



# UNSCRIPTED GROUNDS

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### UNSCRIPTED GROUNDS

## June 2026

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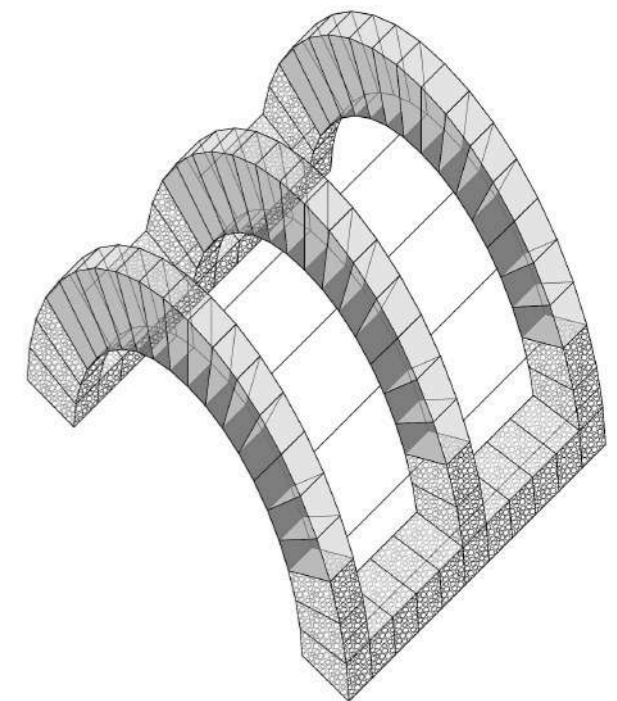
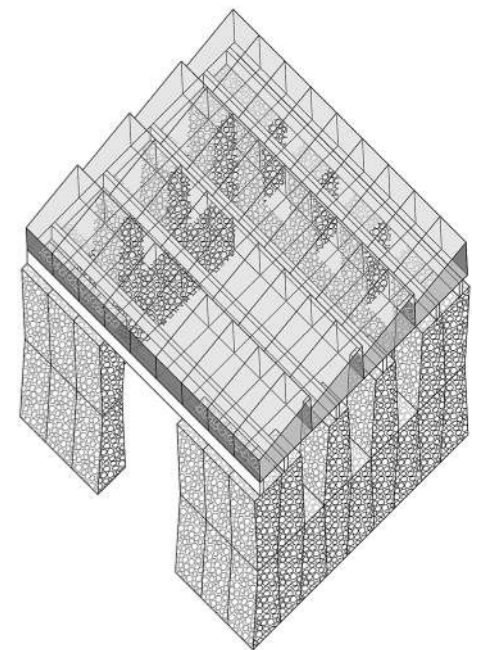
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# UNSCRIPTED GROUNDS

# Between the Fascination and the Commitment with *TERRAIN VAGUE*

Letter from the director

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The royal family at the inauguration of the German pavilion International Exhibition of Barcelona 1929. Restored image of photo by Brangulí-ANC.

I remember being an architecture student and visiting, in 1986, the newly reconstructed German Pavilion in Barcelona. If my fascination with its modernity was already immense at that time, it is difficult to imagine the impression it must have made on the King of Spain, Alfonso XIII, when Mies van der Rohe himself presented it to him at the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition.

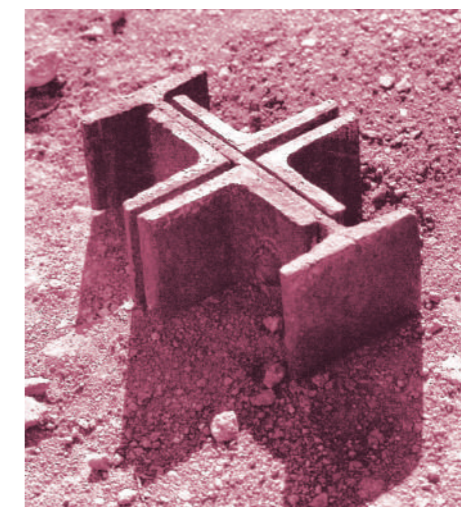
During my first visit to the Pavilion, I purchased the issue 261 of *ARQUITECTURA Madrid* explaining the reconstruction process, carried out by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Professor of Architectural Theory in Barcelona, together with Cristian Cirici and Fernando Ramos. In the subsequent accounts of the reconstruction project, the authors acknowledged:

*We are aware of having lived through an exceptional experience. As architects, we were confronted with the reconstruction of a paradigmatic building of twentieth-century architecture. We began from*

*diverse backgrounds of training and experience. We faced the singularity of a reconstruction for which abundant information existed regarding what we were to rebuild, yet not enough to establish beyond doubt the precise characteristics of the mythical Miesian building. Our work has been a project. But an atypical project insofar as research, critical decisions, and technical solutions have related*

*to one another differently from the ways customary in conventional architectural projects.<sup>1</sup>*

This constitutes a reflection of their strong personal commitment, since the architects undertaking the reconstruction possessed comprehensive knowledge of the materials, all of which had been archived in Barcelona, Berlin, New York, and Chicago. They also relied upon analyses of the remains discovered on the site itself, including the foundations, which enabled them to guarantee the fidelity of the reconstruction, based primarily on the original building rather than on the drawings later redrafted by Mies himself. As well, the reconstruction departs from the original in several respects, such as updated roof waterproofing and drainage systems, the extension of the green marble and travertine finishes behind the exterior walls instead of using painted stucco, and the incorporation of contemporary safety measures.



The 1984 discovery of a fragment of the original 1929 column © Francesc Català-Roca - Fundació Mies van der Rohe.

That was my first encounter with Ignasi de Solà-Morales. My second encounter with Solà-Morales was in 1993. But this time I realized that it was with Manuel, his older brother and Professor of Urbanism in Barcelona, occurred upon the completion of L'illa Diagonal together with Rafael Moneo.

And it was not until after 1995 that I encountered Ignasi de Solà-Morales again through his essay *Terrain Vague*, published in *Anyplace* by MIT Press, and later collected in *Territorios* (Gustavo Gili, 2002). Upon reading this brief text, the same immediate effect was repeated as with the reconstruction of the German Pavilion: first fascination, and then reflection upon social commitment as an architect.

The essay *Terrain Vague* begins by considering the abandoned, empty, or indeterminate urban spaces of large modern cities. The author analyses how photography has shaped our perception of the metropolis and how, in contrast to the traditional image of the city as a symbol of progress and order, an aesthetic and cultural interest has emerged around these marginal and forgotten places.

Solà-Morales advocates the use of the French concepts *terrain* and *vague* because they refer to spaces of urban scale, without clear boundaries, empty, unoccupied, or awaiting transformation, characterized by the absence of a defined function and by a sense of freedom, uncertainty, and blurred memory. These spaces represent zones existing outside the productive logic and urban control of the city, although traces of the past always survive within them, together with open possibilities and expectations for the future. The author argues that these places exert a powerful contemporary attraction because they embody estrangement, ambiguity, and resistance to the homogenization of the modern city. More than mere urban voids, *terrain vague* spaces are charged with poetic, emotional, and critical meaning.

Up to this point, I insist, the text is genuinely fascinating, and this

explains why it has attracted so many scholars of contemporary urban thought. It is therefore unsurprising that this issue of *UOUSj*, under the title *Unscripted Grounds*, brings together articles that reference the term defined by Solà-Morales.

However, at a certain point in the essay, the author remarks that there are photographs of urban spaces that provide us with information not only about built reality but also about human reality. These are images of empty spaces in which the photographer reveals traces of previous lives. In this second part of the text, Ignasi de Solà-Morales associates *terrain vague* with a contemporary experience of estrangement and uprootedness. He argues that the inhabitant of the modern metropolis feels "foreign to himself": living within a changing, accelerated, and fragmented society in which stable identities and enduring certainties no longer exist. This sensation of not fully belonging anywhere is reflected in the city's empty and abandoned spaces.

The text also criticizes the defensive reactions that emerge in response to such uncertainty. According to Solà-Morales, many societies respond to fear and insecurity through forms of xenophobia, extreme nationalism, or closed identities based on race, culture, colour, or territorial belonging. These rigid identifications attempt to construct a false stability yet ultimately produce exclusion and conflict. *Terrain vague* thus appears as a metaphor for this contemporary condition: open, ambiguous spaces without fixed identity, standing in contrast to society's obsession with classifying, controlling, and defining everything. The author warns against the danger of imposing absolute identities—national, cultural, or urban—because they eliminate diversity and the possibility of coexistence with "the other."

Finally, he argues that art and architecture should embrace complexity and difference rather than attempt to erase everything strange or indeterminate. These

empty spaces preserve a critical and human value precisely because they allow us to imagine alternative ways of living and relating to one another. Consequently, the essay questions how architecture should intervene in such places. Solà-Morales warns that aggressively urbanizing them may destroy precisely what makes them valuable: their indeterminacy, memory, and freedom. He proposes instead a more sensitive approach, capable of respecting their open character and symbolic potential.

The essay concludes in a prophetic manner regarding our contemporary reality, marked by conflicts, displacement, and devastated cities, where vast urban sectors are transformed into abandoned and dehumanized spaces:

*Through the violence of war, an urban space becomes terrain vague; the contradiction of war brings to the surface what is strange, unclassifiable, and uninhabitable.<sup>2</sup>*

This once again leads us to reflect upon whether there exists a limit to what should be considered a *terrain vague* case study. Ignasi de Solà-Morales' statement takes the concept of *terrain vague* to a far more radical and political dimension. By asserting that war transforms the city into a strange, destroyed, and uninhabitable space, he describes a condition in which the functions, identities, and certainties that once organized urban life disappear. War produces an extreme form of *terrain vague*: not merely an urban void, but an existential and cultural void.

The text therefore raises an important question: how far can the concept of *terrain vague* be extended? If it originally referred to abandoned or indeterminate plots within the modern city, the term now appears to expand so as to include territories devastated by violence, exclusion, or social collapse. We are therefore compelled to reconsider whether *terrain vague* is merely an urban and architectural category, or whether it also constitutes a political, historical, and human condition linked to the crisis of modernity. Empty spaces



By Palestinian News & Information Agency (Wafa) in contract with APImages, CC BY-SA 3.0.

are not simply "physical places," but visible manifestations of deeper conflicts: wars, collective fears, social exclusion, and the loss of identity.

I believe that our social commitment as architects must compel us to investigate physical spaces whose identities demand reinforcement, while simultaneously rejecting, in unequivocal terms, the manifestations of armed conflict that produce unsafe and devastated environments for human existence.

This reflection has remained with me since the moment I invited Hocine Aliouane-Shaw, professor at ENSAP Bordeaux and colleague within *UNIVERSITY of Universities (UOU)*, to serve as Guest Editor for the present issue of the journal. Coincidentally, this invitation occurred simultaneously with the beginning of my participation in the European research and innovation programme *COST*

(Cooperation in Science and Technology), particularly within the Action *OBSERVISTA* (Observatory of Innovative Strategies for Repurposing Terrain Vague).

Under this shared research framework, it initially seemed possible for all these colleagues to contribute to this remarkable issue, *Unscripted Grounds*. However, events did not unfold as I had anticipated, and regrettably such collaboration failed to materialise, except in a few valuable instances. Reflecting again upon the reasons for this divergence, I have come to believe that many of my colleagues within *COST OBSERVISTA*, when studying, selecting, and even awarding case studies of *terrain vague*, remain captivated by the conceptual fascination of the term itself. Shouldn't we go beyond and fully engage with the responsibility of distinguishing between the fundamentally different conditions encompassed by these spaces?

Writing this editorial letter has allowed me to understand more clearly that those political *terrain vague* produced by war not only obliterate every trace of prior identity, but also prevent the possibility of its reintroduction. Within such spaces, the victors impose new forms of existence founded upon different ethical and cultural values.

It will therefore be profoundly valuable to try to establish a dialogue between these two research communities — the contributors to this issue of *Unscripted Grounds* and the participants in *OBSERVISTA*. Such a debate could help us, or at least help me, to define a critical position that would allow continued engagement with this otherwise remarkable European research and innovation programme without requiring withdrawal from participation, as several members have chosen to do.

## BRUIT DU FRIGO

By contrast, a magnificent example of fascination combined with genuine social commitment emerged through the opportunity to travel to Bordeaux and work with the collective *Bruit du Frigo*.

Founded in 1997, this urban creation studio brings together architects, artists, urban planners, mediators, and builders. It develops artistic, participatory, and contextual projects in public space, combining urban installations, micro-architectures, collective actions, and cultural events, and has become particularly renowned for its work along the Rocade, Bordeaux's urban ring road. Its objective is to promote the transition toward sustainable, shared, and welcoming cities by advocating cooperative urbanism, breaking with the dominance of specialists, and restoring power and agency to civil society.

This approach was initiated in the late 1990s by Gabi Farage and Yvan Detraz, while they were architecture students in Bordeaux. From their awareness as students, they one day realized that their education failed to provide what they were truly seeking. Architectural training seemed to conceal the architect's social responsibility, reducing the profession to the mere production of spaces:

*We were more concerned with the ethical and political foundations of the discipline than with the realities of the profession. We therefore decided, alongside our studies, to go out into the streets in search of what we could not find at school: a culture of everyday life and reality, an active and creative relationship with places and people. How do inhabitants experience the city and appropriate public spaces? What are their needs and dreams? What can be invented to improve our living environment? How can we enjoy our cities more fully? What else can they offer us in terms of emotions and experiences?... All these questions were ones we wished to address together with the population, inventing a new way of being architects, outside the traditional model of architectural practice.<sup>3</sup>*

Through multidisciplinary collaboration and processes of self-construction, they created an atmosphere of experimentation and self-learning in the streets that helped reinforce a position and form of social and political commitment that is of great interest to us.

## RETHINKING PUBLIC LIFE ON BORDEAUX'S RING ROAD EDGES

Organized by Hocine Aliouane-Shaw, professors and students from five universities (Alicante, Peru, Tallinn, Trieste, and Umeå) participated alongside colleagues from the Bordeaux school. We worked at *La Fabrique POLA*, the former industrial warehouse of paints, restored in 2019 to house the facilities of this collective together with other local artists and cultural actors (contemporary art, architecture, cinema, comics, photography, graphic design, multimedia, mediation, etc.).

Its central location, on the banks of the Garonne River, and huge area of 4,000 square meters, it is perfect to host organizations, artists, and three production workshops (woodworking, metalworking, model-making, analog and digital photography laboratories, and artistic screen printing), as well as an exhibition space, a restaurant, and a café terrace. Throughout the year, invitations extended to the local population take the form of exhibitions, training sessions, conferences, artistic workshops, cultural experiences, and unexpected events.

One such event was our intensive workshop, held from 20 to 24 April of this year, 2026, during which we worked on a sector of the Rocade. As Hocine explained to us in his introduction, this 45-kilometer ring road carries approximately 250,000 vehicles per day. But beyond its mobility function, with him we discovered by a long collective walk — picnic included — that it has generated a complex landscape of limits, thresholds, and residual spaces, marked by fragmentation,



*La Fabrique POLA. The name POLA is a blend of two French terms: *pôle administratif* (administrative center) and *pôle artistique* (artistic center).*

informal uses, and latent possibilities.

The workshop focused on these unplanned spaces already produced by this infrastructure: places whose status, access regulations, and uses remain diffuse, contested, ambiguous, or not yet stabilized. We explored how these places might become spaces of prefiguration, where alternative ways of using, sharing, and transforming space could be tested through scenarios grounded in present conditions.

Without a doubt, this issue — *UOUSj#11* — has been the most challenging to produce throughout the five and a half years of our collaborative learning project, *UOU*, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we are by now a network of 50 international schools of architecture, each with its own culture, our architectural affinities have proven stronger than our differences. And even those differences are deeply valuable, for it is through them that we continue to learn from one another.

Even so, much like the many interpretations generated by the brief yet influential text of Ignasi de Solà-Morales, this issue has given rise to intense intellectual and emotional responses surrounding such a complex concept. These tensions are perhaps inevitable when engaging with an idea that provokes not only fascination, but also a profound commitment to our own ethical consciousness.

The tensions, disagreements, and diverse interpretations that emerged during the preparation of this issue should therefore not be understood as failures, but rather as evidence of the conceptual complexity and political urgency of the subject itself. If *terrain vague* continues to provoke debate, it is precisely because it confronts us with unresolved questions regarding memory, identity, violence, freedom, and the role of architecture within contemporary society.

Ultimately, this editorial journey has reinforced the conviction that architecture must move beyond the passive contemplation of urban



*Picnic and long collective walk organized by Hocine Aliouane-Shaw as a way of sharing and experiencing peripheral metropolitan territories that people would not normally explore. La Rocade 20/4/2026.*

emptiness. Our responsibility is not only to interpret these spaces, but also to critically discern the conditions that produce them, to defend the dignity of human life where it has been threatened, and to imagine forms of intervention capable of preserving openness, coexistence, and social justice within an increasingly fragmented world.

The remarkable diversity of outcomes, techniques, and working methodologies developed by the participating schools of architecture significantly enriches the final section of this journal, *ATLAS*.



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# EDITORIAL

# A Term to Open Up the Field

Drawing on debates around *terrain vague*, but also on those of vacancy, liminality and in-between situations, this issue turns to the expression *Unscripted Grounds* in order to widen the field of attention. The point is not to replace one term with another, but to name realities that the figures of the void, the leftover or the wasteland alone do not always allow us to grasp: situations in which frameworks of access, use, value, legitimacy, responsibility or ownership are not, or are no longer, stabilised. In this sense, situations are not understood as mere sites, nor as isolated spatial arrangements, but as knots of material, social and symbolic relations, which only become legible through attentive, often situated forms of engagement with place.

The term *grounds* does not refer simply to soil or terrain, but more broadly to foundations, supports, and conditions from which things can still emerge, be negotiated, or unfold over time. By *script*, I mean here the set of both explicit and implicit frameworks that ordinarily organise a given place: its conditions of access, use, value, legitimacy, responsibility and ownership. As for *unscripted*, the term does not point to a pure absence of script, but rather to the loosening, rewriting, or coexistence of frameworks that remain unsettled, and at times competing.

The expression *Unscripted Grounds* is therefore useful for naming material, relational and temporal situations in which something is no longer fully settled, where several logics overlap, and where architecture can no longer intervene as if the ground were already given and fully legible in advance.

The call for contributions thus proposed to address environments left open, undefined, or held in suspension — often relegated to the blind spots of architectural practice and planning — as situations in which scripts of ownership, use and value loosen without yet being restabilised. It invited contributors to consider these *Unscripted Grounds* not only as objects of

observation, but as grounds for inquiry, experimentation, practice and pedagogy, where situated *care*, shared learning and commoning might be rehearsed or played out, while remaining attentive to dynamics of normalisation, instrumentalisation and, in some cases, gentrification. Finally, it sought to welcome contributions capable of articulating empirical knowledge and critical reflection, by making explicit their methods, positionalities and the ethical questions raised by these forms of engagement with uncertain contexts.

## WHAT THE CONTRIBUTIONS BRING INTO VIEW

The contributions gathered here do not simply illustrate the hypothesis set out in the call. They deepen and displace it.

In **Notes from a Ground that Refuses to Resolve**, Nadia Bertolino begins from Rione Scala, a peripheral district of Pavia, still inhabited and marked by structural vulnerabilities, informal uses and intermittent institutional visibility. Here, unscripted ground is not understood as a merely abandoned or vacant place, but as a situation in which scripts of ownership, use and institutional value are loosened, suspended or contested.

The article makes a decisive distinction between site and situation: the former can be surveyed, mapped, programmed and then reinvested through a proposal; the latter has to be traversed, experienced over time, and entails a transformation of the architect's own stance. The indeterminacy that characterises such places is not perceived as a problem awaiting an architectural solution, but as a condition from which architectural knowledge may be produced.

The text thus argues for a situated practice, grounded in sustained presence, ethnographic attention and a form of responsibility towards the place and its inhabitants. This

practice is not meant to “script” the ground; rather, any architectural engagement with it must remain present, accountable and conscious of the structural, institutional and political conditions from which such a presence proceeds. Bertolino also makes explicit the epistemic, political and temporal limits of participatory action-research in such a context: the persistent asymmetry between researcher and inhabitants, the risk of institutional instrumentalisation, and the difficulty of sustaining long-term engagement when academic realities are out of step with the precarious conditions shaping residents' lives.

Bertolino's contribution is to show that *Unscripted Grounds* do not refer only to grounds of spatial indeterminacy, but to inhabited situations that force architecture to rethink its stance: to be less intent on bringing a solution too quickly, to be more present, to engage over time, to remain accountable to inhabitants, and to stay lucid about the institutional and political conditions in which this presence takes place.

In **Micro, Meso, Macro**, Christelle El Hage approaches the disused railway corridors of Beirut, Paris and Queens not as mere voids or wastelands awaiting reconversion, but as infrastructures that remain operative in other ways. They are traversed by individual appropriations, collective initiatives and institutional strategies that coexist without resolving into a clear course of development. This condition, which she describes as active suspension, shifts attention away from transformation and finality, and towards persistence and process.

The inquiry relies in particular on walking, whether undertaken individually or collectively, understood as an embodied approach especially suited to the linear morphology of the corridors. It brings into view material details, forms of access, use and conflict, as well as a broader territorial reading. From there, El Hage develops a trans-scalar reading — micro, meso,

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macro — through which small-scale reversible appropriations, more collective forms of coordination, and larger competing narratives and planning visions can be understood as intersecting within the same spatial system. What the article brings into focus is that some *Unscripted Grounds* are less a matter of abandonment than of prolonged negotiation, where tactical uses, forms of collective organisation and competing visions for the future of these places remain entangled without settling into a single trajectory.

In **Log and the Practice of Building-with**, Antônio Frederico Lasalvia starts from Topolò/Topolove, a border territory long held in suspension by the geopolitical logics of the Cold War. Charged with histories, traces and inherited forms of knowledge, the village has gradually been reinvested since the end of the Cold War through artistic, cultural and inhabitant-led practices, first through seasonal artistic encounters, and later through the more continuous presence of the Robida collective. The article shows how this marginality can become a productive condition when the place is approached not as a site awaiting a project, but as a situation capable of generating one. Through a practice of building-with, defined as a relational mode in which architecture emerges through negotiation with the site, available materials, inherited knowledge and techniques, and collaborative work, the worksite becomes a site of material production and knowledge exchange, where the separation between design and making is suspended. Lasalvia thereby extends the notion of *Unscripted Grounds* beyond the terrain vague by showing how a marginal or post-rural territory can become the ground for a relational, processual and situated architectural practice, not by imposing a project onto a site, but by building with what it still holds in reserve, including traces, resources, inherited knowledge and temporal layers.

In **Betweenness as Possibility**, Giulia Guadagnoli shifts the



Ville-en-Creux, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

reading of terrain vague away from identifiable spatial objects and towards more diffuse qualities: betweenness, vagueness and centrality. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Beirut through walking and the observation of dozens of sites, the article brings into view a series of interstitial micro-situations — openings in fences, improvised stairs and paths, places to sit, electrical connections, and so on — which testify to ordinary forms of adaptation within a context of fragmented governance. Guadagnoli distinguishes three types of centrality — joint, junction and hub — and argues that conditions of vagueness can enable forms of centrality to emerge from situations of betweenness. In doing so, the article opens up a reading of terrain vague not as an identifiable spatial object, but as a relational and diffuse quality of the urban fabric, traceable to varying degrees across the city, better understood here as a hypothesis for reading than as a stabilised model.

In **Architecture of Belonging**, Maycon Sedrez and Prashya Gosman bring the question of *Unscripted Grounds* into a primarily pedagogical framework, through a reflective analysis of a design studio based on *self-directed learning* (SDL). The ground in question is

Florianópolis, an island shaped by a colonial history that led to the erasure of Indigenous populations, but also by land speculation, contradictory planning logics and road infrastructure that have produced urban fragmentation and residual spaces. Indigenous communities appear here as displaced, scarcely visible, and still struggling to find a place within the urban fabric.

From this perspective, terrain vague is read above all as residual, vacant and neglected space, with both an ambiguous status and a latent potential. The notion of the productive city provides an operative framework for transforming these underused spaces into hybrid and multifunctional programmes, where productivity is not reduced to an economic dimension, but extends to knowledge sharing, cultural production, presence, visibility and forms of participation for Indigenous populations. Within the frame of this issue, Sedrez and Gosman's contribution is primarily pedagogical and project-based: it tests *Unscripted Grounds* through urban voids read through the lens of the productive city. It asks how design education might help reinscribe a long-marginalised population within urban space, whilst acknowledging the



Pic-nic Periurbains, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

methodological limits of working at a distance from the communities concerned.

In **Weird and Speculative Interval**, Erdem Karaçay takes Sazlıdere, near Istanbul, as an unscripted ground marked by successive transformations: the construction of a reservoir that submerged earlier infrastructures and displaced parts of the settlement, the exploitation and abandonment of a quarry, and the more recent threat of the Kanal Istanbul project on an already fragile environment. The article considers this ground not as a passive background, but as an active and reactive materiality: one that records human interventions, resists them, and produces effects whose causes and consequences are not always immediately legible. In this sense, Sazlıdere appears as a ground of instability, memory and agency. The text then shifts the discussion towards modes of representation capable of making this condition perceptible. It explores speculative, unstable and “dirty” forms — dirty montages and radical geo-portraits — at a distance from smooth and controlled architectural representation, in order to document what the author frames as the weird and uncanny ecological condition of the site. The article shifts *Unscripted Grounds*

towards a reading of ground as an active archive, where successive transformations and ecological, political and territorial tensions are inscribed.

In **Unscripting from Within**, João Silveira Serejo examines a set of modernist summer houses in São Pedro de Moel, built from the 1950s onwards, as the trace of a moment of convergence between modern architecture and a shared inhabiting literacy: a capacity to recognise, understand and dwell within the spatial qualities that this architecture made possible. These houses are still occupied but have been partially transformed. What is at stake, therefore, is not the abandonment of the built fabric, but the progressive dissolution of its intelligibility. What comes undone here is less the architecture itself than the alignment between a way of inhabiting and an architecture conceived to endure.

Through the notions of systematic anti-repair and the human void, Silveira Serejo shows how successive material substitutions and so-called improvements, often drawn from models imported from elsewhere, gradually blur the original script by subjecting architectures conceived to age to accelerated cycles of replacement, without making them disappear

altogether.

Here, *Unscripted Grounds* are displaced: the unscripted no longer refers to a spatial void or to a ground held in suspension, but to a desynchronisation between architecture, cultures of inhabitation, desire and temporal rhythms. The question then ceases to be only that of the ground; it becomes a question of relation.

The diversity and singularity of the contributions gathered here make clear that *Unscripted Grounds* do not refer to a homogeneous spatial category.

From one article to the next, they appear instead as situations in which frameworks of access, use, value, ownership or responsibility loosen, are rewritten, or compete with one another. This shift broadens not only the range of realities concerned, but also the ways of engaging with them, being present within them, reading them, investigating them and rendering them legible.

What emerges across the contributions, then, is less a single definition than a set of converging questions about the forms of attention, presence, representation and responsibility that such situations call for. This issue makes unstable, often marginal conditions more legible and argues that they require corresponding shifts in architectural practice, pedagogy and research.

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# On Unscripted Grounds

A conversation between  
the Editorial Committee members

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**HAS:** If we approach *unscripted grounds* not as a fixed type of place, but as situations in which scripts of access, use, value and ownership are not yet, or are no longer, stabilised, what forms of reading, inquiry and action do they call for in architectural and urban practice, architectural education and research? And how might such grounds be engaged without being romanticised, instrumentalised, or too quickly reabsorbed into more conventional logics of planning and control?

**MLN:** *Unscripted Grounds* poses many questions in relation to our discipline, specifically in relation to architectural research and practice. If architecture – through its methods – is able to read a palimpsest of traces, spaces, voices and human behaviours, material and immaterial elements; we could argue that the power of architecture is in being capable, through the imagination, of opening up possibilities rather than proposing specific solutions to each problem.

Often, the notion of unscripted ground is instrumentalised and translated into policies that do not leave much space to the variety of practices, determining conflictual conditions. In other cases, as in the current condition of global crises, top-down decisions and power are determining situations in which we – as educators and researchers – are in a position in which it seems to be important to react.

I am referring to a definition of ‘unscripted’ whereby the notion of indeterminacy is central, as is the reliability on tools, such as maps, which by their very nature are sometimes more accurate than at othertimes, and their potential for defining new grounds. An example is the current debate on the power of maps and digital tools in determining the definition of grounds and territories. “Since early March, Israeli evacuation warnings and strikes across southern Lebanon and Beirut’s southern suburbs have triggered mass displacement. Nearly 1.3 million people have been forced from their homes – with little hope of return as Israeli occupation and strikes continue. Schools became shelters, families slept in cars and authorities built improvised systems to track aid, medicine and available shelter space. Apple says nothing was removed. But the episode shows a separate truth of digital infrastructure: when a place cannot be easily found, users may experience that absence as erasure – regardless of the technical explanation.” (Alomar, 2026)<sup>1</sup>

Architecture is a political discipline – as debated in other previous issues of the *UOU Scientific Journal* – and its values are based on a common trust among us and the context/s in which we live. At a time when technology has the power to delete territories and international laws are undermined by violence and power, what is the role of architects and planners in re-defining the role of these unscripted grounds?

**AKP:** As a relational practice, walking situates us in specific landscapes; connecting knowledge, body, place and materialities. Read through the lens of peripatetic practices, “unscripted grounds” are not empty sites waiting for design intelligence to arrive but instead they are fields where experiences and memories are negotiated.

Read through the lens of movement, pause, hesitation, comfort, fear and exclusion, walking does not simply traverse territory; it produces meaning and relationships, showing landscape as something continuously enacted, recalled, and contested through embodied passage. We ask: who can move here easily? who cannot? It actively discloses and, in part, constitutes the spatial narratives through which land is known, inhabited, and contested.

**JAB:** An *unscripted ground* is not blank. It is a place where instructions have broken down, where one order has been forced over another, and where people still invent ways to live. That is the uncomfortable lesson of *unscripted grounds*. The question is not only how does architecture react to instability, it is whether architecture helps keep unstable places readable, or whether it joins the machinery that makes them disappear.

The case Maria Luna presented is not abstract. Local authorities had to improvise systems for aid, medicine, and sleep. You present a point of no return and you are asking about our role as architects.

My position is simple: architects and planners should treat politics and ground as material, not as background information. Not as 'context' to be summarised in the first pages of a report and then forgotten. The classroom shelter, the car, the aid spreadsheet, the failed search result: these are spatial facts. They are what organises movement, exposure, privacy, care, fear. They are design problems already in motion.

This dynamic model of thinking and designing helps, because it rejects a closed idea of form. It says that contemporary architecture is made through media and information processes, and that politics, sociology, economics, culture, and everyday life enter the process from the start. I would push that claim further. In a place of displacement, the 'start' is not the commission. It is the warning, the roadblock, the damaged façade, the school door relabelled as the entrance to a shelter, the list of medicines, the photograph sent to prove that a street still exists.

This changes the work we are doing as architects. The architect is not only the author of a final object, and certainly not the designer of a beautiful image of a crisis. The planner is not the keeper of a neutral map. Both should become builders of recognition: people who make fragile evidence public, usable, and difficult to erase.

That may take the form of housing, but it may also take the form of a counter-map, a register of temporary shelters, a repair protocol, and a civic room, a plan for schools that can absorb emergency use without surrendering their educational function, or an archive where testimony and material damage are held together.

The questions should be blunt. Where do people sleep tonight? Which routes are usable after dark? Which buildings can hold bodies without turning refuge into storage? Where are water, shade, privacy, power, legal information, and children's routines placed? What names have vanished from the map? Which image, list, or message carries evidence that the official plan cannot hold? These are small questions only on paper. In the city, they decide whether life remains organised enough to continue.

The material described within the dynamic model - videos, performances, abstract models, collages, modified images, citizen-generated fragments - matters here because it is not decorative. In a damaged territory, such fragments may be the archive. A blurred photograph can be more accurate than a clean plan. A child's drawing may show orientation and loss in the same line. A modified map can reveal the route people actually take, the checkpoint they avoid, the back entrance that has become the real front door. This material should enter the project without being polished into silence.

So, the role of architects and planners is not to write one new script over the damaged one? Is it to keep several unfinished records open: domestic, legal, territorial, digital, bodily, administrative, and remembered? Does form still matter?

**SS:** These *unscripted grounds*, vestiges of unclaimed territory or forgotten realms that have slipped through the imposed governance that surrounds them, seem precious places. As Luna writes, architecture is political, it can be used as a means to define, determine, limit, overwrite. In this light *unscripted grounds* emerge as precious sites, spaces to be guarded, spaces that might enable fluid discussion rather than just black and white answers. Might an architecture support and protect their indeterminate state, hold its essence and nurture it, offering spaces of respite, spaces of uncertainty where multiple truths can sit alongside each other in equanimity. Might they offer the spaces we so need today?

**MD:** I remember, a long time ago now, being inspired by Avril Maddrell's paper<sup>2</sup> on absence-presence. Her powerful argument considered the loss of someone (absence) as being signified by a bunch of flowers (presence) on a bench. Of course, the idea of one thing signifying something else is not new to us. Barthes (1957)<sup>3</sup> is probably the best-known exponent of this idea. For this edition of the *UOUSj* we are to some extent considering such ideas in a new light. We are looking at *unscripted grounds* - places with cultural layers both tangible and intangible - open to being read. In their book 'Edgelands', Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts<sup>4</sup> 'celebrate' such places. The places they reflect upon in England are not voids - where there was never anything - they are places of absence - something was there but has now gone. Something that was (and still can be) important to someone, to a community. These are today's *unscripted grounds* and they are not confined to England. Wherever they are to be found in the world, the map, like the flower on a bench, can serve as a presence to remind us of this 'absence.' As the call for submissions tells us: we need to consider how '*...such grounds can be approached as situations where new ways of acting and living together may be rehearsed - and learned from...*' We all have a responsibility here.

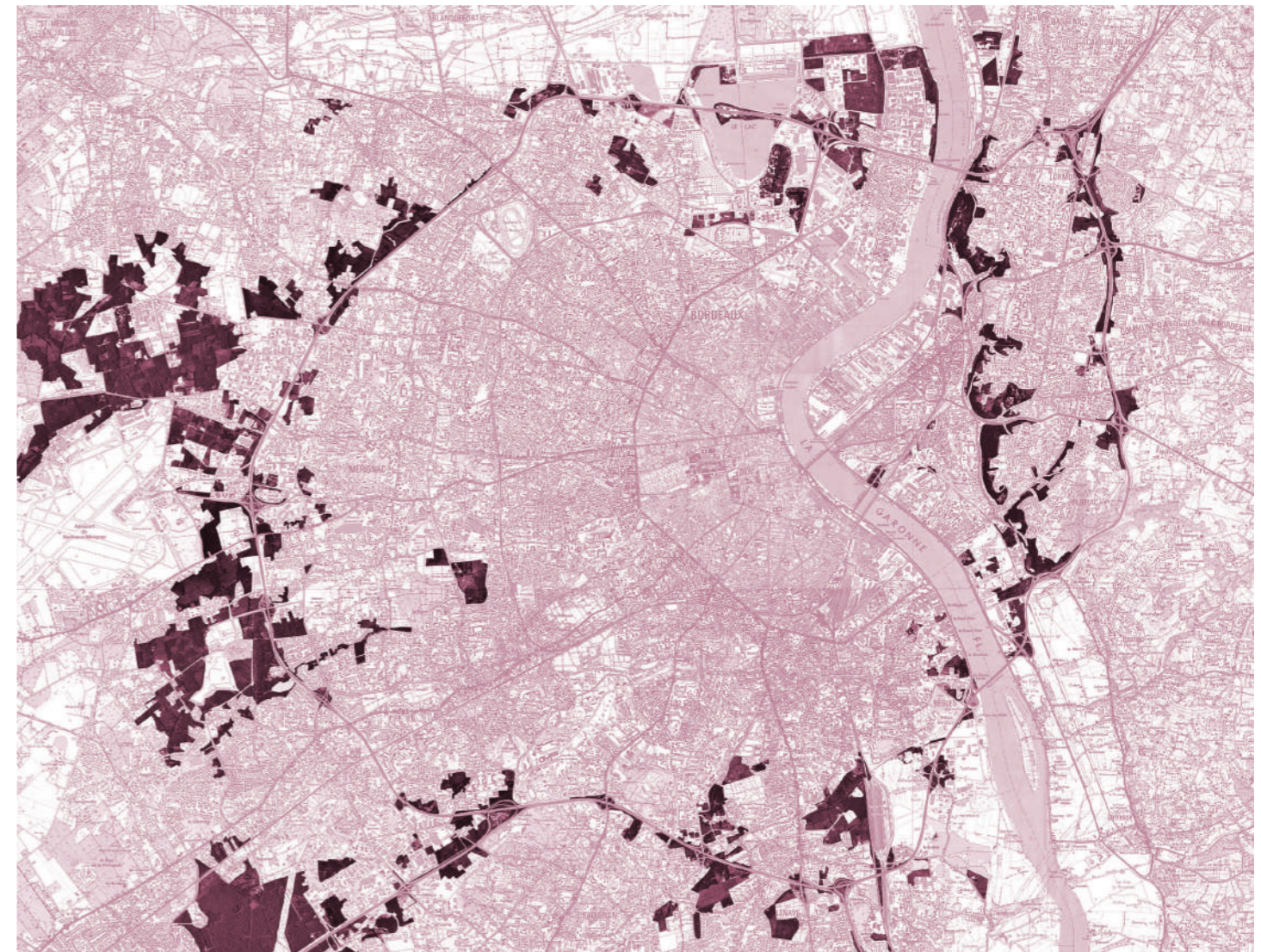
**HAS:** What I take from these exchanges is not a shared position, but a set of useful displacements. *Unscripted grounds* do not appear here as empty blanks. They appear as situations where access and ownership, but also use, value, memory and absence, remain unstable. They call for situated forms of reading: by walking through them, by attending to traces, memories and the fragile signs of what has been lost or pushed aside. These situations also depend, for their visibility, on the tools that record them and make them legible: maps and counter-maps, registers, images, lists, testimonies and other forms of fragile evidence. The task is therefore not to overwrite these situations with a new script, nor to turn their indeterminacy into an aesthetic value, but to keep them legible without normalising them, to make their traces, uses and claims harder to erase, and to support practices of recognition and careful attention.

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# Walking at the Backstage of the City

Hocine Aliouane-Shaw interviews Yvan Detraz



Map of Leftover Spaces in the Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

Yvan Detraz is an architect, co-founder and director of *Bruit du Frigo*, a Bordeaux-based transdisciplinary collective bringing together architects, urbanists, artists, makers and facilitators. Since the late 1990s, *Bruit du Frigo* has worked in everyday territories, approaching public space as a common resource to be reactivated, often through in-situ interventions, residencies and long-term collaborations with local actors and inhabitants. In this interview, Yvan Detraz looks back on an approach that emerged from walking through the peri-urban

margins of Bordeaux and the leftover spaces produced by contemporary urbanisation. The conversation traces a path from an initial attention to the “backstage” of the city, to a method of exploration through walking and mapping, and then to collective practices that opened the way to new forms of public use and shared experience in Bordeaux’s peri-urban margins (16/02/2026).

**Hocine Aliouane-Shaw (HAS):** *You often trace the origins of your attention to the margins of the city to a student exchange in Brussels in the mid 1990’s, during a design studio at La Cambre around the planned Promenade Verte of the*

*Brussels-Capital Region. What did this displacement — both geographical and pedagogical — allow you to see, and how was this attention later carried forward when you returned to Bordeaux, through the early actions of *Bruit du Frigo* and then through your diploma project?*

**Yvan Detraz (YD):** What struck me in Brussels was not so much the sites themselves. We were given potential sites to work on, but the exercise mainly required us to go out into the field, to move around Brussels on foot and by bicycle, rather than simply looking at one isolated site.

What I discovered at that moment was the path between the sites. That was where I saw what one almost never sees in the contemporary city: the side spaces, the backs, the interstices, all the backstage areas of the city. What I found there was an active, living city, but one that

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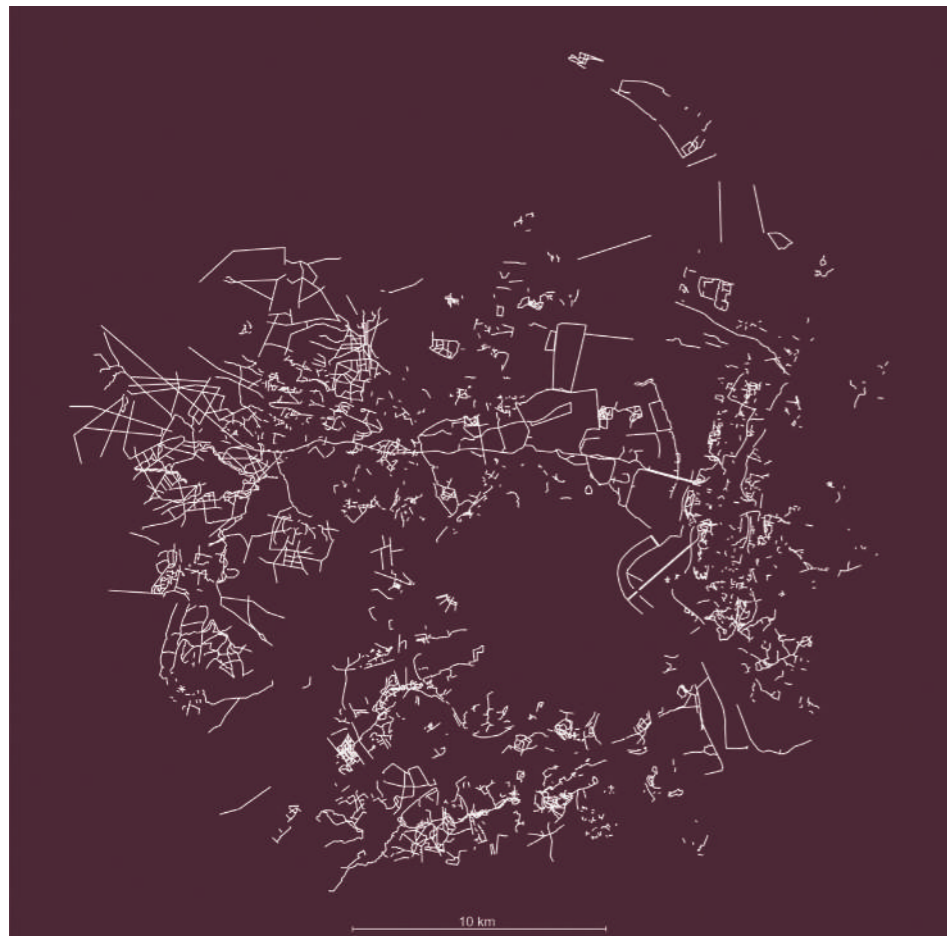
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Map of Pathways in the Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

was hidden, concealed, never really brought into view. There were many spaces with no apparent function, somewhat neglected, somewhat marginal, but where forms of life, hospitality and human activity could nevertheless take place. And above all, there was a continuity. You could move through that peri-urban meander, on foot or by bicycle, through those spaces.

