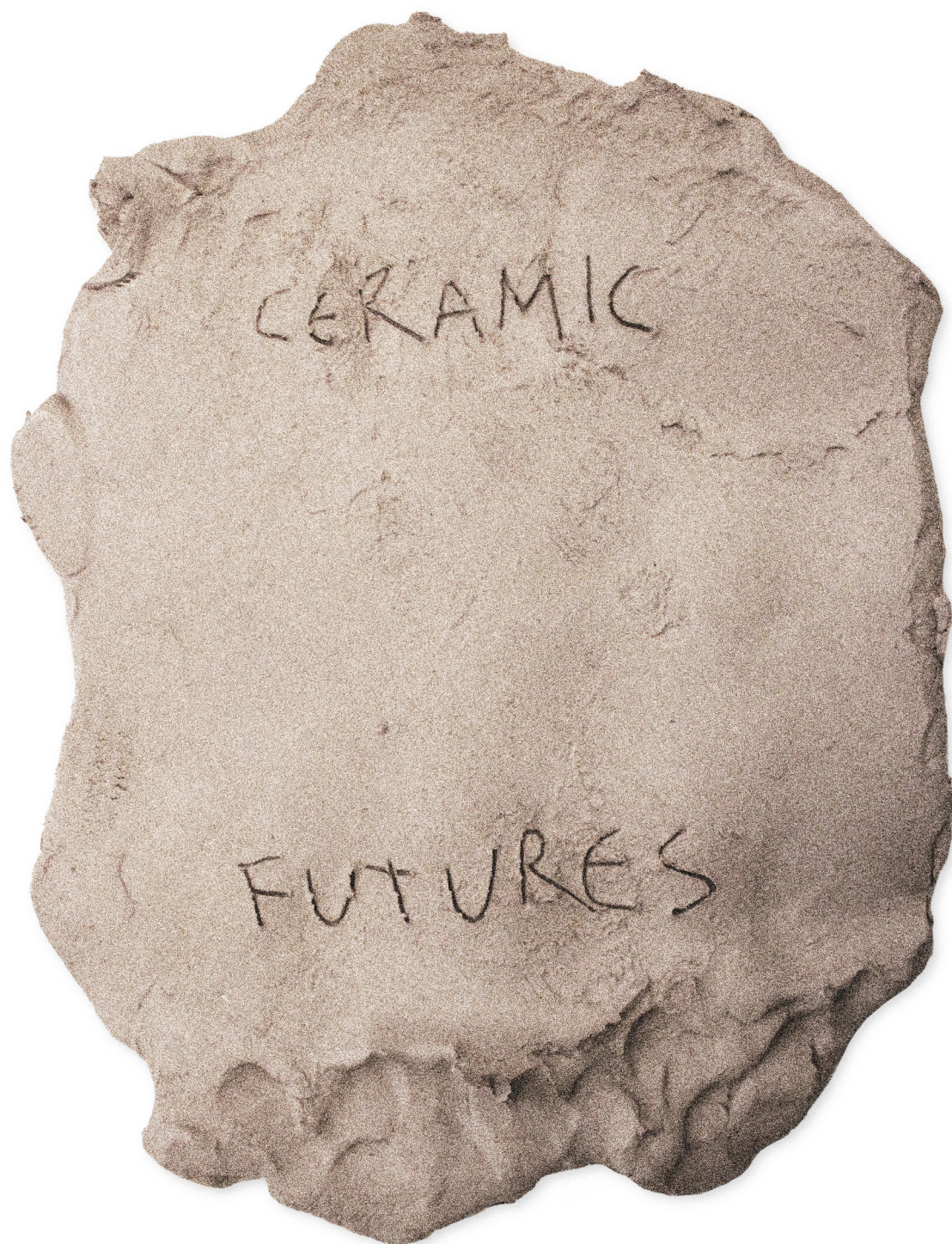




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Introduction

Ceramic Futures is a hands-on research project by Georgia Xypolia and Giorgos Xanthopoulos, between Amsterdam, NL and Athens, GR. Clay has long been humanity's didactic medium; not only containing, but preserving histories, documenting daily rituals and collective struggles across cultures and time. Expanding on this role, Ceramic Futures explores clay as a designer's tool for critical inquiry, by bridging ancient Greek ceramic traditions with speculative approaches to imagining spatial futures. This booklet documents a year's worth of work; in the form of workshop and material experiments.



Futures in Clay I

(1) Workshop Experiment

Athens, GR	June, 2025	Hands-on visioning
location	date	theme

Our first workshop titled *Shaping the Future with Clay* emerged from a collaboration with InterAlia, an Athens-based NGO focused on youth work, non-formal education and advocacy. The collaboration came about during the Future Narratives festival in Ferrara in May 2025, where Giorgos participated through an Erasmus+ project exploring futures literacy and storytelling. Building on ideas developed during the festival, we partnered with InterAlia to organise a hands-on visioning workshop in Athens that tested our early concepts for clay-based futures thinking. This event marked the informal beginning of Ceramic Futures.

Thematically, the workshop explored the intersection of futures literacy, storytelling and art-making,

by using *clay as a tactile medium for imagining and discussing distant spatial futures*. Combining visioning methods such as scenario-building, back-casting, and transition thinking with creative, hands-on activities, the programme consisted of seven activities that guided participants through individual reflection, collaborative foresight, and the creation of a collective imaginary. Analysed here are the ones that involved clay-making. Hosted at InterAlia’s community space in Exarcheia, the four-hour workshop attracted twenty-five participants from diverse backgrounds; including youth workers, architects, researchers, artists, and students; and helped transform our initial ideas into a structured and iterative visioning process.



— write a secret about your future on a piece of paper — tear a piece of clay and bury it inside — make an idol that relates to the secret — share about the form without revealing the secret —

a secret in clay

In this initial clay-based visioning exercise, participants were invited to reflect on their personal futures and translate these reflections into physical objects. Their written thoughts—whether wishes, sketches, descriptions, or poems—were concealed within pieces of clay, which were then sculpted into forms that symbolically related to their visions.

The depth and variety of meaning the participants embedded within the objects was striking. Even with minimal instructions and having little prior experience with clay, participants created forms that carried nuanced personal narratives. Most notably, one participant sculpted their own face to represent a deeply personal future wish; but with her tongue sticking out, adding a playful expression as a reminder not to approach the future too seriously. Another one created an abstract form that could not be balanced when placed on the hand, reflecting their desire to embrace uncertainty and remain flexible rather than seek stability. Other forms included simplified human figures, geometric shapes or everyday objects. These examples highlighted how participants used material form to communicate complex emotions and perspectives that might have been difficult to express through words alone.

The exercise also revealed an un-

expectedly high level of engagement. Although participants were initially hesitant to work with clay, they quickly became immersed in the process and spent considerably longer creating and reflecting than originally planned. Rather than treating the activity as a brief introduction, many approached the task with focus and care, suggesting that tactile making can encourage deeper forms of reflection and self-expression. The extended duration also indicated the value of allocating more time for both creation and collective discussion in future iterations.

Reflecting on the activity, we identified several possibilities for further development. The exercise dealt with themes of manifestation and symbolism, allowing participants to embed personal narratives within physical objects. In terms of materials used, future versions could experiment with air-dry clay, to allow a faster drying process. In relation to architecture, this activity could be utilised as a *co-analysis tool for participatory design processes*; assisting designers to understand people's attitudes towards the future, place-based visions and desires, or even anxieties and concerns; but also glean information through their forms. Further thought ought to be placed on careful cataloguing and processing of the participants' creations to arrive at design-oriented conclusions.





