

turtle



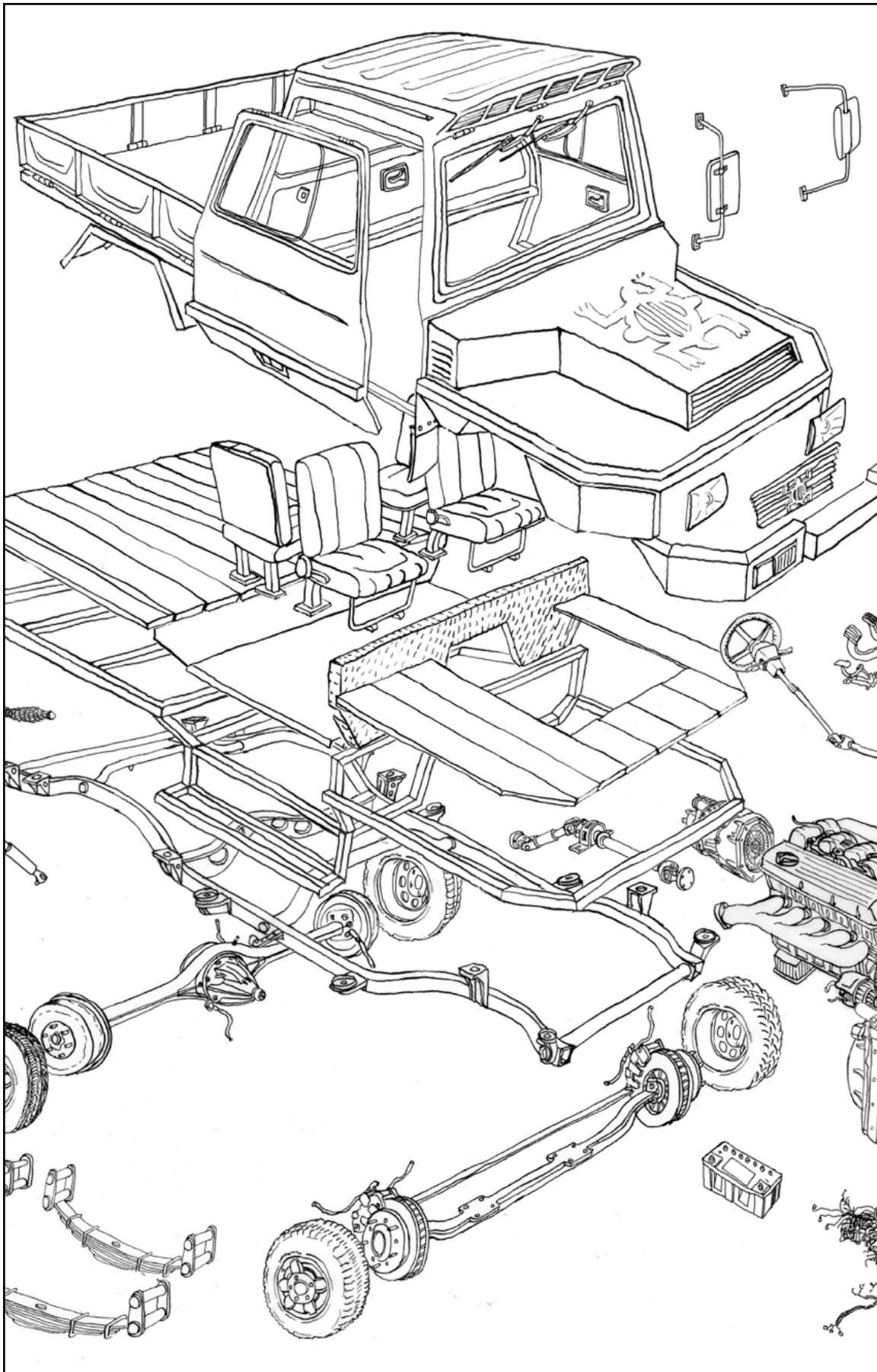
Building a car
in Africa

Melle Smets
Joost van Onna

Book / Exhibition



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Turtle 1 - Exploded view © Melle Smets

1. Project Description

The majority of the world lives in a do-it-yourself environment. In the Western world we are addicted to systems that have locked us out completely. When a car breaks down, it is impossible to repair without specifically designed car parts and a certified mechanic who has the knowledge and tools available. The process is carried out in a pre-set framework that cannot be adjusted. We have become the slaves of modern manufacturing; most of us don't even know how to change a tyre anymore.