I kept that experience somewhere in the back of my mind, with the idea that I might perhaps take it up again in Bordeaux. In the years that followed, in the early days of *Bruit du Frigo*, we began to run educational urban exploration workshops, particularly with young people. We worked a lot in the city centre, because it was practical, but sometimes we would go further out, to the edges of the city. And quite quickly, we also started returning more regularly to interstitial spaces, leftover spaces, large industrial sites, especially on Bordeaux's right bank. So I don't feel there was a clear break between Brussels, the early actions of *Bruit du Frigo*, and my diploma project. It was

something that matured gradually. Walking gradually became the obvious approach: it was a way of recognising these territories, but also of testing their possible public use. My first idea, for the diploma project, was even to make a walking guide to the peri-urban landscape, with routes and descriptions, using the codes of traditional walking guides. I wanted to show that these territories, contrary to what one might expect, were particularly suited to walking, to hiking, including long-distance walking.

**HAS:** *When you began your work in Bordeaux, you were not simply setting out on random walks. There were maps, initial reconnaissance, hypotheses, and then a process of testing them on the ground. How exactly did this chain between mapping, walking and returning to the map take shape?*

**YD:** At the time, I did not have much data. I had an old printed aerial photograph, which was already partly out of date, a few cadastral documents that I had managed to get from a'urba, and

above all an IGN map. There was no Google, and I think that if Google had existed, I would not have done this work in the same way.

I first looked for the blank areas on the map. When there was a blank, it meant that the map did not really know how to show what was there. For me, it was a clue: there might be open, unbuilt or leftover spaces. Then I looked at the bus lines that could get me as close as possible, and I tried to reach the first blank area. From there, I found my way by sight. I took my eyes off the map. The idea was to explore each space, then move from one leftover space to another while passing as little as possible through the established urban fabric, in order to test this hypothesis of continuity. I mostly took photographs, a few notes, sometimes sketches. I paid particular attention to passages, obstacles, boundaries and traces. In the evening, while it was still fresh in my mind, I would transfer what I had seen back onto the map. I redrew the outlines of the spaces I had explored, the routes, the existing paths, the passages I had taken or identified. That is how the map of leftover spaces began to appear: not as a map produced from a distance, but as the result of a back-and-forth process between very limited data, walking, and returning to the map.

What also mattered was the sense of discovery. I did not simply feel that I was checking something I had already seen on a plan. I had the feeling of moving behind things, where almost nobody goes, as if I were exploring unknown territories. I was not the first person to set foot there, but the feeling was very strong. And it was also this pleasure of walking, this way of discovering an environment through its backstage areas, that I later wanted to share.

**HAS:** *In your architectural diploma project at ENSAP Bordeaux, the idea of the Terres Communes appears. What did this notion allow you to formulate about the peri-urban condition, and about the possibility of another kind of public space?*

**YD:** The idea was not to say: there are plenty of available spaces, so we can continue to roll out the city, stitch it back together, restructure it, fill in the gaps. I was formulating the opposite hypothesis: these spaces have a quality of their own. They are not necessarily meant to be filled. They can serve the community, become a common good, and play a social role again in peri-urban territories where this question arises in a rather stark way. At the time, we did not speak about the commons as we do today. I was drawing more on the idea of rural common land: forests or cultivable spaces where one could take a resource, cultivate, grow vegetables, and which were held in common, managed in common. I took up this idea to ask how these leftover spaces could be brought out of oblivion without immediately making them vulnerable. Because as soon as you shed light on them, you give them value, particularly land value. So it was necessary to imagine a mechanism that could protect them, safeguard them, and turn them into terres communes.

That did not mean that something necessarily had to be done there all the time. A piece of common land can also be land that is left as it is, where one accepts a process of ecological reconquest, before asking again later what could be done with it collectively.

What was also decisive was that, during these surveys, I did not only encounter abandoned spaces. I encountered life: huts, play areas for children at the end of housing estates, places where people came to picnic, have barbecues, gather things, cultivate clandestine vegetable gardens. I even saw someone putting sheep in fenced industrial sites and moving them around in a kind of urban transhumance. These people were using spaces within reach, without necessarily appropriating them, without wanting to possess them. That had to be preserved: these spontaneous, sometimes marginal uses, which pass under the radar. The project absolutely could not become a form of policing that prevents, forbids or normalises

these practices. The matrix of the *Terres Communes* comes from there. Once the surveys were completed, I tried to see how all this potential — the leftover spaces, the existing paths, the parks, the cycle paths, certain existing public spaces — could form a coherent network. Choices had to be made, things had to be prioritised, a matrix had to be built that would reach everywhere and allow each inhabitant of the Bordeaux peri-urban area to be only a few minutes' walk from the *Terres Communes*. The idea was that one could set off on an adventure from Bordeaux itself, walk for days, but remain within the metropolitan area.

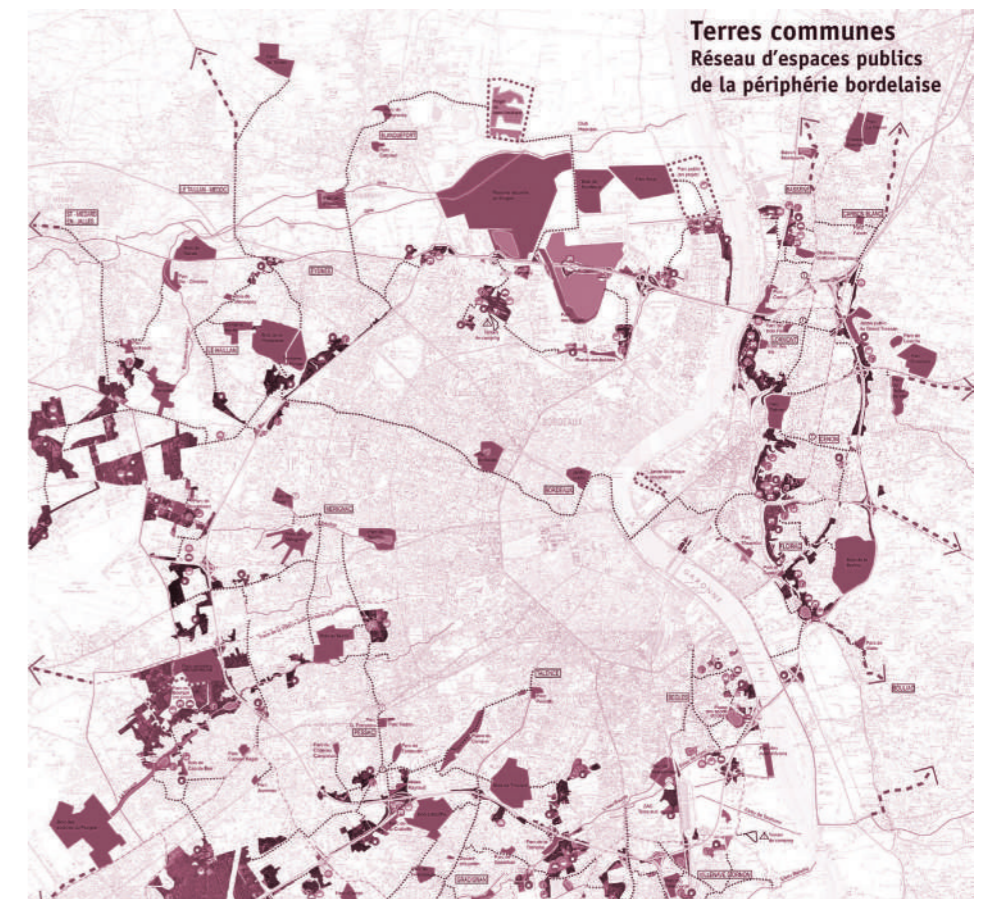
The starting point of my diploma project was also this question: What kind of public space for the peri-urban? In the established city, public space structures, connects and distributes. In the peri-urban, contemporary urbanism tends instead to produce large patches, zones and pieces that do not fit together very well, a bit like a badly assembled puzzle.

Between these pieces, interstices appear. When they are mapped,

these interstices can redraw the figure of a network and carry the potential of a peri-urban public space, with its own vocabulary, where fields can sometimes take the place of squares.

**HAS:** *After the initial surveys, forms of activation appeared very quickly: picnics accompanied by small route guides, then collective walks. What did these formats allow you to test or share?*

**YD:** The picnics and the walks did not have exactly the same role. With the picnics, the idea was quite simple: there were extraordinary sites within the metropolitan area in terms of experience, places that produced a visual and aesthetic shock, sometimes a real emotion. We wanted to share them. The picnic was a fairly obvious way of doing this. You had to convince people to take their car, a bus or their bicycle, sometimes to travel thirty or forty minutes, to go to a place where they would never have gone spontaneously. Sharing a meal, spending an afternoon or an evening together, made that experience possible. People were not just coming to look at a place:



Common Lands Map, Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.



From *Zone Sweet Zone*, final architecture diploma project. Yvan Detraz, 2000

they were coming to settle there for a while and share a moment in a place where they would not have expected to do so. At the same time, I had started making small route guides. They were folded sheets, with a map, a route of three, four or five hours' walking, and a description. I distributed them during the picnics. I am not sure that many people actually went and walked the routes afterwards, but the idea was already to instil something: to make people understand that these territories could be walked, described and passed on, as territories for walking.

The collective walks raised another question. Long-distance walking is more demanding. I had to see whether people other than myself could take pleasure in crossing these spaces. I myself felt a very strong pleasure there, but I had to see whether it could become a shared experience. The first real collective walk came just after my survey in the summer of 1999. A small group of us set off for several days, with bivouacs. Then, over time, we saw that it took hold. In the following years, some walks brought together one hundred, sometimes two hundred people, with a very diverse group of participants. At that point, we understood that it was not only a personal intuition: it was a practice that could exist collectively.

What was also important was that we were not alone. Quite quickly, we discovered that in other cities, artists, architects, landscape architects or walkers were starting from similar questions: tracing paths, making guides, bringing people out to walk in peripheral areas.

**HAS:** *The Parc des Coteaux seems to have played a turning-point role in this story. How did walking, and then the Panorama contemporary art biennial, help this territory become recognised as a continuity, even before it had been developed in that way?*

**YD:** Of all the spaces I had walked through, what would later be called the Parc des Coteaux held a particular place. First because I already knew part of it, especially through the Parc de l'Hermitage, and also because it was one of the places where the experience of walking was most stimulating. For me, it had a value of its own.

I knew that the Grand Projet de Ville, the urban regeneration programme on Bordeaux's right bank, was already working on this territory with the four municipalities concerned, and that there was an intuition that these parks needed to be connected. But the approach remained fragmented, with several smaller parks, perhaps a path to link them, and the possibility of building

around them. There was not yet necessarily the idea of a real green continuity. For me, the value lay precisely in the whole, and in the continuity.

The walk we did in the early 2000s played an important role. It traced out, on the ground, what would later become the fil vert. It was filmed, and the film was then shown to the mayors of the four municipalities it passed through; some of them were discovering places they did not know, sometimes within their own municipality. I said something to them along the lines of: "You don't see it, but you have Central Park on your territory." The phrase was obviously a little striking, but it did express the scale of this green heritage and its capacity to become a metropolitan public space.

A few years later, this recognition of the Parc des Coteaux continued with the creation of the Panorama contemporary art biennial. The idea was to work on the recognition and use of the park through art and culture, even before there were any developments, paths or furniture. Invited to propose a project for this first edition, we suggested doing the 2001 walk again, to see what had changed ten years later, and testing a first refuge, Le Nuage.

Along the route of this walk, there were also works, performances and artistic moments. Walking

was part of our artistic proposal, and it was then institutionalised in the following editions through the Marches de Panorama. Le Nuage appears in this context, but it also opens up another stage: that of the refuges.

**HAS:** *With Le Nuage and then the peri-urban refuges, one moves from a temporary experience to a public project on a metropolitan scale. How did this shift happen, and what questions does it still raise today in terms of maintenance, responsibility and use?*

**YD:** Initially, we did not think of opening Le Nuage as overnight accommodation. During the *Panorama weekend*, people could visit it, but not sleep there. I then negotiated with Jean Touzeau, the mayor of Lormont, the possibility of leaving the refuge on site for an extra month, putting it into real use. During that month, I managed the keys myself, through *Bruit du Frigo*, as well as the occupancy agreements, arrivals and departures.

After *Panorama*, we put out a call to see whether people would be interested. In two days, the thirty nights were booked. I honestly thought there might be nobody, and in fact it worked very well. At that point, I felt there was something there. So I asked for a meeting with the mayor, telling him that I thought we had a potential concept for a fairly unprecedented urban use: sleeping in the city's parks, a practice that is in principle forbidden in France.

But by framing the refuge as a performative artwork, one that was activated when people stayed there overnight, it became possible. We had to respond to very concrete questions: handing over the keys, managing the relationship with people, toilets, daily management. The Lormont tourist office agreed to play a role in this arrangement, and we worked with a lawyer on the legal framework. It took a few months to answer these questions. With an almost fully worked-out arrangement, Jean Touzeau agreed that we could try the experiment. The refuge was reinstalled, and the

season filled up very quickly. I then began writing a dossier to show that this prototype for a peri-urban refuge could be extrapolated to the metropolitan scale, with a trail linking several refuges. It was at that moment that Vincent Feltesse, then president of the Bordeaux Urban Community, called me.

He was interested in the idea of allowing inhabitants to discover another kind of heritage, and developing a metropolitan tourism less centred on historic Bordeaux. I showed him a map, with a theoretical trail marked out by refuges. He immediately understood the project's potential, and the idea of new refuges was launched. After that, we had to defend a way of doing things: an artistic curatorship, with works, artists or collectives chosen for specific sites. We were proposing a method for working with places, which was ultimately followed.

The question of transfer of responsibility came later. Initially, the refuges belonged to *Bruit du Frigo*, since they had been produced with public subsidies. We were responsible for them, we insured them, brought them back in over the winter, repaired them. At a certain point, it became too complicated. We then defended the idea that the refuges had become a public facility, fragmented into several pieces and distributed across the territory, and that the metropolitan authority had to take responsibility for them.

Today, the question arises differently. Some refuges are in poor condition, and we need to know whether they should be rebuilt, transformed, moved, or whether new ones should be imagined.

In any case, the economic and material issues have to be kept separate from the question of use. The success of the refuges has not faded. There is still just as much demand, just as much attachment. So for me, the argument that the project might one day be stopped because there is no money is not valid if the use is still there. And at the moment, that is still the case.



From *Zone Sweet Zone*, final architecture diploma project. Yvan Detraz, 2000

# UNSCRIPTED GROUNDS

# Notes from a Ground that Refuses to Resolve

## Ambivalences of Participatory Practice in Rione Scala

ricerca-azione partecipativa  
posizionalità  
etica della cura  
ecologia politica urbana  
ritmanalisi  
**participatory action research**  
**positionality**  
**ethics of care**  
**urban political ecology**  
**rhythmanalysis**

Questo articolo assume Rione Scala in Pavia come luogo di indagine su cosa significhi praticare l'architettura in territori che resistono a ogni risoluzione. Attingendo a cinque anni di lavoro attraverso Architecture(s) of Care, il quartiere viene letto come territorio non prescritto: non uno spazio di assenza o abbandono, ma una situazione in cui i copioni della proprietà, dell'uso e del valore istituzionale risultano allentati, sospesi o contestati. Seguendo la nozione di terrain vague di de Solà-Morales, questa indeterminazione non è un problema in attesa di soluzione ma una condizione da cui la conoscenza architettonica deve essere generata. L'articolo procede per note di campo situate, mettendo in scena tensioni tra presenza ed estrazione, mediazione istituzionale e critica strutturale, produzione di beni comuni e rischio della loro estetizzazione, con la ricerca-azione partecipativa (PAR) al centro. La PAR è esaminata per le sue potenzialità emancipatorie e i rischi che comporta quando praticata da un'istituzione accademica in un territorio marginalizzato. Attingendo a Haraway (1988), Tronto (1993), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Federici (2018), Rawes (2013), Heynen et al. (2006) e Lefebvre (2004), in una genealogia che include Augé, Koolhaas, Debord, Illich, Alexander, La Pietra, Pettena e Conde, propongo la ricerca architettonica situata come pratica riflessiva che rifiuta di risolvere le contraddizioni che abita, e sostengo che il territorio periferico non prescritto richieda non la risoluzione, ma una presenza sostenuta, responsabile e strutturalmente consapevole.

This article takes Rione Scala in Pavia as the site of an inquiry into what it means to practice architecture in territories that resist resolution. Drawing on five years of engagement through Architecture(s) of Care, it positions the neighbourhood as an unscripted ground: not a space of absence or neglect, but a situation in which the scripts of ownership, use, and institutional value are loosened, suspended, or contested. Following de Solà-Morales's notion of terrain vague, this indeterminacy is not a problem awaiting solution but a condition from which architectural knowledge must be generated. The article proceeds through situated field notes, staging tensions between presence and extraction, institutional mediation and structural critique, the production of commons and the risk of their aestheticisation, with participatory action research (PAR) at its centre. PAR is examined for its emancipatory potentials and the risks it carries when practised from an academic institution in a marginalised territory. Drawing on Haraway (1988), Tronto (1993), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Federici (2018), Rawes (2013), Heynen et al. (2006), and Lefebvre (2004), within a genealogy including Augé, Koolhaas, Debord, Illich, Alexander, La Pietra, Pettena, and Conde, I propose situated architectural research as a reflexive practice that refuses to resolve the contradictions it inhabits, and argue that the unscripted peripheral ground demands not resolution, but sustained, accountable, and structurally conscious presence.

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## ON NOT RESOLVING THE GROUND

These reflections begin not from a design proposal, but from an unresolved condition. Rione Scala, a peripheral neighbourhood on the southern edge of Pavia, refuses the scripts that urban planning typically projects onto marginal territories. It is not derelict, it is densely inhabited by overlapping communities whose everyday spatial practices generate forms of coexistence that neither planning instruments nor architectural typologies adequately describe. Yet it is also fragile: infrastructurally underserved, intermittently visible to institutional actors, and persistently vulnerable to the oscillation between neglect and sudden regenerative attention. Demographically it stands at the intersection of ageing Italian working-class communities and more recently arrived migrant populations, whose everyday geographies rarely coincide with institutional representations of neighbourhood life. Spatially its edges are porous, between housing stock of different eras and conditions, between open land and infrastructural detritus, between maintained civic space and territory that has quietly reverted to informal management.

It is, in the terms this issue invites us to think with, an unscripted ground. The concept of the terrain vague, as theorised by Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1995), captures something essential about this condition: spaces simultaneously absent from the city's functional order and present to its imagination, sites where the stability of property, use, and meaning is held in productive suspension. Yet the terrain vague also risks romanticisation, the peripheral void aestheticised from a distance by those who do not live within it. Part of the ethical labour of this article is to think against that aestheticisation while still taking seriously what indeterminacy, as a structural condition, enables and forecloses. This genealogy of indeterminate urban space runs deeper than de Solà-Morales alone. Marc Augé's

(1992) notion of the non-place, the anonymous, transitional space of supermodernity stripped of identity, relation, and history, offers a counterpoint. Augé identifies the dissolution of place as a symptom of late capitalism's acceleration. The terrain vague of Rione Scala is neither fully place nor non-place but something more contested, more inhabited. Rem Koolhaas's (2002) concept of Junk Space, the entropic residue of modernisation, the leftover of the architectural programme, resonates with the neighbourhood's infrastructural detritus while also demanding qualification. Junk Space for Koolhaas is a condition of surfeit, where in peripheral territories, the analogous condition is produced by systematic withdrawal rather than excess. The Situationist International's practice of the *dérive*, the unplanned, affect-driven drift through urban environments as a form of critical spatial knowledge production (Debord, 1958), anticipates the methodological register this article adopts. The neighbourhood here is understood through duration and sensory immersion rather than cartographic abstraction.

Italian radical design offers a further genealogical thread. Ugo La Pietra's "use of the city" instructions (La Pietra, 1979) and Gianni Pettena's urban experimentations reframed the city as a field of relational encounter rather than a fixed programme. This is a precedent for the situated, participatory mode of practice developed in Rione Scala. Yago Conde's (2000) architecture of indeterminacy provides a more recent theoretical articulation of design that works with, rather than against, the open, unresolved character of marginal urban territories. This indeterminacy is not neutral, it is structurally produced. As David Harvey (2008) argues, the uneven geography of urban investment and disinvestment reflects the spatial dynamics of capital accumulation. Peripheral territories are not incidentally marginal but systematically positioned at the edges of extractive urban processes. To engage Rione

Scala without accounting for this structural production is to risk converting political economy into picturesque.

My engagement with Rione Scala through the programme Architecture(s) of Care spans five years. It began with a Summer School linking architectural theory and social research, and evolved slowly, incompletely, through repeated returns and acknowledged departures into a long-term neighbourhood presence. This article does not present that programme as a model. It presents it as a site of inquiry into its own conditions of possibility and its own contradictions. The central question I address is not whether participatory architecture works, but what it costs — epistemically, ethically, politically — to practice it from within a university, in a territory that has not asked for an architect. Underlying the inquiry is a claim about the discipline itself, that architecture, if it is to remain meaningful in marginalised urban territories, cannot be a predetermined practice, a sequence of brief, survey, proposal, delivery, but must become an open process, responsive to conditions it cannot fully anticipate and accountable to communities it did not initially know. Peripheral neighbourhoods such as Rione Scala are not merely sites of need; they are laboratories of contemporary living, where the contradictions of the city between investment and abandonment, between formal governance and informal practice, between individual dignity and collective precarity, are most nakedly legible. To read these contradictions requires a convergence of perspectives that no single disciplinary formation supplies. The fine-grained attentiveness of ethnography, the structural analysis of urban sociology, the processual thinking of anthropology, and the spatial and material intelligence of architectural design. This convergence is not merely methodological, it is, as Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan (2026) demonstrate through their comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in

collective housing estates, a condition of responsible practice in marginalised territories. It is one that requires designers to move from the role of technocratic expert toward that of co-initiator, activist, facilitator, and, ultimately, engaged neighbor. It is at precisely this intersection that architecture is forced to rethink not only its methods but the scale of its ambitions. It need recognise, as Camillo Boano (2020) argues in his account of the minor project, that the small, the incomplete, and the inoperative can carry an intensity of political and spatial significance that the monumental and the resolved cannot. Designing for a mixed society, one constituted by difference of generation, origin, legal status, and everyday spatial practice, demands an architecture willing to give form to individual and collective dignity without resolving the complexity that makes that dignity difficult to achieve.

## THE UNSCRIPTED GROUND AS SITUATION

A distinction is necessary at the outset between site and situation. A site can be surveyed, mapped, programmed, and returned to with a proposal. A situation must be entered, endured, and allowed to alter the one who engages it. What this issue's call proposes, and what Rione Scala demands, is precisely this shift. A shift from the neighbourhood as a bounded space of intervention to the neighbourhood as a knot of material, social, and symbolic relations that only becomes legible through sustained, attentive, and often collective engagement with place. The unscripted ground as situation refuses the detached architectural gaze; it insists on co-implication. To remain in Rione Scala over time is to become partially and provisionally a party to its negotiations between resident associations and the municipality, between older Italian-born residents and recently arrived migrant families, between the civic infrastructure that exists and the care infrastructure that does not.

This is not only an architectural shift but an epistemological one. Following Haraway's (1988) insistence on situated knowledges the claim that all knowing is partial, located, and accountable I argue that the peripheral neighbourhood forces architectural research into a more honest reckoning with its own positionality. This is precisely because it resists the stabilising scripts of planning. The terrain vague does not merely await architectural interpretation, it demands that the interpreter account for the position from which interpretation occurs. This has direct methodological and ethical consequences for how research is designed, how participation is structured, and how results are translated and to whom. Lefebvre's (2004) *rhythmanalysis*; an approach to urban life that attends to the temporal structures of everyday practice through bodily and sensory engagement, offers a complementary methodological register here. In Rione Scala the rhythms of the neighbourhood are spatially and temporally differentiated in ways that escape survey-based documentation: the kitchen at a community event, the contested threshold of a shared courtyard at different hours of the day, the changing occupancy of the civic centre by different communities across the week. Reading these rhythms requires duration and immersion, not observation from a distance. It requires, in Lefebvre's terms, becoming something of a *rhythm analyst*, attuned to the polyrhythmic complexity of a social space whose full legibility can only be achieved from within.

The indeterminacy that characterises unscripted grounds also opens genuine possibilities. Informal associations have claimed spaces that planning abandoned. Migrant-led social infrastructures have filled gaps in municipal provision. The civic centre renovated through an earlier institutional programme is occupied in ways that neither its designers nor its funders anticipated. In Tsing's (2015) terms these are forms of life that flourish in the gaps that global

and local systems leave behind. They are improvisations that are not merely adaptive but generative of new social forms. Federici's (2018) feminist analysis of commoning adds a further dimension here, the commons are not simply shared resources but social relations of reproduction, and women in particular have historically borne the labour of sustaining them. In Rione Scala the informal networks of solidarity that structure everyday life, the sharing of childcare, the collective preparation of food, the mutual assistance in navigating bureaucratic systems, are predominantly carried by women. Their labour is largely invisible to the spatial and institutional frameworks through which the neighbourhood is typically read. The unscripted ground, read carefully from within rather than observed from without, is full of this kind of invisible labour and a feminist analytical lens is necessary to make it visible.

## PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE AS SITUATED RESEARCH: METHOD, IMMERSION AND THE ETHICS OF DURATION

The Architecture(s) of Care programme developed through a methodological shift that I can only describe retrospectively as a necessary disillusionment. What began as a Summer School conceived within the conventions of university-community outreach, temporary, bounded, legible as academic service, became something more difficult and more demanding. It became a long-term research commitment that could not be justified by any single deliverable. This shift emerged from the recognition that short-term engagement, however intensive, risks reproducing the extractive logic it claims to critique. One arrives, one listens, one makes, one leaves and the neighbourhood absorbs another cycle of attention without structural change. Trust, as a social relation, cannot be

produced within a workshop cycle. It takes longer than a semester to understand why a particular resident chooses not to attend meetings, or what the spatial politics of a shared courtyard actually are. Duration also changes the researcher. Over five years in Rione Scala, my assumptions about what architectural intervention could achieve have been substantially revised. I arrived with design convictions and I remain more slowly, more uncertainly with research questions. This is not failure; it is, I would argue, the condition of intellectual honesty in participatory practice.

Ethnography is often treated as a social science tool that architects borrow and set aside once design commences. In Rione Scala, ethnographic method has been inseparable from architectural thinking, not as a precursor to design but as a co-constitutive practice. I attended residents' meetings without presenting proposals, because I needed to understand what proposals would mean in a context I did not yet know. I observed how the renovated civic centre was used differently by different communities at different times of day, and how space that reads as neutral from the outside is, from within, intensely territorial and temporally structured. I participated in food preparation at community events not because this was architecturally useful in any obvious sense but because the kitchen, in Rione Scala, is a political space. It is the site where authority is negotiated, alliances formed, and the conditions of collective life worked out. This approach draws on the reflexive anthropological tradition that James Clifford (1986) identified as the acknowledgement of partial truths, the recognition that ethnographic accounts are always produced from a particular position and cannot claim to represent a social world in its totality. My field notes are partial; they record what I was positioned to observe, which is not everything. Making this partiality explicit is not a methodological weakness it is, following Haraway (1988), the condition of responsible knowledge production. Design-build

workshops became ethnographic instruments in this context. During the construction of the neighbourhood book-crossing cabin (2025), residents brought fragments of domestic material: salvaged wood, leftover paint, a hinge from a defunct garden gate. The workshop produced not only a cabin but a temporary community of making in which social relations, hierarchies, and solidarities became briefly visible. Material assembly, as a method, reveals relational structures that conversation alone does not access.

### PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: POTENTIALS, LIMITATIONS AND THE UNRESOLVABLE

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has a genealogy rooted in emancipatory commitments that architectural practice has frequently instrumentalised without adequately honouring. Its theoretical foundations lie in the work of Fals-Borda (1987), who, in the Colombian context of the 1970s and 1980s, articulated a research practice premised on the dissolution of the boundary between researcher and researched. This was a practice developed with and led by peasant and marginalised communities, rather than on or about them. Freire's (1970) parallel articulation of conscientisation as a pedagogical and political practice of collective critical awareness deepened this epistemological commitment. Knowledge, for Freire, is not transmitted from expert to layperson but generated through dialogical engagement with the conditions of one's own oppression. As systematised by Reason and Bradbury (2001), PAR encompasses collective knowledge production, reflexive cycles of inquiry and action, and an orientation toward transformative rather than merely descriptive ends. In the context of marginalised urban territories, these commitments translate into a research practice that takes seriously the experiential knowledge

of those who inhabit precarious conditions. It engages knowledge that is fine-grained, embodied, and irreplaceable and that holds open the possibility that spatial practice, at any scale, might contribute to the conditions of its own critique (Fig.1).

In Rione Scala PAR produced outcomes that would not have been achievable through conventional design methods. Workshops such as *Il Bar dei Vicini* (Festival dei Diritti 2024) engaged residents in constructing a mobile kiosk used for neighbourhood events. This was an object designed collaboratively, built collectively, and used in ways that exceeded the intentions of its initiators. The kiosk merits closer attention as a design object precisely because its significance lies not in its formal resolution but in the social process it condensed and the spatial agency it enabled. Its programme emerged from a sequence of open assemblies in which residents identified the absence of a neutral, mobile gathering device, one not affiliated with any single association, as a structural gap in the neighbourhood's social infrastructure. Its material specification was shaped by the constraints of collective fabrication. Dimensions were determined by what could be transported by hand and assembled without specialist tools, and surfaces left partially unfinished to allow future modification. Alexander's (1977) pattern language, with its insistence that living structures emerge from the accumulated wisdom of those who inhabit them rather than from the imposition of expert systems, offers a useful if incomplete theoretical frame here. The kiosk is not a pattern in Alexander's sense, it is too singular, too embedded in a specific set of social negotiations to claim the generative universality he sought. But its design process shares Alexander's core commitment, that spatial form must be generated from within a community's own understanding of its needs, through a process that is itself educative and politically meaningful. What distinguishes the kiosk from conventional community-design outcomes is precisely its



Fig.1 - Set-up for a students-citizens open assembly. Credits: Author, 2025.

openness to appropriation. It was designed to travel, to be claimed by different groups for different purposes, to accumulate meaning through use. Illich's (1973) concept of convivial tools, artefacts that are simple, transparent, and accessible to all, which expand rather than constrain the autonomy of their users, illuminates what the kiosk aspires to be; not a service delivery mechanism but a spatial resource whose value is relational and open-ended. This is what Boano (2020) identifies as the political potential of the minor project; not the grand gesture but the small, deliberate, incompletely resolved object that operates as an intensity rather than a monument, one whose significance lies in what it activates rather than what it completes (Fig.2).

The book-crossing cabin (2025), designed and built in a subsequent cycle of the programme, operates through an analogous logic. Materially modest, it nevertheless generates forms of attachment, the repeated gesture of leaving and taking a book, the recognition of a shared device in a shared space, that exceed its physical dimensions. Both objects are, in the terms this article proposes, devices of care. Not care as sentiment or aesthetics, but care as the ongoing, material, and social practice of maintaining a shared world (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Their resonance with comparable devices documented in other peripheral European territories, such as the informal proximity libraries and kiosks of Bucharest and Cluj described by Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan (2026), suggests that such objects may constitute an emerging repertoire for participatory architectural practice in collective housing contexts across Europe. Small in scale, but significant in what Escobar (2018) calls their ontological force, they have capacity to reshape the ways in which communities engage with shared space, knowledge, and the possibility of collective life. They do not substitute for structural provision, they make the absence of structural provision visible while simultaneously demonstrating, at the scale of the

everyday, what an architecture of accountable presence might look like.

Neighbourhood mapping exercises surfaced spatial knowledge that no GIS dataset contained, the informal routes, the contested thresholds, the locations of informal solidarity, that are invisible to planning instruments but central to everyday life. Participatory processes created conditions in which residents who rarely occupied the same institutional

space came to share a material practice, negotiating, however temporarily, the differences that ordinarily structured their separation. These achievements point to a genuine capacity of PAR to produce both spatial knowledge and social relation simultaneously, to treat the built environment not as a product to be delivered but as a process to be shared. Yet PAR carries significant limitations that must be engaged with rigour rather than acknowledged only in passing. The first is epistemic



Fig.2 - The mobile kiosk travelling across the neighbourhood to offer tea and coffee on a Saturday morning. Credits: Author, 2025.

participatory processes do not dissolve the power asymmetry between academic researcher and neighbourhood resident, they reconfigure it in ways that can be harder to see. When I curate outcomes for exhibitions, when I select which voices to amplify in published accounts, when I translate neighbourhood experience into the vocabulary of academic discourse, as I am doing now, I am exercising forms of interpretive authority that no amount of participatory method entirely redistributes. The knowledge produced in PAR is genuinely co-produced in process but not always equally owned in representation. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) warning about the 'new tyranny of participation' is not merely a historical caution; it describes a structural tendency that operates through the very mechanisms: consensus, inclusion, shared making, that participatory practice valorises. More pointedly, Patricia Maguire's (1987) feminist critique identified the androcentric assumptions embedded in early PAR formulations that participation frameworks have persistently failed to account for the gendered distribution of labour that makes commoning possible, rendering invisible precisely the reproductive work that sustains it. In Rione Scala, this critique is materially present in who attends workshops, who prepares the meals that punctuate them, and whose knowledge counts as architectural knowledge within the research process.

The second limitation is political. PAR can be instrumentalised within governance frameworks that it was designed to contest. Miraftab's (2009) distinction between invited and insurgent spaces of participation sharpens this diagnosis. The invited space of the funded workshop convened by an institution, structured by a methodology, documented for reporting purposes is not the same as the insurgent space of resident self-organisation, even when the two overlap. Municipal actors in Pavia have, on occasion, cited community workshops as evidence of successful neighbourhood engagement while leaving structural

issues of housing precarity, inadequate health services, and legal vulnerability for migrant residents entirely unaddressed. In this framing, participation becomes alibi rather than practice. The presence of collaborative process serving as justification for not meeting structural needs. Federici's (2018) analysis of new enclosures' under neoliberalism is instructive here. The withdrawal of public welfare and the simultaneous promotion of community-led resilience are not coincidental but structurally related processes. When participatory architectural research fills a gap left by disinvestment, it must name that gap as a political condition and refuse to present its own presence as a substitute for the provision that has been withdrawn.

The third limitation is temporal and concerns sustainability. PAR depends on the sustained engagement of participants whose lives are structured by precarity such as irregular employment, uncertain legal status, the daily labour of care, that makes sustained engagement asymmetrically costly. Participation fluctuates not because residents lack commitment, but because commitment competes with survival. When funding cycles end or university calendars impose their own temporality on neighbourhood processes, the continuity that PAR requires is interrupted, and the relational infrastructures it builds can dissolve more quickly than they were assembled.

The ethics of initiating participatory processes therefore includes the ethics of sustaining them, which requires resources, institutional support, and a willingness to remain present beyond the conditions of any particular project. It also requires honesty about when those conditions cannot be met, and what that failure costs the communities involved. These limitations do not invalidate PAR as a method, they specify the conditions under which it can be practised responsibly and the political accounting that responsible practice must maintain.

## POSITIONALITY, INSTITUTIONAL POWER, AND THE RISK OF SUBSTITUTION

I am embedded in Rione Scala through sustained presence, collaborative relationships with local associations, and an ongoing commitment to neighbourhood processes that exceed any particular project. I am simultaneously external, university-affiliated, academically credentialed, and capable of translating local experience into the currency of academic publication.

This duality is not a problem to be solved but a structural condition to be inhabited with care. Feminist standpoint theory insists that acknowledging positionality does not dissolve power asymmetries, it makes them visible and therefore available for critical reflection and partial accountability. When my institutional affiliation facilitates access to municipal planning officers that residents themselves cannot easily obtain, this is not a neutral resource, it is an expression of the same structural inequality that produced the neighbourhood's marginalisation. To use institutional capital in the service of community advocacy without acknowledging this is to reproduce the asymmetry one claims to be working against. I have also had to reckon with the ways in which my presence produces effects I cannot fully control. Some residents speak more confidently in workshops I facilitate, others withdraw. Some associations have come to expect forms of support such as design expertise, grant-writing capacity, access to university networks, that exceed what I am able or obligated to provide.

The ethics of remaining in a neighbourhood over time includes the ethics of managing expectation and being clear about what I can offer, what I cannot, and what must be demanded of institutions rather than outsourced to academic presence.

The most structurally uncomfortable question that Rione Scala has posed to my practice is this, does the presence of engaged architectural researchers in under-resourced territories substitute for the public investment those territories require, and in doing so legitimise its absence? Tronto's (1993) political theory of care is decisive here. Tronto argues that care is not merely an interpersonal ethic but a political one. Caring practices are always already embedded in relations of power, and the question of who cares for whom, at whose cost, and under what structural conditions is irreducibly political.

When care is delegated downward, from the state to the community, from the community to its most precarious members, it does not simply fill a gap, it reinforces the social hierarchies that produced the gap. Krasny's (2019) feminist theorisation of care as spatial practice extends this argument into the architectural domain, insisting that care must confront its political entanglements rather than aestheticise them. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) adds a further critical dimension. Care, understood as simultaneously labour, affect, and ethico-political obligation, cannot be reduced to a stylistic register or a design vocabulary. It requires attention to the invisible, often feminised work that makes any spatial commons actually function, such as the maintenance, the conflict resolution, or the ongoing negotiation, that is never photographed and rarely acknowledged in architectural accounts.

When a community kiosk built by architecture students fills the absence left by defunded public infrastructure, the kiosk is not merely an act of solidarity it is also, potentially, a cover story for disinvestment. I do not think this makes the kiosk wrong. I think it makes the political conditions of its production something that must be named, contested, and refused as sufficient. The self-built civic device is a micro-space of agency, as Awan, Schneider, and

Till (2011) suggest spatial agency can be, but micro-spaces of agency are not substitutes for structural transformation. The ethical obligation of situated architectural research is to hold these scales simultaneously, and to work at the scale of the neighbourhood without losing sight of the scale at which the neighbourhood's conditions are produced.

A related question concerns representation and its aestheticisation of marginality. The Sharper Night exhibition relocated Rione Scala's narratives into the city centre. While this visibility mattered, and while the translation of peripheral experience into a more legible urban space was requested and welcomed by some residents, it also simplified complexity.

As Jane Rendell (2005) suggests, critical spatial practice must acknowledge the partiality of representation. Exhibiting peripheral life risks producing it as spectacle, setting it as evidence of urban diversity for audiences who do not share its precarity. Writing this article presents a structurally similar risk, and I hold this in view.

## COMMONS, SPATIAL AGENCY, AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE UNFINISHED

The infrastructures produced through Architecture(s) of Care, the community kiosk (Il Bar dei Vicini, 2024), the neighbourhood book-crossing cabin (2025), and the neighbourhood mapping exercises, are materially modest and deliberately fragile. Their value lies not in formal resolution but in the processes they enabled and the negotiations they made visible (Fig.3). They are, in the terms this article proposes, devices capable of generating attachment and care.

They are objects small enough to be built collectively, open enough to accumulate meaning through use, and sufficiently present in the everyday life of the neighbourhood to become reference points for a mixed community navigating

shared space across difference. The designer's role in this process is not that of the technocratic expert that modernist planning imagined, but something more distributed and relational. It is what Till (2005) calls the negotiation of hope, the capacity to work with the uncertainty and incompleteness of communities' actual situations rather than projecting predetermined solutions onto them.

Manzini (2015) understands design for social innovation as precisely this, not as the imposition of formal expertise but the facilitation of conditions in which people cooperate, recombine existing resources, and act in ways that generate new forms of collective life. Petrescu's (2005) understanding of commons as ongoing negotiation rather than settled arrangement captures what these objects are and are not. A position further developed in her recent comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in European collective housing contexts demonstrates how such negotiations are always agonistic, contested, and constitutively unresolved (Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan, 2026). In the terms of Mouffe's (2007) agonistic democracy, the conflicts that arise around these objects, who uses them, when, for whom, are not obstacles to the commons but constitutive of it.

The agonistic space is where commoning actually happens. They are not common goods in any stable sense, they are invitations to commoning, which is always contested, always provisional, and always at risk of being claimed by one group at the expense of others. Ostrom's (1990) foundational analysis of common-pool resource governance established that commons can be sustainably managed by communities through self-defined rules and institutions. Her framework however, drawn from rural and natural resource contexts, requires significant modification when transposed to the urban environment, as Foster and Iaione (2018) have shown. Urban commons are constituted



Fig.3 - "Building as a collective ritual", upcycling workshop at Rione Scala. Credits: Author, 2025.

not around bounded natural resources but around the ongoing social negotiation of shared urban space. They are therefore far more vulnerable to the asymmetric power relations, the institutional pressures, and the temporal disruptions that characterise peripheral urban territories. When residents in Rione Scala dispute access to the book cabin, or when the kiosk is appropriated by one association in ways that exclude others, these are not design failures they are the political nature of urban commoning becoming visible, and they must be engaged rather than resolved away.

Federici's (2018) feminist critique of commoning adds a necessary historical and political dimension here. For Federici, commons are not happy islands in a sea of capitalist relations but sites of active struggle against enclosure, against the ongoing processes of privatisation and disinvestment through which capital extracts value from collective life. The fragility of the commons in Rione Scala is not accidental, it is a product of the same structural processes of neoliberal governance, the withdrawal of public services, and the precarity of migrant legal status that produced the neighbourhood's marginalisation. To speak of commons in this context without attending to these structural conditions is to aestheticise what is, in fact, a site of political struggle. Rawes's (2013) conceptualisation of relational architectural ecologies is useful alongside this.

The built objects produced in participatory processes are nodes in a network of human and non-human actors, institutional and informal relations, material and symbolic exchanges. Their meaning is relational and therefore unstable, not because relations are inherently fluid but because the social and structural conditions that constitute them are themselves contested and subject to transformation. Urban political ecology as developed by Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw (2006) insists that urban environments are metabolic, the product of material flows,

labour processes, and ecological relations that are inseparable from social and political ones. Rione Scala's infrastructural fragility is the materialisation of structural inequality in built form.

Leaking roofs, uneven pavements, inadequate lighting in public spaces, these are not design failures but political ones, and they must be engaged as such. Attending to these material conditions is learning to read the building stock as a record of disinvestment, the open spaces as sites of informal ecological process, the domestic thresholds as negotiations between private and collective life. This has been as important to this research as any theoretical framework. Harvey's (2008) right to the city is, in Rione Scala, not an abstract aspiration but a daily negotiation whose outcome is genuinely uncertain. Small-scale spatial interventions do not resolve that uncertainty. They can however make visible what is otherwise invisible, build capacities that persist beyond any particular project cycle, and create micro-spaces of agency in which residents can rehearse forms of collective claim-making that have effects at larger scales, provided the practitioner does not mistake the former for the latter.

This issue's call asks how unscripted grounds shift over time, whether they remain at the margins or are reintegrated into mainstream planning, and to what extent lessons from experimentation persist or are erased. Rione Scala is subject to periodic waves of institutional attention in the form of urban regeneration programmes, European funding cycles, municipal 'inclusion' initiatives, each of which brings its own interpretive frame.