— on one ostrakon inscribe what you would remove from society to reach your desired future — on the other what you would add — share with the group and explain your reasoning — find connections with others' ostraka and form them with clay —

ostracism

Following a collaborative visioning exercise in which participants collectively explored future themes such as food, governance, technology, climate and work, the workshop shifted towards reflecting on the societal changes required to achieve desirable futures through an activity inspired by the ancient Athenian practice of ostracism. In ancient Athens, citizens would inscribe names on pottery shards (ostraka) to vote for the temporary exile of individuals considered harmful to the polis. Reinterpreting this practice, participants used pottery shards to *identify the values, systems, and conditions* they wished to remove from the present, as well as those they believed should be introduced to support more desirable futures.

The collection of inscribed shards revealed a broad range of concerns and aspirations, ranging from structural issues such as racism, borders, and restrictive rules to values such as freedom, respect, and inclusion. Rather than remaining isolated through vague statements, these ideas became the basis for a collective mapping exercise in which participants physically connected related shards using soft clay.

The resulting assemblages transformed individual reflections into shared transition narratives. By linking concepts together, participants created *material diagrams* that visualised relationships between social problems,

desired values, and possible pathways for change. The connections often generated new interpretations and discussions, allowing participants to move beyond simple oppositions of what should be removed or added. The three-dimensional mosaics captured these conversations in a tangible form, producing a collective artefact that documented how different participants imagined societal transformation.

The activity was widely perceived as one of the most meaningful moments of the workshop. Participants described the process as *cathartic*, as it provided a space to identify structural barriers, articulate shared values and exercise a sense of agency through material action. At the same time, the exercise highlighted several opportunities for improvement. Limited discussion time and the physical constraints of gathering around a single table reduced opportunities for deeper exchange. Future versions could benefit from smaller groups, more structured reflection and additional methods for documenting participants' reasoning. The activity also demonstrated potential as a participatory design tool, enabling processes of *co-validation and collective analysis* that could support stakeholder engagement, sense-making and decision-making within architectural and spatial design practice.





— divide in groups representing different future moments — discuss about a shared vision of that time period — identify themes, symbols, patterns and key-words — paint the vessel with underglaze — engrave a scene that represents the imagined future moment — reflect with the group about the imagined timeline —

transition vessels

The final activity invited participants to engage with transition-thinking by collectively imagining different moments along a future *timeline* and translating these imaginaries onto ceramic vessels. Working in four groups representing the years 2025, 2080, 2125, and 2300, participants drew upon ideas generated throughout the workshop to discuss how societal values, technologies, environments and ways of living might evolve over time. Rather than producing written scenarios, they materialised these discussions through collaborative carvings on pre-made ceramic vessels, transforming abstract futures into visual and tactile narratives.

The resulting vessels displayed a wide range of aesthetic approaches, symbols, and storytelling strategies. Some groups focused on key concepts and patterns, while others developed more scene-based or symbolic representations of their assigned period. Together, the vessels formed a fragmented yet interconnected timeline, revealing how participants understood the relationship between present conditions and long-term futures. By inscribing ideas directly into clay, the activity encouraged participants to think about temporality, continuity and change in a more embodied and material way than conventional visioning exercises typically allow.

At the same time, the activity revealed both the creative potential and practical limitations of working with ceramic processes in participatory

settings. Participants became deeply engaged in the carving process, but the complexity of the task meant that many groups were unable to fully realise their ideas within the available time. The unfinished vessels nevertheless provided valuable evidence of the richness and diversity of the futures imagined, suggesting that the exercise could be expanded into a dedicated workshop format focused entirely on collaborative ceramic storytelling.

The activity also highlighted challenges related to collaboration. Although participants were encouraged to move between groups and contribute across different points in the timeline, most remained within their original teams. As a result, opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and more collective forms of authorship were somewhat limited. Future iterations could experiment with structures that encourage greater movement between groups, allowing participants to collectively negotiate transitions between different futures and generate more interconnected narratives across the timeline. For architecture and participatory design, this activity could assist in bringing together *participants from different backgrounds* to collectively imagine and negotiate contextual spatial futures through tactile creativity. The resulting vessels may serve as *material records* and commitments of these discussions, embodying aspirations, values and narratives.





