition room. Divided into different 'phases' of development, Bajeskwartier – the site of a former prison complex undergoing a complete transformation – hosts recurring 'open days' loosely connected to the completion and/or availability of a new phase of the development. Together with prospective buyers and potential residents, I have attended 'open days' for Bajeskwartier in September 2023 and March 2024. As highly public (and publicized) events, these ethnographic visits allowed me to not only engage with the architectural model myself but also observe other visitors – as a contrast to my solitary visits to the Zuidas information center. To add a third dimension of engagement, my visits to the architectural model of Sloterdijk were virtual, tracing photographs and videos of the model online. Importantly, the architectural models discussed here are not only made physically accessible to the public but are also consciously operationalized in the framing of Bajeskwartier, Sloterdijk and Zuidas as building towards (more) sustainable neighborhoods. Through photos and videos of the models as a whole, as well as partial close-ups, complimentary materials (for example timelapses of the construction and renovation of the models), and 'virtual walks' through them, the architectural models are also extended into the virtual sphere – becoming a key component of the mediated construction of the three neighborhoods. In this article, I combine my ethnographic visits to the information centers as a form of sensory engagement with the architectural models and their physical exhibition with textual and discourse analysis of these virtual mediations. Tracing the ways that the models become embedded – and meaningful – in larger discourses of urban futures allows me to explore the visual and verbal language of 'sustainability' constructed in and across these different materials. Especially as the physical models appear to be either largely overlooked by busy commuters and passers-by or 'out of the way' except for specific organized visits like the open days mentioned earlier, their extension into the virtual sphere becomes an urgent site of

inquiry. Discussing the model as a medium on the one hand and pointing to the mediation of the model on the other hand, furthers our understanding of urban planning as a simultaneously material and immaterial process, changing and evolving with and beyond the physical construction.

Material Play: Producing Sustainability in Miniature

In a strict definition, Alexander Schilling argues that models are meant to be scaled representations of existing – or at least planned – realities (Schilling 2017, 44). At the same time, this representation is complicated by material concerns: In most cases, architectural models are not built with the same materials as their 'real' versions, but with and through materials approximating the actual construction. Glass, stone, wood, cement, steel, and other construction materials are rarely used in architectural models and instead replaced through paper, plastic, (lighter) wood-based materials polystyrene, and other synthetics meant to simulate the aesthetics – and characteristics/properties – of these materials. "*Every model is an interpretation*", Oliver Elser, architectural historian and curator of the *Deutsche Architekturmuseum*, suggests. In his historical overview of the architectural model, Matthew Mindrup continuously points out that making models was and continues to be a process of experimenting, of trying to "*find materials and methods for representing architectural ideas in ways that communicate their intended effect*" (Mindrup 2019, 173). Here, I am proposing to approach this experimentation with materiality through the lens of play: More than a practical concern, playing with materiality becomes a way to change not only the look but, more importantly, also the 'feel' of architectural models – and the urban plans materialized in and through them. Writing about modern architecture as expanding beyond itself, architects Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson argue that "*a building today is only interesting if it is more than itself, if it charges the space around it with connective possibilities*" (Smithson & Smithson 1974, 36) – an expectation that, arguably, already begins with the architectural models discussed here. If "*a building takes its impact not least from the sum of its materials*"[2] (Schilling 2017, 44), this play with materiality through abstraction and approximation inevitably holds the potential to change the impact, the affective charge, of the construction both in its miniature and built version. Through the production of nature within the model, its urban vision is charged with the sensory experience of sustainability.

As a material development, this shift towards a more playful use of 'natural' materials becomes particularly notable when approaching models as historical artifacts as well, documenting changing architectural practices

as much as public sentiments. For instance, Sloterdijk in the West of Amsterdam, has undergone previous phases of (re)development – most notable beginning in the late 1960s. Discussing the architectural models of the urban plans for the neighborhood side by side, 1968 next to 2023, highlights a striking shift in the materials used to build the models (see figures 1 and 2).