These frames do not simply describe the neighbourhood, they attempt to script it. The risk is the normalisation of the unscripted ground, its absorption into planning's legibility at the cost of the informal processes and insurgent practices that its indeterminacy enabled. My practice has had to negotiate this risk continuously, participating in funded programmes while

maintaining critical distance from their framing, insisting that what cannot be measured by institutional instruments also has value and making knowledge publicly available while resisting its reduction to policy recommendation.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE OF ACCOUNTABLE PRESENCE

What does it mean to practice architecture in a territory that has not asked for an architect, in a condition that refuses resolution, at a moment when the politics of care and the politics of capital are in fundamental tension? It means, first, to refuse the consolations of method.

Participatory architecture, ethnographic immersion, commons-oriented spatial practice, these are not solutions to the contradictions of engaging peripheral territories from institutional positions. They are frameworks for navigating those contradictions with greater honesty and greater accountability, and they carry their own risks which must be named and held rather than absorbed into methodological confidence. The genealogy of PAR, from Fals-Borda's militant research in rural Colombia to its contemporary articulations in urban architecture, carries within it both a genuine emancipatory promise and a persistent risk of co-optation by the very institutional frameworks it was designed to contest. Situated architectural research, as I understand it, requires holding both dimensions in view.

It means, second, to insist on the political stakes of spatial practice at the margins. The unscripted ground is not simply a site of creative indeterminacy, it is a site of structurally produced vulnerability. An architecture that engages it without attending to that structural production without naming what produced the fragility and demanding its transformation risks being, at best, formally inventive

and, at worst, politically complicit. The peripheral neighbourhood does not need more aestheticisation of its conditions, it needs practices that can hold the scale of the everyday and the scale of the structural in the same analytical frame. The feminist theorists of care, Tronto, Puig de la Bellacasa, Federici, are united in this insistence, care without structural critique is not care but its simulation.

It means, third, to acknowledge the limits of architectural agency while refusing to use those limits as alibi for inaction or disengagement. Rione Scala remains unresolved, conflictual, demographically complex, and materially fragile. It is also alive, generative of forms of social practice and spatial knowledge that exceed anything a funded programme could produce or any academic account could fully capture.

The responsibility of architectural practice at the unscripted ground is not to script it, but to remain present, accountable, and honest about the conditions: institutional, political, structural, from which that presence proceeds. The ground that refuses to resolve is, precisely for that reason, the ground where architecture has the most to learn.

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# Micro, Meso, Macro

## Multi-scalar reappropriation of abandoned railways in Beirut, Paris and Queens (New York)

chemins de fer délaissés  
pratiques multi-scalaires  
appropriations informelles  
marche comme méthode(ologie)  
**abandoned railways  
multi-scalar practices  
informal appropriations  
walking-based research**

Les espaces urbains abandonnés sont étudiés comme lieux de convergence des pratiques quotidiennes, des interventions informelles et des agendas de planification concurrents. De nombreux travaux portent sur la capacité des appropriations collectives et participatives à contester les logiques descendantes d'aménagement. Les corridors ferroviaires délaissés se distinguent dans ce champ. Leur morphologie linéaire traverse différents quartiers et juridictions et leur matérialité conserve les empreintes des anciens réseaux de transport. Leur statut juridique se complexifie par la superposition d'affectation et de droits de passage mêlant intérêts publics et privés. Ces conditions produisent usage et conflit qui se déploient à plusieurs échelles : micro-appropriations par les riverains, des initiatives collectives à l'échelle méso et projections macro cadrant le corridor comme une infrastructure de transport future, un patrimoine industriel ou une promenade linéaire.

Cet article analyse comment les réappropriations multi-scalaires informelles et semi-formelles émergent sur trois corridors ferroviaires délaissés : la ligne Beyrouth-Bekaa, la Petite Ceinture parisienne et la branche Rockaway Beach à Queens, New York. Ancrée dans un travail de terrain qualitatif multisite mené entre 2021 et 2025, l'étude combine marches répétées, entretiens et analyse documentaire. Elle retrace comment les pratiques s'accumulent, se stabilisent ou entrent en conflit. À travers les trois cas, l'analyse montre que les chemins de fer délaissés persistent comme assemblages socio-matériels en état de suspension active, entre vacance et requalification, redéfinis par des pratiques et des revendications concurrentes. Plutôt que de s'interroger sur leur devenir, l'article examine comment les acteurs stabilisent des trajectoires en traduisant les pratiques locales dans des imaginaires et des cadres de gouvernance plus larges.

Abandoned and disused urban spaces have increasingly been examined as sites where everyday practices, informal interventions, and contested planning agendas converge. A growing body of scholarship has focused on how community-led and participatory appropriations can challenge top-down redevelopment and planning logics. Abandoned railway corridors occupy a distinctive position within this broader discourse. Their linear morphology cuts across neighborhoods and jurisdictions, and their material remnants retain the imprints of former transport networks. Their legal status is complicated by layered ownership, easements, and rights-of-way that entangle public and private interests. These conditions generate recurring patterns of use and dispute that unfold at multiple scales: micro appropriations by adjacent residents and informal occupants, meso-level initiatives such as cleanups, gardens, and organized walks, and macro projections that frame the corridor as future transport, heritage infrastructure, or linear parkland.

This article analyzes how multi-scalar informal and semi-formal reappropriations take shape across three decommissioned rail corridors: the Beirut-Bekaa line, Paris's Petite Ceinture, and the Rockaway Beach Branch in Queens, New York. Grounded in multi-site qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2025, the study combines repeated walking-based observation with interviews and document analysis. It traces how practices accumulate, stabilize, and sometimes conflict across scales. Across the three cases, the analysis shows that abandoned railways persist as socio-material assemblages in a condition of active suspension: neither vacant nor fully redeveloped but continuously redefined through competing practices and future-oriented claims. Rather than asking what these infrastructures will become, the article examines how actors attempt to stabilize particular trajectories by translating local practices into broader imaginaries and governance frameworks.

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Abandoned railway corridors are often treated similarly to other residual and disused urban spaces. Within both planning and scholarship, they are often categorized as *friches* or brownfields awaiting formal transformation and reuse, or as “urban voids” or *terrains vagues*, providing informal spaces of un-planned potential (de Sola-Morales 1995; Adams, de Sousa, Tiesdell 2010; Gowda 2019).

This article argues that such framings overlook how these infrastructures continue to organize urban space, practices, and imaginaries long after their transport function has ceased. It proposes a multi-scalar framework to analyze abandoned railway corridors as “network ruins,” focusing on how their linear form and ambiguous legal status produce overlapping practices across scales. By doing so, it moves beyond project-based or end-state analyses to examine the ongoing processes of how these infrastructures are inhabited and negotiated over time.

Existing work on abandoned urban spaces has tended to emphasize indeterminacy and openness, notably through concepts such as *terrain vague*, understood as spaces of “indeterminacy” and “absence of function” (de Sola-Morales 1995, p.120), or as flexible sites for informal and temporary uses (Franck, Stevens 2006). In parallel, infrastructure studies have shown that networks do not simply disappear when they fall out of use, but remain operative as socio-material systems, as they continue to structure urban life beyond moments of breakdown (Larkin 2013; Graham, Thrift 2007). These literatures tend to frame such spaces either as open-ended voids or as latent systems awaiting reactivation, with limited attention to the prolonged and contested processes that unfold between these states.

This article shifts the analytical focus from transformation and end use to persistence and process. It proposes the concept of active suspension: a state where multiple uses, practices, and projections

coexist across scales, without stabilizing into a single dominant trajectory.

This condition of active suspension emerges from the unique spatial and institutional characteristics of abandoned railway spaces. Their linear morphology cuts across neighborhoods and jurisdictions, giving residents fragmented and uneven access to narrow slivers of land. Their material persistence maintains visible traces of past networks and heritage that continue to structure perception and use (Qviström 2012). At the same time, layered ownership, easements, and conditional rights make them difficult to fully reassign or transform. Together, these elements produce corridors that remain actively negotiated, sustaining overlapping and sometimes competing forms of occupation, management, and projection. In this perspective, abandoned rail spaces are viewed as socio-material assemblages, where heterogeneous human and non-human elements - actors, institutions, regulations, vegetation, and built remnants - jointly produce spatial conditions (Anderson, McFarlane 2011; Latour 2005). Indeterminacy is actively maintained through ongoing processes of negotiation, translation, and partial stabilization. Abandoned railways can thus be understood as what Qviström (2012) terms “network ruins,” where the material traces of infrastructure continue to organize spatial practices and imaginaries. The concept of active suspension highlights how these infrastructures remain operative without resolution through everyday use, collective action, and future-oriented projection.

To capture these dynamics, the article adopts a multi-scalar framework structured around micro, meso, and macro levels. This approach traces how everyday appropriations, collective initiatives, and strategic projections interact within the same spatial system, producing interdependent rather than separate regimes of use and meaning.

This article is guided by the following research questions: How do informal, micro-level appropriations and meso-level collective initiatives manifest across decommissioned corridors? How do these localized practices intersect and compete with macro-scale projections and governance frameworks? And finally, how does this ongoing negotiation between scales create a state of active suspension, and what does this condition mean for the long-term transformation of these infrastructures?

To empirically explore these questions, this article examines how multi-scalar dynamics play out in three urban sites where railways have been decommissioned and partially re-appropriated for other uses: Beirut's abandoned rail line, Paris's Petite Ceinture, and the Rockaway Beach Branch abandoned rail line in Queens, New York. In each case, informal practices on the rail lines begin at the micro level and progress to higher scales, with increasing temporal and spatial scope. However, each case develops differently, reflecting the social, political, and structural forces at work in these cities and among the relevant actors and stakeholders.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is part of my ongoing doctoral research, which uses a multi-site, qualitative approach to examine how abandoned infrastructures become sites of appropriation, transformation, and diverse uses and practices under different urban and institutional conditions. The research engages three contexts in which fieldwork has been conducted between 2021 and 2025: Beirut, Paris, and Queens (New York). The analysis presented here is grounded in primary field materials collected across these three sites, and develops these data into an empirical, case-based contribution. It also reflects different intensities of investigation; fieldwork was more intensive along the Beirut-Bekaa line and the Petite Ceinture, while a shorter research episode in Queens serves to sharpen key analytical contrasts.

Within this broader qualitative design, walking has structured my research both methodologically and analytically, offering an embodied and situated approach (Vergunst, Ingold 2016; Careri 2017; Twemlow, Cardoso 2024). Building on work in urban geographical research and ethnography that treats walking as both a “technique of the body” and an investigative tool, this approach foregrounds movement, trajectories, and perceptions as central to understanding how urban spaces are inhabited (Laugrand 2026; Lawhon, Pierce 2015). Ethnographic work emphasizes that walking gives access to embodied, multisensory knowledges and to the relations between bodies, environments, and memory (Laugrand 2026; Ghislotti lared, Torres De Oliveira 2017). In urban geography, walking has been framed as a key practice for producing local literacy and for making explicit the often-unreported observations that underlie qualitative research (Lawhon, Pierce 2015). In the tradition of the situationist *dérive* and psychogeography, walking approaches urban space through trajectories and lived environments rather than fixed points (Debord 1958). Neo-situationist and contemporary walking practices explicitly fuse walking and mapping to produce counter-cartographies of everyday urban life (Girault 2018; Gwiazdzinski 2019). Walking thus serves here as a tool for cartography as well, facilitating a situated engagement with the layered material, social, and affective dimensions of abandoned railway infrastructures.

Walking as a research practice is particularly suited to the linear morphology of urban rail corridors, as they can be followed continuously across neighborhoods, land uses, and administrative boundaries. As in other ruins, walkers must “learn” the space with movements that are unsettled and improvised, as one must “stoop, crouch, climb, slither, leap, swerve and pick” one's way through (Edensor 2008b, p.127). These fragmented, non-linear experiences resist authoritative

narrative representation of the “regulated city,” since ruins generate overlapping traces of industrial pasts, embodied perceptions, and ongoing processes of decay and renewal that unsettle linear understanding of space and time (Edensor 2008b, p.127). Yet unlike other industrial ruins, moving through abandoned rail corridors means moving through the city itself, not just an abandoned pocket of it. This creates an ambivalent experience of simultaneous estrangement from, and connection to, the urban fabric, which is especially useful in observing the tension between their role as marginal space and their role as structuring network. As Edensor writes elsewhere, the rail's “energy, noise and movement is summoned by the surrounding tranquillity, and the stilled networks, now cut off from urban flows, have been replaced by other routes through which matter and energy course” (Edensor 2008a, p.318).

Walking also enables simultaneous observation at multiple scales: close attention to material details such as fencing, vegetation, traces of passage, or improvised constructions (micro); patterns of access, adjacency, and conflict along segments (meso); and the broader territorial positioning of the line within metropolitan infrastructures and governance regimes (macro). Walking along the tracks reveals how structural remnants, property regimes, municipal projects, informal appropriations, ecological succession, and everyday practices intersect in situ. It makes visible how walls, bridges, encroachments, community gardens, security devices, and political signage coexist and compete within the same corridor. It is particularly effective for identifying informal uses and for understanding how human activity inhabits, diverts, or reinterprets the rails.

These methodological advantages were operationalized differently across the three field sites. In each city, the sections walked were defined by accessibility to the rails. For each segment, entry and

exit points were defined, informal accesses documented, and repeated walks were taken. Repeated walks allow the documentation of temporal variation, including seasonal growth, maintenance interventions, and shifting patterns of presence, anchoring analysis in direct, situated observation.

As noted above, the intensity and temporal span of the walks varied according to physical presence in each site. In Paris, I had easier access and could perform frequent repeated walks due to my close proximity to the Petite Ceinture. These walks included both open and closed segments across the city, with a focus on segments running through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissements. Walks on these sections were repeated 5 times between 2021 and 2025. In Beirut, my presence was intermittent, and the walks were therefore more temporally concentrated across three fieldwork trips, with access limitations further narrowing visibility into some sites. The line itself is also more fractured, more restricted, and less visible, resulting in observations focused mainly on the small segments of track in the vicinity of the Mar Mikhael train station, where the greatest density of informal practices was found. Walks on these sections were repeated weekly for a period of 3 months of fieldwork over 3 years. In Queens, my short research stay prevented longitudinal data gathering and resulted in a much shorter and more limited study, rather than a full dissertation case. As a visiting research scholar, I conducted three walks along the Rockaway Beach Branch between January and August of 2023. However, despite this short duration, my stay coincided with an intense period of public debate about the future of the rail, which added a crucial layer of analytical clarity that took much longer to develop in the other studies.

Beyond repeated individual walks, fieldwork at the three sites also involved collective walking practices. Individual walks emphasized systematic coverage and documentation, while collective

walks with association members both in Paris and Beirut served as guided tours and walk-along interviews. More importantly, structured collective walks provided key insights into how different actors and stakeholders viewed the rail line, its place in the urban fabric, and their own role in determining its fate. For example, a nature walk along the Petite Ceinture emphasized the line's ecological and educational value as a wild bio-corridor, while a walk with a train heritage group emphasized its historical importance in the development of the city's economy.

For each of these sites, walking was complemented by literature review, archival research, semi-structured interviews, and walk-along interviews with a variety of stakeholders. Interview subjects included residents, community groups, and artists engaged in informal uses of abandoned rail space, civil society and advocacy groups, government officials, and other interested actors. In this article, interviews reflect the perspectives attached to informal uses and practices in abandoned rail spaces across the three cities, as well as the longer-term visions of different groups vying to define the formal uses of those spaces. In Beirut and Paris, these interviews were conducted with members of associations and NGOs (such as Train Train in Lebanon and the Promeneurs de la Petite Ceinture in Paris) as well as with representatives at the SNCF and the OCFTC. Formal interviews were complemented and triangulated with more informal conversations during walks with residents living along the line. These conversations were essential to understanding how rail preservation agendas, ecological management, and transitional urbanism coexist and occasionally pull the former rail spaces toward different futures. In Queens, interviews with Project Eden and QueensLink clarified the tensions between current meso-scale uses and projected futures. Collectively, these findings illustrate how diverse stakeholders translate site potential into competing urban imaginaries – whether as mobility assets, ecological resources, or

heritage landmarks.

These field materials are analyzed and interpreted in the context of existing research on the three sites, and in light of the broader theoretical work of urbanism scholars conceptualizing abandoned urban spaces more generally.

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE THREE RAILWAY CORRIDORS

The following sub-sections present a brief historical background for each of the three rail corridors, situating its current condition within a longer trajectory of construction, decline, and partial re-use.

### The Beirut-Bekaa Line

Built in the late nineteenth century under the Ottoman Empire, the Beirut-Damascus railway was inaugurated in August 1895, linking Beirut to the Syrian city of Damascus via the Bekaa (Elefériadès 1944). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the railway served as a strategic transport corridor for both passengers and goods. During the French mandate on Lebanon (1920-1943), a coastal extension was implemented to link Beirut to the north and the south. After Lebanese independence in 1943, management of the railway shifted to Lebanese public entities — Chemin de fer de l'État Libanais (CEL), then the Office des chemins de fer et du transport en commun (OCFTC) — but state disinvestment and competition from road transport precipitated a long decline (Boutros 2014). The civil war (1975-1990) caused severe damage and interruptions. By the late 1970s, passenger service had ceased, and the last regular freight service (cement from Chekka to Beirut) stopped in 1997 (Boutros 2014). Today, the network survives as a suspended, materially present remnant. The OCFTC and the Ministry of Public Works and Transport remain formal custodians, while NGOs such as Train Train, international organizations, local associations, residents, artists and

informal occupants all advance different forms of living in the space or projecting its future.

### The Petite Ceinture

The Petite Ceinture railway is a 32-kilometer loop around Paris that was completed in 1867, enabling a full rail circuit around the capital. Initially designed for freight circulation between major Parisian stations, it was later opened to passenger service (Carrière 2017). Despite a brief period of success, passenger operations ceased in 1934 following the expansion of the Paris metro network, after which the line reverted exclusively to freight use.

Freight traffic gradually declined during the twentieth century and disappeared by the 1990s. The infrastructure was subsequently left inactive, and vegetation progressively overgrew on the tracks and embankments. This ecological transformation marked a new phase in the life of the line, as portions of the corridor evolved into informal green spaces embedded within dense urban fabric.

Following this decline and partial transformation, debates regarding the future of the Petite Ceinture intensified from the 2000s, leading to framework agreements signed between the city of Paris and the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer* (SNCF) — specifically Réseau Ferré de France in 2006, later SNCF Réseau in 2015 —, the custodian of the railway. These protocols acknowledge the line's potential for various uses, from ecological corridors and linear parks to social and cultural spaces. While initially intended to preserve the possibility of future transport use (reversibility), they have facilitated the progressive opening of sections for public access, such as promenades and community gardens. A significant move toward opening several sections of the Petite Ceinture took place in 2016 when the city of Paris allocated a budget for participatory workshops along the line. It led to the reopening of various sections from 2017 onward as accessible green spaces for promenade, and

transformed sites of former stations (Ville de Paris 2017). Consequently, the Petite Ceinture operates today as a partially reopened circular corridor, embodying a complex interplay of heritage preservation, biodiversity attention, participatory initiatives, and hidden informal practices.

### The Rockaway Beach Branch

The Rockaway Beach Branch (RBB) of the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) operated from the 1880s until 1962 (George 1993). The line connected the LIRR mainline at Rego Park in central Queens to the Rockaway Peninsula, later extending toward the Far Rockaways. Initially serving both local and regional mobility needs, the branch experienced gradual decline due to competition from subway expansion and automobile travel that ultimately led to its closure in 1962 (George 1993). Following its shutdown, the corridor became increasingly overgrown and structurally degraded. Over the decades, multiple proposals have sought to reactivate the line, including transit plans linking John F. Kennedy Airport to Manhattan (Bethel 2015). Notably, these proposals often bypassed intermediate Queens neighborhoods, reinforcing local concerns about infrastructural exclusion.

In the early 2010s, community-led initiatives began advancing alternative futures for the corridor. These included proposals for linear park conversion by groups like QueensWay, and advocacy for local rail service restoration within Queens by QueensLink (Lehikoinen 2014; Vanshnookenraggen 2016; Duggan 2022). Since then, the Rockaway Beach Branch has remained the subject of ongoing debate regarding its long-term role within the metropolitan system. Today, it remains a contested linear space shaped by competing proposals, community initiatives, and unresolved questions about its role within the urban fabric.

The unique historical trajectory of each of these lines is inextricably linked to its social, political, and economic fate. Yet within each,

recognizable patterns also appear, particularly with respect to multi-scalar appropriation and projected uses.

## EMPIRICAL CONFIGURATIONS ALONG MICRO, MESO, AND MACRO SCALES

Despite their functional obsolescence, these infrastructures continue to shape their respective territories through their physical presence and morphology, their current control structures (such as fences, signs, etc.), and the vestiges of the former transport network (Qviström 2012). These interact with the individual and organizational actors on the line to form a socio-material assemblage (Latour 2005; Anderson, McFarlane 2011) that requires attention to multiple scales

and temporalities. To capture this complexity, this article adopts an empirical analysis structured around three different scales: micro, meso and macro.

### Micro Analogs

At the micro scale, informal reappropriation by individuals — trespassers and adjacent residents — is examined. Here, attention is directed toward situated and often subtle acts of appropriation. These are small-scale gestures that signal forms of presence, traces of care, or negotiations that illustrate what de Certeau (1984) describes as tactical practices: opportunistic actions within spaces structured by more powerful systems.

In Beirut, micro appropriations emerge along a 1-kilometer segment of the former Beirut-Bekaa line between Armenia Street and Independence Street, to Bani Kahfan and St Vartan streets (Fig.1).

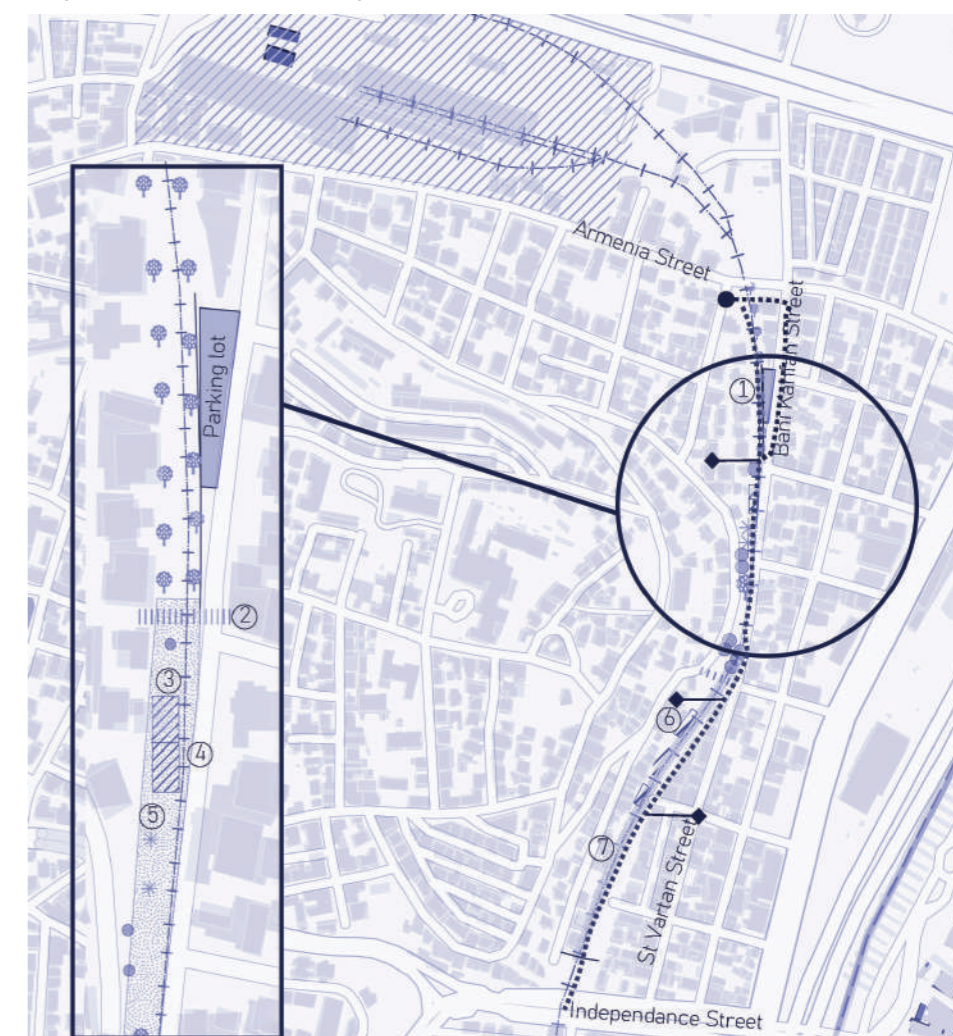


Fig.1 – Cartography of the situations, practices and access observed on the 1km stretch in Beirut on the abandoned railway. Map base extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.



Fig.2 – Examples of resident-led appropriations along the railway corridor:

(1) Section maintained by a private stakeholder, who planted trees and regularly clears the tracks. (2) Informal access to the railway via makeshift steps. (3) Spontaneous arrangement of chairs by residents (November 2021). (4) Informal installation of chairs and a table by residents (December 2021). (5) DIY bamboo fence enclosing a garden along the railway; the structure was observed during all site visits (August 2024). (6) Small protective structure for flowers cultivated by nearby residents; present throughout all visits (June 2024). (7) Tracks partially covered with base course material, with children observed playing on multiple occasions (November 2021). Photos by the author.

This portion, reached by a discreet set of stairs hidden next to a parking lot, is initially marked by recently planted shrubs and trees, maintained by a local resident and businessman who has taken over the upkeep of a 200-meter stretch of this track (Fig.2). Nearby, a 50-square-meter vegetable garden beside the rails has been planted and fenced off to mark that it belongs to the house.

Further along, chairs and other pieces of furniture sit directly on the rails, with the occasional *argileh* (hookah or water pipe) signaling a space of sociability at the thresholds of the dwellings. Several private electric generators are set directly on the tracks or just beside them. Further still, the rails disappear under fine gravel, transforming this segment into a linear parking area. In the final portion, it is common to see children actively

playing on the former right-of-way, and residents' plants and flowers grow on retaining walls protected by improvised bamboo mesh. The corridor here acts as a longitudinal inner courtyard, served by several staircases directly connecting the buildings to the railway platform. Overall, it is striking how the tracks have been absorbed into the everyday life of the neighborhood. These appropriations remain modest but have persisted throughout my field temporality: each time I returned to the site, they were still there.

In Paris, micro-appropriations on the Petite Ceinture unfold both on sections opened by the City and on officially closed segments. I was able to walk all of the opened sections of the entire Petite Ceinture, but the closed sections — which are legally prohibited from access — were easier to access in the 19<sup>th</sup>

arrondissement. Because of the presence of several informal entry points, it was easier to reach them and to walk them repeatedly, allowing me to understand their evolution across time. Opened segments around La gare/le Gore (Fig.3) are punctuated by chairs, seats and freely installed furniture. These uses add to the City's planned and standardized fittings (wooden benches, staircases, platforms), which homogenize the architectural language of the opened segments. Here, the rails function simultaneously as heritage, vintage decor, support for associative installations, and stages for everyday uses that exceed the script of the linear promenade.

More precarious forms of occupation are revealed at the micro scale on closed segments in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (Fig.4). On any given day, several

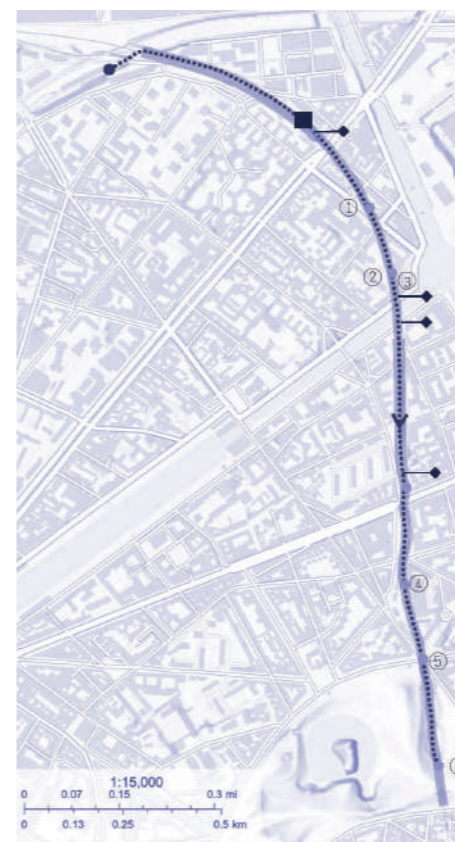


Fig.3 – Map of the repeated walks and informal access points on the Petite Ceinture in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Map base extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.



Fig.4 - Traces of temporary habitation and informal occupation along the railway corridor: (1) Remains of objects indicating a long-term installation (March 2024). (2) DIY tent observed during all site visits (March 2024). (3) Concentration of objects suggesting habitation above or beneath them; encountered on two occasions in 2024 (March 2024). (4) All sorts of objects and informal habitat encountered on all site visits between 2021 and 2024 (March 2024). (5) Tents observed on two occasions in 2021 and early 2022; no longer present during site visits in 2024. (6) Open gate at a tunnel entrance, indicating possible appropriation within the tunnel (March 2024). Photos by the author.

bivouacs can be seen in the deep cutting beneath rue de Crimée in the Buttes-Chaumont Park, accompanied by the accumulated belongings of the bivouac makers. Further east, several shelters can be found installed on the infrastructure, hidden in plain sight. These makeshift shelters testify to a durable presence in an officially prohibited space. They are embedded in a landscape of discreet access points and repeated crossings, such as breaches in fences, low barriers easily stepped over, and other unofficial entry points clearly used by residents. Over the course of many walks, bivouacs appear and disappear in different places, while a few persist, and in some cases extend their footprint. These micro configurations signal a constant tension between closed sections and everyday uses. They coexist with formalized developments while introducing discreet deviations from the institutional scenography.

By contrast, in Queens, micro-scale traces are sparse (Fig.5).



Fig.5 – Retracing two walks taken in 2023 on the RBB in Queens and points of informal access to the railway. Base map extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.

Narrow footpaths and occasional seating indicate some residential use, while dense vegetation limits access for most of the space, making walking impractical (Fig.6, 7). At this scale, the corridor presents limited traces of use, raising questions about the conditions that discourage more present forms of individual reappropriation.

From each of these sites, the traces of micro-level appropriation simply register use and presence by various actors, rather than having a transformative effect. All of these gestures are reversible and low risk, and rely on limited, localized access to the space. They exemplify partial stabilization and temporary uses which do not foreclose the future possibility of other functions. Notably, almost none of these uses is formally permitted.

These observations align with interview data of residents along the tracks, who consistently frame their use of the space as provisional and opportunistic. None of these residents exerts a legal claim to the space – they merely use it for as long as they are allowed to do so.

These micro-appropriations can also be read as acts of care, since they sustain and make livable a shared urban environment, which fits broader scholarship on

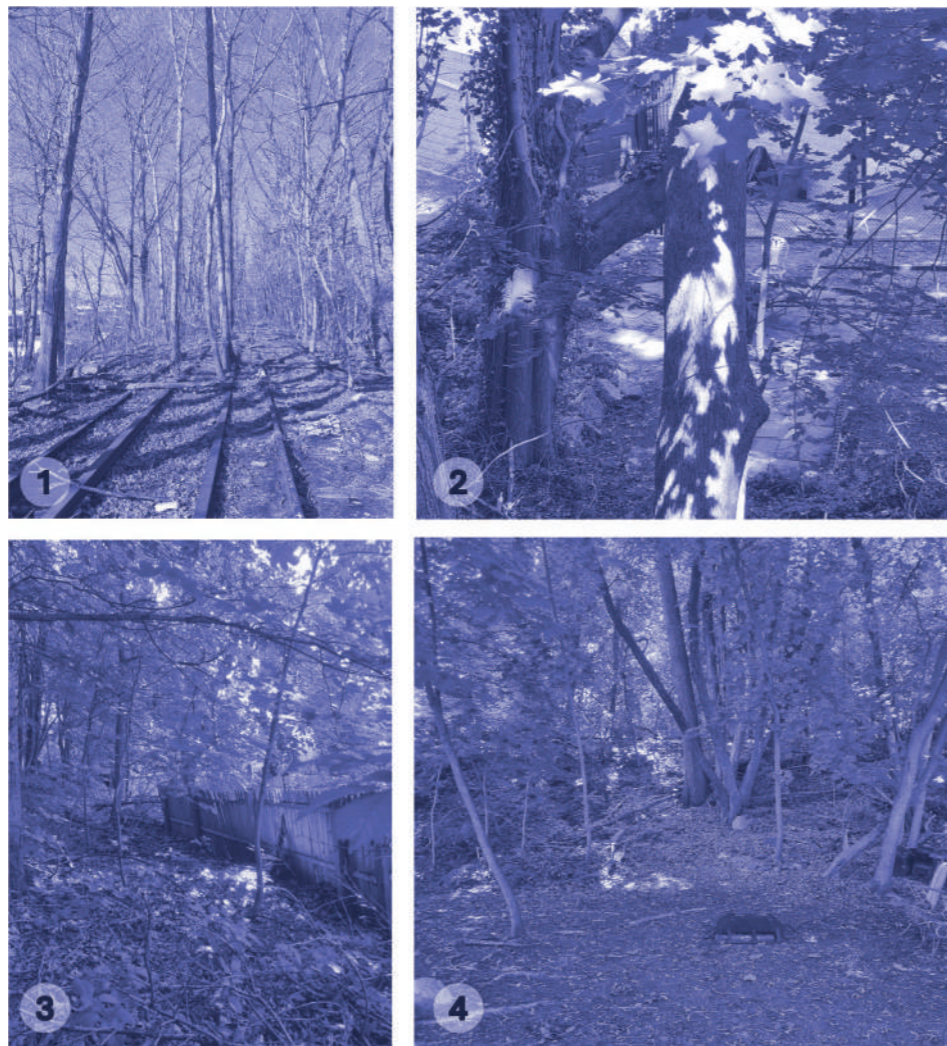


Fig.6 – Weak signals and traces of informal passage and appropriation along a section of the abandoned railway in Queens: (1) Discarded waste on the tracks (February 2023). (2) Chairs and a table arranged by users, with a small path carved into the railway embankment (May 2023). (3) Small bamboo fence constructed on the embankment (May 2023). (4) Informal installation of furniture and a grill on the embankment (May 2023). Photos by the author.



Fig.7 - Left to right: The plan of the Railway Trail in Baabda opened by Terre Liban Association. Stretches of the opened trail with the visible train tracks, and the old Baabda train station in the 2nd picture in the bottom row. Photos by the author, January 2026.

urban care as relational practices embedded in the city (Power, Williams 2020).

### Meso Analogs

At the meso scale, neighborhood and community uses become visible, where local initiatives, community gardens, or other forms of collective practices take place. This scale often reveals patterns of coordination or tension that extend beyond individual or neighborly acts. This is also the level at which informal community groups seek (and sometimes obtain) official sanction and permission for their projects.

On the Beirut-Bekaa line, meso-scale interventions become more visible outside of Beirut, more specifically in the Mount-Lebanon region. The Baabda line becomes a structured form of collective appropriation. A bottom-up initiative by the Terre Liban association mobilized residents and volunteers to clear accumulated waste, cut back dense vegetation and render segments of the former railway accessible for public use. They called it *Darb el Sekkeh* (literally, The Railway Path), and it connects the city of Baabda to its adjacent forest through the railway corridor (Fig.7). Portions of the line were reopened as a promenade,

accompanied by organized walks and public events.

The corridor becomes a shared ground temporarily stabilized through coordinated effort. Although initially this action started as an informal initiative, they had to seek official authorization to expand its scale. It eventually received approval from the OCFTC and was commended as a good way to preserve the space for future railway development. The initiative illustrates how initially bottom-up practices help legitimize unsanctioned uses, pushing them into mainstream urban discourse without fully transitioning into formal redevelopment.

At the same meso scale, however, other forms of occupation complicate the reading of collective appropriation. Along some segments of the network, the OCFTC has authorized quasi-formal “leases” of railway land to private actors for storage, workshops, parking, or small-scale commercial activities. These uses also stabilize portions of the corridor through maintenance, enclosure, and routine presence, operating at the meso-level to structure access and reshape adjacent urban relations. Yet their logics differ from community-led initiatives such as the Baabda trail. They are driven

primarily by individual or corporate incentives rather than community interventions. The tension between these modalities became an explicit controversy in Tripoli, in 2024 when bottom-up community groups successfully opposed one of these private leases that sought to use the rail space as a truck parking lot. Here, the meso scale appears not as a unified field of informal activation, but as a site of negotiation and conflict over who is entitled to appropriate, maintain, and define the future of railway land.

In Paris, meso-scale gestures emerged in the early 2000s through a neighborhood community garden. The Jardin des Ruisseaux was the first community garden developed on the embankments of the Petite Ceinture in the 18th arrondissement (Fig.8). It began with residents' simple determination to clear out the space that had become a repository for rubbish, and to care for it as a cultivation garden. It has since been formally recognized and approved by the city and still exists today.

Notably, the garden opened in 1998, six years before it was officially sanctioned by the joint agreement of the Paris municipality and the SNCF. Since then, the Petite Ceinture has been the subject of numerous community-led initiatives,



Fig.8 - Jardin des Ruisseaux on the Petite Ceinture in the 18th arrondissement. Photos taken by the author, July 2022.

community farms, and restaurants.

These developments started as collective, ground-up interventions, and were then absorbed into formal municipal frameworks as the city began requiring approvals. This transition is common at the meso scale: as ground-up interventions gain visibility and durability, they become subject to more formal procedures. These procedures also aim for a (municipally-led) participatory process, but are constrained by limited timelines, predefined funding mechanisms, and complex administrative requirements. This dynamic is visible in several reopened sections of the Petite Ceinture in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissements, where the city authorized selected collectives to employ participatory workshops to design future open sections. Although these initiatives mobilized residents and introduced new forms of placemaking, the time-bound nature of the process meant that several objectives set by those collectives were not met in the end.

Despite these constraints, other informal, temporary appropriations

still occur at the meso level. Collective walks, guided tours and organized events periodically reactivate segments of the rail corridor, without permanently determining their function. They act as interpretive practices highlighting competing understandings of the site, and emphasizing the interplay between institutional intentions and diverse public engagements. For example, immersive sound walks, guided heritage tours, botanical walks, and biodiversity-focused excursions have allowed interested individuals to explore the potential of the line, and invested associations to promote their vision of it.

In Queens, Project Eden exemplifies a meso-scale transformation of a disused railway segment into a formalized and actively managed community space (Fig.9). Originating 25 years ago on an abandoned stretch of former rail line, the site was initially a dumping ground for garbage and tires, described by participants as a “nothing hill of weeds”. Through significant community effort, volunteers cleared the site,

regraded the soil, and established garden plots, relocating them at one point to optimize sun exposure. This segment of the former line is now an official part of the NYC Parks Department, one of over 500 such community gardens across the city.

The garden operates with 18 dedicated gardeners, and new volunteers must complete 30 hours of labor before receiving a key and access to a plot, demonstrating a structured, yet community-driven, governance model for this specific segment. Leadership includes individuals with professional backgrounds, such as an architectural designer for the Parks Department, integrating local expertise with city-level understanding. The garden's interface with the broader urban context is shaped by its funding from local businesses, personal contributions, and city grants, as well as essential city provisions like compost and, soon, a direct water spot, replacing the laborious use of a distant fire hydrant. However, the garden's position as a segment of a former rail line also makes it a site of contention. The

community opposes a proposed rail restoration project to the Rockaways, citing concerns about noise, cost, and the destruction of their established green space and community hub. These external pressures highlight the meso-scale struggles over the future of linear infrastructure, where a thriving, locally governed segment faces the threat of reintegration into a larger infrastructure plan. The community's resistance underscores their view of this segment as a vital, productive ecosystem rather than a dormant piece of railway awaiting its original function.

The foregoing examples demonstrate the movement visible at the meso scale: practices evolve from individual use, to collective organization, to more formalized legitimacy. The result is a more stabilized form of use, which is still dependent on permissions and funding that could disappear. Moreover, these uses notably still do not completely foreclose competing uses. At the meso-level, actors must negotiate both with authorities, and with micro-level actors to maintain their configuration of the space.

Interviews with representatives of associations promoting meso-level interventions have emphasized both their tenuous legal status, and their need for constant physical presence to maintain their use of these spaces. Conversely, such actors are required by authorities (SNCF, OCFTC) to demonstrate that their interventions are entirely reversible, and will not hinder any potential use of the corridor for future rail transport.

### Macro Analogs

At the macro scale, infrastructure is considered in its entirety, as a continuous territorial linear figure traversing the city or, in the Lebanese case, connecting regions at a national scale. This scale makes visible grander visions of linear parks, revitalized railroads, or transport heritage projects, where the groups involved are united by a shared macro-level vision, rather than by local community. Macro-scale projections are

framed through future use, not present use: a strategic surface onto which actors inscribe plans, scenarios, and policy agendas. In this configuration, micro and meso-scale practices can be mobilized discursively to substantiate these larger visions. They are often cited as proof of demand, as evidence of latent public interest, or as a demonstration of feasibility. Practices that emerged locally are thus reinterpreted within broader narratives, serving to legitimize the macro-scale projections about what the railway could or should become.

In Lebanon, the NGO Train Train has played a central role in reinscribing the national railway network within public and political discourse. Through designed national masterplans, feasibility proposals, exhibitions and media interventions, they advance a specific projection for the future of the infrastructure, in response to the proliferation of diverse and fragmented proposals advanced over the years by international institutions. They defend and militate for revived public transport on the old railway right of way, and advocate for Lebanon's transport future by raising awareness of its railway's history. The railway is here framed as a latent national system whose future revival as a transport corridor must be coherently articulated and actively defended.

A similar dynamic appears in Paris, where two competing macro-scale projections exist. The Association pour la Sauvegarde de la Petite Ceinture et de son Réseau Ferré (ASPCRF) have, for more than three decades, advocated for the preservation of the Petite Ceinture as a continuous railway infrastructure with potential for transport reactivation. Through technical documentation, public statements and sustained dialogue with elected officials they have maintained a consistent presence in public debates on the future of the railway. While they have promoted awareness of rail heritage and recreational train rides on older stock, their primary objective is to preserve the infrastructural integrity of the line against irreversible

micro and meso projects, thereby ensuring the continued possibility of revived rail service. By contrast, the Promeneurs de la Petite Ceinture contribute to consolidating a macro imaginary centered on promenade continuity. Their motto is, the Petite Ceinture is “the biggest park in Paris” and must be all open for the promenade. By organizing walks such as “le grand tour de la petite ceinture à pied” an urban hike that circles around the petite ceinture, and peaceful acts of activism, they reinforce the perception of the railway as a continuous park for the benefit of the public.

The logic of competing futures also structures the debate in Queens, where macro-scale projection is organized around two alternatives spearheaded by two community-led associations. Queenslink advocates for the reactivation of the corridor as neighborhood transit light rail, positioning the line as a critical mobility infrastructure within the New York metropolitan system and proposing the embankments as open parks that can co-exist with rail service. Conversely, Queensway promotes its transformation into a linear park inspired by the famous High Line model in Manhattan. Each mobilizes studies, visualizations, public meetings, and political alignments to stabilize its preferred future. The corridor thus becomes the object of competing macro imaginaries. One oriented toward transportation and the other towards linear park development.