Critical Urban Exploration

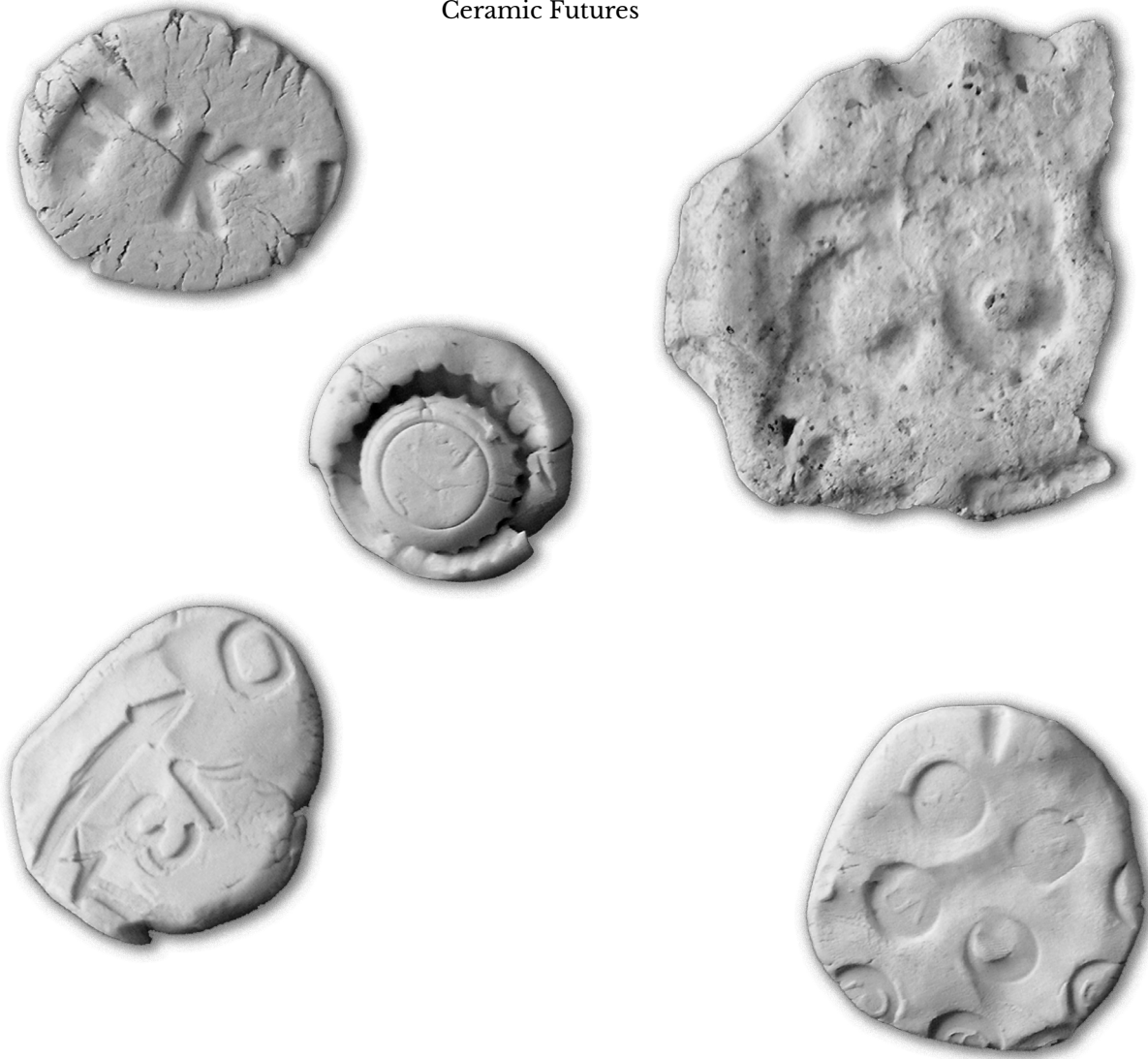
(2) Workshop Experiment

Athens, GR	September, 2025	Urban documentation
location	date	theme

Shaping Athens with Clay was the second experimental workshop developed in collaboration with InterAlia and hosted in early September for students of the College Year in Athens (CYA), functioning as an introduction to the city of Athens through tactile and critical exploration. Bringing together 22 participants from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, the workshop expanded on previous formats by moving outside the community space and into the streets of Exarcheia, where participants engaged directly with the material textures of the city. The workshop was structured around the idea of *Athenian contradictions* — pairs of socio-spatial tensions that characterize the city. These were *chaos/control*, *hope/despair*, *hard/soft*,

and *was/is*. The formation of these concepts was instinctive; attempting to encompass a broad range of topics that are both material and immaterial.

After a brief introduction about the city, participants selected one contradiction and ventured into the streets to explore its physical manifestations in public space through a combination of clay relief-making, pencil rubbings, and found-object collection. Clay emerged as the most intuitive and engaging medium, enabling participants to imprint pavements, walls, railings, and even movement itself into the material. This encouraged a playful and experimental approach, where documentation became embodied and exploratory rather than purely representational.



— choose one topic — go out and explore it through the city — collect textures using clay reliefs — trace with pencil on paper — gather found objects — return and share your findings — make something from the collected materials* — share with the group —

At first, participants were hesitant to begin documenting, but once one started, the others quickly followed. The facilitator's observations focus on a group of non-student participants—a visual artist, an art curator, and an architect—who were already familiar with Athens and had prior experience with creative practices. Their exploration unfolded along nearby streets, where they were drawn to specific urban textures such as old steel balustrades, the plaster surfaces of the Athenian "artificial" and patterned pavement tiles. As the group became more comfortable, their engagement with clay shifted from direct surface imprints to more experimental actions. The artist of the group stepped onto the clay to capture both pavement texture and the imprint of their shoe sole. Later they allowed a car to run over a clay ball; and dropped clay onto sloped surfaces to see how it deformed. They also produced small, spontaneous clay interventions in public space, placing forms in locations that attracted their attention. In contrast, only one participant used paper rubbings, and none engaged with collecting physical objects.

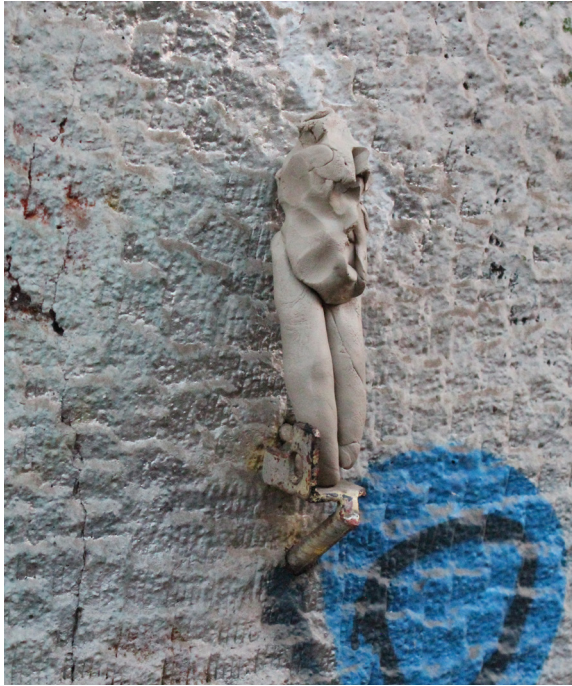
What emerged from the fieldwork was a form of *physical sketchbook of the city*, in which participants translated urban textures into material traces that reflected both their chosen contradiction and their personal perception of Athens. The act of gathering and discussing these fragments later in groups generated reflections on themes such as gentrification, housing, policing, accessibility, and urban

history. Although the planned final making phase was largely constrained by time, the collective discussions proved highly productive, allowing participants to share interpretations and critically reflect on their encounters with the city. Feedback indicated that the workshop offered a meaningful and engaging way to experience Athens, sharpening attention to overlooked details of the built environment while fostering a more critical awareness of urban space. Suggestions for future iterations included integrating maps or guided contextual frameworks to complement open exploration and support counter-mapping approaches.

Overall, the workshop demonstrated how *clay can function as a low-barrier, embodied tool for architectural and spatial inquiry*, enabling participants to physically engage with the city rather than observe it from a distance. By foregrounding texture, proximity, and touch, the exercise shifted attention toward the immediate material conditions of urban space, suggesting potential applications in architectural education and participatory urban documentation. In contrast to more controlled or homogenised environments, the dense and heterogeneous surfaces of Athens played a crucial role in shaping the richness of the outcomes, raising questions about how such methods might translate to other urban contexts.

* A co-creation activity that facilitates reflection and discussion may include using the reliefs as stamps, cutting the pencil-traced textures and utilising found objects for a collage.







Neighbourhood Material Readings

(3) Workshop Experiment

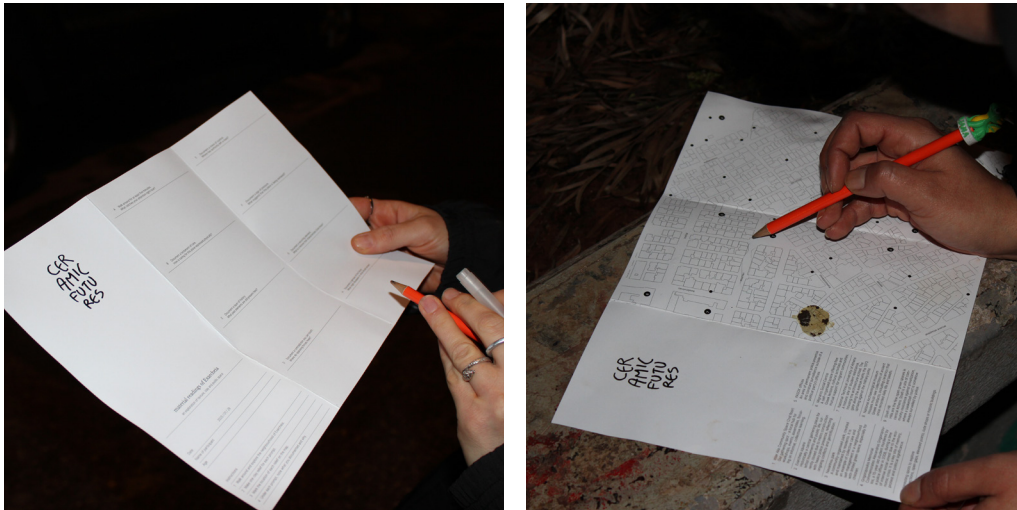
Athens, GR	January, 2026	Urban documentation
location	date	theme

The third workshop was developed again in collaboration with InterAlia for the College Year in Athens (CYA) students, aged 19–21; bringing together around fifteen participants, a couple of which were youth workers from the Athens-based NGO. The overall premise was similar: to explore the Athenian neighborhood of Exarcheia through clay. However, this workshop built on the previous iteration of Critical Urban Exploration by introducing a structured *mapping* component in response to earlier feedback. A key issue in the first version had been the loss of spatial context once clay reliefs were brought back to the community space; participants often struggled to remember where specific textures were collected and from which surface or object.