In order to investigate how a self-organised community functions, Smets and Van Onna travelled to Suame Magazine is the biggest sub-Saharan industrial cluster in Ghana. Here, 200,000 artisans are working in 12,000 workshops, stores and factories, repairing, adjusting and re-inventing scrapped cars. The place is enormous and *business is booming*. Smets and Van Onna began a collaboration with local mechanics, S.M.I.D.O. (Suame Magazine Industrial Developmental Organisation) and KNUST University, to design and build a fully functional prototype.

Turtle 1 is different from all other cars. It was built without a pre-arranged plan, taking the strengths and possibilities of Suame Magazine as the starting point. The design focuses on flexibility and is based on the analysis of the local circumstances, the available tools and infrastructure from West Africa. *Turtle 1* is totally label-free: constructed with any type or brand of car parts that happen to be available. The vehicle can easily be transformed into a tow truck, a shop or a taxi-van. The car is sturdy and fully mechanical, assuring easy repairs with simple tools. While it may be a bit slow, *Turtle 1* can get very old and is above all robust, strong and functional.

After just twelve weeks of construction the first African car was born. Following a blessing by King Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu and a lot of attention from the Ghanaian media, the car was exported to the Netherlands to start a promotional tour. *Turtle 1* became a celebrity, it was featured in numerous magazines, newspapers, television shows and participated in different car fairs (next to state-of-the-art fully electric Tesla S.) and art exhibitions. In both continents the project appeared a success story: people were excited and investors enthusiastic. Consequently, the project expanded. Based on the experiences and ideas that came up during the building process, Smets and Van Onna, together with Dutch partners made a one-size-fits-all chassis for the production of the assembly line for *Turtle 2*. Exactly two years after leaving Ghana, *Turtle 1*, together with a business was shipped back to Suame Magazine.

Whereas the initiators returned with a modest business plan based on the local circumstances and its limited capacities, the Ghanaian partners had a different idea in mind. They had bought a concession for a large piece of land outside Kumasi to develop an industrial estate with the Turtle factory as its centrepiece and had expected the Europeans to return with the necessary investment funds. Also in terms of car design parties experienced conflicting ideas: where the Dutch continue to believe in developing the concept of a scrap-based car, the Ghanaians had begun thinking of a luxury SUV.

Thus, despite all the efforts made to act differently, to (implicitly) also expose the weakness of the western model and the good will from both sides, *Turtle 1* has tragically become a classic example of the pattern African-European projects have been a victim of in the past. Is this the end of a joint dream? *Turtle 1 – Building a Car in Africa* is more than the story about an African car. It presents the fascinating world of self-reliance and improvisation against the backdrop of Western consumerism and industrialisation. The resulting material – extensive documentation that includes film, photography, drawing and writing – illustrates the project to a wider audience via a book and travelling exhibition.



Building the 1:1 wooden test model of *Turtle 1* © Teun Vonk

2. Book

Five years after Smets and Van Onna set foot on Ghanaian soil, it was time to reflect on what had been achieved. The book takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the authors' experiences as naïve outsiders – with no knowledge of cars – who wanted to find out how an informal economy works.

To fully understand the functioning of the Suame Magazine a hand drawn map by Melle Smets is made part of the book. The pull-out drawing can be found at the front of the publication.