In each of these cases, macro-scale projections view the corridor as a continuous system rather than a series of local segments, and with a permanent future use, rather than a series of temporary uses. Existing practices are coopted and translated as evidence for or against each particular projection, selectively incorporating micro and meso uses in support of their vision. Macro-level actors maneuver to maintain their projections and foreclose competing visions; while this maneuvering is ongoing, the line remains in a condition of active suspension, where competing futures coexist.



Fig.9 - Project Eden, the community garden on the embankment of the RBB abandoned line in Queens, New York; Photos by the author, May 2023.

Interview data strongly support this interpretation of macro-level actors. Associations in Paris and Beirut position themselves as arbiters of micro and meso level uses of the line, always viewing legitimacy through the lens of their own envisioned future. The head of Train Train, for example, characterized private use of the railway for truck parking as a “land grab,” while extolling heritage-focused efforts to use the line as a walking trail.

Across these three contexts, association-led initiatives project the abandoned railway into structured futures. At this scale, the infrastructure is less a site of current practice than a strategic asset whose meaning and potential are continuously negotiated through organized collective action.

## ACTIVE SUSPENSION AND MULTI-SCALAR NEGOTIATION

Across the three cases, abandoned urban rail spaces act as multi-scalar fields of negotiation where different approaches to use and governance compete and overlap, without stabilizing into a single predominant form. What emerges is a condition of prolonged, active suspension, where indeterminacy allows multiple futures to coexist. In this state, different temporalities, access conditions, legal statuses, and degrees of reversibility appear and operate at each scale.

The actors who approach these spaces at different scales are constantly renegotiating the identity and use of the space. From temporary trespassers to powerful associations, their understanding of the space is expressed in their actions, maintenance, occupation, or advocacy. These gestures constantly ask and answer the same question: what is this space for? The question is answered differently at each scale, with bivouacs and improvised paths at the micro level, neighborhood gardens and collective cleanups at the meso level, and master plans

and infrastructure proposals at the macro level. Yet, the condition of active suspension continues as long as no single answer predominates.

Active suspension represents a post-operational condition for railways: they have lost their transport function, but their linear continuity, material remains, and legal status continue to organize access, interventions, and projections. While in active suspension, uses only stabilize partially, and most interventions remain reversible, contested, and limited, such that other possibilities are not foreclosed.

Spaces in active suspension are not simply static, awaiting the final decision that will determine their fate, and their users are not simply interlopers who are tolerated until that decision is made. Rather, the actors, the spaces, and the infrastructure exist in a shifting set of associations (an inchoate network), that continuously reassembles and redefines the space, and to some extent, the actors (Latour 2005). As Brian Larkin (2013) points out, infrastructures “are things and also the relation between things,” inextricable from “the social relations to which they give rise” (p.329, 332). When that infrastructure falls into disuse, its former ordering of relations is suspended, and replaced by a more chaotic process of relations in flux.

At the micro scale, practices observed are highly reversible. They rarely pose a structural threat to the corridor’s long-term optionality. They can be seen as fragile, but they maintain presence and activity across the three contexts and contribute to the active suspension of the railway.

At the meso scale, these rail corridors occupy a critical middle position. Here, collective initiatives gain partial stability through organization, negotiated access, and sometimes temporary access. These initiatives often shift from informal, bottom-up practices of community members, towards more formal integration into urban planning and policy. These initiatives usually unfold over several years, creating

more durable material and social arrangements than those on the micro scale. Questions of leases, permits, funding, and compliance emerge.

At the macro scale, the situation is almost the reverse of the micro scale. Advocacy groups and NGOs promote long-term visions such as rail restoration or linear parks. They do not hold legal authority over the corridor, but they implicitly position themselves as arbiters of existing uses. They decide which micro and meso practices are valuable and which are expendable. Practices that align with their long-term plans may be highlighted as evidence; others may be dismissed as temporary, marginal, or incompatible. In this way, the macro actors not only project futures, but they also reframe the present practices in line with their goals and narrative.

Seen through this scalar lens, railway suspension is active and structured rather than empty. Different actors operate with different degrees of formality, some informally and without recognition, others through conditional or temporary authorization, and others through attempts to formalize long-term change. The corridors remain “unscripted grounds” not because they are undefined, but because multiple and competing scripts (projects, practices, and claims) unfold simultaneously across scales without consolidating into a single dominant trajectory.

## CONCLUSION

Across Beirut, Paris, and Queens, the railway persists as a material continuity that sustains both appropriations and projections. The tracks no longer carry trains, yet their linear imprint continues to structure territory, mobilize actors, and attract competing visions. This persistence enables the infrastructure to remain politically and socially operative long after its original function has ceased. Within this field of competing futures, multi-scalar analysis reveals a layered condition in which different forms of action coexist. This

became visible through a walking-based approach that followed the three corridors, revealing how micro traces, meso arrangements, and macro dynamics inhabit the same spatial structures. Everyday gestures, collective stewardship, and strategic projections do not replace or exclude one another; they overlap. The corridors remain accessible to informal and tactical practices, even as their ultimate future is negotiated more formally by institutional actors. They are interdependent regimes through which the abandoned infrastructure is continuously redefined. Micro and meso practices are often mobilized discursively at the macro scale as evidence of public demand or feasibility. Conversely, macro projections shape how local actors position themselves and interpret their practices. The railway thus functions as a scalar mediator, enabling circulation between everyday gestures and metropolitan or national imaginaries.

From this perspective, the notion of suspension becomes central. It is not a temporary pause before an inevitable transformation. It is a structurally productive condition. Understanding abandoned railways through this lens shifts the analytical focus. Rather than asking what these infrastructures will become, the question becomes how different actors attempt to stabilize their becoming. Reactivation is not a singular event imposed from the top down. It unfolds processually across scales where informal uses, collective arrangements, and strategic claims compete and intersect over a long period of time.

Abandoned railway infrastructures are not voids awaiting design intervention. They are already active socio-material assemblages in suspension. What may seem like indeterminacy is in fact a structured field of overlapping practices, claims, and projections that continuously redefine the infrastructure. Seen this way, suspension is not merely a delay before an imagined future, but as an active mode of urban persistence.

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# Log and the Practice of Building-with

A marginal worksite

construir-com  
pesquisa baseada na prática  
pós-ruralidade  
estruturas relacionais  
epistemologia empírica  
**building-with**  
**practice-based research**  
**post-rurality**  
**relational structures**  
**empirical epistemology**

Este artigo examina Log, uma intervenção espacial realizada em 2025 na vila de Topolò/Topolove, na fronteira entre a Itália e a Eslovênia. A execução desta simples estrutura de madeira é abordada como um estudo de caso por meio do qual se interrogam as condições epistêmicas da prática arquitetônica. Ao situar o trabalho na trajetória do envolvimento de longo prazo do coletivo Robida com seu contexto local, o texto argumenta que Log surge da concretização de um método relacional em que habitar, projetar e construir formam um processo contínuo para apreender o espaço. A questão central que este exemplo coloca é: que formas de conhecimento arquitetônico se tornam possíveis quando a separação convencional entre conceber e construir é suspensa? Para responder a essa pergunta, o artigo adota uma abordagem de pesquisa baseada na prática, apoiando-se no envolvimento direto no projeto e na construção de Log, a par de uma leitura crítica da experiência por meio da teoria da arquitetura. A metodologia é, assim, simultaneamente empírica e reflexiva, ao mover-se entre o fazer em primeira mão e a interpretação teórica, tratando o canteiro de obras como um lugar de produção de conhecimento e não de mera execução. O argumento se desenvolve em três etapas: primeiro, traçando a genealogia de práticas situadas em Topolò que tornaram Log possível; segundo, analisando as decisões construtivas por meio das quais o projeto se materializou; e terceiro, identificando as implicações mais amplas do que aqui se denomina *construir-com*. Em termos sucintos, *construir-com* pode ser descrito como um modo relacional de prática em que a arquitetura emerge através da negociação com os materiais, o contexto, as técnicas e o trabalho coletivo.

This article examines Log, a spatial intervention realised in 2025 in the village of Topolò/Topolove, on the border between Italy and Slovenia. The execution of this simple wooden structure is approached as a case study through which to interrogate the epistemic conditions of architectural practice. By situating the work within the trajectory of Robida collective's long-term engagement with its local context, the text argues that Log arises from the embodiment of a relational method in which dwelling, designing and building form a continuous process of understanding space. The central question this example poses is: what forms of architectural knowledge become possible when the conventional separation between conceiving and building is suspended? To address this, the article adopts a practice-based research approach, drawing on direct involvement in the design and construction of Log alongside a critical reading of the experience through architectural theory. The methodology is thus simultaneously empirical and reflective, as it moves between first-hand making and theoretical interpretation, treating the worksite as a site of knowledge production rather than mere execution. The argument unfolds in three stages: first, by tracing the situated genealogy of practices in Topolò that made Log possible; second, by analysing the constructive decisions through which the project materialised; and third, by drawing out the broader implications of what is here termed *building-with*. In succinct terms, building-with can be described as a relational mode of practice in which architecture emerges through negotiation with materials, context, techniques and collective labour.

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## TRACING SITUATED PRACTICES IN TOPOLÒ/TOPOLOVE: TOWARDS THE GENEALOGY OF A MARGINALISED TERRITORY

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1992, territories once structured by the logic of geopolitical confrontation were suddenly forced into an interpretive vacuum. Along the border between Italy and newly formed Slovenia, rural settlements had been systematically depopulated during the Cold War (and even before that)<sup>1</sup> due to their position at the edge of opposing ideological blocs. When the Soviet threat dissolved into thin air, these landscapes quickly lost their strategic military function, but not their condition of suspension. The question remained: how does a place reorganise itself after the disappearance of the narrative that justified its abandonment?

In the village of Topolò/Topolove,<sup>2</sup> in north-eastern Italy, one response was attempted through artistic experimentation. In the early 1990s, Moreno Miorelli and Donatella Ruttar, together with a network of local and international collaborators, initiated Stazione Topolò/Postaja Topolove. Rather than restoring the village through extensive redevelopment or tourism, the initiative activated it through temporary inhabitation. During summertime each year, artists were invited to live in local houses while events unfolded between programmed moments and spontaneous encounters. This led to the gradual overcoming of linguistic and ideological barriers, as villagers and foreigners shared daily life (Fig.1).

Although similar formats have since become widespread (where the cultural activation of peripheral territories is exercised through art), the Stazione/Postaja initiative anticipated debates that would later be theorised as relational



Fig.1 - Mariana Zukki at Stazione di Topolò/Postaja Toplove. Photo by Moreno Miorelli or Antonella Bukovaz (unclear).

practices.<sup>3</sup> In such approaches to art making, the creation of conditions of sociability takes precedence over the production of works in the traditional sense. Such practices are able to sustain a ludic breach into an alternative reality, which instantiates a different set of rules for interpersonal relations. During the experience of Stazione/Postaja, the village functioned neither as an idyllic backdrop nor an artist retreat, but as an environment in which everyday life and artistic performance were progressively harder to distinguish.<sup>4</sup>

While coming of age in this context, over the following decades, a younger generation formed within the Stazione/Postaja climate began to develop its own practices.<sup>5</sup> As the space for artistic expression was already established, the focus of the group gravitated towards *art-proximate*<sup>6</sup> practices through research and theory. While inheriting the experimental ethos of Stazione/Postaja, this generation shifted attention from episodic occupation to continuous inhabitation of the village. Robida emerged from this transition, first as a periodic editorial, and later as a collective with broader activities. Instead of seasonal presence, members chose to dwell year-round in Topolò, transforming



Fig.2 - *On Soundings* practice, curated by Ceola Tunstall-Behrens for Robida Summer School 2025 at Log. The wooden intervention is usually referred to as a "relational structure" because of the way it engages the site. Log's anchoring to topography suggests different ergonomic uses according to where it's approached from. At some points, the structure has the height of a table, while at others it resembles a bench or a bed. Photo by the author.

artistic activity from event-based interventions into a situated mode of research.

Robida's work operates across publishing, spatial interventions, pedagogical activities (seminars, symposiums, etc.) and collective maintenance of spaces (Fig.2). While partly inheriting the conditions opened up by Stazione/Postaja, its practice gradually moved toward ecological thought, minor knowledge systems and forms of shared learning embedded in everyday life. Recent recognition from international institutions (including the New European Bauhaus Prize and the Ammodo Prize, the Lina Fellowship, as well as being shortlisted for the Début Award at the Lisbon Triennial) emphasize a productive tension in its discourse, as a locally rooted practice becomes legible within broader cultural frameworks. This friction, between the situated and the global, or the particular and the abstract, forms the background against which Log arises.

Before analysing such experience, one last point should be addressed, since it is also responsible for shaping Log. Perhaps the main continuity between Stazione/Postaja and Robida, despite their differing methodologies and interests, lies in a shared condition of marginality. Both experiences draw attention to leftover territories, recognising that places can only be understood and transformed through an informed engagement with the conditions which produced them.

Approached in this way, marginality becomes less a limitation than a productive element, as it affords a position from which it becomes possible to think and act outside dominant paradigms. In architectural terms, this raises a set of questions: can leftover spaces be approached not as sites awaiting the imposition of a project, but as situations capable of generating one? What forms of spatialisation can emerge when local and decentralised actions are sustained over a long period of time? And how can a spatial practitioner act without first fixing an object?

In order to tackle some of these questions, this article asks how architectural practice might be reconfigured when the separation between design and construction is suspended. Taking the recent experience of Log as both a built intervention and a conceptual framework, it examines how a process of collective making can operate as a form of situated knowledge production.

Methodologically, the text adopts a practice-based approach, combining direct involvement in the construction process with critical reflection and theoretical positioning. Through this lens, Log is understood beyond its objecthood as a small wooden structure. Its materialisation is framed instead as an experiment in what will be defined as *building-with*: a mode of practice in which form emerges through negotiation with materials, site conditions, tools and collaborators.

## GROUNDING LOG: THE ROOTS OF AN UNSCRIPTED ARCHITECTURE

In 2024, within the broader context of cultural initiatives connected to the European Capital of Culture Gorizia/Nova Gorica GO25, Robida took part in a collaboration with Zavod Cepika,<sup>7</sup> an orchard in Slovenia dedicated to local fruit varieties. The project, titled *Uncommon Fruits*,<sup>8</sup> addressed the disappearance of vernacular knowledge related to fruit cultivation after the rampant widespread of wine monoculture in the region of Goriska Brda, on the border with Italy (opposite to Topolò).

Within this framework, the need arose for a structure that could support social gatherings, host ecological observation and promote fruit culture in the vicinity of Topolò. That became Log: an open-air timber structure built collectively in a meadow below the village, whose making is the central subject of this article. Informed by the place-based practices that had taken root in Topolò over the preceding three decades, its realisation unfolded as a shared effort. Architects Madalena Vidigal, Diogo Amaro and Antônio Frederico Lasalvia worked alongside Robida and members of the local community to gather materials from the surrounding landscape and assemble the structure on site. For the sake of brevity, but also to reflect the situated nature of this account, this constellation of collaborators will hereafter be referred to in the first-person plural.

The initial question in the process of building Log regarded materiality. With *what* should we build in such a context, given its layered history and remote condition? This was not only a question of typological precedent or tectonic culture, but also a pragmatic matter of accessibility and environmental impact. The village sits on a steep mountain slope and in order to make this vertiginous terrain inhabitable, previous generations built an

extensive network of dry-stone walls around it. This gesture created flat terraces for agriculture while simultaneously clearing the fields of rocks for cultivation. Simple but effective, this stone infrastructure endures to this day through the rough friction of its unmortared joints, which hold the slope in place while draining rainwater safely through the gaps.

Today, most of this landscape intervention is overtaken by forest. What were formerly farming grounds now lie in the shadow of trees, as the woodland advanced towards the village once people stopped tending their fields. The rugged, anthropised landscape is currently in the steady process of becoming rewilded. Accordingly, the site chosen for Log was exemplary of this context: an open meadow on the edge of the woodland, delineated by dry-stone walls built between naturally occurring boulders. Other than its illustrative condition, proximity to the forest made the prospect of working with timber logistically justified in this terrain.

Over the past decades, depopulation has led to reduced forest management in the area, making dead standing trees easy to find in the woods near Topolò. Among these, chestnut is particularly valued for its resistance to decay. Its high tannin content allows it to withstand moisture, insects and weathering without chemical treatment, making it well suited to outdoor conditions. Chestnut trees have also played a central role in the subsistence economy of mountain communities in the region, providing both a structural building material and a food source. For the construction of Log, the choice of chestnut was thus at once practical and symbolic, establishing a tacit acknowledgement of the continuity between building and cultivating that has long shaped this landscape.

With the help of a neighbour, we gathered the necessary timber in a forest above the construction site. The trees we sought were already dead and not in contact with the



Fig.3 and 4 - Collecting logs in the forest as part of the construction process. The dead standing trees were felled and sectioned into movable lengths, then guided downhill out of the forest. As this primitive method of transportation tends to leave surface marks due to ground friction, the final processing of timber was made on site. 2025. Photos by the author.

ground. Because their wood had been safely dried in the shade over the years, the phases of the moon, usually observed in relation to the moisture content when gathering wood from living trees, could be disregarded.

As thinkers such as Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui (2016) have argued, technologies are always shaped by the cultural, environmental and historical conditions in which they emerge. Therefore, they develop in relation to specific geographies, materials and ways of life, meaning that they are not something universal. This became evident while gathering logs.

To transport heavy trunks downhill, our neighbour drove a wedge into the end of each piece of cut timber. A rope attached to this fitting allowed the trunk to be guided along the slope with the

help of gravity. Developed long before mechanised forestry, this technique remains effective today precisely because it responds to the particularities of the mountainous terrain with minimal means. This was a clear instance of construction beginning long before assembly, as the decisions taken in the forest (what tree to cut, how to move it and how to trim it for transport) already determined the dimensions and possibilities of the structure to come (Fig.3 and 4).

Beyond the needs and means of transportation, the very act of collecting timber foregrounded the inherent specificity of Log. Craft theorist Clara Needleman (1993, 90) acknowledges that the particularities of wood are intimately tied to their biological life. That is because wood carries traces “determined by the conditions in which the tree grew and the place of this particular piece of wood in

the body of the living tree.” Each log thus reflects its own circumstance, varying in density, curvature and resistance from point to point. Unlike industrial timber, which is turned into standardised sections through milling operations, raw logs remain unique because they retain the memory of their growth within their sinuous silhouette.

This material specificity, however, is largely surpassed by the procedures through which architecture traditionally operates. Given the complex logistics of construction, coordination is required between multiple agents and building elements, usually separated across time and distance. This often leads to the homogenisation of resources in order to make the building process effective. Adopted in such a context, the grain patterns of wood are generally reduced to a bidimensional texture, as they are

displayed on the straight faces of plywood or on the surface of standard wooden boards for visual effect. While this is certainly a legitimate building strategy, as it makes construction more efficient, it simultaneously forecloses other tectonic possibilities for this materiality. How to work with the variability of wood without erasing it or merely deploying it as a cosmetic quality?

The arts of construction, as we know them in the West, have historically operated through abstraction. As architect and theorist Pier Vittorio Aureli (2023, x) argues, abstraction manifests not primarily in appearance “[...] but rather in the way [architecture] is produced, especially in the way the exactitude of measurement has been systematically applied to building in order to control construction and separate intellectual life from manual labour.” Drawings, notations and measurements allow a project to exist as an intelligible construct before its physical realisation. And yet, the same tools that make architecture legible also operate as instruments of power, enabling and enforcing unequal social relations at the building site.

To be clear, Aureli's critique is not directed towards abstraction as such, but against the naturalisation of its consequences. As a cognitive process, abstraction remains indispensable to design practices, allowing projects to be conceived and communicated. The problem arises when it inadvertently suppresses other forms of architectural knowledge, particularly those embedded in building processes. When a designer prescribes every detail of construction in advance, certain technical solutions are favoured over others, typically on the basis of economy and labour. Ultimately, this process leads to material intelligence being displaced by a narrow kind of pragmatism, which reduces construction to efficient assembly while remaining oblivious to forms that can only manifest through the direct interaction with matter.

Against this streamlined production of architecture, the resistance posed by natural materials becomes a productive counterpoint, as it requires a different kind of attention towards construction. It was precisely the purposeful search for this friction that shaped the design of Log from the outset. Rather than beginning from fixed measurements, the project was conceived through an anticipated relationship between tectonic elements: the idea pointed to where joints would be needed and what structural logic would hold the pieces together without assigning exact dimensions to each component in advance. These would emerge in situ, through the encounter with the material itself. Such methods recall pre-industrial building traditions, including naval carpentry (namely, with *compass timber*), where shipwrights searched forests for naturally or artificially curved trunks whose morphology corresponded to structural needs, allowing the anatomy of the tree to guide the anatomy of the structure. (Doods and Moore, 1984).

Consequently, material differences were not approached as obstacles to be corrected, but as opportunities in the process of crafting Log. Each deviation required adjustment, transforming the act of construction into a sequence of situated decisions. A knot emerging from one beam, for instance, produced a slight outward sweep that seemed like a natural support for a seated body. Hence, this piece was placed at knee height, facing the valley, in order to potentiate its feature as a seat, which was only discovered mid-process. The structure thus arose from a continuous negotiation between an abstract plan and the particular material affordances disclosed through execution.

Put another way, design established a general order, but its realisation remained contingent upon what the wood itself made possible (Fig.5). To that end, the tension between geometric clarity and organic vitality became a defining characteristic of the structure. The outcome preserves

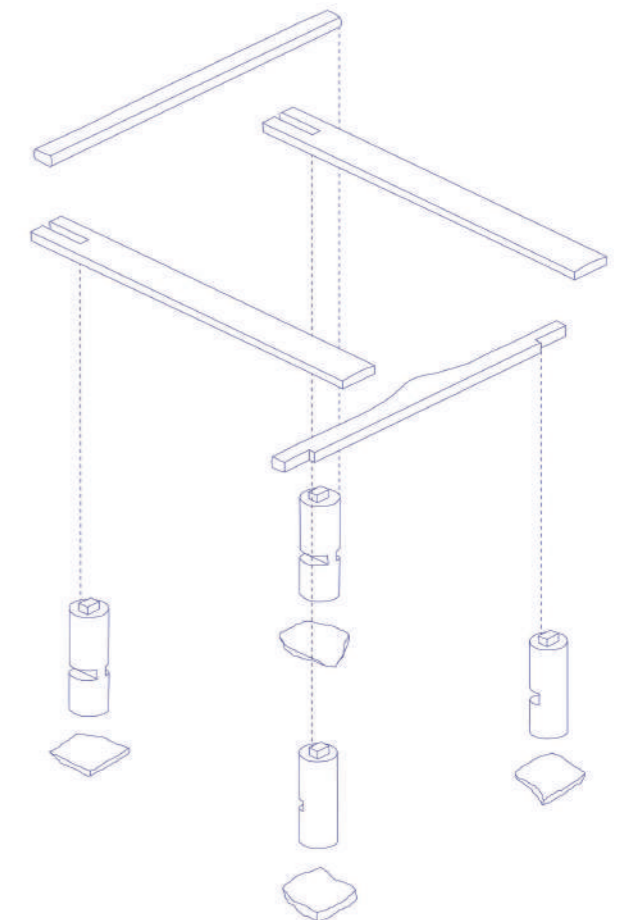


Fig.5 - Log exploded axonometry. 2025. Four stone foundations hold four pillars, which in turn support four beams. Drawing by Elena Ruclli.

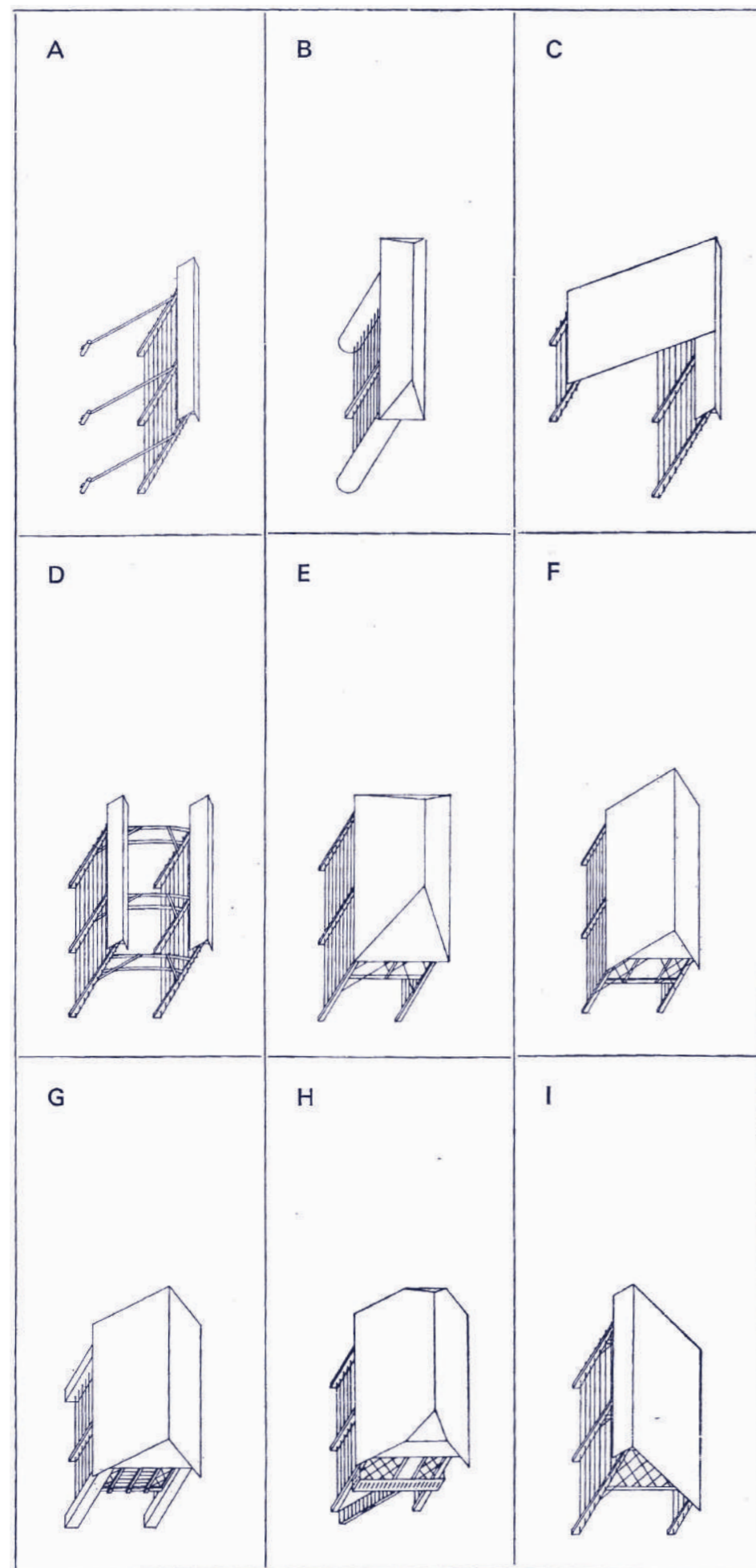


Fig.6 - Characteristic shapes of Slovene hay-racks. (Mušič 1970, 82).

both conditions at once, as it is recognisable as a deliberate composition, yet retains the contingencies of living matter. Where the natural curvature of the wood did not interfere with joinery, it was left intact. These traces, thrown into relief by the rigorously orthogonal composition, function as inherent ornaments. They testify to the fact that the resources used were not fully subordinated to external logic while acknowledging the need for shaping them (even if minimally) for use. If timber established the structural logic of the project, the question remained of how this organic matter should meet the ground. In the mountain forest environment where Log is located, this point of contact is decisive: wood exposed directly to soil will inevitably rot, compromising the structure's integrity over time. The answer, as we would find out, did not require radical invention, but reinterpretation. Local building traditions had already developed precise solutions to this condition, and, among them, the vernacular *kozolec* (the Slovenian hay-rack) stands as a fine example (Fig.6).

Scattered throughout the forests surrounding Topolò, often partially hidden by vegetation, these rural structures consist of timber frames supported on stone bases. Originally conceived as simple agricultural equipment for drying crops, the *kozolec* gradually evolved into a permanent building through incremental adaptation. As architect Renzo Rucli (1998) observed,<sup>9</sup> this transformation did not occur through a single act of design, but through successive adjustments across time: first with the addition of roofs over a linear structure built adjacent to field crops, then with the reinforcement of its supports with two sets of parallel lines, and eventually the replacement of wooden posts with masonry in particular geographies. In the region surrounding Topolò, stone bases were crucial due to high pluviosity levels. The inert supports prevented moisture from reaching the timber, greatly extending the lifespan of the structure while anchoring it more firmly to the mountainous terrain (Fig.7).



Fig.7 - Example of a Kozolec with stone pillars. (Rucli 1998).



Fig.8 and 9 - Stills from the film Log, shot for *Uncommon Fruits*. Video by the author. Available online at <https://vimeo.com/1143198590>

Before building Log, we visited two *kozolci*<sup>10</sup> still standing around the village to study their logic (Fig.8 and 9). Even in ruin, their structural clarity remains evident: a small number of masonry supports define a grid from which the entire wooden skeleton rises. Following the tectonic precedent of the *kozolec*, stone foundations were repurposed from collapsed retaining walls nearby to receive Log's chestnut pillars, lifting the wood slightly above ground. This gesture was not a literal reproduction of the vernacular type, but an adaptation of its constructive system, developed for this context. Sustained by four flat stones, the structure touches the earth lightly while remaining legible as an irreducible composition.

Through these and other contextual influences, the process of construction made Log inseparable from its site: its tectonics were informed by buildings encountered within walking distance; its dimensions were constrained by the processes of collecting and transforming available resources; and its materials were repurposed from overgrown or collapsed infrastructures of the past. Furthermore, a three-week timeline from first site visit to completion made elaborate pre-planning impractical, compressing design and construction into a single and continuous act.

## CONCLUSION: FOR A PRACTICE OF BUILDING-WITH

The preceding sections have traced the making of Log through the contextual and processual aspects that shaped it. In order to conclude the article, what follows draws out the broader implications of this experience, using it as a basis from which to articulate the notion of *building-with* in order to reflect on what such a practice might mean for architecture more generally.

The history of architectural representation is inseparable from the progressive separation between those who conceive and those who build. As Brazilian architect



Fig.10 - Log immediately after construction. The wood shavings from working the wood created an ephemeral pavement around the intervention. Photo by the author.

transformation by definition, the building site can also be approached as a catalyst for knowledge production and exchange, taking advantage of the constant negotiation between bodies, tools and materials that takes place in it.

The construction of Log unfolded as a reimagining of the building site and its possibilities. Because the same individuals were involved in both conceiving and crafting the structure, decisions could remain open until the moment of contact with material reality. Building functioned not as the final phase of a predetermined sequence, but as a continuation of design thinking through other means. That meant that the site was approached as an active field whose specificities could inform decisions as the process unfolded. In this regard, the relevance of this experience extends beyond the object it produced (Fig.10), as it also lies in what its materialization demonstrates. The form Log acquired is the direct consequence of a renewed relationship between design, labour and knowledge in architecture, pointing to the potential of another configuration.

Admittedly, the relative simplicity of this intervention made such an approach more readily attainable. Working at a small scale, with a limited number of participants and without the demands of complex coordination allowed the project to remain strategically open in ways that would be difficult to sustain in larger projects. Yet this processual condition should not be dismissed as an exception. On the contrary, its unusual character makes visible a set of relations that are often obscured in more formalised contexts. Precisely because the project was not overdetermined, it became possible to observe how design can remain responsive not only to the input of those involved in its construction, but also to the capacities of the material itself. In this sense, the example does not stand outside architectural practice as an anomaly, but rather exposes, in a condensed form, sociotechnical dynamics that are always at play (even when they are invisibilised).

Sérgio Ferro (2024) acknowledges, the rise of drawing as the primary instrument mastered by architects coincided with the consolidation of a hierarchical division of labour, in which execution became subordinate to detached instruction. In this structural transformation of the discipline, the epistemological role of making was greatly diminished. The building site ceased to be a place of collective negotiation and became instead a place of compliance, altering the nature of architectural practice.

While architecture's capacity to generate social change is often invoked with hope by its advocates or severely doubted by its critics, both positions tend to share an unspoken assumption: that whatever transformation a building produces happens after it is finished. The construction site itself is rarely considered a space of change — and for understandable reasons. It requires technical competence, carries inherent risks and has historically been organised through strict divisions of labour. Yet, being a space for

In recent years, a growing number of architects have turned toward direct engagement with construction. By building with their own hands and engaging with real materials on site, they tentatively re-enter spaces that the discipline long ago delegated to contractors and tradespeople. These direct actions, unmediated by the usual architectural apparatus, activate processes in which the control over a project is not concentrated on a single individual, but distributed along a network of actors. Within this framework, *building-with* can be understood as a practice in which form develops through a horizontal engagement rather than a top-down imposition.

It is telling that such an experience of building-with did not emerge in an urban context, where most resources for architectural production are concentrated, but from a rural condition at the margins of contemporary economic flows. This suggests, once again, that different contexts afford different modes of practice. In Topolò, the relative scarcity of means gave rise to what might be described, after Ferro, as *a poetics of economy: a way of working that responds closely to available resources, time and labour*. Within this approach, the most technologically advanced solution is not necessarily the most appropriate. Equally, the usual compartmentalisation of work into specialised and hierarchically organised roles proves neither viable nor desirable. The meaningful consequence of this method is that building approaches that have become obsolete elsewhere (due to the amount of work or time they require) may be reappropriated and resignified.

In this regard, the didactic dimension of *building-with* becomes relevant. To illustrate this with the case discussed so far, Log does not conceal the process of its making, but renders it legible. Joints, supports and connections are left visible, allowing the work to communicate how it stands and how it was made. In doing so, Log restores a posture towards



Fig.11 - Log inhabited. As people find their own ergonomic relationship to the structure, vegetation begins its own form of appropriation (Lasalvia 2025).

empirical knowledge that is often obscured in contemporary construction, where layers of specialisation and concealing finishings tend to make building processes opaque. Under this light, tectonic legibility is not just a matter of aesthetic taste, but also radicated in ethics: by making its constructive method available to the eye, the structure implicitly suggests that such an approach could be taken up elsewhere, by others, with different means (Fig.11).<sup>11</sup> What is transmitted is not so much a finished object, but a record of a process, which becomes an invitation for others to understand, adapt and continue the work.

To sum up, to *build-with* is to work in continuity with the conditions encountered: with the material and its feedback; with the knowledge embedded in local tools and techniques; with the negotiations inherent to collective labour; and with the temporal rhythm and historical layers of a place. It does not imply the absence of intention, but the suspension of total control. Form is thus not fully prescribed in advance, but clarified through the process of its execution. Authorship becomes distributed across human and non-human actors, and the worksite re-emerges as a site of knowledge production through practice.

Log demonstrates how such an approach could operate at the scale of a modest intervention. By collapsing the distance between conceiving and making, and by allowing the material and the site to

actively participate in the formation of the work, this project repositions architecture as a relational practice. In doing so, it suggests that the most significant outcome of building may not be its status as an object, but the relationships it affords as it comes into being and as it is maintained in time. Architecture, understood this way, is less a matter of giving form than a disposition for remaining open to it.

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## NOTES

1. Prior to Cold War tensions, Slovene culture in this border region had already been consistently suppressed under the Italian fascist regime's campaign to italianise the national territory.

2. The village carries two names: Topolò in Italian, Topolove in Slovenian. This bilingual condition reflects the border territory in which it sits. For brevity, this text uses the Italian toponym throughout.

3. In the canonical book *Relational Aesthetics*, French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) defines art as a "state of encounter", emphasizing the production of intersubjective relations rather than autonomous objects.

4. In the text *Robida's Speculative Infrastructures*, currently under publication, Aljaž Škrlep interprets Stazione di Topolò/Postaja Topolove as a "generat[or] of new imaginaries for post-rural areas."

5. This movement is narrated by Vida Rucli and Aljaž Škrlep in the text *Staying With the Place: Dwelling as a Curatorial Posture* (Binci, 2025, 147), pointing to the influential role of the Stazione/Postaja years: "That recurrent event was for many of us our most important formative experience, where we met some of our best teachers, a school that taught us that it was possible to imagine futures, or rather *not-yets*, there, in a place that would elsewhere be considered only as a place to leave behind, a place of departures."

6. In *Pedagogies of the Art-Proximate*, currently under publication by Robida, Sophie Mak-Schram traces a genealogy of what she terms "art-proximate" in order to navigate the blurry terrain between art, activism, pedagogy and community practice. Mak-Schram proposes proximity as a descriptor for practices that draw strategically on the histories, resources and methods of the art field without remaining limited to it or centred within it.

7. Founded in 2010 by Gregor Božič (n.d.), Zavod Cepika takes care of a small orchard where "More than 120 different fruit varieties are cultivated, from which 68 endemic or traditional varieties from the borderline area between Slovenia and Italy." The orchard provided fruit tree saplings which were planted around Log after the structure was built.

8. The archival material of *Uncommon Fruits* can be accessed online at <https://uncommonfruits.robidacollective.com/>.

9. Following the general study of Mušič (1970), in *The Architecture of the slovene 'kozolec'*, local architect Renzo Rucli studies the particularities of this typology in the region of Benecia / Benečija (Italy), where Topolò is located.

10. *Kozolci* is the plural of *kozolec*

11. This is what motivated the book *Log: notes on Building-with* (Lasalvia 2025), which documents the process through the voices of its participants.

# Betweenness as Possibility

Tweaking the focus on *terrains vagues* from objects to qualities

stare tra  
vaghezza  
centralità  
emersione  
**betweenness**  
**vagueness**  
**centrality**  
**emergence**

La letteratura anglofona in pianificazione e progettazione urbana tratta la qualità dello 'stare tra' con significati distinti in ambiti di ricerca specifici. Lo studio qualitativo della *unknown city* ed il suo carattere esperienziale usa l'attributo *in-between* con riferimento a luoghi definiti come *terrains vagues*, spazi indeterminati, o spazi di possibilità. Inoltre, l'analisi quantitativa della forma urbana parla di *betweenness* come misura di centralità in modelli reticolari di spazi determinati. La prima definizione di 'stare tra' riguarda soltanto alcuni luoghi, la seconda comprende qualsiasi nodo in una rete. La prima coinvolge le percezioni sociali della liminalità di un luogo. La seconda risulta dalla misurazione dello spazio attraverso modelli matematici. A partire dalle nozioni di *terrains vagues* di Sola Morales e di *campo di centri* di Christopher Alexander, questo articolo imbastisce un quadro concettuale per investigare sul piano qualitativo lo stare tra come localizzazione spaziale percepita associata a vaghezza e centralità, intese come qualità che caratterizzano tutto lo spazio urbano in diverso grado. Casi selezionati da rilevazioni in 67 siti a Beirut, Libano, forniscono l'evidenza empirica per una tipologia di fattori a descrizione delle tre qualità. Queste descrizioni costituiscono uno schema preliminare per una definizione della qualità dello 'stare tra' come motore morfologico di trasformazione, dispiegamento o emersione della forma urbana, verso ulteriori indagini su configurazioni territoriali a diverse scale. A sua volta, questa definizione offre uno sbocco per collegare le osservazioni sui *terrains vagues* con lo studio di condizioni di vaghezza, e di centralità vs. liminalità, in tutto lo spazio urbano.

The quality of betweenness features in the anglophone urban planning and design literature in specific research areas with distinct meanings. Qualitative scholarship on the unknown city and its experiential character uses the attribute *in-between* with regard to places defined as *terrains vagues*, indeterminate spaces, or spaces of possibility. Meanwhile, quantitative scholarship analysing urban form refers to betweenness as a measure of centrality in network models of determinate spaces. The first definition of betweenness is exclusive to particular places, the second encompasses any node of a network. The first engages social perceptions of the liminality of a place. The second relies on spatial measures based on mathematical modelling. Building on Solà Morales' notion of *terrains vagues* and Christopher Alexander's notion of *field of centres*, this article sketches a conceptual framework for qualitative inquiry of betweenness as a perceived spatial location associated with vagueness and centrality, understood as qualities possibly characterizing the whole of urban space to different degrees. Selected cases from observations in 67 sites in Beirut, Lebanon, provide empirical evidence for a typology of factors describing the three qualities. These descriptions constitute a preliminary outline towards a definition of the quality of betweenness as a morphological driver of transformation, unfolding or emergence, of urban form, to be further investigated in territorial configurations at different scales. In turn, this definition provides some leeway to connect insights from the literature on *terrains vagues* with the study of conditions of vagueness, and of centrality vs. liminality, over urban space as a whole.

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## BETWEENNESS AS POSSIBILITY: AN INTRODUCTION

Focusing on qualities in the study of urban form, regardless of their attribution to clearly identifiable geographical objects, supports a broader and stratified understanding of their incidence. Moreover, it supports an explicit examination of the co-existence or association between distinct qualities, regardless of their actual attribution to the same single object. This article looks at betweenness, and its relationship to vagueness and centrality, considering their perceived incidence in urban space as a whole, rather than as exclusive attributes of particular places. This interpretation constitutes an original stance, compared to the intended meanings of *betweenness*, *vagueness* and *centrality* in specific research areas in the anglophone urban planning and design literature.

Qualitative scholarship engages the attribute 'in-between' in inquiries on the unknown city and its experiential character (Borden et al., 2001). In this context, this attribute is used to describe perceptions of marginality, peripherality and liminality regarding urban places named – among other definitions - *terrains vagues* (Solà Morales, 1995). Partially translatable as grounds characterized by vagueness, aka indeterminate spaces (Groth, Corijn, 2005; Rosa, Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, 2024), the term *terrains vagues* often refers to places lying in an interstitial state, possibly a left-over or residual, spatial location. Moreover, beyond strictly locational attributes, the association of vagueness and liminality stands on their interpretation as social perceptions, evoking an implicit binary associating centrality and the obviousness of determinate spaces. Indeed, the referenced scholarship puts one side of such binary interpretations into question, reclaiming the protagonism of *terrains vagues* in expressing

and confronting contemporary urbanization challenges (Groth, Corijn, 2005; Andres, 2013; Gandy, 2013; Tonkiss, 2013; Kavmasinou, Roberts, 2014; Silva, 2024). At the same time, betweenness stands as the defining attribute of particular places identified by vectorial objects (Kuhn 2012), and vagueness and obviousness remain confined to vectorial objects regarded as mutually exclusive. On the other hand, quantitative scholarship invested in the analysis of urban form refers to betweenness as a measure of centrality in models focused on mobility flows across determinate spaces. This measure assumes that any place enjoys a certain degree of centrality based on how many shortest paths between node pairs cross it (Freeman, 1977; Newman, 2005; Crucitti, Latora, Porta, 2006; Sevtsuk, Mekonnen, 2012; Serra, Hillier, 2019). In line with this article's standpoint, these definitions of betweenness and centrality encompass, to different degrees, any place featuring in a model. Nonetheless, their metrics-based understanding of the two qualities, grounded in mathematical models based on network science, considers them as objective locational attributes rather than social perceptions.