To address this, the workshop was structured around a printed, double-sided brochure. One side provided short *instructions* for the activity and eight prompts designed to guide observation and reflection: walking and noticing initial impressions; doc-

umenting signs of care; tracing layers of history; identifying contradictions in space; recording traces of control; noting signs of pressure or change; capturing recurring textures of Exarcheia; and imagining glimpses of the future. These prompts were intended as open-ended entry points, which moved from general observation to more intense socio-spatial reflection, while allowing for intuitive and personal forms of documentation. Ample space was provided for written notes or sketches, enabling the participants to record their findings while moving through the city.

On the other side was a *map* of the Exarcheia neighbourhood, accompanied by a series of annotations designed to support participants in navigating an unfamiliar area. These highlighted locations connected to the workshop prompts, significant contemporary and historical landmarks, parks and hills, as well as a selection of “interesting spots to explore” intended to encourage curiosity, observation, and independent exploration.



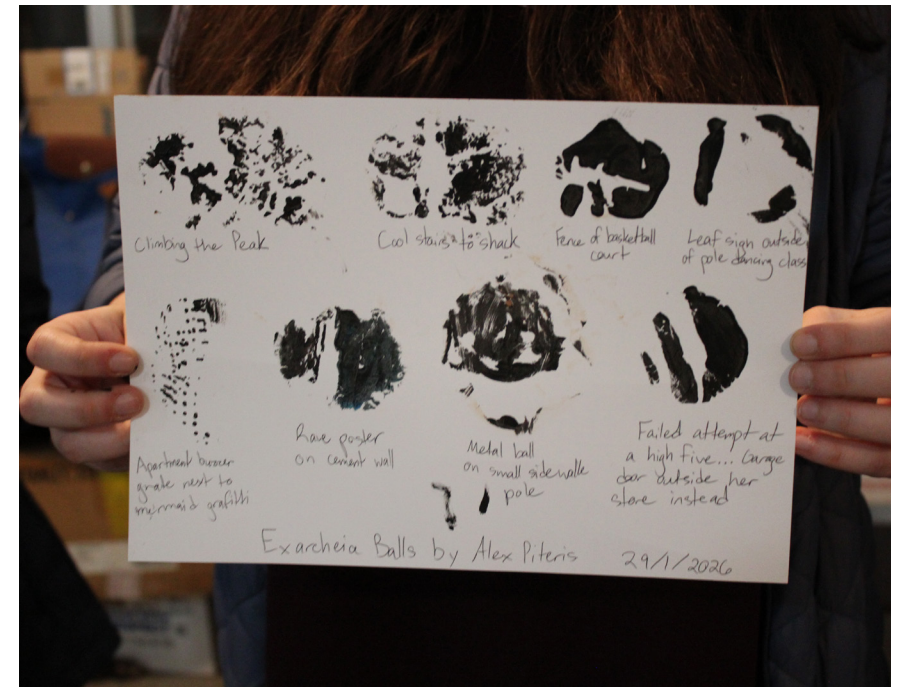
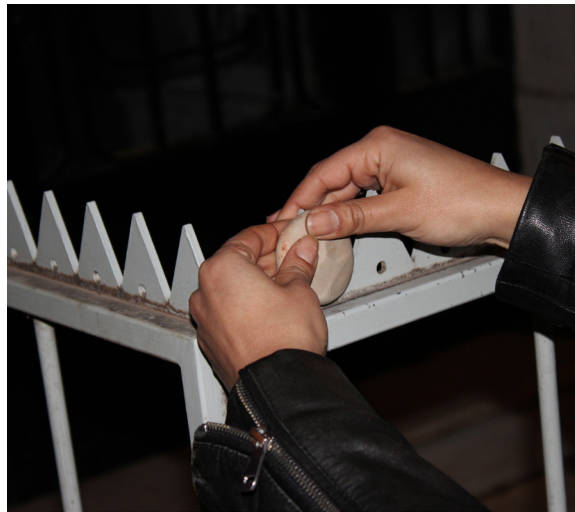
— section clay and store in a plastic bag — walk around and explore the neighbourhood — make at least one clay relief for each prompt — mark the location of each relief on the map — note what you documented and why under each prompt — return and share findings with the group — reflect about common themes and experiences —

After a short introduction to InterAlia, Ceramic Futures, and the workshop framework, participants received the brochure and were introduced to the prompts before heading out into Exarcheia in small groups. By the time exploration began, it was already evening, and participants moved through the neighbourhood collecting clay reliefs while responding to the prompts. Alongside the clay imprints, they were encouraged to mark locations on the map and write short reflections, creating a combined system of spatial, textual and material documentation.

Following two participants affiliated with InterAlia, both youth workers rather than students, offered insight into how the prompts were interpreted in practice. Rather than approaching the themes one by one, they explored the neighbourhood with the broader topics in mind, allowing observations to emerge intuitively through walking and conversation. Their attention was often drawn to *barriers* and forms of exclusion, leading them to document spiky fences, metal partitions surrounding the main square, and the closed shutters of storefronts. Alongside these traces of control and policing, they also recorded signs of *care* and community, focusing on the façade and surroundings of the local refugee community centre. Fragments of the neighbourhood's layered *history* similarly attracted attention, including discarded patterned tiles discovered within a pile of construction rubble. Throughout the exploration, they

collected numerous reliefs from natural elements, like tree bark, branches and vegetation. Both participants were highly engaged in exploring textures and quickly reflected on how materials, surfaces, and objects could be interpreted through the prompts, generating discussions that revealed tactile documentation as a catalyst for urban reflection.

Overall, participants engaged more with the sensory and social experience of walking through Exarcheia than with the analytical structure of the prompts. The map proved difficult to read for some, particularly as most were unfamiliar with the area, while others arrived expecting a more conventional clay workshop and were initially unclear about the broader aims of the exercise. As a result, the prompts functioned less as a structured framework and more as loose triggers for observation and discussion. Despite this, the workshop supported an open-ended engagement with the neighbourhood. Participants remained active throughout, moving through the area, collecting textures, and exchanging impressions in real time. Walking, clay-making, and informal dialogue produced a rich set of material traces, even when not fully aligned with the intended framework. The process highlighted both the challenges and potential of such participatory tools, while suggesting their value as *co-analytical methods* in architectural practice, where embodied documentation can complement conventional representation.



(4–5) Workshop Experiment

Athens, GR	May–June, 2026	Hands-on visioning
location	date	theme



Futures in Clay II

At the beginning of the summer of 2026, the fourth and fifth workshops were hosted over two consecutive weeks at the office space of *Urbana*; an Athens-based organisation working on feminist and participatory approaches to urban design. Organised as part of Urbana's *Open Space* programme, the workshops provided an opportunity to revisit, after almost one year, the first clay-based workshop, and to further develop the earlier visioning ideas of Futures in Clay I. Reflecting Urbana's network, the workshops were attended by a small group of women, who were predominantly young and many of whom were architects or creatives. In this way, these sessions allowed us to re-test our previously developed methods within a new context and more relevant group of participants.