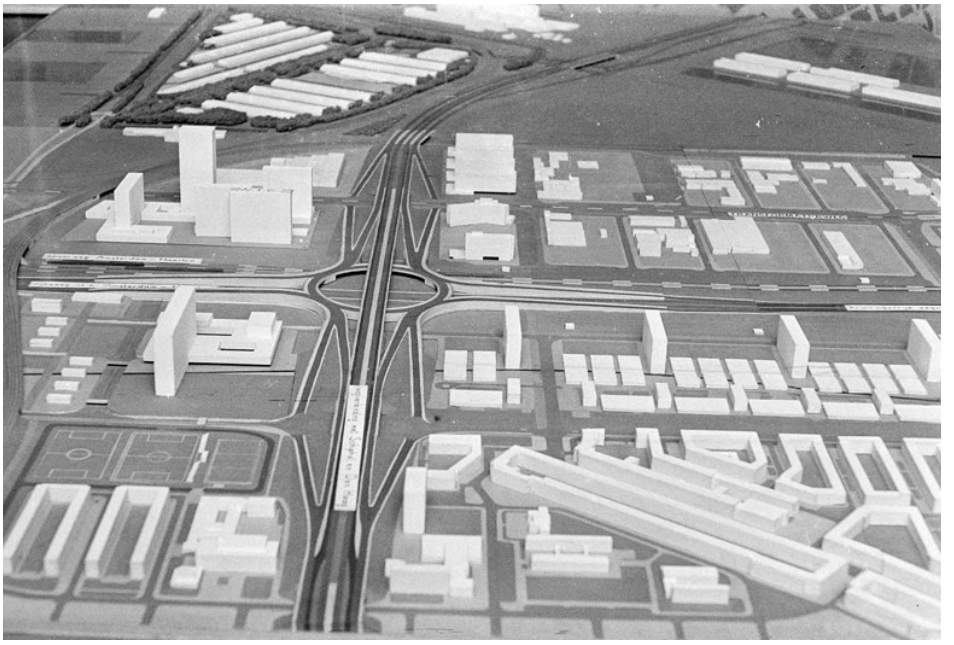

Figure 1: *The architectural models of Amsterdam-Sloterdijk from 1968.* Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau - Fotoarchief, 1963-1968. Photograph by: Jacques Klok.

Figure 2: *The architectural models of Amsterdam-Sloterdijk from 2023.* Photograph by: Uptown Sloterdijk.

"In their application to prospective residents, the idea of the 'green urbanite' constructs a particular – and apparently particularly desirable – resident of these neighborhoods that echoes other discussions of processes of gentrification."

Relying mostly on abstractions of buildings, cut from polystyrene, the earlier model of the neighborhood can be understood as a functional representation, a simplified three-dimensional visualization of urban planning (see figure 1). Similar to the buildings, the infrastructure is referenced but kept minimal in the architectural model. Importantly, I do not mean to imply that this model is less realistic, or even less detailed, than the newer one. Rather, the three-dimensional model of Sloterdijk in its current vision (see figure 2) brings together different materialities in a more playful way – that is, in turn, charged with meaning.

The architectural models of Amsterdam-Sloterdijk from 1968 (figure 1) and 2023 (figure 2) are strikingly different in their materiality – arguably following different objectives in their representation of the neighborhood. While different modeling materials have become typical as representations of different types of material realities, the increasing reliance on 'natural' materials does more than simulate, represent, the characteristics of the actual construction materials. To push this even further: The buildings represented through wooden blocks in the architectural model of Sloterdijk will – most likely – not be actually built out of wood. Instead, the material can be understood as a strategic aesthetic choice, charging the architectural model with a sense of sustainability. And, of course, the wooden blocks and transparent cubes, carefully arranged on the plan of the neighborhood, evoke associations of toy building blocks. Both their materiality and their positioning invite the viewer to imagine moving them around, turning them, stacking them, replacing them, removing them in an open-ended experimentation with ways of building a city. Returning to Miguel Sicart's definition of play as a way to "*experience the world*" (Sicart 2017, 5), the aesthetic reference to materials of play and playing adds a layer of potential to the architectural model. We might still build the city differently; the model tells us.