Designed by Ko Sliggers – known for his award-winning cookbook about Sicilian Cuisine *Koken Tussen Vulkanen*, the book is from start to finish filled with humorous and insightful images and video's. All the photographs are accompanied with a code which is able to provide additional information, such as: date, location and car part reference number. Numerous pages in the book display a QR code. Placing their phone on the page and scanning the pictogram redirect the viewer redirected to one of the forty video's that are incorporated in the book.

In addition to texts written by the authors, Warna Oosterbaan, known from various titles such as *Motorziel: kleine sociologie van een machine* (2010) leaves no question unanswered in his thoughtful interview at the end of the book.



Spread from the publication *Turtle 1 - Building a Car in Africa*



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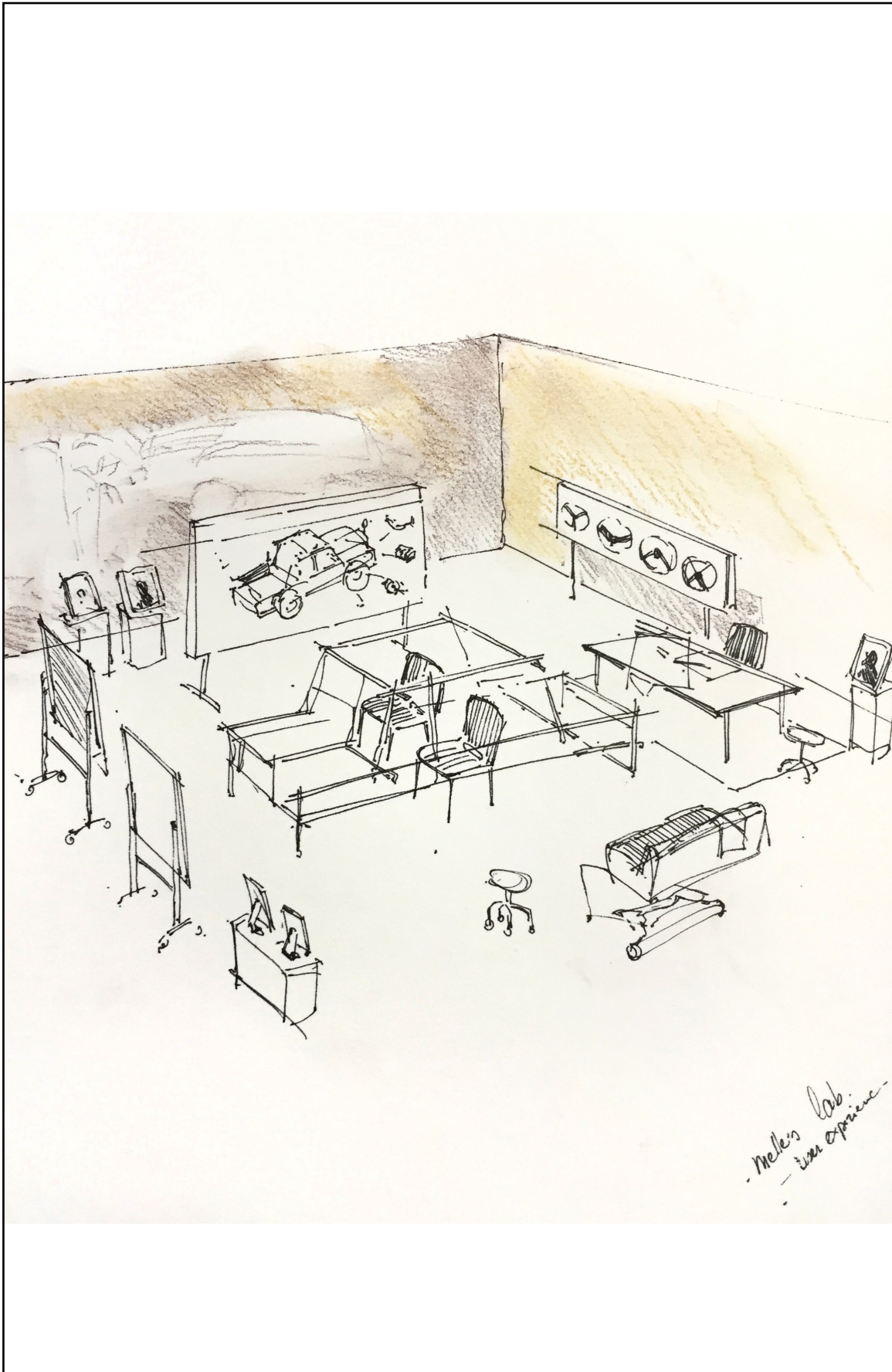
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Scan the QR code to view the video's incorporated into the book