This series was originally conceived as three interconnected two-

hour workshops, each exploring tactile ways of thinking about the future, the self and the city. The first workshop echoed the earlier idol-making exercise and focused on individual reflection, inviting participants to translate personal futures, wishes and concerns into clay forms. The second workshop shifted towards collaborative making, exploring how collective ideas about urban life could emerge through shared clay model-making and discussion. A third workshop, intended to focus on practices of manifestation and agency-building through the previously-explored ostracism activity, along with constructing contemporary curse tablets, was ultimately not realised due to practical constraints. Despite this, the first two sessions formed a full-circle moment for the workshop experiments, returning to core questions of futures-thinking through clay-based making.



— write a secret about your future on a piece of paper — tear a piece of clay and bury it inside — make an idol that relates to the secret — share about the form without revealing the secret — write a small description about a far-away-future on a piece of paper — make an idol or form that represents this — share with the group — discuss and find common themes —

narratives through clay idols

The first workshop brought together seven participants with backgrounds in architecture, art, and craft, including one with prior experience in ceramics. Following a brief introduction to the project, participants were invited to write a secret, wish, or reflection about their future on a piece of paper, conceal it inside a piece of clay, and sculpt an object that represented it. Rather than introducing themselves verbally, participants later presented themselves through their creations.

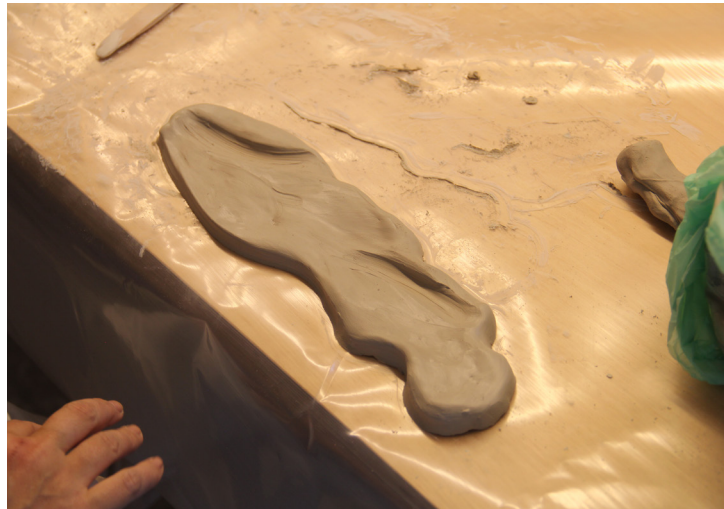
One participant sculpted a human-like figure covered in flower petals, describing her desire to “blossom” despite present anxieties. Another created a series of interconnected pinched cups filled with small clay fragments, representing her wish for an open, multiplicitous future. A participant formed a bird reminiscent of ancient Greek pottery, expressing her aspiration to combine architecture and archaeology. An artist working across weaving and engraving sculpted a model of her hand, reflecting a desire to remain creative and hands-on in her future. Another participant made a figurative form with elongated arms holding inscribed clay fragments, expressing a wish to move beyond social norms. One participant worked fluidly through multiple transformations, eventually creating a crown that evolved into a planted garden and internal tower, expressing a desire to build “home” both physically and metaphorically. Finally, a participant sculpted a two-part idol in which tangled snakes or threads represented present anxieties, while a robust base

filled with beads symbolised future opportunities.

The second activity shifted towards *collective futures of the city*. Participants were asked to reflect on urban life across different scales—from neighbourhood to region—and translate their ideas into clay forms. Although the more open-ended prompt initially proved challenging, it gradually led to more spatial and diagrammatic responses. One participant cut triangular openings into a clay slab, drawing inspiration from brise-soleil systems and traditional island dovecotes. Another created an elongated vessel representing the Athenian basin, filling it with small clay fragments symbolising neighbourhoods and buildings gradually expanding across the landscape. The work reflected on urban growth and questioned what happens when a city continues to expand until it reaches its geographical limits.

Across both activities, participants highlighted the openness of the process and the absence of pressure to produce aesthetically resolved objects. Several described the experience as therapeutic, emphasising the value of working through ideas materially rather than verbally. The participant with prior clay experience particularly noted the rarity of engaging in ceramics collectively, contrasting it with the solitary nature of most clay practice. Overall, the workshop demonstrated how simple prompts combined with tactile making can generate rich reflections, connecting personal narratives with broader spatial imaginaries.







— make with clay while discussing a shared theme — share and reflect on the forms as the discussion evolves — identify common concerns, desires and ideas — try make something together as a collective reflection —

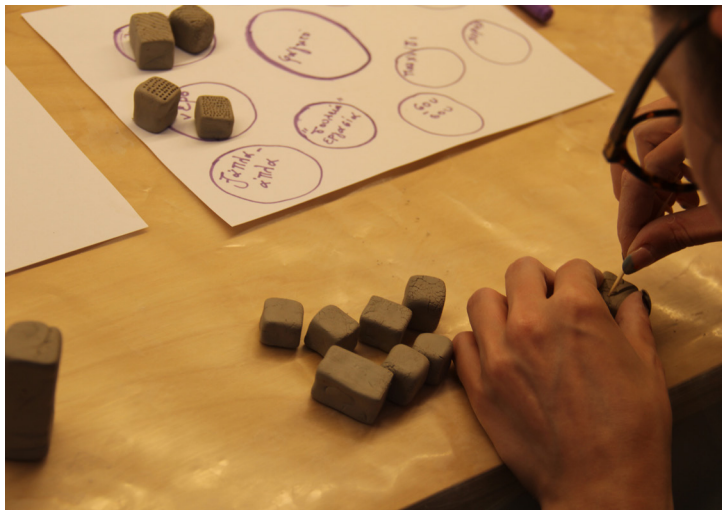
making a clay model

The second workshop was attended by four participants, all of whom had also participated in the previous session. Although attendance was lower than anticipated, the smaller group created a more intimate atmosphere and allowed for a different mode of facilitation, where discussion and making could unfold more collaboratively. The workshop explored the question *How will we live in the future?*, inviting participants to reflect on housing, mobility, public space, ecology, and cohabitation through conversation and clay-making.

Rather than separating discussion from making, participants quickly began working with clay while talking. The conversation moved fluidly between topics, with objects emerging as tools for organising thoughts and testing ideas. One participant sculpted a balcony filled with plants, seats and a table, reflecting on the lack of outdoor communal space in the typical Athenian polykatoikia. Alongside it, she created a bicycle, imagining alternatives to the city's car-centric mobility culture. Another participant made a small table and chairs, using them to reflect on urban furniture and the ways public space is organised and occupied. An architecture student developed a boardgame-like set of cubes inscribed with symbols corresponding to different aspects of urban life—food, work, play, water, gossip, and rest—imagining a housing model generated through the priorities and

desires of its inhabitants. In contrast, an artist participant responded to what she perceived as a rigid understanding of the city by creating a series of spiral forms, proposing a more fluid and organic spatial imagination. The workshop facilitator also participated in the making process, producing a series of quick clay objects that both responded to and provoked discussion. These included an avenue gradually transforming into a forest as a reflection on the future reuse of road infrastructure, a form inspired by Le Corbusier's Dom-ino structural system, and a collection of everyday domestic objects. Making alongside participants helped reinforce the idea that there was no correct way to respond to the prompt and encouraged an exploratory, iterative approach to the discussion.