In their playfulness, i.e., their capacity "*to afford playful behaviors*" (Sicart 2017, 19), architectural models like the ones discussed here draw a connection between materiality and desirability – and point to larger

socio-political questions as negotiated in and through their playful aesthetics. More provocatively phrased: *Can we also playfully construct belonging?* All three (re)development projects discussed here formulate a discourse of a better, greener future – of a space charged with potential and possibility. For instance, Bajeskwartier – the site of a former prison complex – is presented as becoming an "*exuberantly green hotspot for genuine urbanites*", while Sloterdijk in the West – a former industrial hub for the telecommunications industry – is framed as a "*green, resilient and urban area*" on the official websites of the respective neighborhoods. In these formulations, the dual emphasis on 'green' and 'urban' as interconnected rather than oppositional is notable. In their application to prospective residents, the idea of the 'green urbanite' constructs a particular – and apparently particularly desirable – resident of these neighborhood that echoes other discussions of processes of gentrification (Bcf. Lindner and Sandoval 2021). Concerns that "'*green' may become a code word for safe, rich, professional, and privileged*" (Mehdizadeh and Fischer 2013, 6) have been raised in regard to both the design and implementation of urban policies centered on sustainability – and certainly resonate in these descriptions of desirable residents. In my discussion of the playful aesthetics of architectural models, then, the emphasis on potential and possibility becomes a way to negotiate criticism against the gentrifying consequences – if not necessarily intentions – of sustainable urban (re) development (cf. Pearsall 2018). The materials used in architectural models are, according to architectural theorist Matthew Mindrup, not just meant to make models representative but also – and maybe more importantly – "*comprehensible to an unfamiliar audience*" (Mindrup 2019, 174). By highlighting nature and natural materials in the construction of architectural models, I argue that the miniature versions of Sloterdijk, Zuidas and Bajeskwartier, quite literally, materialize sustainability. In other words: The material production of nature in the architectural model intersects with an imaginary production of these neighborhoods as green, sustainable, livable – while at the same time communicating an openness to further intervention, experimentation, change. Miguel Sicart similarly points out that a discourse of 'playfulness' can be appropriated, particularly by design (Sicart 2017, 2). Returning to an understanding of play as 'make believe', then, takes on a political dimension as well: Through material play, architectural models are charged with making sustainable urban policies not only comprehensible but also believable (and seemingly 'buildable') while further detaching them from the realities of gentrification. Here, this becomes further complicated when discussing who actually gets to materially, haptically, play with the architectural models – and the urban futures they aim to materialize.

Perspective Play: Between Proximity and Distance

The heart of the 'Bajeslounge' – the 'information and inspiration center' in and for Bajeskwartier – and the object first and foremost notable when entering through the center's glass doors is a miniature model of the neighborhood. Encapsulated in a glass case, the architectural model simultaneously invites closeness and distance. In both the promotional material available on the website and during my in-person visits, people are leaning close to the glass case, pointing at the miniature infrastructures and smiling at the playfulness of the representation – while at the same time keeping the model just out of reach, just out of touch. This is particularly noticeable because everything else in the 'Bajeslounge' invites touch, from suggested materials for floors and wallpapers in open drawers to potential finishes for appliances on display throughout the lounge. Understanding play as "*a practice, a way to position oneself opposite objects, the world, human as well as non-human beings*"[3] (Raczkowksi and Hanke 2021, 10) highlights the significance of positionality in countering concerns of gentrification. Playing with perspectives in a constant shift between proximity and distance, I argue that architectural models of on-going (re)developments complicate the spatial grounding of urban plans. Different to the exhibitions mentioned in the introduction to this article, the architectural model displayed in the 'Bajeslounge' – and similarly in the information centers for Zuidas and Sloterdijk – is not an artistic artifact that can be referenced, contrasted, compared along dimensions of representability or 'realisticness'. The stasis of the model suspends it between an abstract idea and a real construction, neither fully theoretical nor fully representation.

Noticing the very particular shapes of miniature buildings in the model that seemed – otherwise – still quite abstract, I asked the resident 'educator' during one of my visits to the Zuidas information center for the plans not just of the neighborhood but of the model itself. Continuously updated (and exhaustively renewed in January 2022), the architectural model of Zuidas changes, aesthetically and materially, as the neighborhood does. And yet, from the visitor's perspective, the status of these changes remains somewhat opaque: Some of the miniature buildings, spaces, and infrastructures are already completed, some are under construction, some are planned – and some are still waiting to be designed, planned, constructed. In the meantime, the 'space' to be taken up by these future constructions in the model is filled with placeholders. These placeholders, simultaneously abstract in their materiality and specific in their shape, complicate an understanding of the actual status of the urban development – and the potential for (public) intervention in these plans. The miniature shapes

Figure 3: *Promotional photograph used by Bajeskwartier, as a model to be experienced and explained.* Photograph by: Bajeskwartier Amsterdam.