Sketch of Turtle Lab © TomDavid Architects

3. Exhibition

When buying a modern car you can go online and select your dream model in different colours, with alternative interior upholstery and a selection of dashboard electronics. This variety of choices hides behind years of work – calculating every single detail and its consequences – by a large team of engineers, designers, marketing and financial specialists. As we now know, up until the point of Dieselgate....

After a preview exhibition at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, where the project was shown for 6 months as part of the group manifestation *Project Rotterdam*, it is time to present the project to a large international audience. While the media had extensively covered the building process, the full story with its final conclusions has never been shown before. The dream between the initiators and local partners in Suame Magazine has come to an end, yet what did we learn? Which lessons can we use in the future? Is it possible to produce informal car factories alike? What are the pitfalls?

One of the options for the travelling exhibition would be to transform the venue into the *Turtle Lab*: a research institute, educational centre, production space and showroom all-in-one! Here, the customer stands on the front line: he can choose his car by being in direct contact with the building team who assemble and design the vehicle in merely a few weeks. Where large car manufacturers hide their trade secrets and keep all brainstorm sessions behind closed doors, the visitors of the *Turtle Lab* will receive insight into the functioning of a large, informal factory. They learn about the origins of the first prototype and, at the same time, become part of the growing network that can make use of the research made by Smets and Van Onna, as there are numerous industrial clusters to which their concept could be applied.

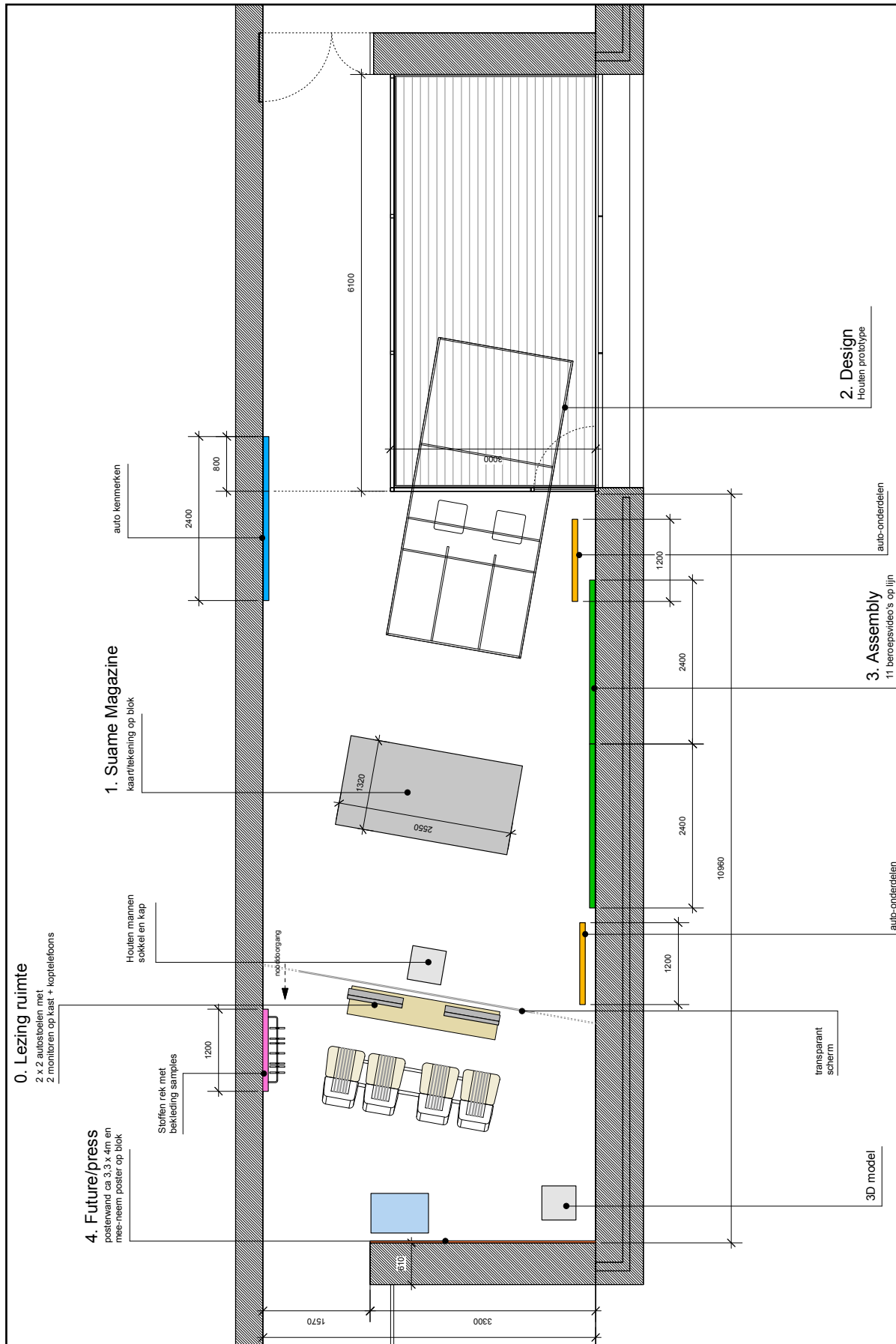
What is there to see in the *Turtle Lab*?