This article proposes a conceptual framework for qualitative inquiry of betweenness as a perceived spatial location and of its association with vagueness and centrality as perceived qualities of place. It defines betweenness as the quality of a place which is surrounded by, and possibly confined among, two or more places. This definition assumes that surrounding places exert a certain influence on the emergence of form in the place they surround. It also applies the notion of place to any possible scale, from the smallest to the largest (Tuan, 1975; Swyngedouw, 2004). Moreover, the inquiry defines vagueness as a social quality of place based on Solà Morales' (1995) stratified notion of *terrains vagues*, overlapping with cognate notions *spaces of possibility* or *differential spaces* (Harvey, 2012; Andres, 2013; Loi, 2024; see Schmid, 2022, p. 378, n.

228 for a recap on Henri Lefebvre's references to the concept behind these expressions). This definition bypasses misunderstandings associating *terrains vagues* to emptiness (Rosa, Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, 2024). Most important, it does not confine vagueness within particular places, but rather extends it to any place defined as a center of meaning (Tuan, 1975). Finally, the definition of centrality as a spatial quality of place refers to Christopher Alexander's notion of the field of centers, reflecting the progressive aggregation of centers into larger centers, or centers of higher intensity (Alexander, 2002). In this perspective, centrality unfolds as an emergent condition of intensity associated to betweenness depending on the relations among surrounding features<sup>1</sup>.

Selected cases from observations of 65 sites in Municipal Beirut, Lebanon, between 2010 and 2016, provide the empirical evidence to ground these conceptual definitions. In doing so, the proposed selection features a number of entries for a typology of user led physical installations or adaptations in open space, characterized by conditions of betweenness and vagueness. The typology highlights factors describing these two qualities. It also identifies three types of centrality based on the distinctive arrangements engendering betweenness: (a) 'joint', referred to places characterized by betweenness on a single bilateral connection; (b) 'junction', referred to places whose betweenness involves two or more distinct bilateral connections; and (c) 'hub', referred to places whose betweenness involves one multi-lateral connection where heterogenous factors converge. Meanwhile, factors of vagueness explain the conditions enabling the emergence of centrality from a situation of betweenness. In this sense, the typology justifies a conceptualization of betweenness-in-vagueness as a morphological driver of transformation, unfolding or emergence, of urban form, to be further investigated in territorial configurations at different scales.

## WALKING IN A CITY OF EXCEPTIONS: SERENDIPITY AND EXTENSIVITY IN THE COLLECTION OF EVIDENCE

Beirut, the field of this inquiry, has been portrayed as an example of permacrisis (Harb, 2025). Studies on urban governance in Beirut provide insightful examples on the notion of informality (Fawaz, 2016), in a country, Lebanon, which the International Monetary Fund has classified under the category of fragile and conflict-affected states (IMF, 2022). Furthermore, insider scholars describe Lebanon as an incapacitated state (Harb and others, 2025), where regulatory practice in urban planning takes exception as the rule (Krijnen, Fawaz, 2010; Fawaz, 2017), and the interplay of structural factors, urban planning failure and everyday coping mechanisms reproduces socio-spatial inequalities (Mady, 2025). Herewith, a combination of centralized governance and legislative paralysis maintained by sectarian power-sharing (Harb and Atallah, 2015; Chaaban and others, 2016) jeopardizes municipal regulation, oversight, law enforcement and maintenance of the built environment. As a result, everyday coping mechanisms meet with fragmented and contradictory municipal action.

This setting constitutes a fertile field for the study of vagueness as a condition for possibility and differentiation through the emergence of urban form. It also clearly calls for unglamorous interpretations of the implications of vagueness, highlighting both its opportunities and liabilities. As put by Mona Harb: "Indeed, the less a public space is planned and designed into an abstract space generating specific types of socio-spatial practices, the more it has the potential to be politically subversive – in the sense of having the possibility to become appropriated and claimed through spatial practices and experiences

in the Lefebvrian sense." (Harb, 2013, p.2). Through the cracks of fragmented municipal action, this possibility gives way to a swarm of overlapping, sometimes competing, spatial claims, on public space and beyond. The specific forms of allegiance and influence at play in each neighborhood either legitimize, merely tolerate or actively deny each claim, giving way to highly volatile spatial practices. Collecting evidence on these swarming everyday spatial practices required a combination of serendipitous and extensive survey.

Preliminary observations begun in 2010 as part of a newcomer attempt to get to know a seemingly unwalkable city through walking. It initially focused on the serendipitous discovery of pedestrian shortcuts through what were progressively revealed as widely permeable blocks. Later, these walks developed into opportunities for occasional encounters with urban practices (De Certeau, 1984), more specifically practices resulting into small scale user-led installations and adaptations of urban form. An initial occasional photographic documentation of the places emerging from such practices later developed in a more systematic survey. This twist came along in 2011, with the extensive walks done as part of the field work for the *Plan Vert de la Municipalité de*

*Beyrouth* (Municipalité de Beyrouth, Bureau de la Région Île-de-France au Liban, 2013), working for the consultancy firm URBI Architectes et Urbanistes, under the guidance of the late, and highly missed, Arch. Eng. Habib Debs (1958-2023). Walks continued beyond this assignment, both out of passion, and as part of the tasks undertaken as a graduate student within the M.A. in Urban Planning and Policy at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Along the way, the findings of these walks fed a photographic exhibition at the AUB City Debates 2014, a photographic essay on the ezine *Jadaliyya* (Guadagnoli, 2014), and the M.A. thesis (Guadagnoli, 2016). The thesis compiled the findings of the overall work and triggered in depth ethnographic investigation in specific places, shedding light on examples of the above mentioned interplay between everyday coping mechanisms and fragmented and contradictory municipal action. This article is the first publication based on these overall research findings, reinterpreted in the light of more recent work conducted by the author towards her PhD thesis (Guadagnoli, 2025).

Across such different undertakings, walks covered about two thirds of the surface of Municipal Beirut (Fig.1). These walks can be grouped in three types. First, regular walks intended for everyday personal purposes,



DISCLAIMER: The representations of open spaces and of user-led interventions in this map are not exhaustive of all passages accessible on foot, nor of all objects placed by users in the areas covered by the walks, neither they correspond to a single moment in time as they are based on encounters occurred in the course of 6 years (2010-2016).

Fig.1 - Overview of the places surveyed in Municipal Beirut between 2010 and 2016.

recurrently searched, out of personal inclination, for alternative pathways along the same trajectory. These walks already allowed certain blocks to be covered in full detail, and to track the evolution of particular places over extended periods of time. Second, random exploratory walks in unknown areas allowed the survey's coverage to extend over new places. Finally, third, systematic walks secured coverage of all accessible open spaces visible on the cadastral map of the city. These walks targeted block by block most of the eastern part of the city and sections of the western part. Later in the process, targeted visits to particular places contributed to track their evolution over time. Photographs recorded installations and adaptations whose purpose appeared visually self-evident. The recording also underwent a work-in-progress refinement excluding portable installations temporarily extending private property entitlements just outside the front door of shops and homes, such as the widespread placement of clusters of plant pots, and plastic or foldable chairs and desks. This means that all instances recorded were unmovable, if not by destroying them altogether, or placed in a location which did not display conditions of entitlement for particular users. The recording was kept open ended. Meanwhile, seven places were also observed and photographed over time, documenting 6 types of interventions - replacement, damage, maintenance, removal, handmade upgrading, formal upgrading - determining their transformation over a few years. Furthermore, a selection of three places (Fig.2, Fig.5, Fig.7) was further documented by mapping and analyzing its urban context and holding informal interviews with stakeholders.

Finally, one place (Fig.5) went through in-depth investigation with participant observation, semi-structured interviews, detailed mapping and consultations towards a tactical neighborhood planning proposal, discussed in the above mentioned M.A. Thesis.

## SELECTED FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD SURVEY

Between 2010 and 2016, the field survey documented 65 places. It categorized these places into 8 classes, according to functions grouped into two broader categories of installations, those instrumental to walking and those instrumental to recreational practices. In the category of walking practices, cases included 9 fence breakthroughs, 12 steps, and 19 paths, stairs and ladders. Among recreational practices, including rest, cases included 14 make-shift seats, 2 fountains, 7 lighting poles and electricity plugs, and 2 soccer goal posts. The ownership of these places mostly ranged between private persons and the public domain, while few places were on land owned by private institutions or state agencies. Regardless of their ownership, all of these places were physically accessible to pedestrian circulation (Fig.1). Two more places, for a total of 67, also featured in the photographic survey, adding a category related to plant life, with two spontaneous tomato plants grown out of solid waste dumping sites (Fig.10). All images featuring below are by the author of this article, unless otherwise noted.

In this article, a selection of 9 places illustrates one example for each the above mentioned classes, with two examples, paths and stairs, splitting the related class in two distinct entries. This selection of user led physical installations or adaptations in open space provides supporting evidence for the below examination of spatial betweenness as possibility. The evidence shows how betweenness characterized by conditions of vagueness gives way to conditions of centrality. Four of these nine sites display adaptations and installations related to pedestrian need for shortcuts. The other five refer each to different recreational uses.

Observed fence breakthroughs display different arrangements. Most entail a physical modification revealing the actual stability and

regular use of the breakthrough. Some display a makeshift rough lay out. Some display a finishing touch, just enough to give a sense of legitimacy, while still allowing for easy redress in case of changing circumstances. In Fig.2, the finishing touch can be observed in the precision with which the grid was cut off the frame. Indeed, the preservation of the frame reveals the wish to keep open the possibility of blocking the hole again, if need be. Located between a large municipal sport facility and a sidewalk along a high speed ring road, the breakthrough stands on the opposite side of the gate of the facility, its official entrance, saving a long detour to users coming from the ring road. Here, facility-to-street betweenness meets two factors of vagueness corresponding to the interplay between two different concerned stakeholders. The ambivalence of the management of the facility mirrors the above mentioned fragmentation in local governance on the side of the



Fig.2 - Fence breakthrough (photo by Emanuela Piazza, 2011).



Fig.3 - Steps (2012).

public administration, tolerating informality while by-passing formalization. The centrality established by fence breakthroughs can be labelled 'joint'. This label corresponds to the horizontal bilateral connection characterizing their facility-to-street betweenness, occasionally ignoring the vertical betweenness of the steps added in the particular case portrayed in Fig.2. Steps of different shapes are commonly added in points requiring some kind of climbing over. Bricks or stone blocks used to build observed steps display different arrangements. Some are cemented into the ground (Fig.3), others are just laid on the ground and easily removable (Fig.2). Some work in combination with other furnishing, such as the lighting pole and the rungs in the railing in Fig.3 or the fence in Fig.2. Some work by themselves. The steps in Fig.3 are located between a large sidewalk on a boulevard and a private seaside estate, whose owner, one of the most prestigious private



Fig.4 - Path (2012).

universities in the country, is used to social responsibility policies. These steps display similar factors of vagueness to Fig.2. Fragmented local governance, from the public administration side, and private ambivalence, from the land owner side, allow anybody, able and willing to overpass, to enter the estate at any time. In turn, instead of opening an official public entrance with opening hours, vagueness preserves the option to easily restrict this possibility by removing the bricks. In the case of steps, betweenness refers to two trajectories, one horizontal and the other vertical. The related quality of centrality can therefore be labelled 'junction' as it involves multiple overlapping trajectories.

Paths are usually carved out of wild vegetation growing on vacant land, as in typical examples of *terrains vagues*. Carving typically occurs whenever alternative routes entail a much larger distance, in case of a dead end, of an irregular

road grid, or in case alternative routes entail exposure to heavy vehicular traffic or to security checks. In this class, betweenness concerns the streets connected by the path, maintaining a singular and bilateral character. The related quality of centrality established by this arrangement can therefore be labelled 'joint'. The key factor of vagueness can be attributed to the vacancy of the land, where perceived emptiness, together with the both physical and symbolic screen of wild vegetation, encourage access by people lacking mainstream mobility options. Occasional items lay along the path to help overcoming punctual obstacles, holes or steeper stretches. Fig.4 portrays a stretch of a long path carved by users along a north-south trajectory, flanked by the eastern stretch of the city ring road.

The path lies on the land which used to host the old, nowadays abandoned, railway. Here, as a

factor of vagueness, fragmented local governance lies behind the persistence of vacancy on such a large plot of land owned by a single institution. Regardless of various encroachments and infrastructural breaks determining a wide variety of landscapes along the way, until 2016 the path was still fully, if not comfortably, walkable for almost 2,5 km, from Armenia Street to the Adlieh Roundabout. The first closures were first observed during the last field visit in the southern stretch.

Makeshift stairs and ladders are typical features of *terrains vagues* in Beirut due to its hilly topography. In this example, betweenness concerns multiple connections, between the streets connected by the path created with the stairs, and between sites at different ground elevation. The overlap of these two connections, respectively on a horizontal and on a vertical plane, leads to label as 'junction' the quality of centrality established by this arrangement. Again, the key factor of vagueness can be attributed to the vacancy of the land. This is not uncommon in privately owned land in Lebanon, due to the speculative financial advantages of keeping properties idle as a result of conflict, insecurity and the lack of regulation, particularly in lots with topographic and locational constraints. Moreover, based on in-depth ethnographic investigation into the case portrayed in Fig.5, fragmented local governance interestingly brings in a contradictory set of ambivalences.

Three episodes in these stairs' almost four decades long life show how the municipality actually interfered by both disrupting and supporting moves, based on two specific functions among its prerogatives. The first function is the installment of street furniture. In this regard, municipal services treated in very different ways the two edges of the lot of the stairs interfacing with the public domain, on the top and the bottom of the lot sharply sloping ground. When the research's main interlocutor and his friends rehabilitated the damaged

sidewalk and set up a seating area along the northern lower side of the lot, the municipality adopted an abstract conception of the public domain by imposing the dismantlement of the seats, deemed as obstructions of public rights of way, even though the sidewalk was already interrupted and unusable as such. Vice versa, much later, when the municipality installed a parapet on the upper southern side of the lot, the parapet was divided into two sections to grant access to the shortcut in between, acknowledging the public benefits provided by the stairs. Then, moving to the second function, following up on an informal request by an influential neighbor, the Municipality once accepted to extend to the lot its maintenance service of green public



Fig.5 - Stairs (2012).

domain, occasionally watering the plants next to the stairs. Ironically enough, the unwillingness of municipal employees to coordinate with the users, led this supporting move to destroy recent plantings because water pressure from the water truck was too strong. These three episodes show the fragmentation of public regulation across different agencies, based on different decision making factors, bypassing both owners and users.

Makeshift seating spots are also a typical feature of Beirut sidewalks. Common within streetscapes typical of mild weather Mediterranean coasts, this practice in Beirut achieves a peculiar intensity, because of the above mentioned conditions of possibility for spatial claims through neighborhood social

dynamics. The purpose of these seating spots varies widely, from residential leisure, to shopkeeping, to army and private security posts and licenced or unlicensed valet parking services. Most of them consist of mobile elements placed just outside of homes and shops, and were therefore excluded from the caseload. Yet, in some cases, seats were assembled into unmovable installments. Or, in some other cases, they were located in the absence of adjacent homes or shops which may justify the entitlement of specific users. For example, taxi drivers hold seating spots in key junctions for vehicular traffic such as the place portrayed in Fig.6, close to many of the city most prestigious hotels. Notable in the picture is the role played by the planting pots, screening the

seat from the street and preventing parking in front of it. In this class, spatial betweenness entails multiple overlapping connections on a horizontal plane, along sidewalk alignments and along the sidewalk to roadway connection, particularly strong in the case of taxi drivers. The related quality of centrality established by this arrangement can therefore be labelled 'junction'. Lying in the public domain, the key factor of vagueness can be attributed to the fragmentation of local governance. Multiple visits to the site, between 2014 and 2016, evidenced the discontinuous presence of the taxi drivers, the removable character of the arrangement, with the seating pad occasionally placed or removed on purpose, and its instability, with a final smash on the supporting

tube ultimately preventing its reinstallation.

Public fountains on walls of private buildings are a typical feature of historic urban landscapes in the Islamic world, through the institution of *waqf* (Deguilhem, 2008). While those fountains were often intended for drinking, they may come to mind when observing the two ornamental fountains installed by private shopowners at the entrance of their shops, as observed during the field survey in two different neighborhoods of Beirut, Tariq Al-Jadideh and Geitaoui. While the ornamental role of fountains in public space, as well as in private estates, is commonly acknowledged in urbanism worldwide, the specific character of the two fountains observed in



Fig.6 - Seat (2014).



Fig.7 - Fountain (2014).

Beirut lies in their betweenness, at the interface of public space and private property. Indeed, while the fountain in Fig.7 lies entirely on the sidewalk and therefore within the public domain, the furnishing of the spot in between the two trees de facto turns it into an extension of the private realm of the shop onto the sidewalk. Justified during Ramadan time by the custom of adding festive decorations such as the lanterns, the extension turns here into an all-year-round set up with the relative permanence of the fountain. In this case, betweenness entails two horizontal connections: the sidewalk to roadway connection as a landmark attracting the attention of drivers to the shop, and the connection established by pedestrian flows along side-walk alignments. The quality of centrality established by this arrangement can therefore be labelled 'junction'. Moreover, the key factor of vagueness can be attributed to fragmented local governance, allowing the shop owner to set up this unique makeshift extension of his shop into the public domain.

Compared to previous examples, where betweenness involves one or more bilateral overlapping connections, the last three examples present a different quality of betweenness. In these three cases, multiple converging factors determine a single multilateral connection. Betweenness in these examples is characterized by three components simultaneously required for the operational purposes of the installation. The quality of centrality established by these arrangements can therefore be labelled 'hub'.

In Fig.8, the placement of a football goalpost exploits the connection between a paved ground, a blind wall and a street pattern making the place accessible from multiple sides. In Fig.9, a make-shift lighting pole and an electricity plug in the public domain exploit the connection between the electricity grid, the facility provided by a small public garden and the street. In Fig.10, a tomato plant exploits the connection between a dumpsite, some soil and solar

radiation to grow, while the adjacent pile of debris impedes circulation around it, reducing chances for its removal.

In the case of the make-shift football pitch in Fig.8, ambivalence on the side of the land owner allows for the relative permanence of the removable goalposts, granting the possibility to use the place as a car park if need be. Whereas with respect to the lighting pole and electricity socket in Fig.9 and the tomato plant in Fig.10, the vacuum left by a substandard service, respectively lighting in the public domain and solid waste collection and street cleaning, constitutes a key factor of vagueness. In the case of the lighting pole, this factor acts in combination with the fragmentation of local governance allowing for the set up of make-shift installments in the public domain. In the case of the tomato plant, the neglect of the site related to the persistence of a pile of debris brings an additional factor of vagueness, giving way to the emergence of centrality.



Fig.8 - Football goal posts (2016)



Fig.9 - Lighting pole and electricity socket (2012).



Fig.10 - Tomato plant (2015).

Table 1 provides an overview of all the conditions of betweenness as a possibility for the emergence of centrality, favoured by the conditions of vagueness at play in the observed places.

## “LESS IS MORE, MORE IS DIFFERENT” (BATTY, 2000, TITLE): BETWEENNESS AS POSSIBILITY THROUGH DIFFERENTIATION

This article provides an alternative reading on *terrains vagues*, tweaking the focus from geographical objects (Kuhn, 2012) to spatial qualities. It does so by revisiting the margin-center dialectic in scholarship on *terrains vagues* through the concept of betweenness. It casts betweenness as a spatial perception, meaning a qualitative understanding of the spatial location of a place, rather than of its marginality and centrality in terms of societal significance. Building on Christopher Alexander's notion of the field of centers, the article sketches a conceptual framework towards a work-in-progress definition of betweenness. In Alexander's terms (2002), betweenness can therefore be defined as a morphological driver of the unfolding of centrality in urban form, where 'unfolding' turns into 'emergence', in the language of complexity science (Batty, 2000). According to Alexander, "the rules are only approximate. [...] Nevertheless, as a rough rule of thumb, we may keep hold of the idea that centers are coherent entities, often marked by local symmetry, by differentiation, by the presence of a boundary, and by convexity, which cooperate to cause a field effect." (2002, p. 119). Taking Alexander's words as a definition of centrality, Table 1 shows the association between centrality patterns and different conditions of spatial betweenness, in the presence of factors of vagueness. Juxtaposing the three qualities, the table highlights how vagueness, breeding a swarming

|  | Use                     | Betweenness  | Vagueness   | Centrality |
|--|-------------------------|--|---|------------|
| Fence break-through (Fig.2)                  | pedestrian shortcut     | facility-to-street                                   | private ambivalence+ fragmented local governance                    | joint      |
| Steps (Fig.3)                                | pedestrian shortcut     | street-to-facility ground-to-low fence               | private ambivalence+ fragmented local governance                    | junction   |
| Path (Fig.4)                                 | pedestrian shortcut     | street-to-street                                     | vacancy+ fragmented local governance                                | joint      |
| Stairs (Fig.5)                               | pedestrian shortcut     | street-to-street lower elevation-to-higher elevation | vacancy+ fragmented local governance                                | junction   |
| Seat (Fig.6)                                 | rest                    | roadway-to-sidewalk                                  | fragmented local governance   | junction   |
|  |                         | sidewalk-to-sidewalk                                 |   |            |
| Fountain (Fig.7)                             | attraction for customer | facility-to-street                                   | fragmented local governance   | junction   |
|  |                         | sidewalk-to-sidewalk                                 |   |            |
| Football goal posts (Fig.8)                  | playing sports          | paved ground-to-blind wall-to-street                 | private ambivalence   | hub        |
| Lighting pole and electricity socket (Fig.9) | power supply            | electricity distribution grid-to-facility-to-street  | fragmented local governance+ substandard service (public lighting)  | hub        |
| Tomato plant (Fig.10)                        | reproduction            | dumpsite-to-soil-to-solar radiation                  | neglect+ substandard service (waste collection and street cleaning) | hub        |

Table 1 - Conditions of betweenness, vagueness and centrality in the observed places.

multiplicity of practices, provides an enabling condition for betweenness to unfold and for centrality to emerge. According to Alexander, unfolding enacts a process of differentiation of urban form headed towards the emergence of centrality. Yet, this spatial understanding of centrality, and of betweenness by extension, raises questions on the representation of space. As put by Alexander, it requires putting aside the "picture of space [...] that] has been put in our minds by Descartes and by the assumptions of mechanistic science, [...] specifically [describing] space as a neutral and strictly abstract geometric medium" (Alexander, 2002, p. 426), "the kind of inert and abstract Cartesian matter-space scientists have taken for granted for the last three hundred years" (Alexander, 2004, p. 23). Different scholars previously examined these questions of representation, alternatively addressing them as view, vision or model of space, from different disciplinary perspectives, highlighting the ontological grounds of the epistemological constraints posed by geometric space (Couclelis, 1999; Farinelli, 2003; Decandia, 2008; Davoudi, 2012; Webber, cit. in Paba & Perrone, 2017; Lefebvre cit. in Schmid, 2022). The conceptual framework sketched

in this article provides preliminary insights to craft an hypothesis about the emergence of urban form in the light of this literature.

This hypothesis suggests that vagueness, as conceptualized and documented above, may act as a magnifier of certain qualities of space, such as betweenness and centrality. In turn, this magnifying role may prove uniquely revealing, observing how the qualities here under consideration get otherwise ignored in modern geographic and geometric models of terrestrial space, represented as an inert, united, homogeneous and isotropic vacuum and neutral container (Couclelis, 1999; Alexander, 2002, 2004; Farinelli, 2003). By extension, this conclusion matters for spatial planning and design, and for scholarship on vagueness in urban space, because these qualities also get ignored in the study, and in the planning and design of places conceived according to those models of terrestrial space. Therefore, this article ultimately sheds light on the ontological implications of framing the question of vagueness in terms of spatial objects such as *terrains vagues*, or in terms of qualities, such as betweenness, vagueness and centrality, and their association.

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## NOTES

1. "A recursive field effect in which centers are induced by other centers", Alexander, 2002, p. 119.

# Architecture of Belonging

Activating residual spaces for Indigenous people

*terrain vague*  
 cidade produtiva  
 comunidades Indígenas  
 aprendizagem autodirigida  
 projeto de arquitetura  
*terrain vague*  
**productive city**  
**Indigenous communities**  
**self-directed learning**  
**architectural design**

Este estudo apresenta um estúdio de projeto de arquitetura que articula os conceitos de *terrain vague* e de cidade produtiva para refletir sobre a presença, visibilidade e pertencimento de povos indígenas nas cidades. Diante dos complexos desafios sociais e espaciais das cidades contemporâneas, é fundamental reconhecer as limitações físicas do espaço urbano. Os espaços residuais podem ser considerados como um recurso imprescindível para a atividade urbana. *Terrain vague* é um conceito que trata espaços urbanos desvalorizados e negligenciados emergentes do constante crescimento e transformação urbana. Geralmente esses espaços residuais situam-se nas intersecção da infraestrutura urbana, da natureza e do ambiente construído, assumindo uma aparência indesejada. Um estúdio de projeto é proposto e adota a Aprendizagem Autodirigida (AAD) como abordagem pedagógica. Neste contexto, a autonomia do aluno é fundamental para desenvolver suas próprias percepções sobre problemas globais. O estúdio propõe um terreno inicial em Florianópolis, sul do Brasil, com longa história colonial e presença indígena. Contudo, os grupos indígenas foram completamente deslocados da cidade e ainda enfrentam dificuldades para encontrar um local para ocupar. AAD demonstrou ser uma abordagem eficaz para apoiar os alunos no desenvolvimento de iniciativa e objetivos de aprendizagem. Os projetos revelam que *terrain vague* pode funcionar como plataforma para inserir habitação, espaços de encontro e outras formas de ocupação indígena por meio da sua língua, expressão artística ou práticas de aprendizagem. O estudo também apresenta desafios relacionados ao desenvolvimento de projetos a distância, o que inclui acesso limitado a comunidades indígenas e as sensibilidades culturais do Brasil.

This study introduces an architecture studio that connects the concepts of *terrain vague* and the productive city to reflect on Indigenous presence, visibility and belonging in cities. Due to complex social and spatial contemporary urban challenges, it is critical to acknowledge the physical limitations of space in our cities. Thus, residual spaces become an essential and valuable resource. *Terrain vague* refers to constrained, disregarded and neglected spaces that emerge from constant urban growth and transformation. These sites are usually a friction between urban infrastructure, nature and buildings assuming an impression of unwanted leftovers. Since residual spaces form political and ambiguous conditions, learner independence is critical to develop their own perceptions of world problems. A proposed studio focuses on this territory to employ a Self-Directed Learning (SDL) pedagogical approach, to support learners to move across uncertainty. The studio proposes an initial site in Florianópolis, an island south of Brazil with a long colonial history and Indigenous presence. Indigenous groups were however completely displaced from the city and still struggle to find place. SDL demonstrated an effective approach to support learners in developing initiative and learning goals. The projects reveal that *terrain vague* can be used as a platform to insert housing, gathering, and other forms of Indigenous visibility through their language, artistic expression or knowledge. The study also presents challenges related to designing from a different country, including the limited access to Indigenous communities and the cultural sensitives of Brazil.

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"Architecture is an active connection, a practice which activates a relation between material spaces and their inhabitation; and, it structures that relation, it structures what we call the relation between space and polity, as well as the construction of polities themselves." John Palmesino, Matters of Observation (Turpin, 2013).

Brazilian cities continue to struggle with uneven development, which is still a consequence of colonial exploratory urbanization. This issue impacts on spatial, cultural and political layers of cities and extends to Indigenous marginalization. Across many cities, it is possible to identify pressures on land, including housing speculation and implementation of infrastructure. Such mode of development creates fragmented city structures and form with neglected and disregarded spaces. Solà Morales' (1995) concept of *terrain vague* positions these neglected spaces as ambiguous but potential areas for development, where dominant principles of urbanization are relaxed, which allows alternative occupation and social articulations.

The study area is at the entrance of Florianópolis, an island in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, known for its natural landscape and decades of environmental protection

development (Bridges, 2024). However, this scenario generates pressure on land value which ultimately creates fragmented spaces and urban voids. The island's urban planning and development includes some controversial projects in the past, which violated federal, state or local environmental regulations (Lopes and Di Bernardi, 2022) increasing residual spaces and tension in different forms and places. The land fragmentation resulting from these complex systematic transformations poses major challenges, which are exacerbated by the city less restrictive masterplan proposals.

Figure 1 presents the study area and mapped residual spaces demonstrating the accumulative process of fragmented development. Figure 2 presents the access to the island and public transportation. Indigenous groups travelling from afar arrive at the bus terminal, then they walk or take buses to other parts of the island.

The site residual spaces often emerged from the process of implementation of vehicular access to the continent, colonial and pos-colonial development, and predominantly land speculation. In this context, Indigenous groups face numerous issues such as displacement, lack of visibility and

lack of space, creating significant barriers for belonging. This condition has exposed conflicts, violence and struggles that this population endures (Mosaner et al. 2023) and demonstrates the lack of participation in the construction of space.

Florianópolis presents a particular and revealing case for such study. Historical patterns of Indigenous communities' removal and erasure have intensified discrimination, marginalization and prejudice, influencing how these individuals use the city spaces today. Each summer, Indigenous communities travel by bus or car to the island to sell artisanal products such as baskets, decoration, pottery, beauty accessories, toys, sculptures. Three Indigenous communities (*Guarani, Kaingang and Xokleng*) occupy an abandoned bus terminal, which was a provisional arrangement and became a permanent solution (Mosaner et al. 2023), despite the local government's push back. The Indigenous leaders are lobbying to secure the rights to the land and transform the facilities according to their needs. Another initiative from the local government was to create an Indigenous shop near the public market (*Largo da Alfândega*), but the differences and conflicts between the Indigenous groups using the space led to its closure. In addition,

non-responsive planning further restricts the access to public and private space, accommodation, and cultural facilities.

To identify solutions for these issues, the architecture design studio '*Terrain Vague: Reframing Residual Spaces*' was proposed to a final year master group (described in the next sections as '*studio Terrain Vague*'). Self-Directed Learning (SDL) was selected to support learners' journey. The aim of this article is to present the challenges and benefits of working with this pedagogical approach in this specific studio setting.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs exploratory study research, suggested by Swedberg (2018), which is appropriate for conditions where the aim is to generate insights through situated practice rather than producing definitive conclusions. The research focuses on how SDL was adapted, enacted and experienced within a master-level architectural design studio at Deakin University, Australia. The studio serves as the case through which the challenges of SDL are examined and how learners interpret this approach in a complex studio setting. The analysis draws on multiple forms of materials generated through the studio including learners' work, tasks, observations, outside studio exchanges and learner-tutor interactions. These inputs provide evidence of how SDL shaped learners' engagement with the brief, their development of methods of inquiry and their responses to the conceptual framework of *terrain vague* and productive city.

An analytical approach follows interpretive thematic analysis, focusing on three criteria aligned with the research aim: 1. how learners enacted SDL, 2. how theoretical frameworks were operationalized, and 3. how projects responded to Indigenous socio-spatial conditions. The research is limited by the geographical distance from Indigenous communities, reliance on mediated

and asynchronous exchanges and the time constraints of academic trimesters. For that reason, we relied on secondary sources to present concepts about Indigenous life experiences. Despite these limitations, the research captures the pedagogical dynamics of the studio '*Terrain Vague*' and demonstrates how SDL operated as learning structure that shaped learners engagement.

## PROBLEMATIC: TERRAIN VAGUE AND PRODUCTIVE CITY

According to Solà-Morales (1995), *terrain vague* embodies the interfaces where activity and intention are suspended. These spaces are distinguished by lack of clarity on ownership, abandonment, lack of program and meaning; these conditions generate a sense of expectation. Solà-Morales uses French to define the ambiguity of the word *vague*, as interconnected ideas, wave (movement), vacant (unoccupied), and imprecise (indeterminate). This semantic interpretation insinuates that *terrain vague* has an open condition and uncertainty that can be manipulated. This concept is particularly relevant when decolonialization practices are in place, because it exposes how urbanization generates empty spaces through exclusion.

Colonial and post-colonial processes displaced vulnerable communities and as happened in Florianópolis, erased Indigenous people from the city. *Terrain vague* becomes a symbol of spatial exclusion and marginality. Such ambiguous and neglected spaces can be found in any size and are shaped by conflicting interests, temporal discontinuity, and unresolved urbanization, as suggests Ursprung (2016). The concept of *terrain vague* represents a record of these conflicting conditions, exposing the contractions of contemporary cities' development. To detach *terrain vague* from such in-between status is only possible through innovative methods that reorganize, reconnect

and reframe the void by linking it to the city.

To reconnect void and city, productive city design was implemented as a studio method because it encourages cities and citizens to transform underused spaces (land or buildings) into hybrid functional programs (Francke, 2016). The application of productive city design focuses on connecting economical, industrial and architectural layers to generate innovative forms of social and cultural production within cities (Francke, 2016). From this perspective, an understanding of *terrain vague* shifts from a framing as urban waste to that of a catalyst of new programs and opportunities for occupation.

Since the 1990's, with traditional industrial activity in decline and city expansions, industrial sites became opportunities for economic growth and integration of social and cultural programs in the urban areas (Francke, 2016). High-tech industrial processes, service-based economy, and clean production also enabled many manufacturing processes to be reintroduced to the city; a concept described by Sassen (2009) as "*intermediate economy*". In this sense, the productive city challenges segregation of functions, typical of modernist planning, advocating for hybrid and multifunctional spaces that support various forms and scales of production.

Reintroducing productive activities in cities has recently expanded to integrate circular economy, smart cities and citizen participation in the making of space (Suwala et al., 2025). The productive city's logic is relevant to post-colonial places where questions of who produces space, and for whom, are more evident. We see this as an opportunity to enable production of Indigenous knowledge and active engagement on making space. In this sense, integrating Indigenous knowledge and participation enables a new vision for cities. For example, recognizing Indigenous people as knowledge holders and including them in environmental and spatial decisions is advocated

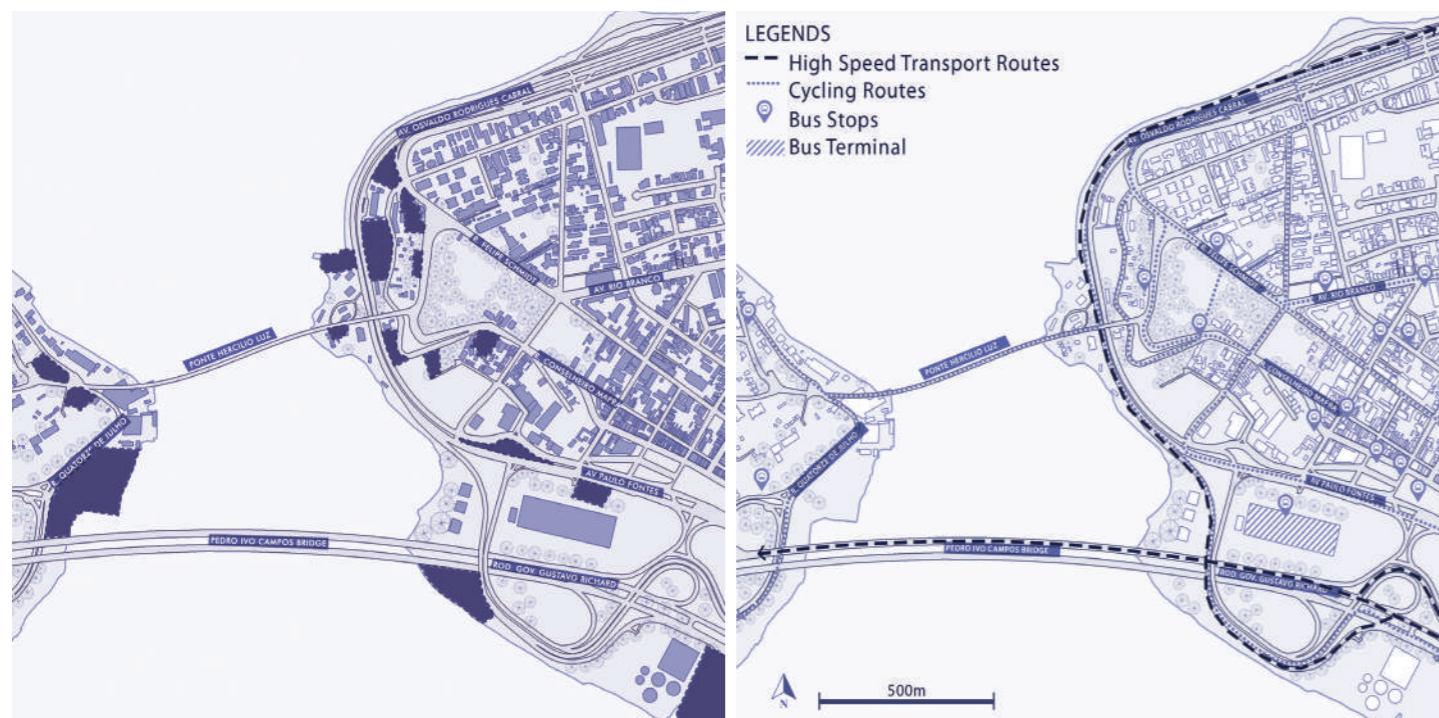


Fig.1 and 2 - Residual spaces of Florianópolis mapped by learner Aayushi Shah. - Mobility mapped by learner Aayushi Shah.

by Alam and Scott (2025). In addition, Billauer and Nel (2024) demonstrate the numerous problems emerging from the lack of recognition of Indigenous people's knowledge and practice in the design of spaces.

### ADAPTING SDL TO THE STUDIO 'TERRAIN VAGUE'

SDL positions learners as active learning agents, developing strategic abilities to make effective decisions, building narratives, and securing agency to create innovative and contextual solutions. The studio 'Terrain Vague' is supported by Liow's (2021) heterarchical architecture model of SDL and Gibbon's (2003) understanding of learner's autonomy. These two approaches suggest incremental responsibility levels, reflective research, and exploration through iterations; concepts that are closely related to architectural studios.

Learners are also encouraged to formulate questions, define learning goals, select their own methods or areas to study, collaborate with colleagues, and be critical about decisions and their implications. These are actions embedded in the

studio 'Terrain Vague'. SDL pedagogy comes with challenges, particularly learner independent thinking can be constrained if over-structured guidance is implemented (Gibbons, 2003). In addition, Brookfield (1983) states that without opportunities for dialogue, SDL learners direct themselves within boundaries of what they already know. However this seems less of an issue within the context of a master level architecture studio, because these learners are expected to document inquiry, reflection and exploration. To support learners, the studio implements a structure to address two complex issues: the productive city and *terrain vague* (Fig.3).

In an SDL setting, tutors interact with learners as facilitators, providing access to learning materials and inputs that enable learners to operate at the boundary of the learning zone, which Vygotsky (1978) calls "zone of proximal development". The zone of proximal development reflects the limits of learners' knowledge and defines what they can develop independently and what demands tutor intervention in the form of orientation. SDL learners engage with unknown ideas by actively identifying steps towards an answer, which demands curiosity,

and skills such as exploration and self-awareness. From its inception it was considered critical in SDL to allow learning to take place at the learners' pace and predilection (Piskurich, 1993). Structures have since evolved that incorporate hybrid interfaces and various forms of facilitation.

While traditional design studio models enable advanced design outputs, the employed methods may not always allow learners to develop agency, or methods may not offer flexibility to accommodate diverse learning preferences. SDL sets a more open structure for design thinking, enabling learners to make decisions about learning pathways and to work with confidence particularly within ambiguous and culturally sensitive spaces.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR 'TERRAIN VAGUE'

Unlike traditional SDL models in which learners are completely independent, the studio 'Terrain Vague' provided a structured brief designed to enable learners' exploration of themes and engage in group discussions (see Table1). In addition, the tutor defined

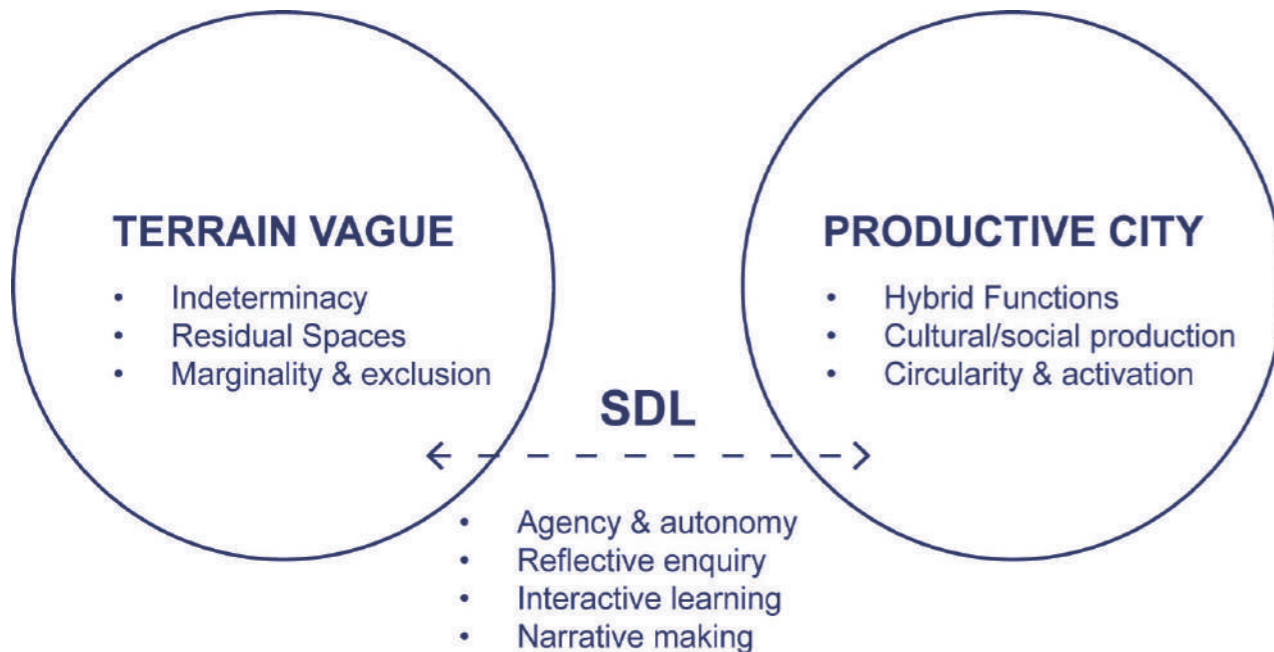


Fig.3 - SDL as link for exploration of the problematic *Terrain Vague* and the Productive City (Authors, 2025).

timeslots for collective inputs and workshops. In trimester 2, week 3, the theme was context drawings, where learners interpreted this theme according to their design development and the tutorial session focused on individual priorities. A flexible structure such as this is essential as it allows the tutor to remain responsive to learner's needs.

The flexibility embedded in the studio 'Terrain Vague' enabled the tutor to integrate learner-led initiatives and learning requests. For example, learners asked to integrate AI in their design process (a skill outside their zone of proximal development boundary) and a workshop on AI workflows was introduced. AI is transforming architecture design but is still disconnected from curriculum (Sedrez and Pitts, 2025), thus this integration links to challenges learners will face in the next years. This represents another benefit of SDL, as learners can integrate technological or methodological innovations and assume control over some aspects of their learning.

In implementing SDL, learners' agency and tutors' facilitation need to be synchronized to support meaningful engagement, especially

considering tutors' limited contact hours. Overall, the studio operates like Liow's (2021) heterarchical studio, which has two SDL phases of "behavioural indicators". The first is ownership of learning, in which learners identify steps, methods, and content they need to learn. The second engages self-management and monitoring, in which learners formulate their own questions, explore methods and self-evaluate progress. The heterarchical studio also highlights the importance of explicit tasks defined in the design brief to support learner autonomy (Liow, 2021), as demonstrated in Table1.