Figure 4: *Promotional photograph used by Sloterdijk, as a model to be experienced and explained*. Photograph by: Uptown Sloterdijk.

might become physical shapes, or they might not. This suspension in time, apparently, necessitates further explanation – as all three (re)development projects discussed here offer educational tours that situate the viewer in relation to the modeled vision of the city (see figures 3 and 4).

This adds another dimension to questions of perspective: In the architectural models discussed here, the surrounding city disappears – creating the illusion of this better, greener neighborhood as detached and detangled from both the history and the present of the city. Underneath images of the *Zuidas* model on the development's website, the only one with an open comment function, this tension is also palpable as comments point out 'missing' references to existing residential areas (and their residents) in

the modeled area as strategic: "*It will certainly save a lot of difficult policy discussions about noise and particulate pollution, for example, if one can 'forget' these almost 600 residents of the area*" (@Sander, 10 March 2022). While exemplary, comments like this complicate the promise of 'integration' of these larger (re)developments into the existing urban fabric of the city. For instance, the description of the masterplan for Bajeskwartier on the website of the leading architectural firm OMA details the transformation of "*the former prison complex into a hub for sustainable living, well integrated with Amsterdam's urban fabric*". Beyond the practical reasoning to only 'model' the neighborhood in question, the representation of the surrounding urban fabric through abstractions, white cubes and empty spaces, arguably creates the illusion of the city as a blank canvas. A blank canvas that, in turn, is waiting to be developed towards better, greener versions of their current realities. In this regard, the architectural model as a – if somewhat passive – form of play resembles urban simulation games like SimCity, which Kenneth Kolson critiques as representing an "*urban tissue [...] completely cut off from the surrounding region*" (Kolson 1994, 8). Taking into account the consequences of sustainable urban development projects on the land and housing costs of surrounding neighborhoods[4] further complicates this distanced and detached view: Arguably, 'green gentrification' expands not just beyond the space represented by the architectural model but into the city as a whole.

At least for the physical models, the ways to engage with them remain – spatially and conceptually – restricted. The model for Sloterdijk can be visited – or rather seen through a glass window – in a separate annex of the train station *Station Sloterdijk*, the infrastructural heart of the neighborhood, while Zuidas presents its model in an information center in Amsterdam's World Trade Center in the middle of the transforming area. Maybe even more obviously than in the 'Bajeslounge', the architectural model of these (re)developments forms the heart of the respective information centers, functioning as a reason to visit the centers (and consequently discuss the urban planning vision with the resident 'educators'). At the same time, the emphasis on the aesthetics of playfulness also comes with a reference to play as "*parameterized*" (Pearce 2006, 69) – as having agreed upon rules. In the context of this article, the rules are simultaneously referring to the practical regulations of urban planning and the more subtle rules of engagement with these plans. What anthropologist Christopher Kelty calls "*formatted participation*" here determines the limits of play as it comes to the different models. For instance, the architectural model of Zuidas is the only one not protected by a glass casing – and yet still implicitly

keeps viewers at a distance. To engage with, to play, the model, viewers are steered towards digital touchscreens strategically placed around the model: Upon pressing 'play', the model begins to light up in different parts, while a screen on the wall behind the transports the viewer 'into' the model in virtual animations. Both the perspective of the viewer and the future of the neighborhood, it appears, are already determined, already written. In the carefully curated information centers, residents – present and future – are invited to approach the playful models, but remain still distant, still distanced in their forms of play. The rules, it seems, are made elsewhere.

Mediated Play: Desirable Urban Futures

"*Everything in the image is a promise*", write architects Jan Knikker and Alex Davidson in their defense of using architectural renderings (and in response to criticism raised by Mark Minkjan) (Knikker & Davidson 2016). Oliver Elser points out the deep connection between models and media: According to the historian, the development of photography lead to more models built towards mediatization, towards "*that crucial moment a photographer presses the shutter button*".[5] In the increasing mediatization of the process of designing, writing, and building sustainable architecture, the model takes on an additional – and arguably even more playful – role. Both *Bajeskwartier* and *Zuidas* have extended their architectural models not only through visual materials but also audiovisual and interactive animations. Approached through the lens of play, the virtual experience becomes further entangled with what urban media scholars Christoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval refer to as the "*aesthetics of gentrification*". Drawing on their understanding of aesthetics as strategically employed to actively produce "*spaces of desire and seduction*" (Lindner and Sandoval 2021, 15), architectural models become another site to visualize – and manifest – urban futures as always already there. For instance, the Zuidas information center features a 'virtual walk' that can be viewed via the development project's website as well as on a dedicated display within the center. While focusing on the infrastructural heart of the development – the redesigned Amsterdam-Zuid station – the 'virtual walk' presents an eerily empty vision of the neighborhood, featuring cars, buses, and trains traversing an empty infrastructural grid. Particularly for a (re)development project like Zuidas, which presents the vision of the neighborhood as 'living' and 'lively', this urban quietness is striking. Accompanied by dramatic piano music, the 'virtual walk' cannot be controlled, steered, by the viewer but rather functions as a predetermined film with a given conclusion for both the animation and the future of the neighborhood. However, the