Visitors can assemble a car based on their goals, functions and aesthetic wishes. The one-size-fits-all chassis, which was designed for the local production line for *Turtle 2*, will be on show alongside with a flexible wooden 1:1 car frame. There is also a wide variety of fabrics, car seats and steering wheels to choose from.

After deciding what the car should be like, visitors are introduced to the mechanical team – from rubber cutter to plastic moulder to sprint master – via video portraits that are hung onto the exhibition walls. Here they can witness their speciality in handcraft; there is no such thing as generic sizes in this workshop.

Interested in getting your own hands dirty? On the other side of the room a desk and photocopying machine is available. Here visitors can print the universal A4 manual that illustrates, step by step how to build your own car. For those with more entrepreneurial ambitions: a king size monitor displays 12 lessons – do's and don'ts when setting up your own business in an informal economy. Folders with contracts and reports analysing the industrial growth of open-air factories are placed alongside.

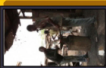
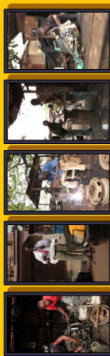
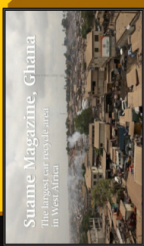
Last, but not least, a car would not be a car without promotional gadgets and merchandising. Visitors may take a free poster of *Turtle 1* to pin on their walls at home



Sketch of Turtle Lab © TomDavid Architects



Sketch of Turtle Lab © TomDavid Architects



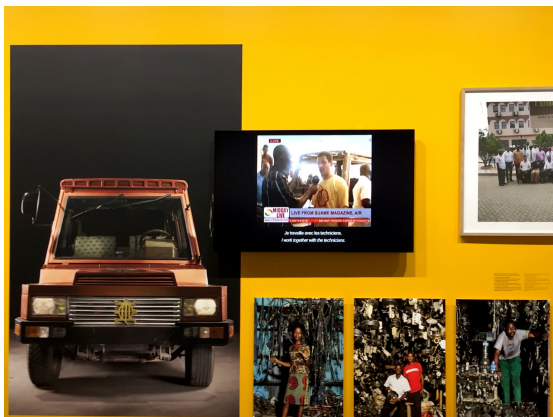
Turtle 1 – Building a car in Africa EXHIBITION - COMPACT VERSION

The extensive documentation, consisting of photography, film, sculptures, drawings and text is brought together in an exhibition that reflects on the achieved goals, problems and successes of this adventurous project. The show is available for venues in the Netherlands and abroad. Two versions, compact and extended, makes sure the show can be installed in every type of space.