Towards the end of the workshop, the group returned to the original ambition of collaborative making. Using the remaining clay, participants used their handles simultaneously and collectively formed a large circular base. Then, they arranged their individual creations upon it, producing a city-like landscape. The spontaneous exercise was described as liberating and enjoyable, providing an unexpected yet fitting conclusion to the workshop. More than any individual object, this final collective composition embodied the workshop's central question: how different needs, desires, and imaginaries might coexist within a shared future.





Material Questions

Early this year, a series of vessels was decided upon for an exhibition of Ceramic Futures. During this experimental phase, the main aim was to bring together the different clay-making experiments and thoughts developed over the previous months into practice. A first research question emerged: *How can clay function as a critical medium for reflecting on spa-*

tial, social, and ecological struggles? The idea was to use clay as a tool for reading places; thinking of clay not just as matter but as a way of knowing. The vague question about the future becomes handleable through a sequence: *collect (material and stories), transform, assemble, critique, envision*. This is the organisational framework that structures the work.



Towards the Vessels

critical regionalism

During my broader architectural practice, starting already in my academic years, the theory of critical regionalism has been quietly influencing my work; whether a research project, a design studio, or a later endeavour, I observe, research and design with this theory running underneath. A resistance strategy against the placeless and the generic, rooted in the belief that architecture should respond to where it actually is; in its materials, its climate and its history. First articulated by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in their 1981 paper "*The Grid and the Pathway*", the theory was a direct response to the universalising tendencies of modernism. Though situated in that moment, it feels deeply pertinent today. Trying to find ways to engage with current spatial and social struggles through making, critical regionalism felt like a natural connection; a framework that already knew how to listen to place. The actions of collect, transform and assemble are, in this way, completely intertwined with the places they narrate.

narrative vessels

It is fascinating how ceramic vessels, across many cultures and periods, were never only functional objects. Vessels meant something. In ancient Greece, through their shape, ornament and the scenes painted on their surfaces, they documented daily life, mythology and collective identity; they were archives before the word existed. They also carried belonging; the style of a vessel told you where it came from, which society made it, what values it held. I

wanted to reinterpret that idea. This is why this series is called *Narrative Vessels*. Thinking about an exhibition that reads places, the aim was to create *a series of vessels that narrate each place as an assembly*; understood as a family, not as individual objects. Inspired by Georges Perec's attention to the mundane, a writer known for examining the overlooked rhythms of everyday life through close, patient observation, clay becomes the medium to observe, document and inquire; to materially explore inhabitation of the city.

places

Based in Amsterdam, the translation of places into clay was explored across several locations. Thinking through different contexts, three were chosen; a mixture of natural, industrial and ordinary urban landscapes, each offering a different realm to investigate. The *NDSM wharf*, *Westerpark*, and the *Albert Cuypmarkt*.

NDSM holds a particular personal weight, having worked on this area for three years. It offers a post-industrial atmosphere layered with social history, art and multiple strata of time that act as a palimpsest; raw in its material character, unresolved, still becoming. *Westerpark* is a different kind of park; not the manicured green of Amsterdam's more formal spaces, but a place of heritage and industrial memory, small farms and festivals; complex in its layout and rhythms. And then the *Albert Cuypmarkt*; perhaps the closest thing in Amsterdam to a Perec subject. A chaotic, diverse market sitting in the middle of one of the most affluent, well-kept neighbourhoods in the city; full of food and waste, and both locals and tourists.



the repeating form

For this series, a simple vessel form is chosen. All vessels begin with the same quantity of clay and share the same shape, allowing them to be recognised as part of the assembly. The forms are thrown on the wheel; not trying to make them identical, but using intuition to reproduce a shape that has been made for the last two years: a cylinder with a simple foot that opens gently toward the top. The repetition of this form is itself an ethnographic act; the same container applied to different places, accumulating difference through surface, gesture and material rather than through shape.

Other hand-building methods were tested and considered, but

ultimately the wheel offered something the others did not. Throwing produces a symmetrical, neutral base; a controlled and repeatable starting point from which the acts can then intervene, without the irregularities that hand-building tends to introduce into the form itself. The intention was never to become a refined thrower, or to demonstrate technical mastery of the medium, but rather to use the wheel as a tool for generating a consistent and anonymous vessel; something stable and open enough to then receive drawing, carving, imprinting, deformation or assemblage. The making of the form is not the statement. What happens to it afterwards is.



Design Matrix

gestures

To structure the experimentation across locations, a design matrix was developed; a framework that maps each vessel to a specific location, a gesture and a glaze. Rather than forcing the same set of gestures onto every place, the matrix allows each location to suggest its own ways of being read, selecting from a shared vocabulary of gestures that were developed and refined throughout the research process. The intent was to test these gestures across different contexts first; the glazes were added as a final layer once the gestures had already been established.

These gestures are the physical acts through which clay becomes a reading of place. *Carving* translates movement and observation into line directly on the surface of the vessel, mapping routes, contours or the memory of a space. *Repetitive texture* uses a single found object to create a continuous, all-over pattern across the surface; the object itself disappears into the rhythm, becom-

ing atmosphere rather than record. A *catalogue of objects* documents found materials by pressing each one once into the soft clay, leaving their negative traces side by side as a legible archive of what was collected. *Texture reliefs* transfer the surface character of a place onto clay through direct contact; walls, floors, bark, stone, capturing the material skin of a site. *Assemblage* incorporates found fragments directly onto the vessel before firing, some surviving the kiln, others burning away and leaving only their ghost. *Deformation* uses the vessel itself as a direct recording tool, pressing it against elements in the environment so that the place physically reshapes the clay. *Inscription* carves words, names, street fragments or overheard language into the surface, turning the vessel into a textual archive. And finally, the *glaze* itself functions as a gesture; each developed from materials gleaned at a specific location, it is the final and most permanent layer of reading.



	Westerpark	Albert Cuypmarkt	NDSM
carving	<u>vessel 3</u>	<u>vessel 6</u>	<u>vessel 8</u> , <u>vessel 10</u>
repetitive texture		<u>vessel 4</u>	
catalogue of objects	<u>vessel 2</u>		
texture reliefs	<u>vessel 1</u>	<u>vessel 5</u>	<u>vessel 7</u>
assemblage			<u>vessel 11</u>
inscription			<u>vessel 9</u>



Photo by Benedetta Pompili, at vuur collective

Glaze Making

vuur collective residency

The glazes developed for each location function as a distinguishing layer. Just as regional pottery styles once made visible the identity and origin of a vessel, and reflected contextual struggles and histories, a series of glazes was developed, by incorporating gleaned materials from the Amsterdam locations, that lend the vessels a sense of legibility.

Although we have engaged extensively with clay-making before, the glazing world was an entirely uncharted territory. To venture into glazing as a narrative tool, we applied for *spring residency at vuur*; an Amsterdam-based ceramics collective known for their experimental approach to materials and industrial waste. A month-long residency there was a period of intensive learning, testing, and developing distinct glazes from locally gleaned materials.

The first glaze began with ash. The collective maintains an abundance of wood ash from beech and oak, collected from the nearby pizza restaurant *Piccola Storia*. During a workshop with *Hannah Rose Whittle*, the ancient technique of ash glazing was introduced; a process with roots going back thousands of years, in which wood ash acts as a natural flux, melting into the clay surface during firing and producing results that are impossible to fully predict or control. *The ash glaze outcome was striking,*

and it felt like a natural fit for the Westerpark vessels, where the organic and the industrial meet.

For NDSM, the material of interest had always been the brick.