animation ends with an invitation to visit the information center to "*walk through the future yourself*" [in Dutch: '*loop zelf door de toekomst*'], thereby promising a more interactive, playful exploration of the neighborhood. In the information center, the viewer is positioned in front of a touchpad that allows for turning (via a swiping motion), zooming (via a pinching motion) as well as selecting the part of the station to be displayed (via clicking). Yet, the interactive potential – the forms to engage with the present and future of the neighborhood's infrastructure – remains limited to the static position of a passive viewer. Playing with the affordances of different media, recent architectural models for 'sustainable' developments are simultaneously referencing and abstracting the proposed construction sites – thereby temporally suspending the urban futures envisioned in and through them.

Architectural researcher Lisa Moffitt highlights the potent ability for models, as both physical artefacts and mental ideals, "*to reflect prevailing cultural views about the world and to even go reshape those views*" (Moffitt 2023, 18). These understandings of both urban play and architectural models as containing the potential for change – for alternative visions and their realizations – are tied to an engagement with space. In turn, this engagement changes with the context of play, "*the environment in which we play, the technologies with which we play, and the potential companions of play*" (Sicart 2017, 7), which resonates with the different modes of engagement afforded by physical and virtual architectural models. The interactive map (figures 5 and 6) offered as part of the promotional material of Bajeskwartier follows a different logic from the 'virtual walk' through Zuidas, bridging the physical distance of the architectural model as miniature through interactive mediation. Starting with an aerial view of the neighborhoods around the Amstel, the map seamlessly blends photographic elements with virtual renderings of the development project and digital clickable overlays. In doing so, the interactive map appears to be suspended in time, between the present and the (possible) future of the city. In the background, sounds of birds chirping intersect with voices of people – and most notably children playing – surrounded by the soft lapping sounds of water. The sounds of the city have completely disappeared in favor of a playful version of communal life in and with nature.

In addition to 'information icons' as an added layer of orientation on the map, two of the four planned 'districts' of the Bajeskwartier can be clicked, transporting the viewer from the photorealistic map into the virtual version of the architectural model. Here, the presence of the city is further restricted: Once inside the model, this is all that exists. The streets and buildings beyond the model remain sketches, black lines drawn on paper,

Figure 5: *Virtual model of Bajeskwartier that positions the viewer outside of the model*. Photograph by: Bajeskwartier Amsterdam.

Figure 6: *Virtual model of Bajeskwartier that positions the viewer inside the model as one of its rendered – imagined – inhabitants*. Photograph by: Bajeskwartier Amsterdam.

two-dimensional representation of something that might or might not exist – which further underlines the previously discussed distancing between the development projects and the existing urban fabric surrounding them. In the closer view of the virtual model, the viewer is given further options to playfully engage with the model by viewing virtual renderings, entering into selected apartments for an impression of the interior, or watching an animated virtual tour of different parts of the model. These options are supplemented with two 360° views: The first one offers different perspectives on the model – similar to shifting one's position around the physical model exhibited in the information center. The second option positions the viewer inside the model, on the street level and – perceptually – as one of the rendered inhabitants. In the virtual model of Bajeskwartier, the emphasis lies on the construction being – and becoming – a neighborhood, conjuring associations of community and care, but also, maybe more critically, of 'sameness'. In the context of gentrification, this raises questions of inclusion and exclusion, of desire and desirability. Suspended in time and space, between the plan and the play, gentrification seems always possible – but never real.