One of the tasks embedded in the brief was to identify and integrate a design method to support learner decision making throughout the trimester, in this sense, the tutor did not provide a predetermined design workflow. Thus, research on design methods in combination with collaborative sharing sessions supported the learner's progress. In addition, studio sessions supported group discussions to facilitate both individual and group decision-making. These negotiation sessions happened in key moments throughout the trimesters, aligning with Gibbons' (2003) emphasis on learner autonomy and the logic of

learner's responsible engagement with their learning.

While milestones are required to comply with the university curriculum expectations, learners retained agency on what to present at each design review, as well as how they would present. This structure emphasizes a gradual increase in responsibility levels, reflective inquiry, and experimentation. In practice learners went through cycles of research, reflection, discussion and review, resonating Taylor's (1987) Learning Process Sequence (LPS), which is a foundation for SDL (Fig.4).



Fig.4 - Taylor's Learning Process Sequence (adapted from Taylor, 1987).

| Week | Trimester 1   | Trimester 2  |
|------|---|--|
| 1    | Site Investigation and Research   | Recapitulating Trimester 1 and discussing new insights |
| 2    | Definition of design method, research strategies and problem formulation workshop | Testing massing physical models                        |
| 3    | Precedents study, brief development   | Context drawings                                       |
| 4    | Task 1 Submission (Research A3 booklet)   | Preliminary plans, section and model                   |
| 5    | Site analysis: Indigenous aspects   | Interfaces between proposal and the city               |
| 6    | Site analysis: Environmental aspects  | Environmental resolution                               |
| 7    | Site analysis: Urban aspects  | Isometric and model                                    |
| 8    | Task 2 Presentation (Research StoryMap)   | Sections and elevations                                |
| 9    | Masterplan and preliminary concepts   | Design detail  |
| 10   | Masterplan and preliminary concepts   | Preparation for submission                             |
| 11   | Masterplan and preliminary concepts   | Task 1 Submission (Design Panels A1)                   |
| 12   | Task 3 Submission (Reflective Folio A3, Design Panels A1, Design Brief)           | Task 2 Submission (Research booklet A3)                |
| 13   |   | Task 1 Presentation to external jury                   |

Table1 - Structure for the studio 'Terrain Vague'; extracted from the design brief developed by Maycon Sedrez in 2024.



Fig.5 - Example of AI-Aided Design workflow using sketches and models, workflow created by learner Kline Umhao.

This form of facilitation supports learners in the development of metacognitive awareness, a critical component of architectural design and SDL (Avsec and Jagiello-Kowalczyk, 2021). Equally important was the tutor sensibility to learners' creative ideas and suggestions. This requires establishing a safe and professional environment to allow learners' thoughts to be expressed without inhibition. SDL is particularly relevant to architectural education because design involves ambiguous contexts, incomplete information, and competing values. Learners must face these complex conditions by adopting critical perspectives rather than relying on prescriptive solutions.

## OUTPUTS OF 'TERRAIN VAGUE'

Because of the physical distance from the actual site and its socio-spatial complexities, the studio 'Terrain Vague' needed to provide a learning environment capable of fostering ethical sensitivity, critical inquiry and adaptability. By providing supportive interfaces between learner and tutor (tutorials), where ideas are refined and reflective milestones are reviewed, the tutor aimed at enabling learners to combine steps within and outside their zone of proximal development. Moments of uncertainty, such as 'I don't know', 'what should I do', or 'how do I resolve this', become insightful learning moments, especially when

learners employed creative and exploration methods to obtain answers.

### Examples of learners' agency and autonomy

Learners engaged in several peer group activities that shaped the direction of their work, including suggesting the workshop on artificial intelligence (AI) aided design workflows (Fig.5); building a site model to test design variations; and selecting design methods that aligned with their focus. In the final presentation all learners decided it was appropriate to make a group introduction to explain the design comprehensively. Learners also supported the organization of two exhibitions outside the university space: one showcasing AI-aided design outputs at the Gallery Bates Smart in Melbourne, and another exhibition presenting final design outcomes at the Brazilian Embassy in Canberra.

### Examples of tutor's facilitation

While learners develop independence, the tutor has a key role in providing inputs to enhance learner understanding of the site, culture and context. Four Indigenous themes were suggested in the design brief: 1. artistic production using natural fibers, seeds, clay and wood; 2. cultural representation through dance, food, music, body art, and folklore; 3. language traditions and storytelling; and 4. agricultural and environmental knowledge.

The tutor (Maycon Sedrez) is Brazilian and native to the site region, this facilitated language translation, provision of resources and cultural understanding. He connected learners to a Brazilian cohort supervised by Anna Pimenta (University of Santa Catarina, UFSC) and an Australian cohort supervised by Paul Trotter (Queensland University of Technology) both studying the same area. This collaboration was consolidated through a shared online space (MSTeams) to enable exchange of materials. Additional strategies included building collective narratives through StoryMaps (an online application that combines maps, images, and text in a web format) documenting different aspects of the site. Here, learners engaged in co-designed research and learned about a new tool for communication and narrative development.

Brazilian climate and landscape offer many challenges for architectural studios. Concepts from Indigenous use of materials and connection to land were explored through precedents and examples brought by the tutor. For example, a lecture on Indigenous house and its impact on Brazilian colonial architecture covered the relevance of understanding Indigenous approach to climate.

To draw on experience in Indigenous housing asynchronous conversations with Brazilian architects were facilitated. 'Terrain Vague' learners submitted



Fig.6 - Kaingang leader Sadraque Lopes, extracted from video-interview with Anna Pimenta (2024c).

questions to Dr Nauira Zanardo Zanin, professor at the Southern Border University and researcher at the Center for Urban Dynamics and Cultural Heritage (NAUI) and at the National Institute of Science and Technology Brazil Plural (IBP). She also shared her experience on designing with *Guaranis* in a conversation with our UFSC partner, Anna Pimenta (2024a). Students also submitted questions to Dr Ricardo Socas Wiese, professor at UFSC, who was the coordinator of the architectural design for the UFSC Indigenous Student Housing (Pimenta, 2024b). These conversations were done in Portuguese language by Anna Pimenta, uploaded to YouTube and then translated by the tutor in

Australia. Finally, an interview was conducted with a local Indigenous leader that provided critical insights into the community challenges, needs and aspirations (Fig.6). These interactions offered key perspectives and emphasized the tutor role as facilitator.

While SDL implementation enables learner independence, some learners prefer initially directive forms of instruction. For example, one learner asked for more specific design tasks, demonstrating a misunderstanding of the brief's openness. The tutor responded by suggesting reviewing the studio schedule together, highlighting how weekly prompts could be interpreted and adapted

to their own preferences. Again, when challenges seem to be too big for a learner, operating within their zone of proximal development is recommended, because they re-apply existing knowledge to a different problem.

The learner subsequently decided to produce a physical model, a routine task for architects but aligned closer to their learning style.

### Examples of responses to site and context

An urban block was used as starting point for the design. Learners were encouraged to explore and define a final site based on their collective research (Fig.7).



Fig.7 - Group research to support discussion, compiled by learner Prashya Gosman.

They needed to consider main structures such as the *Da Luz Park*, preserve views to the *Hercílio Luz* bridge and the *Santana do Estreito* fortress, and find opportunities to connect with the city and the bay. Engagement with the Indigenous communities and cultural practices focused on developing architectural programs to accommodate forms of production for the *Guaranis*, *Xoklengs* and *Kaingangs*. Issues such as seasonal and permanent accommodation, movement patterns, protection of children and young people, and areas for cultural production and exchange emerged throughout the design process.

Cameron and Eiman (2025) recommend adopting Indigenous sensory knowledge in architecture education such as memory, language and identity. While experiencing certain senses was not possible, learners found opportunities to incorporate Indigenous knowledge through available sources or reports. Examples are Prashya Gosman who created drawings while listening to Guarani music, Kline Umhao who studied Indigenous languages through online videos, and Jui Janokar who investigated the cultural links between the edible seeds produced by the *Araucaria angustifolia* trees (*pinhão* in Portuguese) and the *Xokleng* group.

### Examples of reflective enquiry

Across the studio the design work addressed Indigenous cultural production, housing demands, culinary and language knowledge, botanical knowledge and education. All learners approached the selected sites by creating hybrid architectural programs, such as accommodation, communal spaces, agricultural production, and cultural visibility. These programs are documented and explored through engagement with the socio-spatial context of the city.

Learner Aayushi Shah created a marketplace to integrate production, commercialization and seasonal accommodation (Fig.8). The design was a multifunctional hub where Indigenous artisans could make, sell, and inhabit



Fig.8 - Indigenous market: indoor production, designed by learner Aayushi Shah.



Fig.9 - Housing and shelter, designed by learner Sagar Chotaliya.

simultaneously. The proposal features economic autonomy and cultural exchange, connecting with context aiming at positioning Indigenous productivity as a visible urban element. The design proposes a bridge connecting the ocean and historical sites currently separated by roads; this makes a link with touristic activities giving a new meaning to the site. Lightweight structure and the use of screens allows permeability, reinforcing the Indigenous connection to nature and use of local materials.

Learner Sagar Chotaliya explored seasonal and permanent housing, proposing a flexible architecture system to accommodate the community movement throughout the year, supporting long-term social presence. The design combined a hybrid program of working, living and communal facilities, targeting immediate needs for accommodation and broader cultural issues of belonging (Fig.9). A timber frame structure creates a module that can be adapted according to users' needs. This project is a good example

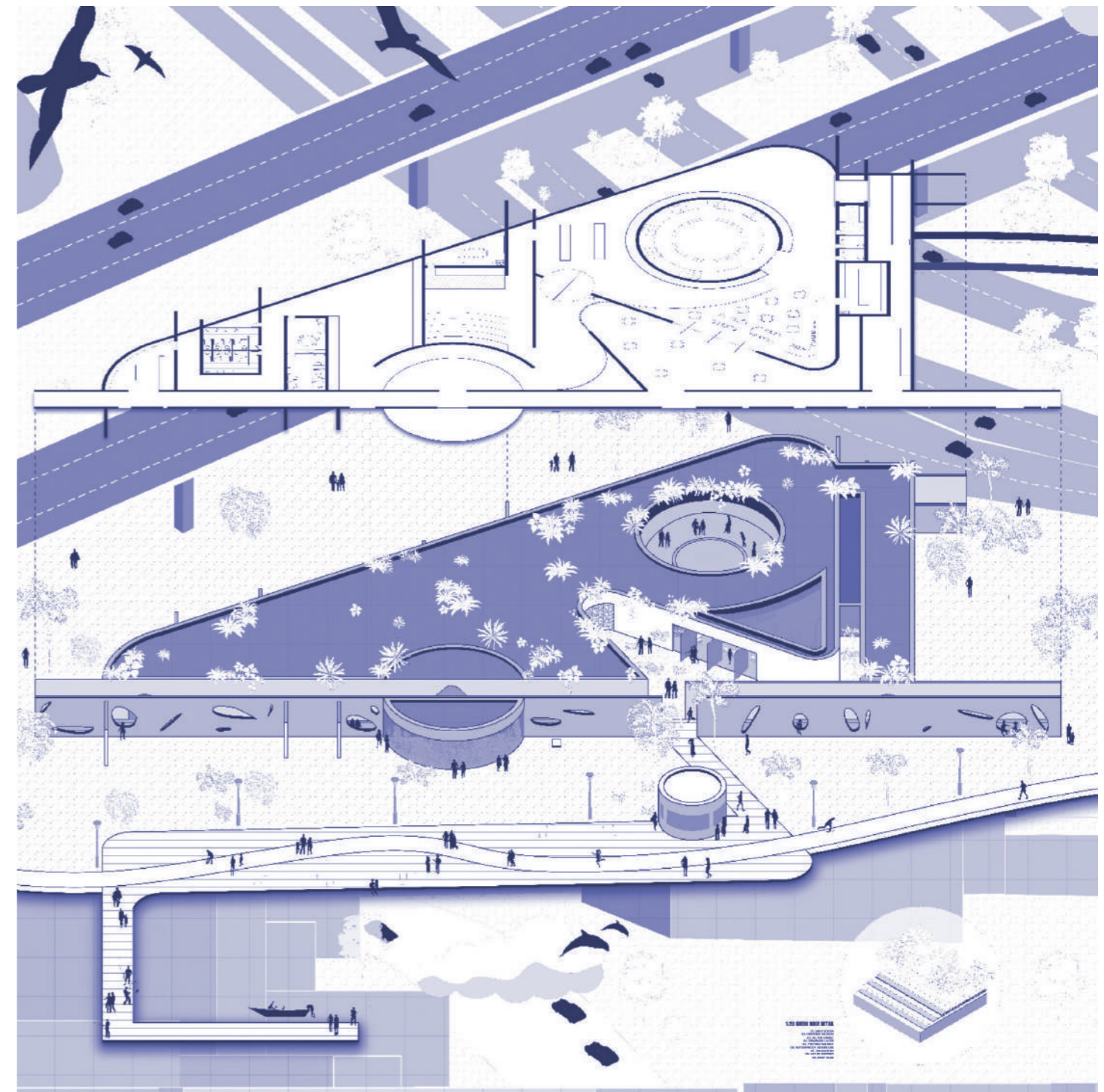


Fig.10 - Marine Ecological Center, designed by learner Prashya Gosman.

of independent inquiry, where a critical discussion around how Indigenous people would feel living in a tall building was supported by interviews with local experts. How to make interfaces with nature in a vertical solution were discussed and proposals developed. A selected solution was to allow gardening to occur throughout the whole project, with spaces for artisanal production integrated at every level of the building.

Learner Prashya Gosman proposed reconnecting the

Indigenous community with ocean-based agricultural practices. The design proposal combines exhibition and restaurant spaces creating a complex dedicated to food production in the surrounding bay. Indigenous people are integrated in farming activities and production of food. The design provides spaces for seafood culinary experiences, fishing knowledge, algae production, and cultural storytelling. The aim was to reactivate coastal traditions and highlight the relational connection between Indigenous identity and

marine ecosystems (Fig.10). In this design proposal the main material is concrete due to an influence of modernist projects that embrace connection with nature, however the proposal was generated through reflecting on site forces and Indigenous music inspired drawings used in the building form.

Learner Kline Umhao addressed a critical issue related to preservation of Indigenous languages by proposing a museum dedicated to the oral transmission of languages. The design proposal creates

immersive spaces for listening and speaking, storytelling, and intergenerational exchange (Fig.11). This production of knowledge offers new forms of archival practices and enables visitors to learn how Indigenous languages shape Brazilian culture, language, and culinary. The learner investigated Indigenous houses and how natural materials are used to create "ocas" (Indigenous house). A meticulous physical model employed bamboo to manipulate organic forms. The whole design was redefined by this physical model which was used to generate digital drawings and visualizations.

### Lessons learned

The design proposal outcomes of this studio present a pathway to reimagine residual spaces as productive Indigenous grounds. In the final review, learners presented the designs to a Brazilian architect and a Brazilian landscape architect practicing in Australia. This was an important aspect of linking the studio to the site since the jury feedback spoke about designing in context and lived experiences reinforcing the learning journey. The design proposals were also exhibited outside of the university context, further strengthening learning, exposing learners to broader audiences and professional contexts. Learners independently developed two publications: a booklet summarizing all designs, and a zine to be distributed in Canberra's exhibition, demonstrating how SDL encourages learners to take ownership of their learning. This documentation and dissemination connected learners with professional spaces as they prepare for workplace. In this way the studio extended beyond academic boundaries and enabled learner initiative, responsibility and engagement.

SDL offers several benefits for architectural studios, including stimulating learners to reframe problems and to engage in "abductive thinking" (Avsec and Jagiello-Kowalczyk, 2021). Naturally, learners used previous knowledge to produce visual material to

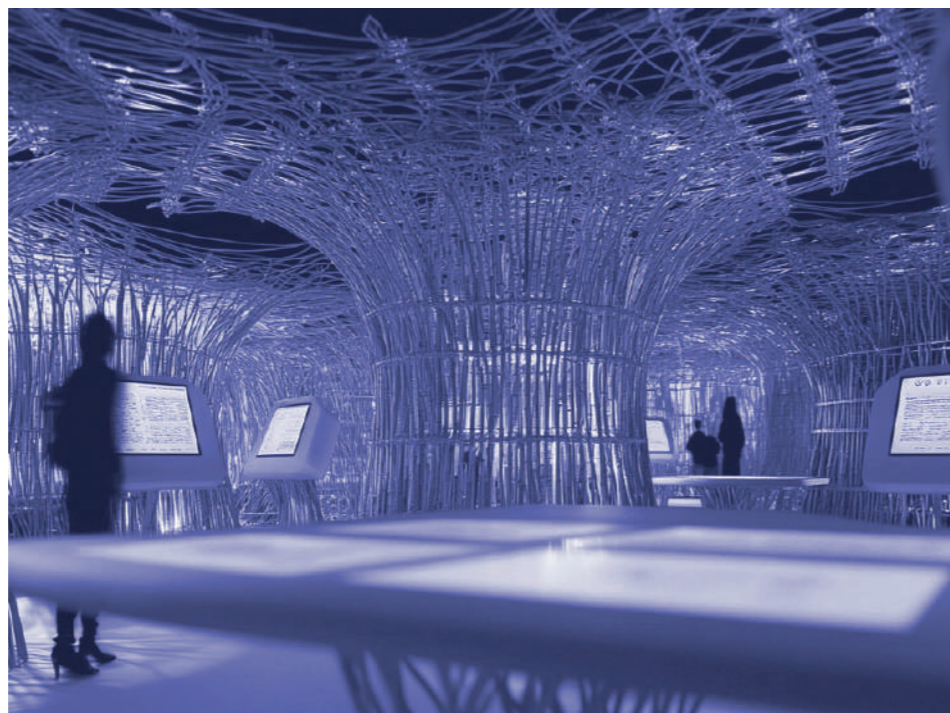


Fig.11 - Language preservation center: indoor exhibition space, designed by learner Kline Umhao.

explain their stories. Building narratives is a type of activity that encourages individual learning because it involves research and communication. Within this project dialogue and narratives are approaches that link back to Indigenous traditions of storytelling. However, it is critical that future studios incorporate a strong agenda to allow more Indigenous participation, with identifiable outputs for the community, such as exhibitions, discussions with decision makers and involvement of architects. This iteration of the studio couldn't exhibit works in Brazil or connect with *Xokleng* and *Guarani* people to participate in the co-design.

The studio 'Terrain Vague' adopts a broader understanding of the productive city to include production of knowledge, social and cultural practices, and collective interfaces. Such alignment between the productive city and *terrain vague* offers a pathway to reframe residual spaces as active enablers of social justice. A complementarity between the unused spaces and the possibility of becoming productive had a positive impact on learners' development of design ideas. The openness of *terrain vague* concept allowed learners to explore alternative forms of occupation

and socio-cultural interfaces. The neglected potential of these sites was converted into more than just places because of the productive city's integrative logic, concepts of belonging and spatial repair emerged in the learners' work.

Conducting the studio from a distance introduced methodological challenges, including limited access to the communities. Experiencing Indigenous sensory knowledge was done by mediated exchanges such as videos, photographs and reports. We acknowledge that this does not replace an immersive on-site experience and offers insights only enabled by technology. Participation of locals through interviews and videos enhanced the learning experience. The interviews are available on YouTube and can be reused in future iterations of this studio. The studio is presented as a solution to advance United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in the international platform for architectural design Local Learning Studio (LLS, 2026)

The studio's contribution lies in demonstrating how SDL as a teaching framework can support learners in acquiring critical skills that are useful in real-world situations. Navigating uncertainty, negotiating design parameters and engaging with culturally sensitive

contexts are some of the challenges presented in the 'Terrain Vague' brief. This requires tutors to act as facilitators that attentively listen to learners' voices. The studio outcomes reveal how *terrain vague* operates as platform for Indigenous agency and provides opportunities for reintegration into cities. In doing so, the studio positions residual spaces as architecture principle for cultural visibility and spatial justice.

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates an approach to adapting SDL in an architectural design studio. It indicates how tutors must facilitate learning and allow learners to take over learning directions by selecting methods and goals. In a master level, learners need to perform in the boundaries of their zone of proximal development and combine existing knowledge with exploration. In this case, the tutor's role as facilitator proved to be critical in an SDL format. Using an open format created opportunities for learners to make decisions on what they want or need to learn. In addition, it helped to maintain a balance between learner autonomy and tutor guidance and ensured that learners remained engaged.

By positioning learners as participants in learning decisions, SDL supported them on navigating ambiguity, negotiating meaning, and engaging with the socio-spatial challenges of Indigenous communities. The experience of studio 'Terrain Vague' shows that when learners are given structured autonomy and are encouraged to shape their learning pathways, they can develop new skills. It supports learners to recognize these skills and transfer them to real-world design practice where uncertainty and negotiation can be central to decision-making.

Future iterations of this studio must establish deeper links with Indigenous communities, which is a major challenge for tutors. However, it is important to ground the design processes in lived experiences and exchange. Strengthening these connections would enrich

learners' cultural sensitivity and understanding of context.

More broadly, the studio demonstrates how an integration of *terrain vague* and the productive city under an SDL framework creates a design challenge that is comprehensive and connected to the world's complex realities.

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# Weird and Speculative Interval

Sazlıdere as unscripted ground

tuhaf ve tekinsiz  
bozulma  
kirli temsil  
karanlık ekoloji  
ototopografi  
**weird and uncanny  
disturbance  
dirty representation  
dark ecology  
autotopography**

Bu çalışma, zemini pasif bir arka plan olmaktan çıkarıp, zaman içinde tepki veren 'tuhaf' bir etken olarak yeniden tanımlamaktadır. Mimarlığın alışlagelmiş yapma biçimlerinden ayırarak, zeminin bu etkenliğini kayıt altına almayı öncelikli bir pozisyona yerleştirmeyi hedefler. Performatif etkileşimlerden doğan, bütünüyle kontrol edilemeyen, bilinmedik ve tuhaf yeni temsil yöntemlerini araştırır.

Çalışma, ekolojik bozulma ve kapitalizmin yarattığı 'tekinsiz' atmosfere odaklanarak, insanların gezegen ölçeğinde nasıl beklenmedik bir jeofiziksel güce dönüştüğünü tartışır. Çalışmanın hedefi tekinsizliğin temsiliyetini araçsallaştırarak ekolojik farkındalığı görünür kılmak ve bu durumu spekülative mimari temsil biçimleriyle tartışmaktır. Bu makale, İstanbul'da hayata geçirilmesi planlanan Kanal İstanbul projesinin mevcut su kaynakları, doğal habitat ve yapılı çevre üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerine odaklanmaktadır. Ekolojik bozulmaların doğrudan sahnelendiği Sazlıdere Barajı ve yakın çevresi temel vaka çalışması olarak incelenecektir.

İnsan tahribatına uğramış bir dünyada ortak yaşam ihtimallerini düşünmek, ancak kirli assemblajlar kurgulamakla mümkündür. 'Kir', temsilde bulaşmayı ve karışmayı ifade eden, yaratıcı biçimsizliğin bir sembolüdür. Materyalizm ekolojiyle kesiştiğinde, insanın insan-ötesi çevresel dünyalarla kurduğu ilişkilere odaklanır; bu dünyalarda nesnelere ilişkileri çoktan kirlenmiş ve birbirine bulaşmıştır. Donna Haraway'ın 'sorunla birlikte kalma' kavramı ve Timothy Morton'un 'karanlık ekoloji' kavramı eşliğinde, Sazlıdere'nin bozulmuş manzarası kirli montajlar ve radikal jeoportreler aracılığıyla temsil edilir.

This study redefines the ground, shifting it from a passive background into a 'weird', peculiar', time-reactive agent. Departing from conventional modes of architectural production, it aims to prioritize the documentation of this agency of the ground. It explores uncontrollable, unfamiliar, and unconventional new methods of representation.

Focusing on the 'uncanny' atmosphere generated by ecological degradation and capitalism, the study discusses how humans have been transformed into an unexpected geophysical force on a planetary scale. The objective of the study is to make ecological awareness visible by instrumentalizing the representation of the uncanny, and to discuss this condition through speculative forms of architectural representation. This article centers on the destructive impacts of the proposed Kanal İstanbul project on existing water resources, natural habitats, and the built environment. The Sazlıdere Reservoir and its immediate surroundings, where ecological degradation is directly staged as the case study.

Contemplating the possibilities of coexistence in a world ravaged by human destruction is only possible by constructing dirty assemblages. 'Dirt' serves as a symbol of creative formlessness and entanglement in representation. When materialism intersects with ecology, it focuses on the relationships humans establish with more-than-human environmental worlds; in these worlds, the relations between objects are already dirty and intertwined. Guided by Donna Haraway's concept of 'staying with the trouble' and Timothy Morton's 'dark ecology,' the degraded landscape of Sazlıdere is represented through dirty montages and radical geo-portraits.

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## THE WEIRDNESS OF THE GROUND AND TOPOGRAPHY AS A RECORD

*This was actually nothing more than the blue of distance. That day I spent at the Great Salt Lake, I stared at my feet for a long time. In this ancient landscape where near and far were so intertwined, where puddles resembled oceans, and the curves in the sand resembled mountain ranges, even my feet seemed very far away to me. The salt crystals left behind by the drying water had formed indentations on the surface. One was like a rose carpet, another a pile of reeds, another a field of snowflakes (Solnit, 2006).*

By reconceptualizing the ground as a 'weird', peculiar, and time-reactive agent rather than a static background, this research moves away from traditional architectural methods to focus on documenting the ground's active agency.

Considering the notion of 'weird' in architectural theory, this study situates the 'ground' within a broader discourse on non-human agency and spatial estrangement. Being a canonic theorization, the notion of the 'uncanny' in architecture, as articulated by Vidler (1992), reveals how spaces become unsettling when the familiar behaves in 'unfamiliar' ways.

From a philosophical perspective, according to Mark Fisher (2020), the 'weird' encompasses that which lies beyond conventional perception, cognition, and experience. Harman's object-oriented ontology frames material entities as partially withdrawn and fundamentally 'strange', reinforcing the idea of the ground as an active agent rather than a passive substrate. This perspective resonates with the environmental and atmospheric design approaches explored by Rahm (2009), which treat space as an active and 'peculiar' system that produces effects over time. These perspectives support the repositioning of the 'ground' as an unpredictable, weird, responsive and agentive participant in

architecture.

'Ground has a weird cyclical form because it is deeply tied to time. It does not remain fixed; rather, it bends, twists, and acts as a 'whirlpool' in the material fabric that resists being smoothed over. It cannot be fully known because it can sometimes be lost under the influence of its surroundings, carried away by the influence of water (Morton, 2016).' It is weird under the influence of the unknown; passive nature is weird because nature is not expected to react.

Places contain multiplicities, and this has a retroactive erosive effect. Consequently, space is never truly homogeneous; it is a multiplicity formed by the continuous accumulation of identifiable effects (Morton, 2016). We might think of strangeness as disorder, as something being wrong, as something weird, as something that should not actually exist. We call things that do not belong weird. Weirdness attributes things to the familiar, things that lie far beyond it, and can never be identified with the comfortable (Fisher, 2020).

Topography, therefore, must be read as a temporal and material record rather than a mere surface contour. As David Leatherbarrow (2004) notes, topography calls up and recalls the materials and behavioral modes of each landscape and structure, rendering every surface an active participant in time. These topographic markers preserve traces of the past while continuously prompting future actions. In the conventional architectural imagination, topography is often relegated to a passive background meant to be controlled. However, a critical reading reveals that it actively reacts, layers itself, and exerts its own strange agency. It is not simply the foundation beneath architecture, but a complex matrix of relationships connecting the landscape, the body, and practices of use. Topography is attempted to be controlled, but it reacts, it is layered, and it is weird.

To capture this active weirdness, the most suitable methodological

form is montage—the deliberate juxtaposition of disparate elements that do not conventionally belong together. Through the creation of radical 'geoportraits' (strange montages of place), this study prioritizes the act of recording and representing the ground's agency over the physical act of building. From this perspective, the topography itself functions as an active record, making the writing of topography a fundamental axis of architectural representation.

## THE SPECULATIVE INTERVAL: UNCONSCIOUS RECORDS

*A city is built to resemble a conscious mind; it is a network capable of calculating, managing, and producing. Topography, on the other hand, is the city's unconscious, containing the repressed, the unknown, the dark, and the lost lands within it (Landa, 2022).*

The unconscious can also be thought of as a kind of assembly machine, containing many oddities, as it lies outside our everyday experience. It is perceived as a weird, abstract, and transcendent feeling (Fisher, 2020). The hidden and folded memory structure of the ground is reminiscent of the unconscious. The records of topography are unconscious. The act of recording the unconscious recalls Rendell's speculative place writings (Rendell, 2005).

Regarding the unconsciousness, an explanation of déjà vu is the recollection of something seen in a dream and then forgotten. It is an unconscious perception that later seeps into consciousness. It corresponds to the unconscious recollection of a previously experienced event. This situation is peculiar. As the number of encounters experienced increases, the sensitivity of the senses and the number of variables in the familiar experience increase, creating multiplicity in the unconscious. The multiplicity of experience here suggests a creative ground that



Fig.1 - From left to right: Robert Smithson Spiral Jetty, Richard Serra, Lucin Cutoff, pivot irrigation.

makes different combinations possible. It goes beyond the unconscious, beyond time, space, and causality, beyond habitual experience and understanding. From an architectural perspective, it suggests spaces that question the ways in which material objects are perceived, spaces that are initially perceived but later discovered to be transformed into something else entirely.

It is the production of an encounter between space, body, and perception that repeats itself but is never exactly the same. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty sometimes appears, sometimes disappears completely, sometimes returns as another version covered in salt (Smithson, 1972). Richard Serra's relationship with topography, particularly in his installations on sloping terrain, can be read as a gesture that emphasizes the existing

characteristics of the ground (Bois, & Shepley, 1984) (Fig.1).

Topography is unconscious; it is related to memory. Left to its own devices, it is ambiguous, undergoing a rapid process of construction whose outcome is uncertain. It can be seen as an ever-present illusion, a distraction. We can see topography in a constant process of construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Topography can become a target of exploitation under the influence of human intervention. It can be affected by feelings of unease, discomfort, restlessness, unpleasantness, and anxiety.

Lucin Cutoff is a railroad line that divides the Great Salt Lake in two. Over time, this intervention has irreversibly altered the lake's salinity levels, colors, and ecological balance. Weirdly, one side of the lake has remained dark red while

the other side has stayed blue. The pivot irrigation technique, used to produce crops in arid climates, is an attempt to control the soil. The effort to create an area suitable for agriculture creates weird, repetitive circular areas on the surface.

Edward Burtynsky's<sup>1</sup> aerial photographs reveal the enormous damage that global industrialization has done to nature and the destructive ecological and social consequences of globalization. He conveys his perspective on nature, the landscapes we have constructed, and their effects on us by choosing to show only what is. We see destruction and deep wounds in the landscape in mines, waste ponds, and industrial and technological waste dumping areas (Cammaer, 2009). While geological formations that took thousands of years to form are the norm in topography, sudden and violent interventions caused by human impact leave irreversible ecological wounds. The Little Rann of Kutch in the Indian state of Gujarat is an area where approximately one million tons of salt are extracted from the floodwaters of the Arabian Sea (Fig.2). However, with the gradual decline in groundwater levels, the salt pans are beginning to disappear. Shrimp farming has begun in the areas where the salt pans have been abandoned. Burtynsky's images reveal the delicate balance between natural processes and human intervention, and how human intervention has transformed the topography.

Humans have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale. We can position humans here not so much as subjects but

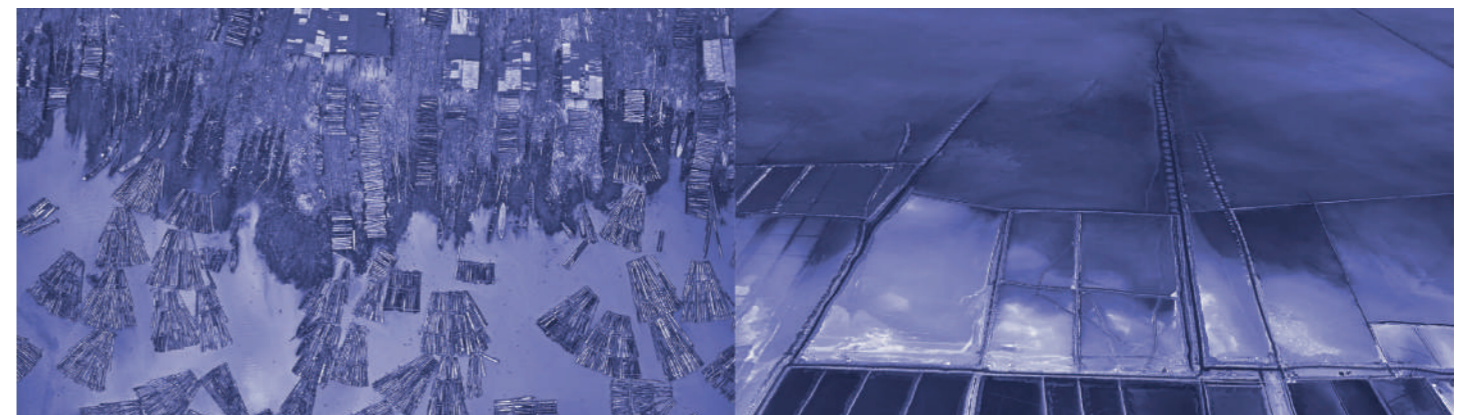


Fig.2 - Burtynsky, E. Home page. <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/home-page>

as agents influencing a geophysical process. This is because we cannot say that humans have conscious intent here. They have become a dispersed, involuntary force. This lack of intent evokes *déjà vu* as an uncanny and speculative interval. It can be said that these examples, which allow us to see topography as a continuous process of construction, destruction, and reconstruction, are records of the ground.

## SAZLIDERE, AS THE UNSCRIPTED GROUND

*A place promising the unknown, with all its manifestations and dangers.*

Sazlıdere is affected by disturbances. Manufactured environments, dammed streams, and their historically superimposed, mutually transforming layers reveal how this environment was constructed.

Sazlıdere is located in the west of Istanbul province in Turkey. It lies on the route of the planned Canal Istanbul project. Sazlıdere is threatened by a large-scale project that aims to connect Istanbul between the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea, transforming the natural waterway into an artificial canal. This study focuses on a relatively limited section of approximately 13 km of the Canal Istanbul project, around the Sazlıdere Reservoir (Fig.3). The Sazlıdere Reservoir currently provides approximately 10% of Istanbul's drinking water. The area hosts an ecology where agriculture and livestock farming activities continue, as well as non-human life forms. "According to WWF-Turkey (2025), that if these

areas are opened to development, they will become unsustainable; this indicates a disaster that will trigger a radically different transformation and a new type of degradation (WWF-Turkey, 2025)."

Before the Canal Istanbul project, the opening of the Sazlıdere Reservoir, which involved concreting the stream and supposedly controlling the water, had a decisive impact on the region. Before the reservoir was opened, the Şamlar Dam was used for a similar purpose to meet Istanbul's water needs. Built during the Ottoman period, this weir was submerged when the Sazlıdere Reservoir was opened and increasing the basin's width. Its existence is occasionally revealed when the water level drops.

The quarry in the area was similarly exploited for its resources, abandoned as its function diminished; it can be read as a space caught in limbo, in a state of transition. Humans consumed the resources they needed and then abandoned the area, leaving behind a dramatic landscape. As a result of the control mechanisms established

by the stream and the reservoir, this quarry is also affected by the rising waters (Fig.4).

One of the consequences of the river's widening, which disregarded the passive nature of the environment, affected the settlement of Şamlar. The rising water level displaced some settlements, and the village cemetery was moved to a different area. In 2023, with the receding of the water, some graves reappeared, reminding us of their existence.

"As Barad says, topography is not merely conceived as a surface shaped by discourse and culture; topography itself is an active, material force. The materiality of the ground is part of power. Thus, the ground here is not merely the stage of power, but an active player. Actions such as slope, water overflow, and soil erosion are agents that resist power." (Barad, 2003). Nature produces its own response to human domination; in a way that disrupts architecture, interrupts appearance, multiplies perception, and makes the familiar uncanny. By becoming part of

our daily life relationships, water reminds us once again that it is an active agent against humans.

Sazlıdere's current state is uncanny and weird. Uncanniness brings with it the problem of agency. In the absence of sufficiency, the real question is whether there is an agent. Ecological awareness is the moment when the narrator realizes that he is a tragic culprit (Morton, 2016). The perspective brought by the uncanny allows us access to the powers that govern the earthly realities we often overlook.

The uncanny is the exposure of space, ground, and body to an agency beyond their own will (Fisher, 2020). The uncanny situation is when we feel the effect but cannot identify the agent. Capitalist influence is similar; power is dispersed, the agent is anomalous, and responsibility is suspended (Fisher, 2020). Capitalism is an uncanny structure in every sense; it came from nothing but has a huge impact on many other elements. The metaphysical scandal caused by capital pushes us to ask more comprehensive questions about abstract and inanimate agents.

On the one hand, there are the molecular dynamics linked to the circulation of capital and the accompanying socioecological, metabolic transformation processes; on the other hand, there is a complex interplay between scales of regulation and governance embedded within these processes. These regional and networked spatial scales are never fixed; their scope, content, relative importance, and interrelationships are constantly debated, redefined, reconstituted, and restructured (Swyngedouw, 2003).

## Disturbance on Sazlıdere, second nature

Disturbance is a change in environmental conditions that leads to a significant transformation in an ecosystem. Floods and fires are forms of disturbance; humans and other living organisms can also cause disturbance. Disturbance can either renew or destroy ecosystems. How destructive a disturbance is depends on many factors, including scale (Tsing, 2017). Time scales are also important; short-term damage and long-term damage have different effects. The quarry displacing the ground, the overflowing water disrupting settlements, the TOKİ (Housing Development Administration of Turkey) housing units being built on agricultural land completely disrupting the marshland, and the Istanbul Canal completely destroying the Sazlıdere and surrounding ecosystem can be cited as examples.

Disturbances creates space for transformative encounters and enables new landscape assemblages (Tsing, 2017). Observing the formation of landscapes reveals how humans and non-human elements collectively shape the world.

Disturbances that shake local and global environmental contexts can be read through the lens of new materialism; in this context, we must understand disturbances not from a human-centered perspective, but in conjunction with all other living and non-living others with whom we share the planet. Nature is not something to be controlled or to control, protected or to be protected, but rather a 'co-construction' (Haraway, 2016).

Nowadays, in a period where contemporary environmental and political disruptions are intensifying and intertwining, representing ecological and material ways of thinking and acting together in an entangled, fragmented synthesis is the method employed by dirty representation. Dirt is associated with being contaminated and mixed up in representation. We can think of dirt as a symbol of creative formlessness (Frichot, 2023).

When materialism intersects with ecology, it directs attention to the relationships humans establish with non-human environmental worlds, where the relationships between things are dirty and contaminated (Frichot, 2023). Thinking about the possibility of shared life in a world corrupted by humans is what I hope assemblages will do. Each assemblage shows how life forms develop together within decay. Assemblages are performances of livability, composed of contaminated representations.

In the context of a commune life; it is essential to mention multidisciplinary artist, researcher and educator Kirsty Badenoch, who works to connect fragile and degrade landscapes, communities, and ecologies by focusing particularly on forest ecosystems. With a research-based approach, she develops collaborative, site-specific projects that explore human and beyond-human relationships. Her project *Falling, Fallen, Felled* (Fig.5) is a research endeavor in Abernethy Forest that engages with the place through walking, writing, and drawing. It involves transforming and recording the forest through drawing, writing, and notation.



Fig.3 - Views of Sazlıdere by the author, 2025.



Fig.4 - Submerged settlements; quarry and cemetery.



Fig.5 - Badenoch, K. *Falling, fallen, felled*. <https://www.kirstybadenoch.com/#/falling-fallen-felled/>



Fig.6 – Sazlıdere, tape recordings, from the author's archive.

The method involves laying large sheets of paper directly onto the topography. The goal of the production is collaboration; the drawings are formed over time through the interventions of nature. It can be positioned as a recording of the landscape and can be said to create landscape assemblages.

In another project, she records an area where steel plates are left in nature, reflecting the performance of nature's active state as they oxidize over time. She positions them as tools for experiencing the landscape. Kirsty Badenoch records the traces left by natural forces in matter through landscape recordings.

Considering Badenoch's unfamiliar yet stimulating recordings, Sazlıdere invites a similar in-situ recording methodology. The approach in Sazlıdere began by treating walking as a practice. The ground was treated as a form of autotopographic writing and recording. Autotopography is considered a form of autotopographic writing and recording: writing the space through the self, performatively reproducing the relationship established with the place. Performing the landscape as an autotopographic exercise refers to place-related exercises, repeated encounters, repetitions, and a performance-based practice (Arlander, 2012). The videos recorded emphasized that topography is an active factor. The aim was to use the body as a drawing tool that responds to and traces the geography. Elements belonging to the soil—stones, trees,

ground—were not considered independently, but were recorded with tape (Fig.6). Using the body as a drawing tool against geography plays a central role in this context. Through embodied interaction, a performative reproduction of the relationship established with the place is achieved. Assemblages of Sazlıdere's disturbances are obtained.

The performance-based drawing methods utilized by Kirsty Badenoch (2021) have been effective in the specific context of Sazlıdere in terms of reflecting environmental and ecological changes. In drawing the unknown and the weird, uncontrolled drawing methods emerging from performative interactions with the space were employed. In the planimetric drawing of Sazlıdere, which attempts to articulate its relationship with the weird and the unexpected, the aim was to superimpose tape recordings. Certain objects collected through the walking experience were scanned and transferred to this drawing plane; tape recordings were scanned and incorporated, and video and photographic records from Sazlıdere were superimposed. Through the representational language generated by these diverse techniques, an attempt was made to redraw Sazlıdere on the plan plane; the constantly changing state of the site was represented through a dirty drawing (Fig.7).

Through H el ene Frichot's (2023) approach, dirt is a symbol of creative formlessness, signifying contamination and entanglement in

representation. When materialism intersects with ecology, it focuses on the relationships humans establish with more-than-human environmental worlds; in these worlds, the relations of objects are already contaminated and entangled with one another. On the axis of new materialist readings, dirt resists conventional classifications, enabling us to rethink material ontologies. Conceiving possibilities of coexistence in a human-damaged world is only possible by constructing new assemblages that embrace this contamination.

In this context, I refer to the speculative drawing and model productions—which present the realities we experience or will experience from a different perspective—as the 'Radical Geo-portraits of Sazlıdere.' By embracing the creative movement of dirt that pushes the boundaries of matter and thought, they render visible the knotted relationships across different scales and times (Frichot, 2023). These dirty representations, whose boundaries are slippery, dynamic, and constantly shifting, merge theory and practice to form a robust foundation for speculative architectural representation (Fig.8).

Sazlıdere, damaged by repeated interventions, establishes new, accumulated relationships. The active state of the topography can connect with the subconscious, with the multiplicity of experience. Sazlıdere is affected by ecological change, its future uncertain, weirdly dark. These strange situations in Sazlıdere are recorded and can establish a creative plane.