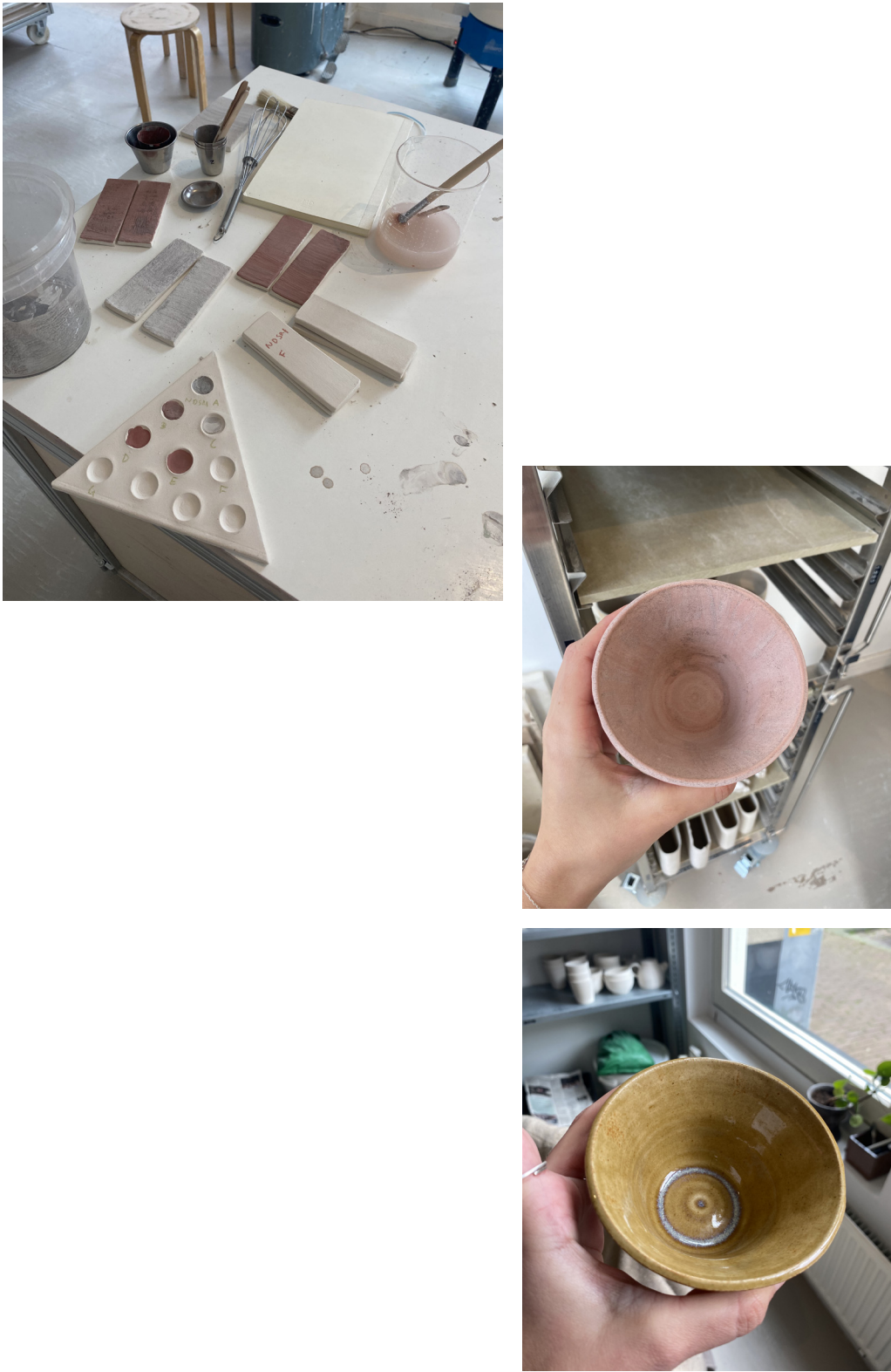
Unlike the rest of Amsterdam, which uses largely uniform materials across its public spaces, NDSM has a characteristic purple-brown brick that has been present since the shipyard era and continues to define the ground of the wharf today. Having worked with and around this brick for three years, the desire to bring it directly into the glazing process felt almost inevitable. The brick was collected, crushed, ground and sieved into a fine powder, and a glaze was developed using 20% brick content, then tested further with the addition of different oxides to explore colour possibilities.

For the Albert Cuypmarkt, the starting point was the fish and seafood section; specifically the oyster shells discarded after each market day. Through a process of calcination at 1000°C, followed by crushing, grinding and sieving, the shells are reduced to pure calcium carbonate, a material with a long history in glaze-making. A satin glaze was developed using 15% oyster shell, and a further glaze was made combining both brick and oyster shell at 35% total, connecting the two locations into a single material experiment.

Ceramic Futures



Glaze Making





Photos by Benedetta Pompili, at vuur collective

gestures

carving

repetitive texture

catalogue of objects

texture reliefs

assemblage

inscription

Westerpark vessels

*vessel 3 Carving the Gashouder, Westergasfabriek
glaze from beech and oak*

*vessel 2 Cataloguing gleaned branches and rocks
glaze from beech and oak*

*vessel 2 Transferring textures from trees and paving
glaze from beech and oak*

Westerpark Narrative Vessels



Left to right: vessels 1, 2, 3



gestures

carving

repetitive texture

catalogue of objects

texture reliefs

assemblage

inscription

Albert Cuypmarkt vessels

vessel 6 Carving a cognitive map of the market within De Pijp
glaze from oyster shells and brick

vessel 4 Pressing a repetitive texture with an oyster shell
glaze from oyster shells and brick

vessel 5 Transferring textures from architectural elements
glaze from oyster shells and brick

Albert Cuypmarkt Narrative Vessels



Left to right: vessels 4, 5, 6

Ceramic Futures



Narrative Vessels



gestures

carving

repetitive texture

catalogue of objects

texture reliefs

assemblage

inscription

NDSM vessels

*vessel 8 Carving the waterfront connecting NDSM east and west
glaze from brick*

*vessel 10 Carving and cutting the blue doors of the Loods building
glaze from brick*

*vessel 7 Transferring textures from architectural elements
glaze from brick*

*vessel 11 Using brick dust in the clay body itself
glaze from brick*

*vessel 9 Inscribing reviews gleaned from the internet about NDSM
glaze from brick*

NDSM

Narrative Vessels



Left to right: vessels 7, 8, 9, 10, 11



Ceramic Futures



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Narrative Vessels



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Photo by Benedetta Pompili, at vuur collective

Material Reflection

The sequence that structured this project; *collect, transform, assemble, critique, and envision*; was chosen at the beginning as an organisational framework, a way of making a vague research question handleable; but looking back now, having moved through it in practice across months of walking, gleaning, throwing, testing and firing, it reads differently. It was not only a method for making the hands, through the material, through the mistakes and the unexpected results, and each vessel that came out of that process is evidence of the sequence having been completed; not an illustration of a place, but a record of how it was approached.

Collecting meant walking slowly and paying attention, gleaning stones or debris, textures, oyster shells and bricks not by searching for the representative, but by following what intuitively caught the eye or the hand. *Transforming* meant bringing those materials into contact with clay; pressing, imprinting, crushing, firing. *Assembling* meant making decisions about what materials could be combined and fired safely, what would survive the kiln intact, like brick dust, and what would not, like a rock that might explode. *Critiquing* meant stepping back and asking what the vessel reveals that a photograph or a map could not. And *envisioning*, the final and most open term in the sequence, is where this reflection lives.

the gestures as methods

From the beginning, the ambition was never to create a collection of

vessels that represent what these places look like, because photography does that work better, faster and more accurately. What clay offers is something different. Clay can produce a record of how a place was approached, handled and read. The gestures developed through this research are not mere illustrations of place but methods for reading it; and methods, unlike representations, can travel.