Discussion and Conclusion

From an urban media studies perspective, paying attention to the multiple ways that urban planning is mediated allows for additional insights into the material and discursive production of urban futures as better and greener. More than giving a 'photorealistic' presentation of a proposed construction site, architectural models function as both materializations and abstractions in this process of mediation, as three-dimensional embodiments of urban plans between practices of sustainability and processes of gentrification. Rather than understanding playfulness as an inherent characteristic of all architectural models, playfulness in this article is understood as carefully constructed through materials, perspectives, and media. As a conceptual lens, playfulness allows for a teasing apart of the structures and dynamics of power that Bajekswartier, Zuidas and Sloterdijk (need to) negotiate in their public communication and representation. "*Play has the capacity to remain play while giving the actions performed political meaning*", Miguel Sicart argues (Sicart 2017, 80) – and yet, the distinction towards an aesthetics of playfulness, 'of being of a mode of play but not playing' as distinguished in the introduction to this article, arguably undermines the political potential of architectural models. Both the engagement of architectural models with urban plans and the engagement of visitors with the architectural models themselves remains restricted by the rules of engage-

ment of their form and setting. Applying Miguel Sicart's understanding of play as "*a movement between order and chaos*" (Sicart 2017, 3) points to the tension between the structured planning of urban policies and the lived messiness of urban realities. At the intersection between aesthetics and politics, Camilo Boano and Giorgio Talocci argue, we can find the "*depth of influence of urban design, which acts not as a benign product of development, but as a contested channel through which corporations, governments and urban inhabitants are involved in the shaping of urban spaces*" (Boano & Talocci 2014, 118). By approaching architectural models as material objects built, experienced, and mediated throughout the different sections of this article, I have argued that (re)development projects like Bajeskwartier, Zuidas and Sloterdijk increasingly draw on an aesthetics of playfulness to counter criticism raised against the gentrifying effects of 'sustainable' urban planning.

Drawing on Jacques Rancière, Camilo Boano and Giorgio Talocci suggest that urban play contains the potential to "*resist the givenness of the place*" (Boano & Talocci 2014, 112). Conceptually, play connects to ideas of openness, of experimenting with and through alternative versions of the urban. Through play, we enter into speculation, into the negotiation of possible futures (Raczkowksi and Hanke 2021, 14). In his discussion of a 'right to the city', critical geographer David Harvey emphasizes that changing the city is a collective endeavor, "*a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization*" (Harvey 2008, 23). Following visual anthropologist Luc Pauwels' suggestion that cultural imaginations can be acquired through "*observing, analyzing, and theorizing its visual manifestations*" (Pauwels 2010, 546), building architectural models can be understood as a discursive and collaborative practice in materializing these possible futures as and through alternative visions of the city. However, this requires a process that actively engages with communities, residents, neighbors. The forms of play afforded by the architectural models discussed here – as material, experienced, and mediated objects in both physical and virtual spaces – do not follow this promise. Rather, the strictness of the parameters around who can engage with the models, as well as in what ways and where, limits the creative potential of architectural models. This corresponds to Christoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval's conclusion that aesthetics are increasingly employed to strategically preclude "*alternative and more inclusive ways of creating, inhabiting, or experiencing the neighborhood*" (Lindner & Sandoval 2021, 14). In doing so, the examples discussed here fall short of "*reclaim[ing] play as a way of expression, a way*

of engaging with the world – not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production" (Sicart 2017, 5) and instead default to an aesthetic of playfulness as a discursive strategy detached from the political potential of play. The production of nature in architectural models thereby also expands into socio-political discussions of citizenship, participation, and 'ownership' of spaces. In other words: In the playful representation of green neighborhoods as better neighborhoods, the lived consequences of gentrification disappear in favor of a controlled urban vision of sustainability.

“In other words: In the playful representation of green neighborhoods as better neighborhoods, the lived consequences of gentrification disappear in favor of a controlled urban vision of sustainability.”

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Endnotes

1 Original Quote: "*Gefühl für Raum, Ästhetik und Stofflichkeit*" (translation by the author).

2 Original Quote: "*Ein Gebäude nimmt seine Wirkung nicht zuletzt aus der Summe der Materialien, aus dem es gefügt ist*" (translation by the author).

3 "*Spielen als eine Praktik, als eine Art und Weise, sich gegenüber den Dingen, der Welt, Menschen wie auch nichtmenschlichen Wesen zu positionieren*" – own translation.

4 See for instance Dan Immergluck and Tharunya Balan's discussion of the Atlanta Beltline.

5 Original Quote: "*Architekturmodelle, die für den entscheidenden Moment gebaut werden, in dem ein Fotograf auf dem Auslöser drückt*" (translation by the author).