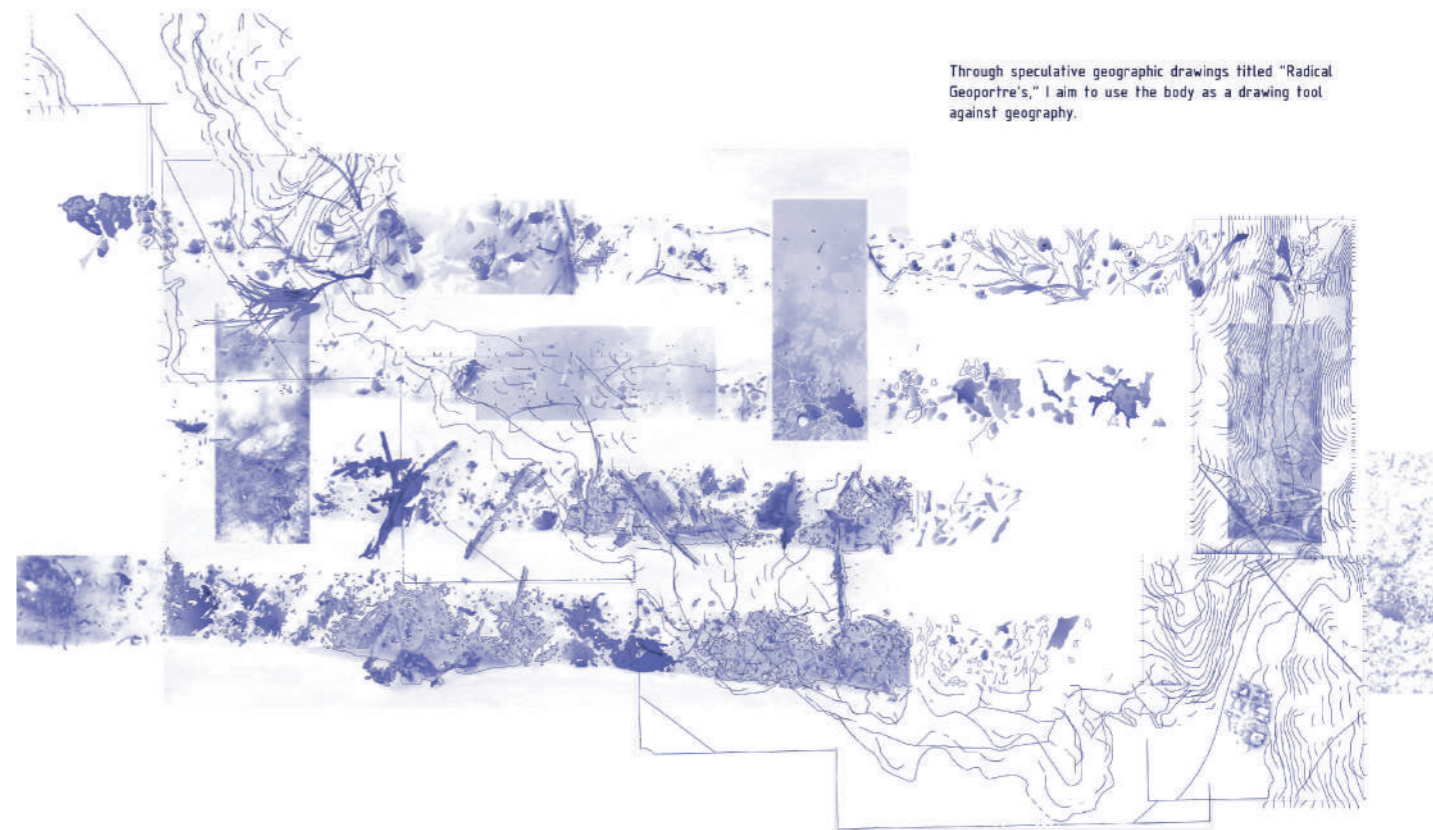


Fig.7 - Record the Ground: experiment to capture unexpected new relationships after recording surfaces with tape.<sup>2</sup>

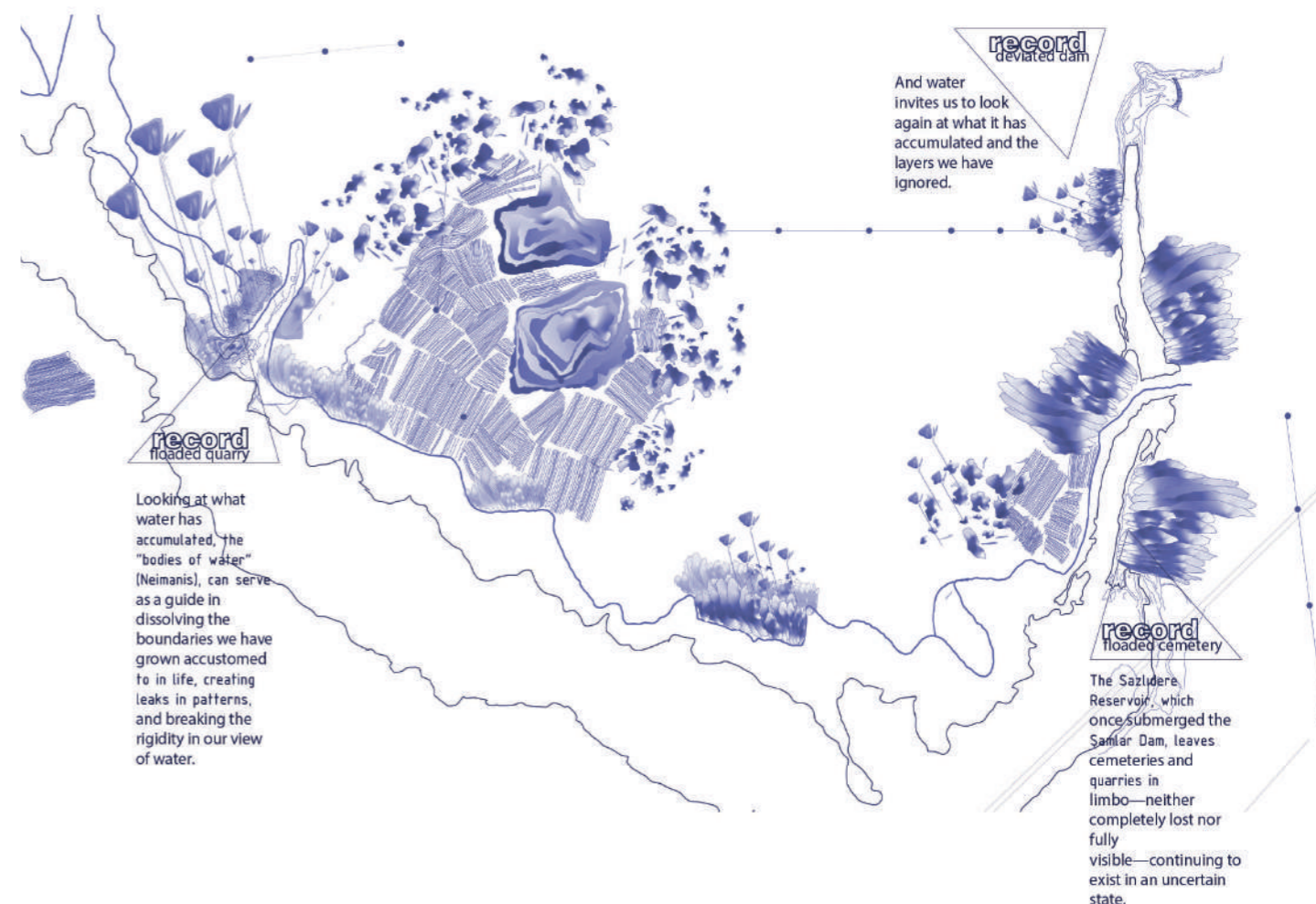


Fig.8 - Radical Geoportre's: Dirty representation of the Sazlıdere plan view.<sup>3</sup>

## THE WEIRD ASSEMBLAGES OF SAZLIDERE, RADICAL GEOPORTRES AS DIRTY REPRESENTATION

*Dark ecology is ecological awareness, yet it is also darkly uncanny and weirdly, darkly sweet (Morton, 2016). It resembles a state of coexistence, like getting used to something weird. A cyclical knowing, a self-aware knowing, a weird knowing.*

According to theorist Donna Haraway (2016), this perspective deepens with the breaking of human-centered representation and the acceptance of an existence of 'entangled assemblages' intertwined with non-human entities. Haraway's call to 'stay with the trouble' suggests remaining within the chaos, contamination, dirt, and uncertainty of representation rather than purifying it. This is both an ecological and ethical orientation: it accepts that representation established with nature is always an intervention and therefore a dirty act.

'I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking' (Haraway, 2016). As Haraway suggests, we can seek ways to represent our planetary problems and enable a different perspective through the work of Design Earth, which attempts to approach them with a humorous language by 'staying with the trouble.'

Design Earth represents the aesthetic forms of the landscape and how technological systems have changed the world. It develops architectural drawings that speculate on living with old technologies such as oil fields, landfills, and mines on a damaged planet. A critical and political drawing language brings a different perspective to the depiction of nature under domination. These areas, distant from cooperation and coexistence, are spaces removed

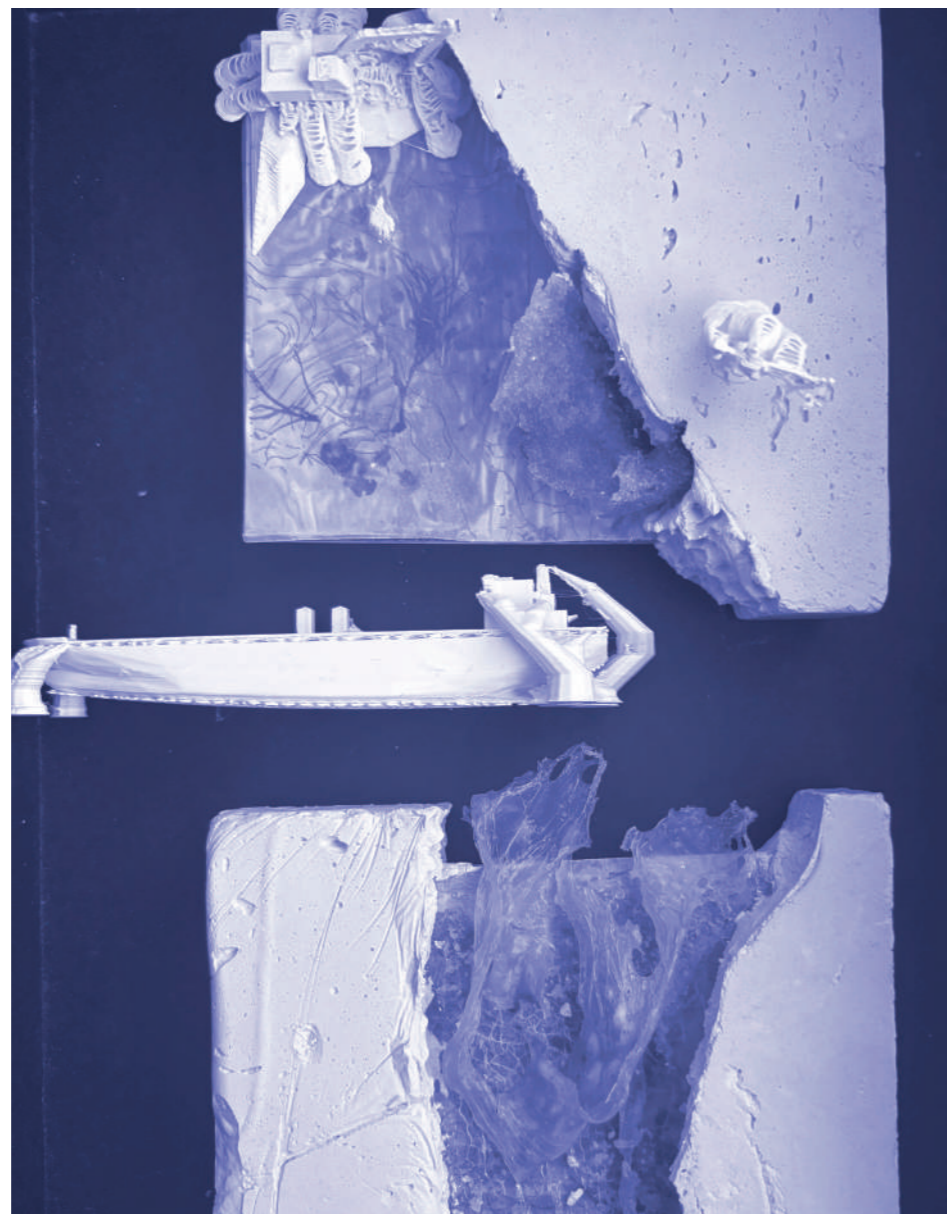


Fig.9 - The components of the model. Plaster layer: The existing boundaries and physical topography of Sazlıdere are solidified through plaster casting. Plexiglass Print: The plexiglass surface, placed upon the plaster base, contains the drawings of the autotopographical records of the site. Gelatin material: Represents the dirty and fluid interval where the natural and the synthetic intertwine. At the uppermost layer of the model lies the human impact, which is the primary element triggering this weirdness. 3D-printed ship and dozer figures are integrated into the system as infrastructural actors that irreversibly transform the landscape.

from social and spatial relationships dominated by inequalities, where the state is seen as monopolizing both violence and resources.

Of Oil and Ice is a project produced by Design Earth<sup>4</sup> for the 2017 Sharjah Biennial. Oil and Ice combines two problems caused by climate change, the melting of Antarctic glaciers and the energy-intensive desalination industries in the Arabian Gulf, with a proposal to drag icebergs from Antarctica to the Strait of Hormuz. Transporting massive icebergs to deserts is an absurd and disturbing gesture

on a grand scale; it reveals the magnitude of the climate crisis, humanity's desire to engineer the planet, and the limits of that desire. As in Design Earth's work, a productive joy and irony here become a tool for discussing disaster scenarios without being didactic.

Radical geoportraits produce humorous assemblages representing the situation within this trouble. Models showing the relationships at the current Sazlıdere border of ships planned to pass through the Canal Istanbul

both reflect dark reality and show a strange relationship (Fig.9). Radical geoportraits do not bring imaginary images to life; they are déjà vu. They are the products of seeing a reality we have experienced or will experience from a different perspective. Assemblage models showing giant buildings rising above agricultural fields are different creative ways of representing this trouble.

Radical geoportraits are humorous assemblages of trouble. Trouble is dirty for us. Dirt is a creative act that pushes the boundaries of matter and thought, making productive labor visible (Frichot, 2023); it can be seen as a body that preserves the drawing of dirt.

Architecture's fetishized image of construction represents the dirty side of the sacred. It can be said that today's architecture offices serve as a cover attempting to mitigate the disastrous effects of capital on ecology. Bloomer plays with categories and challenges the assumption that clear ideas can be conveyed through the agreed conventions of architectural representation. From this perspective, we need a different view, and I argue that this could be a dirty representation. Dirty scales, dirty combinations, the dirty state of representation are tangled assemblages composed of relationships knotted with other combinations across multiple scales and times (Frichot, 2023).

Dirty materialism says that dirt resists categorization, that it breaks away from familiar categories. It enables us to rethink and construct material ontologies. It brings criticism to the status quo. We must seek new ways of conceptualizing our positions and relationships, but the new often remains shiny. Drawing and modeling can explore this meaning.

This potential can be combined as a theoretical and practical method that follows this dynamic and fragmented process, establishing the foundation of representation through models and drawings.

## CONCLUSION

The potential of Sazlıdere has been seen as an uncanny and speculative interval. The Sazlıdere region, the area of study, is under the material and cultural influence of broader—often global—socioecological relationships in which capitalist or modern social relations, and therefore modern life, are produced. In Sazlıdere, it is possible to speak of a new production of nature as a result of the inequalities and exploitative relationships created by capitalism. Built environments, canalized streams, and their historically layered, mutually transforming strata reveal how this environment was constructed.

Ecological awareness is cyclical because human intervention gives it a cyclical form, and ecological, biological systems are composed of cycles and are influenced by many non-human actors. In this context, the current ecological crisis and multiple political processes in the field have been opened up for discussion through a crisis of representation. Representation through ground records is seen as a meaningful way of revealing what is present. The term crisis of representation refers to the blurring of the relational process between the representative and representation itself.

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## NOTES

1. Edward Burtynsky is a photographer who records surface changes caused by human impact through aerial photography. These images, which reveal the damage and transformations left by humans as a geophysical force on the topography, are also documents. They aim to raise awareness of the normally invisible consequences of the cumulative effects of human impact on the planet and to define the problem in a vivid manner.

2. Figure 7 was produced within the scope of the course "Architecture in Context: Architectural Essay Film & Practices: Research and Representation," conducted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bihter Almaç during the 2024-2025 Spring Semester in the Architectural Design Master's Program at ITU.

3. Figure 8 was produced within the scope of the course "Architecture in Context: Architectural Essay Film & Practices: Research and Representation," conducted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bihter Almaç during the 2024-2025, Architectural Design Master's Program at ITU.

4. Design Earth. *Of Oil and Ice*. <https://design-earth.org/projects/of-oil-and-ice/>

# Unscripting from Within

## The human void and architectural dissolution in São Pedro de Moel

modernidade latente  
terrain vague  
dissolução arquitectónica  
literacia da suficiência  
heteronímia hermenêutica  
**latent modernity**  
**terrain vague**  
**architectural dissolution**  
**literacy of sufficiency**  
**hermeneutic heteronymy**

Este ensaio examina a dissolução das casas de férias modernistas em São Pedro de Moel, uma pequena povoação costeira no litoral atlântico central de Portugal, onde entre 1954 e 1974 uma convergência notável de condições produziu a normalização quase instantânea da arquitectura moderna. Recorrendo a processos de obras, observação de campo e habitação prolongada do lugar, argumenta que esta dissolução não é primariamente material mas relacional: o que falha não é a arquitectura — que persiste enquanto estrutura legível — mas a ecologia de literacia, desejo e alinhamento temporal que outrora tornou a arquitectura legível e habitável. Invertendo o conceito de *terrain vague* de Solà-Morales, o ensaio propõe que em São Pedro de Moel o território permanece guionizado enquanto o sujeito humano se tornou des-guionizado — transparente a uma arquitectura cujo tempo lento já não corresponde à temporalidade acelerada dos seus habitantes contemporâneos. O padrão resultante de anti-reparação sistemática — a alteração consistente precisamente dos elementos que já funcionavam — é lido não como negligência mas como violência temporal imposta sobre estruturas calibradas para envelhecer, não para serem substituídas. O ensaio introduz o conceito de *modernidade latente* para explicar a recepção original do modernismo, e desenvolve a *heteronímia hermenêutica* — uma metodologia tripartida de Investigador, Testemunha e Narrador — como resposta estrutural a um objecto de estudo que se revela não como edifício ou sítio, mas como situação — e, em última instância, como evento: o arco completo da aspiração colectiva à articulação material à dissolução presente.

This essay examines the dissolution of modernist summer houses in São Pedro de Moel, a small coastal settlement on Portugal's central Atlantic seaboard, where between 1954 and 1974 a remarkable convergence of conditions produced the near-instantaneous normalisation of modern architecture. Drawing on building permits, field observation, and sustained inhabitation of the site, it argues that this dissolution is not primarily material but relational: what fails is not the architecture — which persists as legible structure — but the ecology of literacy, desire, and temporal alignment that once made the architecture legible and inhabitable. Inverting Solà-Morales's concept of *terrain vague*, the essay proposes that in São Pedro de Moel the territory remains scripted while the human subject has become unscripted — transparent to an architecture whose slow time no longer corresponds to the accelerated temporality of its contemporary inhabitants. The resulting pattern of systematic anti-repair — the consistent alteration of precisely those elements that already functioned — is read not as negligence but as a temporal violence imposed upon structures calibrated to age rather than to be replaced. The essay introduces the concept of *latent modernity* to explain the original reception of modernism, and develops *hermeneutic heteronymy* — a tripartite methodology of Investigator, Witness, and Narrator — as a structural response to an object of study that reveals itself to be not a building or a site but a situation — and, ultimately, an event: the full arc from collective aspiration to material articulation to present dissolution.

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## A HOUSE ON THE SLOPE

Approaching from the west, along one of the radial streets<sup>1</sup> that descend from the settlement's main avenue toward the pine forest, the house appears gradually — first its roof-line, cantilevered beyond the façade, then the stone pier that anchors the projecting volume to the steep terrain below. It is a summer house, built around 1960, where the maritime pine forest meets the Atlantic. The site falls sharply. The architect responded by projecting: the main living volume extends outward over the slope in a decisive cantilever, its weight carried visually by a single stone column rising from the garden below. The soffit was originally lined in timber. The balustrade was tubular steel with a wire mesh infill — industrial, light, precise. The window bands were proportioned to frame the canopy of pines and the filtered Atlantic light. On the ground below, rough stone retaining walls shaped a garden of agaves and succulents that belonged to the same material grammar as the house itself. The building permit drawings show the architect's intention with unusual clarity: the house was drawn with its trees, its human figures on the terrace, its topographic section — not as an object placed upon a site, but as a situation inhabited from within.

Today, the cantilever remains. The stone pier still carries the volume. But the timber soffit has been replaced or concealed. The tubular balustrade with its wire mesh has given way to frame-less glass panels held by stainless steel fixings: a solution that belongs to a coastal apartment balcony, not to a terrace above a pine forest. Ochre paint interrupts the chromatic composition. The window profiles appear heavier. A metal gate now mediates what was once a seamless transition between road and garden. None of these alterations is catastrophic. None would register as destruction. And yet the house no longer says what it once said. Its vocabulary has been edited, syllable by syllable, by hands that did not

read the original script — like a text progressively overwritten in a language its editors do not fully command.

This essay examines the conditions that produced that original script, the literacy that sustained it, and the dissolution that is now — intervention by well-intentioned intervention — unwriting it from within.

## THE GROUND THAT WAS ALREADY PREPARED

São Pedro de Moel is a small coastal settlement on Portugal's central Atlantic seaboard, nestled between the Leiria pine forest and the sea. For most of its history it was a seasonal appendage of the inland town of Marinha Grande, whose identity had been shaped since the eighteenth century by the royal glass industry.<sup>2</sup>

The glass factories did more than generate wealth. They produced an *epistemology*: generations of workers and industrialists who understood material through process — viscosity, transparency, the precise moment at which molten glass yields to the shaping hand. This was embodied knowledge, cultivated through daily practice, and it engendered a particular way of seeing — an appreciation for clarity, precision, structural honesty, and the controlled behaviour of light. When the industrial families began building summer houses in São Pedro de Moel, they carried this sensibility with them: a material literacy that would prove decisive for the reception of modernist architecture decades later.

In 1947, the urbanist Lima Franco produced a plan for the settlement that translated its informal spatial logic into a regulatory framework.<sup>3</sup> The plan codified principles already operative in the landscape: the distance between houses, the preservation of sea views, the protection of the pine canopy. Crucially, it established a parcellation — radial streets descending toward the sea, plots

oriented to light and topography — that would provide the spatial grammar within which a new architectural language could emerge. What the plan could not legislate was the desire that would fill those plots. That desire was already forming.

By the early 1950s, the convergence of conditions was remarkable. A community predisposed toward material precision and structural transparency. A regulatory framework that enabled experimentation. And a generation of clients who, returning from Brazil and America with magazines showing Californian houses dissolving the boundary between garden and living room, recognised in those images not foreign imports but *latent possibilities* — things they already knew but had not yet seen built. António Baroseiro, a young architect practising from Marinha Grande, entered this prepared ground in 1952.<sup>4</sup> The speed at which his vocabulary was absorbed reveals something that conventional models of stylistic diffusion cannot explain. In less than a decade, what should have been gradual cultural adaptation condensed into near-instantaneous normalisation. By 1960, Baroseiro was producing five projects simultaneously in São Pedro de Moel, and other architects had entered what had become a laboratory of modern domesticity.

This research terms the conditions that made this possible *latent modernity*: a collective disposition in which a community did not passively receive modernism but actively recognised in it the expression of desires it already held.<sup>5</sup> The literacy that sustained this recognition — the capacity to read sufficiency where speculation sees scarcity, to appreciate a timber window frame for its proportional precision rather than replacing it with something that merely looks newer (Fig.1) — is what this essay calls the *literacy of sufficiency*. It was shared, cultivated, and, for two decades, entirely adequate to the task of inhabiting what had been built (Fig.2). Its dissolution is the subject of what follows.

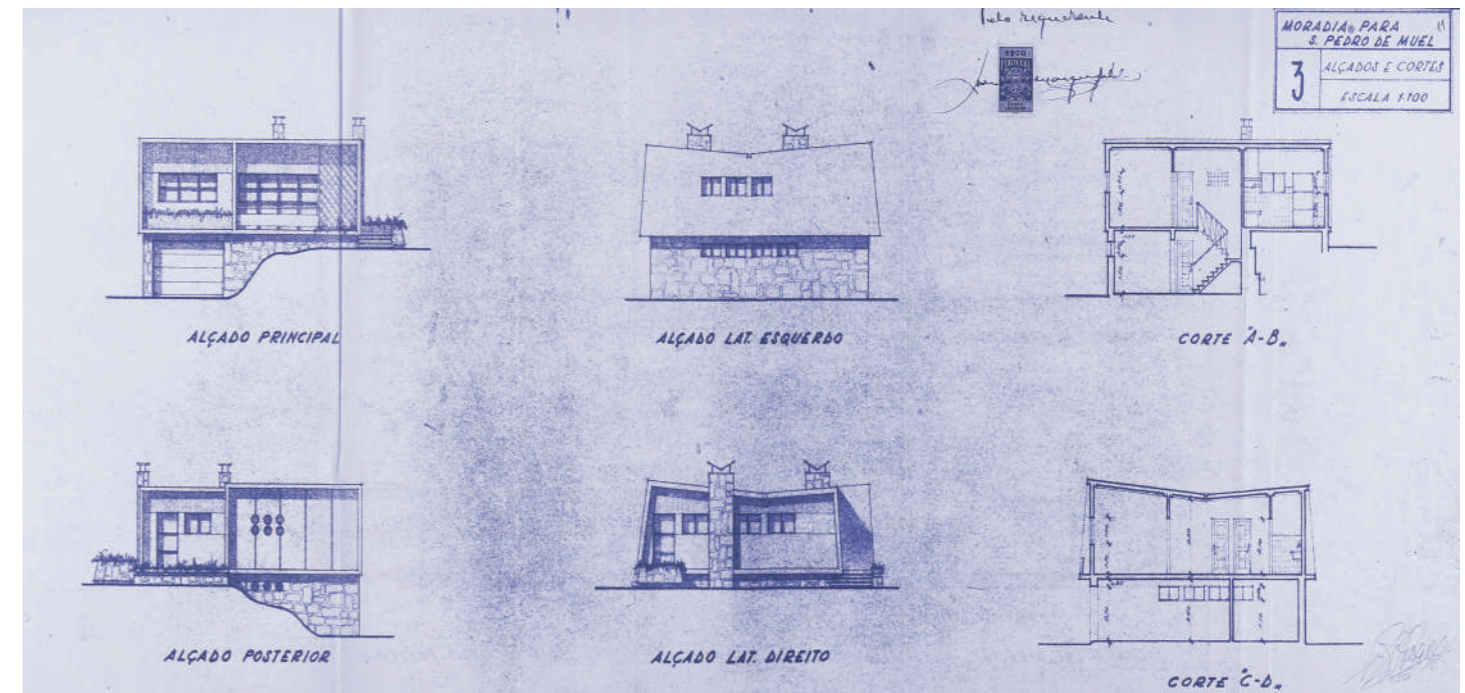


Fig.1 - Summer house, São Pedro de Moel. Elevations and sections, 1954. The building permit specifies 'casquinha' (hardwood) for exterior window frames, with profiles drawn at 1:10 scale — calibrated to disappear within the opening, preserving the proportional relationship between solid and void. Source: Municipal Archive, Marinha Grande, building permit 1954.



Fig.2 - The same house, 2019. Sixty-five years after construction, the chromatic composition described in the building permit — 'white, grey and red, valorised by the use of different materials and the distribution of volumes' — remains legible. Source: author, 2019.

## THE HUMAN VOID

In a seminal 1995 essay,<sup>6</sup> Ignasi de Solà-Morales gave a name to a particular kind of urban condition: the *terrain vague*. Drawing on the double etymology of the French *vague* — from *vacuus* (empty, available) and *vagus* (wandering, uncertain) — he described spaces that had slipped out of the productive circuits of the city:

abandoned sites, derelict yards, residual interstices where former functions had ceased and new ones had not yet arrived. For Solà-Morales, the *terrain vague* was defined by a fundamental condition: the withdrawal of architecture. Where architecture retreats, the terrain becomes vague. These were cool ruins — spaces stabilised by time, softened by patina, available for aesthetic contemplation and

creative re-imagination.

São Pedro de Moel does not fit this diagnosis. Its modernist summer houses, built largely between 1954 and 1974, have not been abandoned. They remain inhabited, used, transformed — and yet something here is unmistakably vague. The condition, however, does not reside in the territory. The architecture is still



Fig.3 - The same house, 2024. Material weathering has advanced — concrete staining, paint erosion — but the architectural script persists: volumetric articulation, proportional openings, the dialogue between stone base and rendered upper volume. The house ages; it does not yet dissolve. Source: author, 2024.

present: its concrete frames, its flat roofs, its calculated openings persist, however altered, as legible structures (Fig.3). The architecture operates in slow time — material, tactile, calibrated to endure. The subject who now inhabits it moves at another speed entirely — accelerated, visual, oriented toward models that belong elsewhere. What has become vague is neither the ground nor the subject alone, but the temporal gap between them. And what we find here are not cool ruins but hot ones — dissolution that is active, contemporary, unfolding in real time, without the patina that permits contemplation. In São Pedro de Moel, the terrain is scripted. It is the human who is unscripted.

This human vagueness is not the contemplative wandering of the flâneur. It is an anxious errancy — a restless passage through things

without the capacity to dwell within what they offer. Desire has been displaced toward suburban models, toward solutions seen in emerging urban peripheries, and is now addressed to a structure that was never designed to accommodate it. These subjects are, in a phenomenological sense, transparent: they occupy space without inhabiting it, present without being opaque enough to enter into dialogue with what the architecture proposes. The architecture still exerts its gravitational pull — but the transparent subject lacks the mass to be captured by it, passing through the field without entering orbit. Where Solà-Morales identified a vagueness born from the absence of inhabitation, what emerges here is its uncanny inverse: a vagueness produced by presence itself.

This transparency materialises.

It translates into a pattern of intervention that might be called systematic anti-repair: the consistent alteration of precisely those elements that already functioned.<sup>7</sup> Original timber window frames, designed in proportion to the façade and to the Atlantic light, are replaced with oversized PVC profiles that interrupt the compositional logic of the elevation (Fig.4). Exposed concrete — left deliberately unfinished as an expression of material honesty — is clad in ceramic tiles imported from a suburban repertoire. A veranda is enclosed, severing the threshold between interior and forest. Each intervention presents itself as an improvement. Each one damages what was already sufficient — not out of negligence, but out of a desire addressed to the wrong structure. Each act of anti-repair is a temporal violence: the imposition of fast time — industrial production,



Fig.4 - PVC window frames awaiting installation at the same house, November 2025. The profile thickness exceeds the original hardwood frames — specified by the architect at 1:10 detail — by a factor of three. The intervention was undertaken without a building permit. Source: author, 2025.

planned obsolescence — upon slow time calibrated to age, not to be replaced (Fig.5).

The process is cumulative and self-reinforcing. Each act of anti-repair diminishes the legibility of the original script. As proportions are altered and materials replaced, the house loses the capacity to communicate the logic of its own making — and the next inhabitant arrives into a dwelling yet more opaque to reading, yet more likely



Fig.5 - The same house during intervention, November 2025. Uniform white replaces the original chromatic differentiation. New window profiles designed for continental thermal performance occupy openings calibrated for Atlantic light. The building permit's promise — 'simple and without artifice, valorised by different materials and colours' — is being overwritten in real time. Source: author, 2025.

to be subjected to further erosion. The spiral feeds itself: transparency breeds anti-repair, anti-repair breeds illegibility, illegibility breeds deeper transparency. What Solà-Morales diagnosed in the abandoned margins of the European metropolis finds here a more disquieting counterpart: a vagueness produced not by the absence of architecture, but by the inability of its inhabitants to inhabit what remains.

## FROM SITUATION TO EVENT

The call for this issue proposes that unscripted grounds be approached as *situations* rather than merely as *sites*: knots of material, social and symbolic relations that become legible through attentive engagement with place. This distinction proves decisive for São Pedro de Moel. As long as it is treated as a site — a collection of buildings to be catalogued, an architect's oeuvre to be documented — it yields a familiar architectural history. But when approached as a situation, what becomes legible is

something else: not the buildings alone, but the event of their making and unmaking — the constellation of desires, literacies, and temporal rhythms that brought this architecture into being and are now dissolving it from within. The object of inquiry shifts. It is no longer the architect, António Baroseiro. It is no longer the place. It is the event — the full arc from latent aspiration to material articulation to present dissolution — that constitutes the true object of study.

For two decades, this normalisation was sustained by a shared literacy. The architect was the catalyst; the place was the laboratory; but the event was the convergence itself — the singular occasion in which creative practice met a prepared ground and produced an architecture that was both legible and lived. Normalisation, however, carries within it a paradox. The more completely a new architectural language is absorbed into everyday life, the more invisible its founding logic becomes. When modernism became simply the way things were, the literacy that had made its reception possible was no longer cultivated — because it was no longer perceived as necessary. The script became background. And it is precisely when this background is disrupted — when aluminium cuts through concrete, when ceramic tiles seal what was left deliberately open — that the original logic resurfaces, legible now only by contrast with what violates it.

What, then, is the truth that dissolution makes accessible? Following Deleuze's reading of Proust — where the search is oriented not toward the recovery of the past but toward a truth that only the present can unlock<sup>8</sup> — we propose that the dissolution of these houses reveals what architecture was, in its deepest sense. Architecture was never the concrete, the timber frames, the calculated openings — though it required all of these. Architecture was the convergence: the occasion in which a community's latent aspiration met a practitioner capable of giving it form, in a place

whose conditions allowed that form to be recognised, inhabited, and sustained. Architecture was the relation, not the object. This truth remained invisible for as long as the convergence held. It is only now, when the human void has hollowed the houses from within, that the full scope of what has been lost becomes legible — not a collection of buildings, but an entire ecology of making, reading, and dwelling together. The dissolution is not the origin of this truth, but it is the optic through which the origin becomes retrospectively intelligible.

## POSITIONALITY AND METHOD

The recognition that the object of study is an event carries immediate methodological consequences. A conventional survey would catalogue the houses. A historical monograph would reconstruct the architect's career. Neither would access what this research has identified as its true object: a truth that resides in the relation between what was made, how it was inhabited, and why that inhabitation is now failing. The method had to be discovered rather than imposed. It emerged from the sustained experience of witnessing dissolution — from years of walking through São Pedro de Moel as its houses were progressively unscripted, documenting what was being erased before erasure became normalised,<sup>9</sup> and responding to an ethical imperative of testimony in a context where cultural memory is actively dissolving.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting methodology — developed over three years of sustained engagement with São Pedro de Moel and theorised here as *hermeneutic heteronymy*<sup>11</sup> — operates through three distinct yet interconnected stances, each accessing a different dimension of the event. The *Investigator* practises a documentary archaeology: excavating building permits, construction details, professional networks, and material chronologies — the sedimented evidence of a convergence already past. The *Witness* operates as a surrogate for the vanished literate inhabitant — the last reader of a script that the current occupation is actively discarding. Walking through the houses as they dissolve, registering atmospheres, proportions, and the precise quality of light through openings that were designed for it, the Witness exercises a memory of literacy rather than claiming a privileged position of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The *Narrator* reconstructs the event retrospectively, weaving archaeological evidence and lived testimony into an interpretive synthesis — not through explanation alone but by enacting the relational structure of the event for the reader.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, the three stances are already operative before being named. *The Ground That Was Already Prepared* is predominantly the Investigator's territory: building permits, urban plans, archival chronologies. *The Human Void* belongs to the Witness: the phenomenological encounter with anti-repair, the

registered atmospheres, the fieldwork dialogue documented in note 7. *From Situation to Event* is where the Narrator synthesises both registers into the interpretive recognition that the event — not the building, not the place — constitutes the true "object": not a thing to be catalogued but a situation that has unfolded in time. The voices do not alternate in strict sequence; they inflect one another. But their structural distinctness prevents any single register from colonising the inquiry. This plurality is not eclecticism but a structural response to an object that changes depending on the position from which it is observed. It carries an ethical commitment: to document dissolution without nostalgising it — to testify to what is being lost without pretending that testimony alone can arrest the loss.

## THE LAST READERS

Return, now, to the house on the slope. The cantilever still projects over the pine garden. The stone pier still carries its weight with the same structural conviction it held in 1960. But the frameless glass balustrade that has replaced the original tubular steel and wire mesh (Fig.6) can no longer be read as mere aesthetic substitution. After the argument this essay has developed, it becomes something else: a confession. It is the material evidence of a subject who cannot tolerate mediation — who requires literal transparency because the phenomenological transparency that once connected inhabitant

to landscape through calibrated openings, proportioned frames, and the deliberate filtering of light has been lost.

The wire mesh mediated: it allowed air, view, and the sound of wind through pines while maintaining the tactile boundary between terrace and forest. The frameless glass eliminates mediation altogether — and in doing so, eliminates precisely the relation it was meant to enhance. It is not an improvement. It is a symptom.

This diagnosis carries consequences for architectural practice that exceed the particular case of São Pedro de Moel. If the dissolution documented here is not primarily material but relational — if what fails is not the building but the ecology of literacy, desire, and temporal alignment that once made the building legible — then conventional responses are structurally inadequate.

Heritage conservation, as currently practised, preserves fabric while ignoring the conditions that made that fabric meaningful. Urban regulation controls form while remaining silent about the cultural competences required to inhabit it. Neither addresses the core problem: that the *terrain vague* identified in this essay resides not in the territory but in the hiatus between territory and subject.

The call for this issue invites new ways of engaging with unscripted grounds. What São Pedro de Moel suggests is that re-scripting cannot be achieved through design alone. If the script was produced by a convergence of material literacy, tacit aspiration, and creative articulation, then its recovery demands that architecture extend its agency beyond the production of space toward something more difficult: the re-cultivation of the capacity to dwell within what is already sufficient. This is not a nostalgic programme. It is an epistemological one. And it begins, as this essay has tried to show, with learning to read what remains — before the last readers, too, are gone.

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## NOTES

- The radial street pattern derives from the 1947 urbanisation plan by Lima Franco. See FRANCO, J.D.L. *Urbanização de São Pedro de Moel: Ante-Plano. Peças Desenhadas e Memória Descritiva e Justificativa*. 1946. Arquivo Municipal, Marinha Grande.
- On the broader context of Portuguese urbanisation plans, see LÔBO, Margarida Souza. *Planos de Urbanização: A Época de Duarte Pacheco*. Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1995.
- The royal glass factory was established in Marinha Grande in 1769 under the Marquis of Pombal. On the epistemological dimensions of industrial production and material culture, see SIMONDON, Gilbert. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier, 1958.
- FRANCO, J.D.L. *Urbanização de São Pedro de Moel*. 1946.
- Baroseiro's first documented project in São Pedro de Moel is the Casa Aníbal Henrique Abrantes (1952). The broader context of his practice is the subject of the doctoral dissertation from which this essay derives.
- The concept of *latent modernity* synthesises Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling" (WILLIAMS, 1977, pp. 128–135), Ernst Bloch's "not-yet-conscious" (BLOCH, 1986 [1959], pp. 113–178), Michael Polanyi's tacit knowledge (POLANYI, 1966, p. 4), and Charles Taylor's concept of articulation (TAYLOR, 1989, pp. 91–107). Full development belongs to the doctoral research from which this essay derives.
- SOLÀ-MORALES RUBIÓ, Ignasi de. *Terrain Vague*. In: DAVIDSON, Cynthia C. (ed.). *Anyplace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 118–123.
- The gap between literacy and illegibility was made explicit during fieldwork in November 2025, when the author documented the replacement of original hardwood frames with PVC profiles at a house designed in 1954. The intervention was proceeding without a building permit. When confronted, the contractor asked whether "a permit was needed to paint a house" — unable to distinguish between surface maintenance and the destruction of a compositional system calibrated at 1:10 scale. The author's response — whether the windows being carried into the garage were intended for another house — registers the same perception from the opposite side of the literacy divide. Both parties looked at the same object and saw different things.
- DELEUZE, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*. Paris: PUF, 1964. Deleuze argues that Proust's *Recherche* is not a novel about memory but a search oriented toward truth — the search is directed forward, not backward.
- The urgency of documenting erasure before it becomes normalised resonates with Said's argument for the ethical necessity of testimony. See SAID, Edward W. Permission to Narrate. In: *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 1984, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 27–48.
- On the imperative of testimony in moments of cultural dissolution, see BENJAMIN, Walter. The Storyteller. In: ARENDT, H. (ed.). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 83–109.
- The term draws on Fernando Pessoa's literary heteronyms — ontologically distinct perspectives, each with its own coherence — transposed into a hermeneutical framework informed by GADAMER (2004 [1960]) and RICOEUR (1992). Full theorisation is developed in the doctoral dissertation from which this essay derives.
- The Witness does not claim epistemological superiority but exercises a reconstructed literacy — assembled through years of research, observation, and sustained inhabitation — that functions as a surrogate for the collective literacy the community no longer cultivates.
- The term "enacts" is used in its epistemological sense: the Narrator's writing performs the relational structure of the event, rendering visible connections that no single voice could produce alone. On narrative as knowledge production, see RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.



Fig.6 - Summer house on the slope (Sections 1 and 6), composite. Left: original state — tubular steel balustrade, wire mesh, timber soffit, terraced garden. Right: current state — frameless glass, stainless steel fixings, metal gate. The structure endures; the script has been overwritten. Sources: private archive (left); author, 2024 (right).

# ATLAS

# Unscripted Atlas



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Maria Cristina<sup>5</sup>; Limoncin, Paola<sup>6</sup>; Umani, Vittoria<sup>7</sup>;  
De Rivero, Manuel<sup>8</sup>; Santillana, Enrique<sup>9</sup>;  
Alvado Bañón, Joaquín<sup>10</sup>; Sánchez Merina, Javier<sup>11</sup>**

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Rethinking Public Life on Bordeaux's Ring Road Edges was an international intensive workshop organised by the École nationale supérieure d'architecture et de paysage de Bordeaux (ENSAP Bordeaux, France) in April 2026, in close collaboration with La Fabrique POLA and Bruit du Frigo.

Over five consecutive days, it brought together 47 students and 11 teachers from EKA Tallinn (Estonia), the University of Trieste (Italy), the University of Alicante (Spain), Umeå School of Architecture (Sweden), ENSAP Bordeaux, and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (Peru). The workshop combined two online sessions with an intensive on-site week in Bordeaux. The projects presented at the final review are included in this Atlas.