The compact exhibition consists of the following material:

- Two advertising images of Turtle 1 (photograph on poster, painting on wooden board)
- Photographs, videos and official documents reflecting the building progress of Turtle 1
- Video portraits of the local artisans
- Photography portraits of local shopkeepers
- Photographs of Suame Magazine
- A illustrated map of Suame Magazine
- Two copies of the book: *Turtle 1 - Building a Car in Africa*

From March until September 2017 the compact version was included in *Autophoto*; a group exhibition at Fondation Cartier, Paris. The work of Melle Smets and Joost van Onna was presented between renowned names, such as Robert Adams, Lee Freeland, Yasuhiro Ishimoto, Andreas Gursky – who also focussed on the car, or the car industry during their photography career.





A typical shop in Suame Magazine (Ghana) © Teun Vonk

4. Paradox

Paradox is based in Edam (20 kilometres north of Amsterdam). The not for profit organisation develops projects around contemporary issues with documentary authors: photographers, filmmakers, visual artists, writers and researchers. Paradox does not programme its own exhibition space but collaborates with venues in the Netherlands and abroad.

Since 1993 Paradox has developed more than 60 distinctive activities, travelling to some 150 venues worldwide.

Paradox was founded in 1993 with the aim of stimulating the development in photography. To reach this, Paradox produces travelling exhibitions, organises symposia and publishes audiovisual, digital and printed publications. The recording of history as it is unfolding, and the interaction between social, economic and technical factors, with the changes in society which flow from these changes, are recurring aspects in both our thematic and monographic projects.

Within these projects we experiment explicitly with multimedia forms of presentation, and the interaction between different disciplines (photography, film, audio, writing) as well as platforms (exhibitions, websites, books, DVDs, tablet Apps and educational programmes). Our main goal is to reach a wide audience without losing the nuances that the addressed social issues require. This is the reason behind our multiplatform strategy: one reaches a different audience with a diversity of platforms. But the synergy between different media as well as platforms also create new experiences for an audience, raising questions in unexpected ways. Furthermore it challenges the notions and conventions around the presentation of (photographic) material leading to experiments mixing of old and new technology, media and platforms.

Paradox seeks partners in realizing these kind of projects, in particular publishers, designers and partner institutions in the Netherlands and abroad. Exhibitions are created in close collaboration with museums and as a result travel to a broad variety of institutions, both nationally and internationally.

Project List

White spots | Turtle 1 | Voyage à Dakar | Borders Kill | 9 Days - from my window in Aleppo | Women We Have Not Lost Yet | The New Suez Canal | Digital Storytelling | Chickens; Scared by Torpedo | Ebifananyi | The Last Book Revisited | Maydan - 100 Portraits | I Hear You | Not in my Back Yard | Points on the Map | Me We | Oil & Paradise | Look at me and Tell me if you Have Known me Before | Via Panam | Offside | Poppy | The Netherlands - Off the Shelf | Indelible Images | Angry | Tokyo Symphony | We are the World | Spectator | Occupation: Soldier | Multivocal Histories | The Last Days of Shishmaref | So Blue So Blue | North Holland Biennale 2008 | Go No Go | Five Stories | Greenhouse | The Wars | European Fields | Why Mister, Why? | I(p+r)/n | Britanya | Experience | Ay Dios | >play | East Wind West Wind | p'rend | Dutch Fields | City Bikes / Stadskietsen | Avatar | Long Live me!