Critical regionalism was the personal entry point for this chapter of making, a theory that has shaped an architectural practice for years and that offered a way of framing what it means to read a place through its own materials rather than importing the generic. But the gestures themselves do not require that framework to function, and someone else could pick them up with an entirely different theoretical starting point and they would still work.

Personally, some gestures proved more generative than others, and several will continue beyond this project, into future practice. Texture relief, in particular, emerged as a remarkably precise way of translating context into surface. Comparing the three relief vessels side by side, the differences are immediately legible; the raw, industrial character of NDSM, marked by industrial materials like steel, sits in clear contrast to the organic quality of the park, and to the smaller, more domestic textures of the market within De Pijp. Equally rewarding was the process of working directly with the materials themselves, for example crushing brick and incorporating it into the clay body, or developing glazes from a high proportion of recycled and gleaned matter.



the ecological dimension

The ecological questions in this project were never imposed as a framework from the outside; they arrived through the materials themselves gradually, beginning with the choice to work with recycled clay; partly practical, partly principled, rooted in the understanding that clay is infinitely recyclable before it is fired and that there is something important about that quality in a project concerned with what places already offer. But it was the residency at *vuur* that opened the ecological dimension more fully, by making visible how much of what is needed already exists in the form of what other processes discard.

If this assembly of vessels is about reading what a place offers, then its waste materials are as much a part of that reading as its surfaces and textures; a glaze made from oyster shells or brick dust carries something of a place's relationship to consumption, to industry, to what gets thrown away. In this way, the ecological argument and the critical regionalist argument turn out to be the same: use what is there.

envision

The vessels are finished and exhibited, but the gestures remain open; what this project produces beyond the objects themselves is a set of methods that can be picked up, carried elsewhere and applied to places and struggles that have nothing to do with Amsterdam in the

mid-2020s, and that transferability is not incidental but central to what *Narrative vessels* is aiming for.

In a moment when cities are changing rapidly, when public space in northern European countries is being smoothed and standardised across neighbourhoods, when the same materials, the same surfaces and the same spatial logic appear regardless of context, the act of pressing soft clay on a wall made of bricks is a small but deliberate act of resistance. The vessel does not shout, but it refuses to be generic, and in that refusal it makes an argument that is both aesthetic and political.

Ancient ceramic vessels are among the most reliable archives of how people lived and what their environments were made of; textures, pigments and materials that would otherwise have been lost are still readable in their surfaces thousands of years later. Translating this into the project, the places documented in these vessels are changing, as all places do, and what gets pressed into the clay or fired into the glaze is not a record of how they look but of how they were encountered; a specific moment of contact between a place and a maker.

What comes next is less a plan than an invitation; to other makers, other architects, other researchers willing to walk through a place, collect what it offers and discards, and let the material speak. The sequence is there, the gestures are there, and the vessels from Amsterdam are a first proof that places can be read this way through clay.

Final Thoughts

This booklet documents a year's worth of work that we produced by getting our hands and clothes dirty, and keeping our minds open; thinking about and through clay. Divided between Amsterdam and Athens, we initially perceived this as an opportunity to think critically about our different environments, but later got perplexed and confused by not being able to work simultaneously and with a common method. Eventually, we realised that our distance, along with our own personal interests and ambitions, led us to a dual mode of work: material experiments, or inquiring with clay through the hands of the architect as the maker; and workshop experiments, or inquiring with clay collectively through the hands of many. In this way, Ceramic Futures looks both inwards, through artistic creation, and outwards, through community engagement. Through this dual work we have understood the usefulness of clay as a tool for critical, spatial thinking within and around architecture.

Clay allowed us to venture into the city, to explore, to document, and to reflect. Equipped with clay we were able to walk and see in a way that we didn't do before, asking ourselves a new set of questions: What do I choose to document? What can I reach out to and press clay into? And why *this* instead of *that*? By making clay reliefs we were able to capture physical textures, but also to materialize fleeting thoughts, concerns or ideas. Documenting a tree's trunk

might be out of pure textural interest, but it might also be a reflection about the way Athenian trees remain dwarfs due to limited open soil, or about the ever-changing nature of Amsterdam's green spaces through history. Clay itself is a vessel; through form and intention it can contain ideas and narratives, or even concerns and not-yet-formed thoughts. Clay can be used to think.

By working both through our own hands and through collective processes, we have also come to verify the open-ness of clay. As a means to document and reflect tactilely about the city, clay is easy to use and open to all, regardless of age, skills or knowledge. Through a structured process anyone can easily use it, however, it can become a powerful storytelling tool when utilised by architects or spatial thinkers, particularly within architectural education.

Aside from the observation and documentation, clay allowed for the communication of the observed ideas. In the workshop experiments people engaged in collective debates that were created through their collections of clay reliefs; while a series of ceramic vessels—the result of the material experiments—were shown in an art exhibition, allowing the audience to reckon with the embedded narratives. Thus, clay does not only hold the capacity to store narratives, but also can be utilised to communicate them to broader audiences; even ones unfamiliar with architecture or design.

Although, to truly understand this potential much more research and experimentation is required.

By working through different modes of experimentation we also realised that clay can be as much *product* as *process*. This is reflected through the project's outputs. On the one hand, a series of collaborative clay workshops produced multiple small-scale unfired, non-final, maybe-obsolete objects, that have for the majority lost their usefulness aside from being testaments of a process that occurred. However, what was produced is also a series of transferable methods for collective critical exploration, documentation and visioning. The clay itself can be reused endlessly. On the other hand, a series of vessels document a months-long critical, artistic journey; final-objects that have transcended from clay experiments to ceramic works of art and architecture.

Clay allowed us to think about the future; in more ways than initially expected. First, explicitly, evidenced by the workshop experiments. By looking towards ancestral ceramic practices, like ostracism, we can engage with the future by asking tough but specific questions. What should go? What do we need to reach our desired or ideal futures? How do we *express* it? In this way, clay-making invites a specific, meaningful, condensed curation of one's ideas, by choosing symbols, scenes, patterns, words, that are written, inscribed, scribbled, torn,

glued. Second, implicitly, evidenced by the material experiments. By engaging with the documentation of a place's essence, the produced ceramic vessel opens the ground for open-ended questions. What is it that makes space a *place*? What is important *here*? What will happen to it? Clay can then also invite personal and collective reflection, much like a work of art does.

Finally and more personally, clay allowed us to think about our own future, as architects, designers, makers, spatial thinkers, artists; two people that struggle to find their position within the field of architecture. Despite this being our first collaborative creative endeavor and the difficulty of working with so much distance between us, clay offered us a glimpse into something that we don't see here yet. Ceramic Futures has been an open question in itself from the beginning. What can *we* do with clay? Now, looking back, the answer has been looking at us from the beginning: with clay we may enact what we believe is missing. How could we think collectively, tactilely, simultaneously, critically, creatively; if not with clay? How could we engage with place contextually, critically, extensively and artistically; if not with clay? While this part of the project ends here, much more thought and work is required to understand the true extent of possibilities that clay opens up for architecture—and we are excited to keep going.