Students participating:

Abuziarov Tamerlan, Aixa Bell Torrens, Alejandra Pérez del Solar, Alejandro González Vergara, Alessandra Gonzales, Andrea Cárdenas, Arabella Aabrams, Candela Garcia Aliaga, Carolina Lona, Dominik Gromek, Douaa Zaimi, Edoardo Pasini, Elena de Dlego Trancon, Giulia Fantino, Johanna Kerschbaumer, Joos Manon, José Cotta, Kawthar Tazine, Keijo Johann Norden, Keila Carrero, Kelly Grahv, Kristian Tigane, Lagrù José, Lombardo Emanuela, Lucero Flores, Lucrezia Fonda, Macià Inés, Malak Fennan, Malak Khamsi, Mano-Meelis Onni, Manon Vie, Maria Fornes Pulido, Mariana Amado, Melany Padilla, Miguel Garcia Sanjuanbenito, Morgan Razafindrainibe, Nada Souaf, Nailea Juhasz, Raik Artur, Ruben Eder, Ruth Concho, Samuel Savimägi, Saúl Valera, Silvia Merino, Sofia Schneider, Tarany Arcila, Widal Pokam.

The ATLAS includes also - as a result of the call - the student project: **An Idea for Vitezne Namesti**, by Matteo Cuva.

## CONTEXT

The Bordeaux ring road ("la Rocade") is a major piece of metropolitan infrastructure: a 45 km urban motorway ring carrying around 250,000 vehicles per day. Beyond its mobility function, it has produced a complex landscape of edges, thresholds and leftover spaces, marked by fragmentation, informal uses and latent possibilities. The workshop took as its starting point the unscripted grounds generated by this infrastructure: places whose status, rules of access and uses are loosened, contested, ambiguous, or not yet stabilised. Through situated observation, the workshop explored how such places might become grounds for prefiguration, where alternative ways of using, sharing and transforming space could be explored through scenarios grounded in present conditions.

## OBJECTIVES

The workshop aimed to help students further develop their ability to:

- encounter selected situations along the Rocade directly through collective walks and direct engagement with the site;
- read Rocade-edge situations as situated spatial conditions, shaped by atmospheres, forms of appropriation, constraints and latent resources;
- produce a shared visual understanding of selected on-site situations through visual inquiry and mapping;
- formulate scenario-based spatial propositions that are grounded, legible, and able to address questions of access, use, care and shared responsibility.

## WORKING METHOD

Over five days, students worked in mixed international teams to:

- collectively immerse themselves along a Rocade transect, exploring

selected situations through walking and on-site attention;

- document and interpret conditions through visual inquiry, including notes, situated mapping, sketches, photographs, collages and diagrams;
- develop scenario-based proposals anchored in present constraints, while exploring short- and mid-term horizons where relevant.

In this workshop, proposals were understood as prefigurations: transitional steps able to reveal a potential, support or consolidate emerging uses, and prepare a shift towards a more desirable future condition, rather than full architectural or urban projects presented as final solutions. Spatial scenarios were meant to remain anchored in present constraints, with a clear starting situation, a limited set of actions and spatial moves, an indication of the actors involved, and an explicit handling of access, care and responsibility. No on-site construction or installation was expected.

## FINAL FORMATS

Each team produced:

- a spatial narrative articulating, in visual form, the observations, interpretations and scenarios developed during the week;
- a short video documenting both the process and the main outcomes of the workshop.

The final presentation combined these materials with process-based physical supports developed collectively during the workshop.

## SCHEDULE

- Workshop online presentation: 10 April 2026
- Workshop online lecture session: 17 April 2026
- On-site workshop at La Fabrique POLA and ENSAP Bordeaux: 20–24 April 2026

# Latent Link

## De Diego Trancon, Elena; Eder, Ruben; Fornes Pulido, María; Grahv, Kelly; Gonzales, Alessandra

Teachers: Aliouane-Shaw, Hocine; Limoncin, Paola; Looover, Jaak-Adam

The spaces surrounding the Ring Road have long operated as an underused, fragmented landscape. Sited between the lake and the river, this zone fractures commercial, industrial, and residential areas, leading to progressive deterioration marked by waste and neglect.

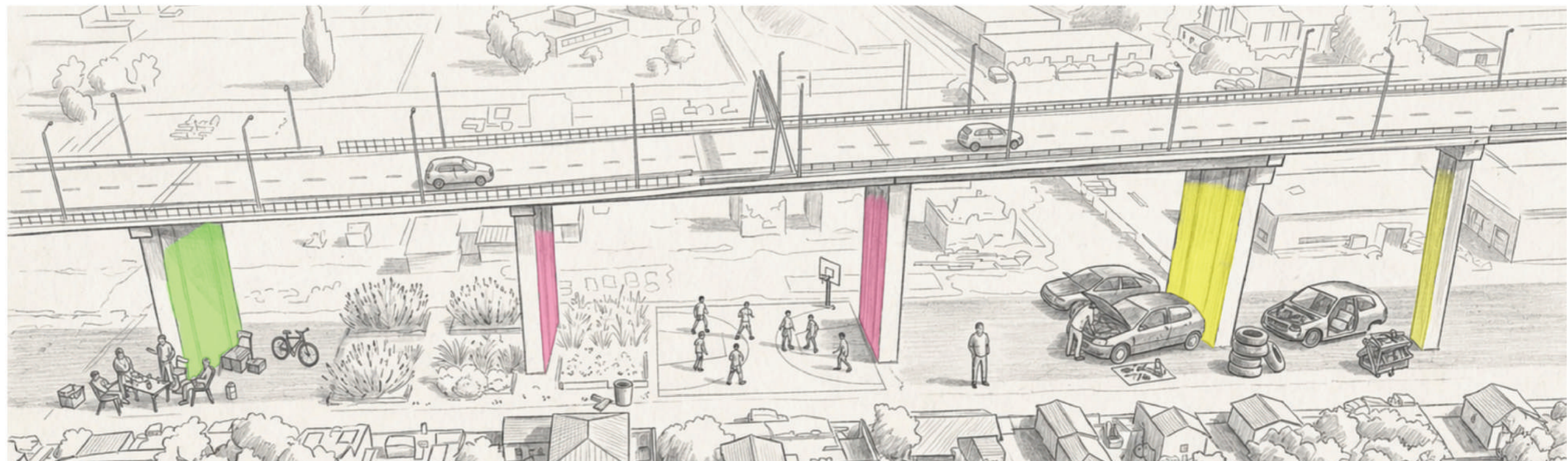
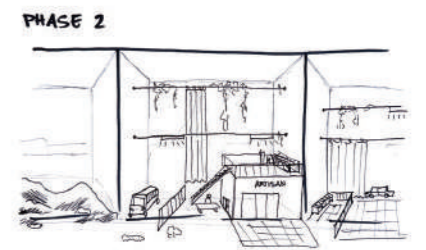
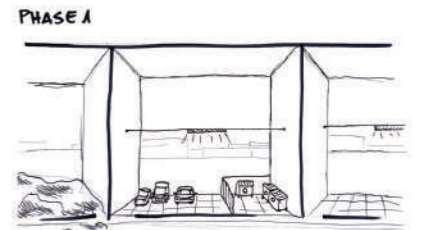
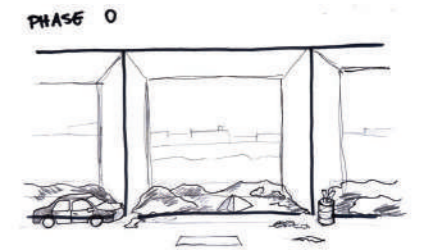
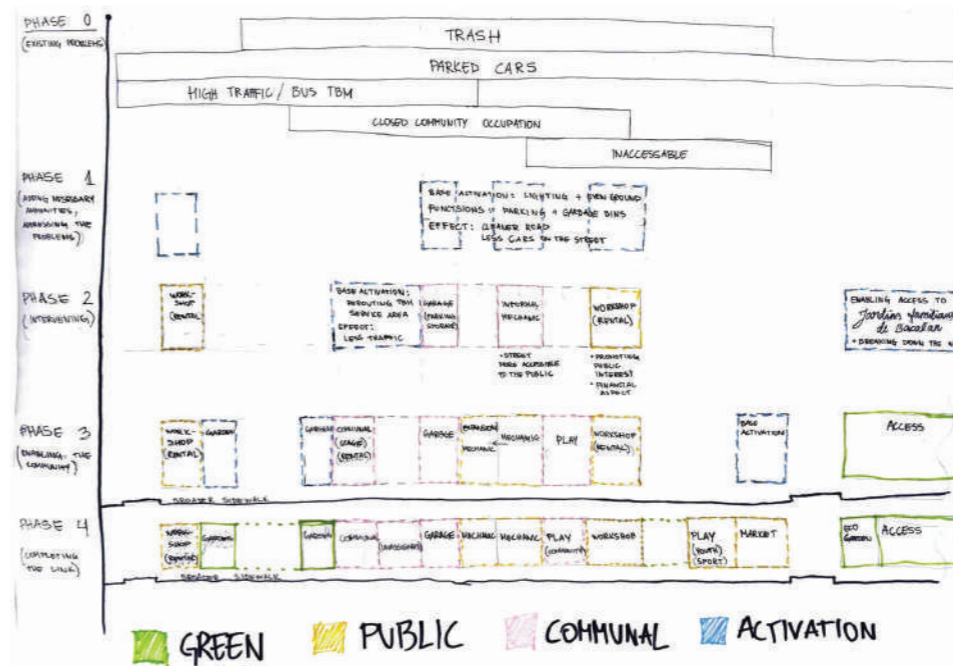
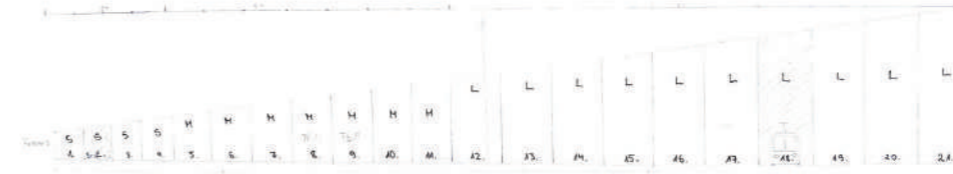
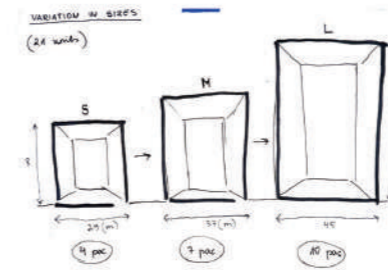
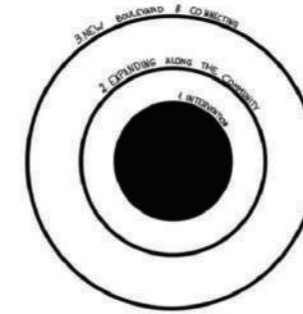
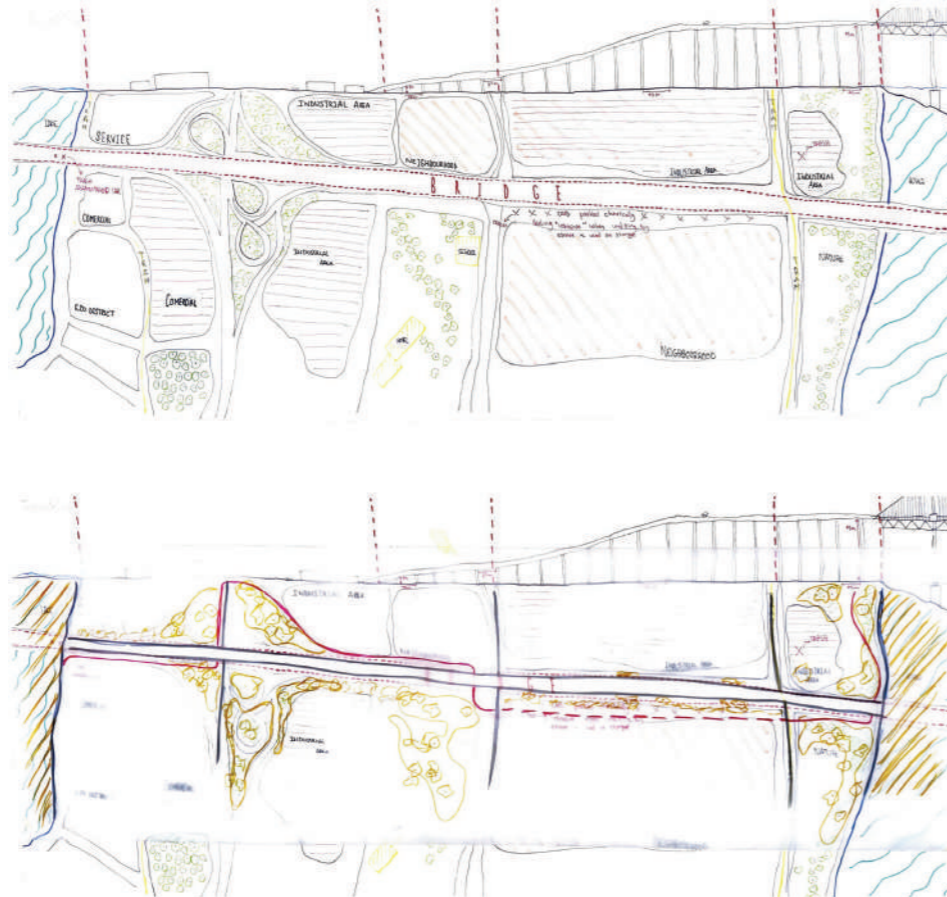
Recognizing that a lack of communal space prevents local appropriation, our project showcase proposes a transformative hypothesis: "Tactical interventions in underutilized spaces foster organic community ownership, acting as a catalyst for broader urban revitalization".

The project identifies the bridge's existing megastructure as a latent opportunity. Rather than imposing heavy, intrusive transformations, it envisions a progressive, site-sensitive strategy utilizing the repetitive structural frames beneath the highway.

This unfolds in carefully measured phases: beginning with essential lighting and ground stabilization, advancing to differentiate frames based on local requirements, and ultimately activating the site with gardens and shared recreational programs.

Crucially, this phased approach negotiates in a sensitive way between the intimate needs of the Bacalan community and the broader context of the city. The final consolidation transforms these spaces into a continuous, flexible boulevard connecting Bordeaux's transversal green systems.

By creating mutual benefits, it ultimately fuses the local neighborhood with the larger urban fabric, fostering dynamic relationships built on collective care and shared responsibility.



# Tiptoe

**Andrea Cárdenas, Arabella Aabrams,  
José Cotta, Tarany Arcila, Abuziarov Tamerlan**

Teachers: Aliouane-Shaw, Hocine; Limoncin, Paola; Looover, Jaak-Adam

This proposal is not intended as an isolated construction, but rather seeks to establish a harmonious coexistence between society, La Rocade, and nature. Tiptoe is conceived as a system of platforms, both vertical and horizontal, that connects two fragmented areas and strengthens the link with the Garonne River, reclaiming an underused environment and transforming it into a place for gathering and dwelling.

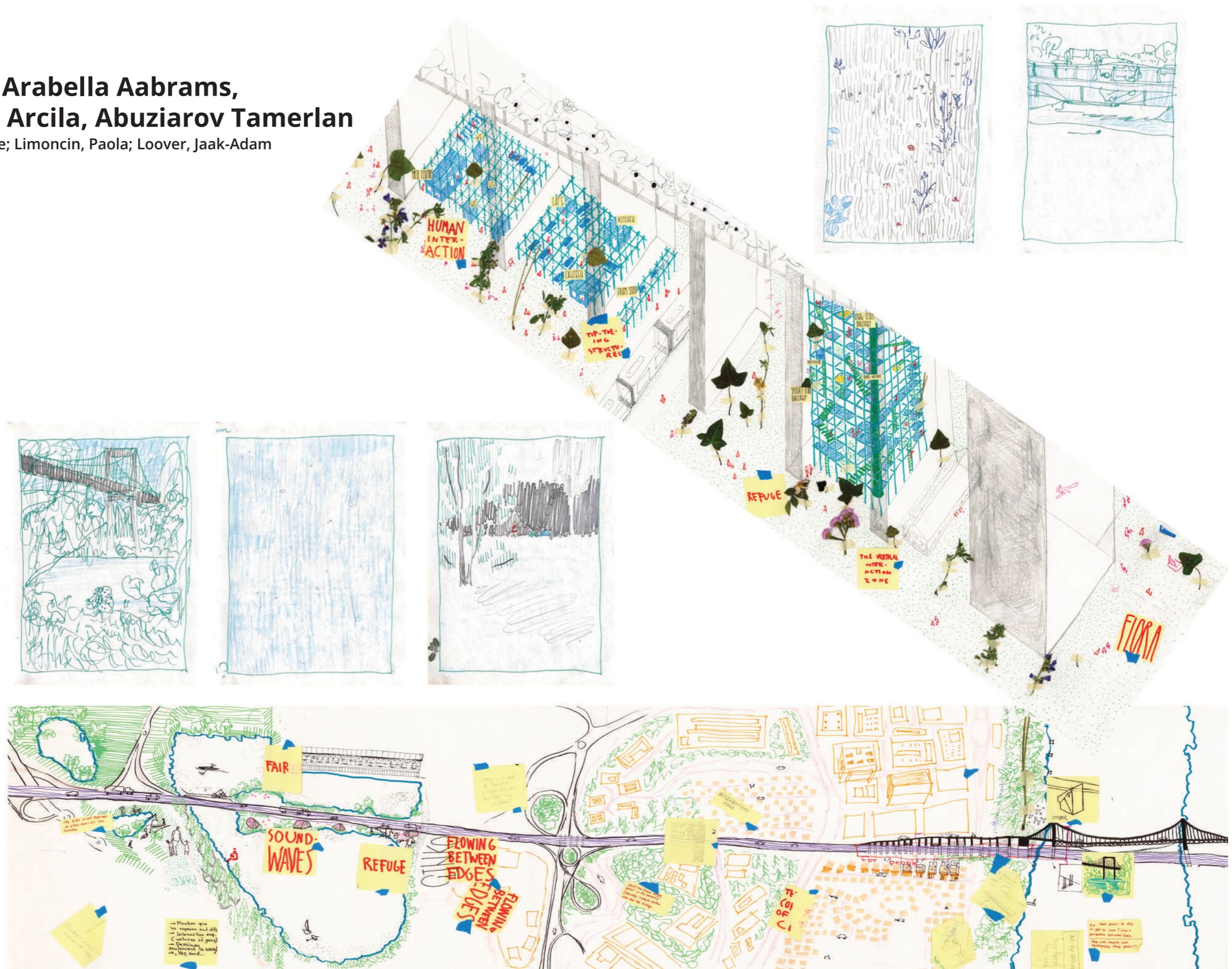
The structure intertwines with the existing bridge support as a shelter, creating a vertical interaction zone for multiple uses. It organizes private outdoor spaces oriented toward the landscape and a horizontal public volume for services and collective appropriation. Between platforms, vegetation integrates the natural into the built structure.

Following the logic of tip-toeing, the system is elevated on minimal piles, freeing the ground level and allowing the soil, vegetation, and flows of people to pass through freely. Reversible enclosures are introduced, which can be removed to create open and flexible spaces that adapt to different uses, from contemplation to refuge.

This openness is essential near the river, merging landscape, structure, and water into spatial continuity.

Thus, an ecosystem forms that encourages human interaction and environmental cohesion.

More than an object, the architecture is a flow system: where the community appropriates the edge, recovers its potential, and reestablishes the connection between city and nature.



# Free-Land

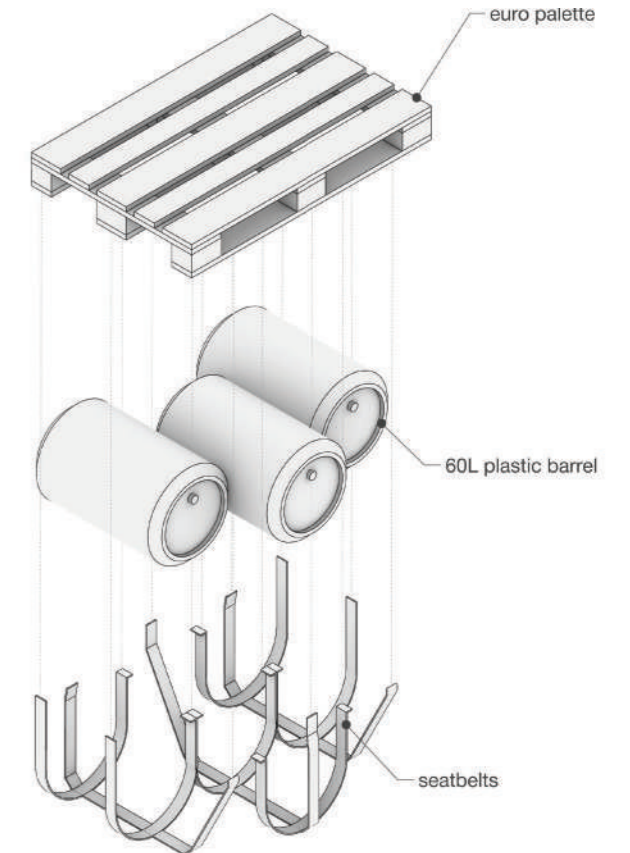
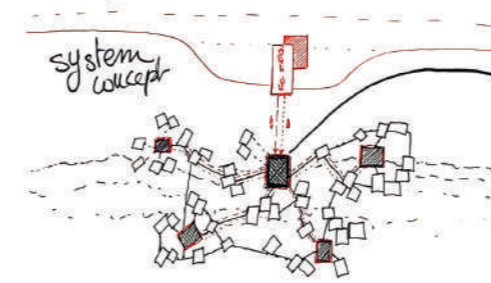
Fennan, Malak; Fonda, Lucrezia;  
García Aliaga, Candela; González Vergara, Alejandro;  
Norden, Keijo Johann

Teachers: Gotlieb, Carlos; Nobile, Maria Luna; Santillana, Enrique

After our site visit, we identified the lakeside edge along the ring road and began to interpret it as an island, both geographically and socially isolated. This area is currently inhabited by many homeless people who live in extremely precarious conditions, directly exposed to environmental risks such as rising water levels. This observation became the starting point of our project.

We aimed to propose a simple, accessible solution that could provide a basic built structure using materials already available on site: wooden pallets, plastic barrels, nails, and various discarded elements such as car debris. From this, we developed a step-by-step construction guide, allowing individuals to build their own floating structures in an autonomous and adaptable way. Beyond the immediate response to precarious living conditions, the project also engages with broader issues such as the increasing cost of land and housing, as well as the impact of climate change and rising water levels. It evolves into a flexible floating system that welcomes a wide range of users: people who cannot afford rent, homeless individuals, but also artists or temporary occupants seeking alternative ways of living. The project is designed as an open and inclusive environment. The floating units are connected to service stations located on solid ground, ensuring access to water and electricity.

Additionally, the northern part of the site establishes a relationship with the exhibition park, creating opportunities for cultural and artistic events, and reinforcing the project's role as both a social and creative platform.



# Revealing the Forgotten Landscape

Fantino, Giulia; Flores, Lucero; Juhasz, Nailea; Khamsi, Malak; Pokam, Widal

Teachers: Gotlieb, Carlos; Nobile, Maria Luna; Santillana, Enrique



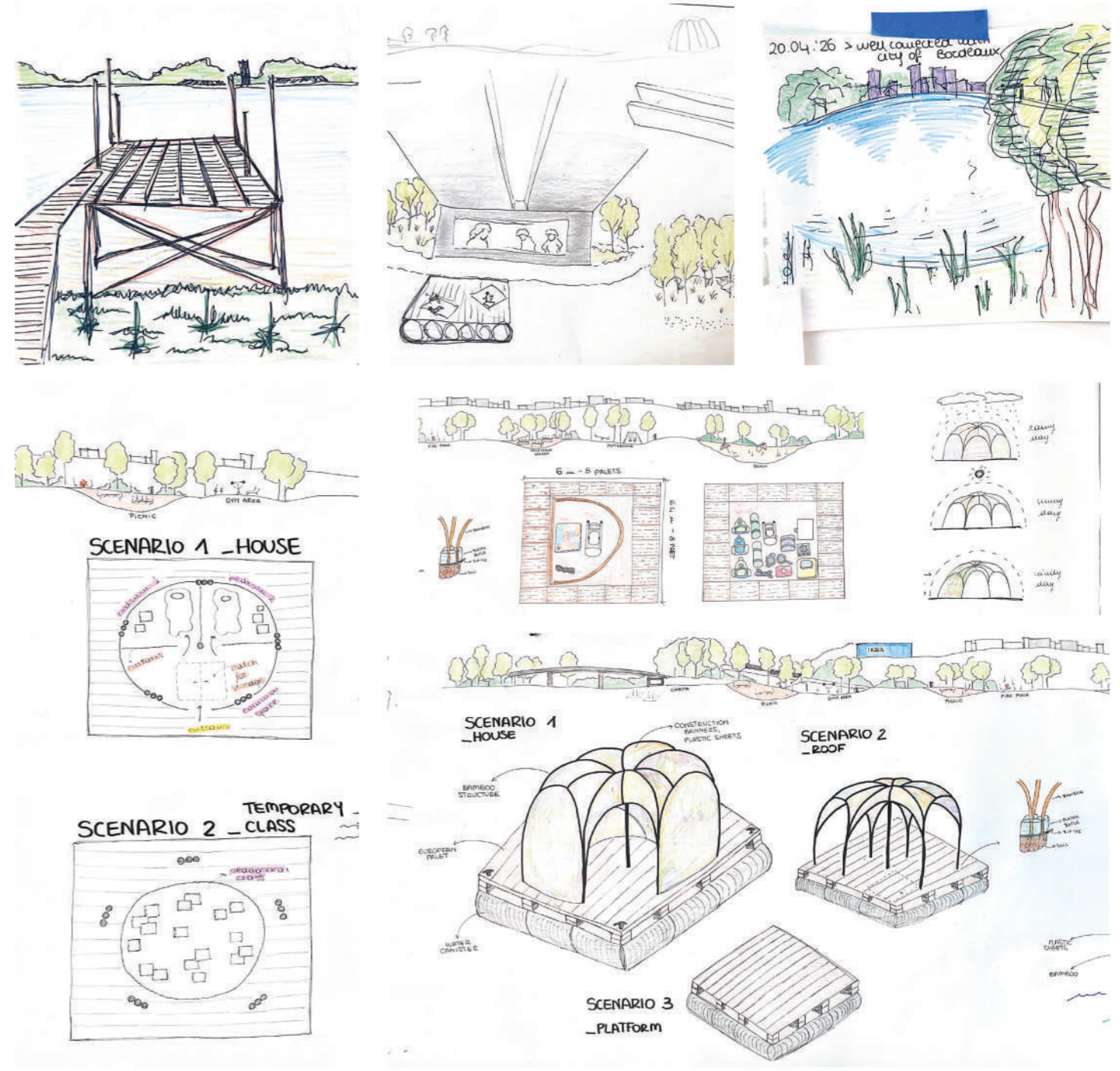
Between the intersection of the Rocade and Bordeaux Lac, in areas that appear abandoned and undefined, we encountered informal settlements. Hidden within the vegetation, these shelters are self-built using materials found in the city. The ground itself reflects accumulation—abandoned carts, cans, and packaging—revealing traces of everyday life.

Despite their precariousness, a clear form of organization emerges. Among dispersed shelters, a shared, lived logic becomes visible. Spaces for cooking and eating act as gathering points, while areas for washing, storing water, resting, and

observing the landscape function as collective services. This creates a form of community life that connects people and nature. This discovery reshaped our perception of the site, prompting new questions: what defines daily life here, and how can a place seen as marginal become one of belonging and resilience?

Our proposal responds by imagining the lake as a continuous shared ground. A promenade surrounds it, activating a sequence of services for diverse users, including cooking areas, sports spaces, bathrooms, and water points. Along this path, mobile

cabins introduce a flexible architecture. Each unit can transform into an open platform, a shelter, or an enclosed space, adapting to different needs and climates. Built from recycled materials and designed for flooding conditions, these lightweight structures are easy to assemble, disassemble, and store. These cabins function as shared tools for refuge, study, and leisure. In return, users contribute to maintaining the environment, fostering collective responsibility. The lake is thus reimagined as a living, evolving system where landscape and community continuously interact.



# The Street of Many Worlds

Lagrù, José; Lombardo, Emanuela; Macià, Inés; Joos, Manon; Raik, Artur

Teachers: Gotlieb, Carlos; Nobile, Maria Luna; Santillana, Enrique

During the first part of our walk, the Rocate remained almost invisible. As we moved further, it slowly appeared, without dominating the landscape. This changed drastically once we entered the gypsy neighborhood, where the infrastructure revealed itself as a massive and overwhelming presence. Its scale felt inhuman, creating an uncomfortable and oppressive atmosphere.

This moment became the starting point of our project. We chose to transform this space into a more

livable and welcoming environment. At the same time, we observed that the gypsy community lives quite isolated.

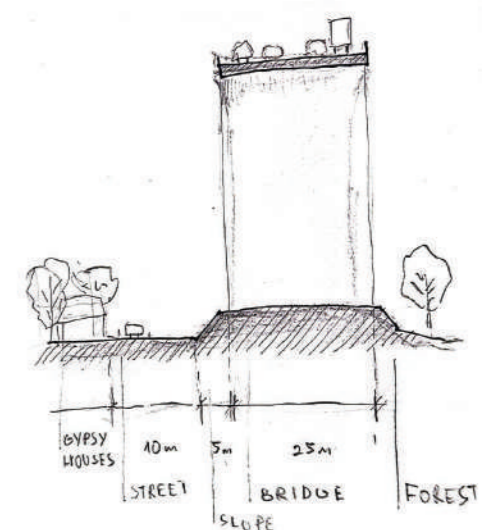
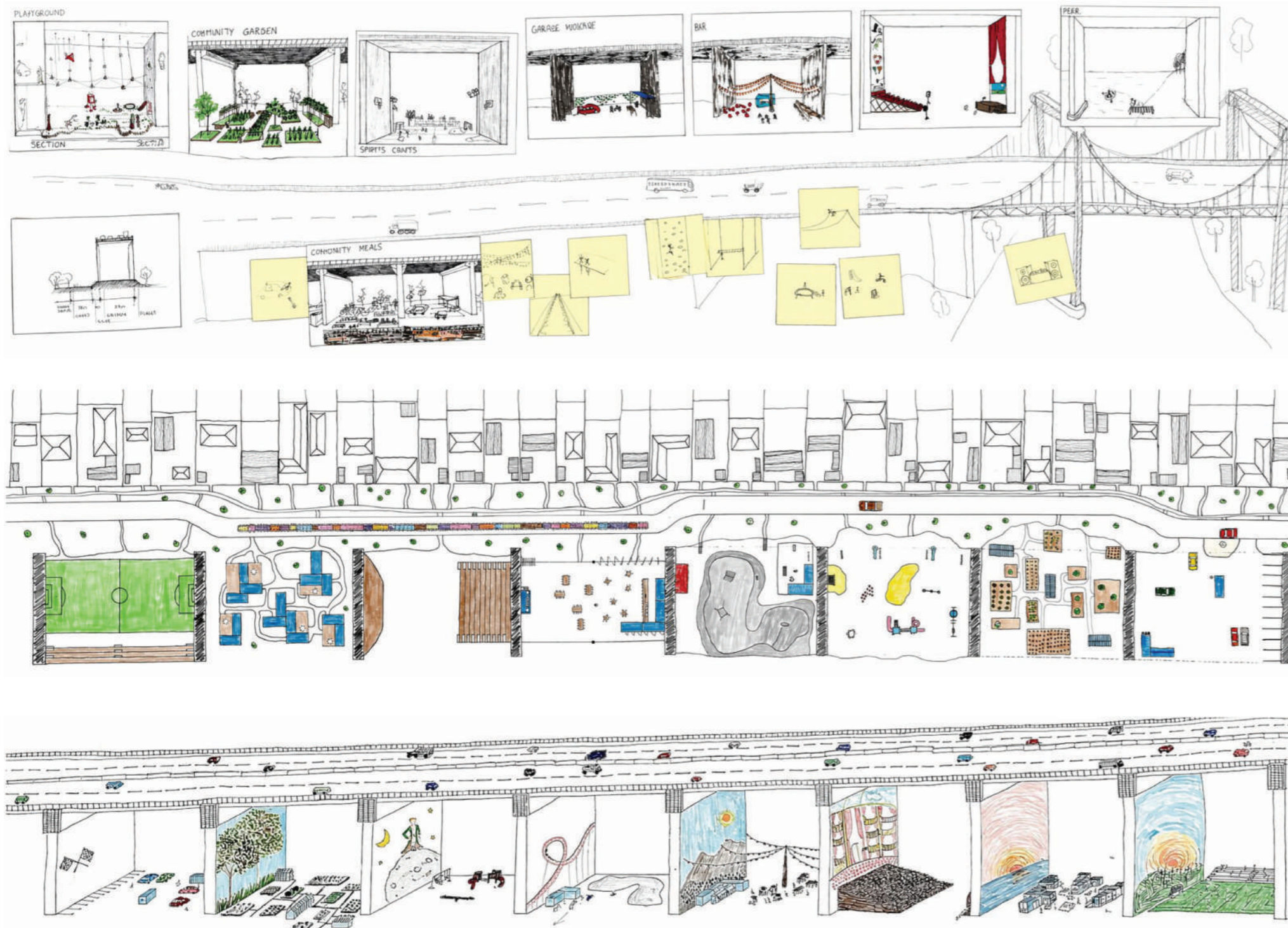
Our aim is to open up this world, while respecting its identity, and to create opportunities for interaction with a wider public.

Our proposal introduces a sequence of large "boxes" between the existing columns. Each box forms a distinct world, defined by its own function and atmosphere. Together, they create a street of

volumes, approximately 30 by 40 meters and up to 40 meters high. Murals reinforce the identity of each space.

The program includes a playground, sports areas, an open-air cinema, a bar, repair workshops, a community garden, and co-working spaces. Reused containers structure the interiors.

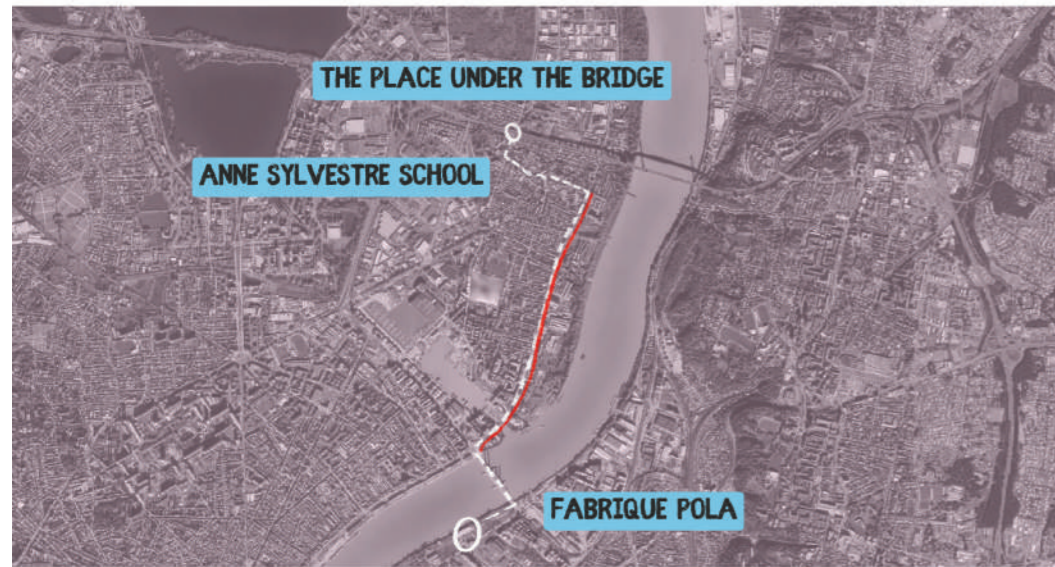
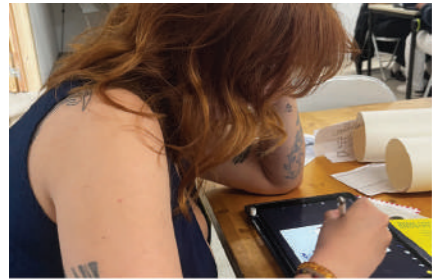
All functions connect to the community while remaining open to everyone, turning the street into a place for shared events and encounters.



# Marelle Club

**García Sanjuanbenito, Miguel; Tazine, Kawthar; Tigane, Kristian; Vie, Manon**

Teachers: Alvado Bañón, Joaquín; D’Oria, Maria Cristina



The bridge is an artificial construction that cuts through the natural landscape, devouring everything on its way like a giant snake.

Motorized machines are carried on its back, but us humans are squashed underneath its belly. It is paradoxically an infrastructure that creates large scale connections, but small scale disconnections. We need to fight this giant snake!

We need to conquer it! We shall punch a hole into its belly and

cut through its separating walls. The disconnection shall become a connection! And there is no better way to do it than by throwing a magnificent party, having fun and games, listening to great bangers and celebrating, while standing face to face with this dreadful serpent!

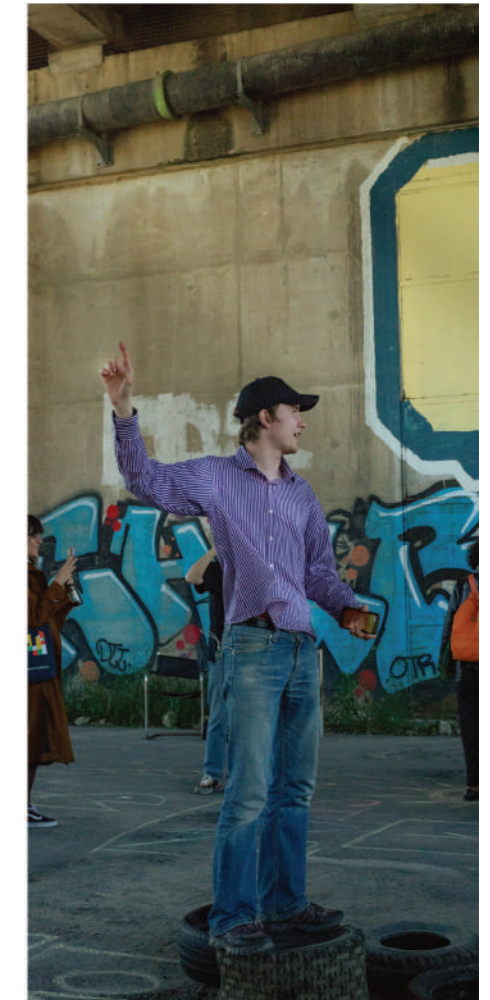
At the very beginning of the week we looked for a topic that could bring people together.

We focused on the Aquitaine Bridge, specifically on the space underneath. We started with

creating a path that would lead the inhabitants towards our gathering space.

Our creation process was guided through the help of the Anne Sylvestre elementary school actors (mediator, students), local businesses and some members of the neighborhood.

They shared their history with us and inspired our process. We invited anyone to participate in this gathering, including all the workshop members.



# Breaking the Walls of Otherness

Gromek, Dominik; Zaimi, Douaae; Onni, Mano-Meelis; Amado, Mariana

Teachers: Alvado Bañón, Joaquín; D’Oria, Maria Cristina

Around the Rocade, a variety of social dynamics can be observed beyond the city. In response to exclusion and homelessness, many individuals have settled in the residual spaces adjacent to the road, often under highly precarious living conditions. Consequently, a clear separation emerges between these individuals and the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. In this context, we, as students, have begun to question the role of the architect in such situations, seeking to develop a viable proposal rather than imposing unrealistic imaginaries that fail to respond

sensitively to the site and its existing dynamics. Therefore, we have chosen to engage directly with the issue, aiming to challenge this condition of otherness through action, with a particular focus on waste as an initial step toward reconnecting people experiencing homelessness with the surrounding community and improving their current living conditions. After analysing and speaking with them, we found that shopping carts are commonly used to transport waste, which is then managed either by burning or accumulating it in specific points. We decided to go

to the site not only to observe but also to contribute through concrete actions, participating in this waste management process by collecting trash ourselves using a shopping cart. Through this experience, we identified that the most appropriate form of intervention would be to propose a self-supported waste management system, enabling individuals to address this issue while also fostering collaboration with other members of the community. In this way, a starting point can be established for a gradual process of revitalization, opening possibilities for future small- and large-scale interventions.

**OUR WAY OF DEALING WITH IT!**

**SHOPPING CARTS AS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

TRANSPORT STUFF    STORE TRASH/STUFF    DISPOSE OF TRASH

**OTHERS**

**Rejection ≠ Fear**

**Where they put the trash**

**1st Actual Step: Cleaning events**

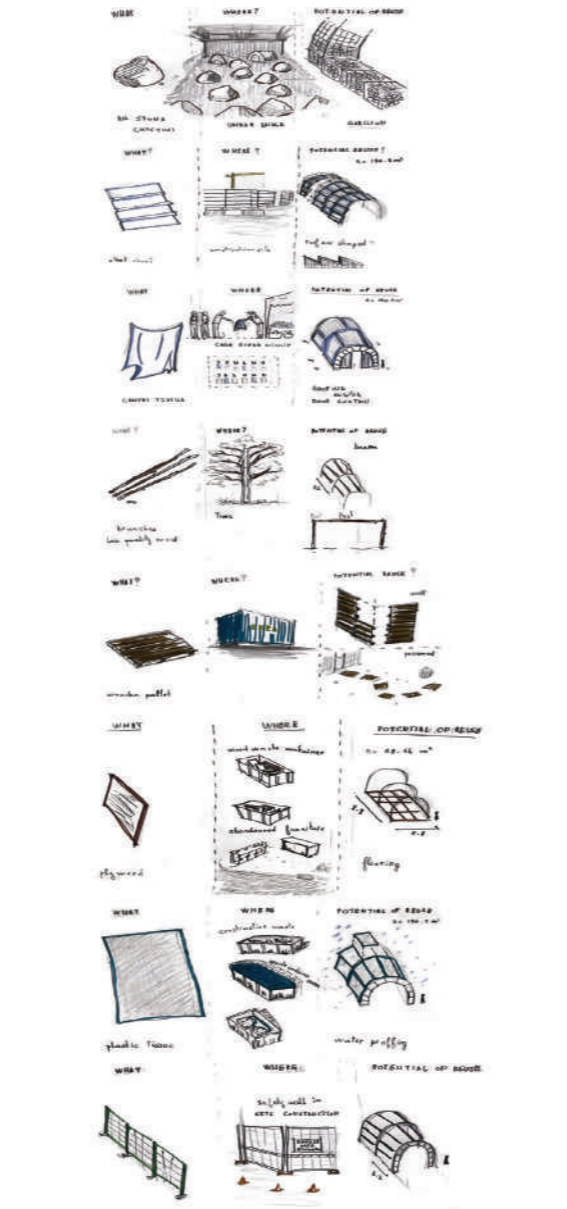
**DATA**

SHOPPING CARTS - OVER 20  
DISTRIBUTION:  
- AUCHAN - 30  
- IKEA - 15  
- PRIMARK - 2  
- LEADER PRICE - 10  
- UNIDENTIFIED - 20

# Trolley-Land

## Carrero, Keila; Kerschbaumer, Johanna; Pasini, Edoardo; Schneider, Sofia; Razafindrainibe, Morgan

Teachers: De Rivero, Manuel; Sánchez Merina, Javier; Umani, Vittoria

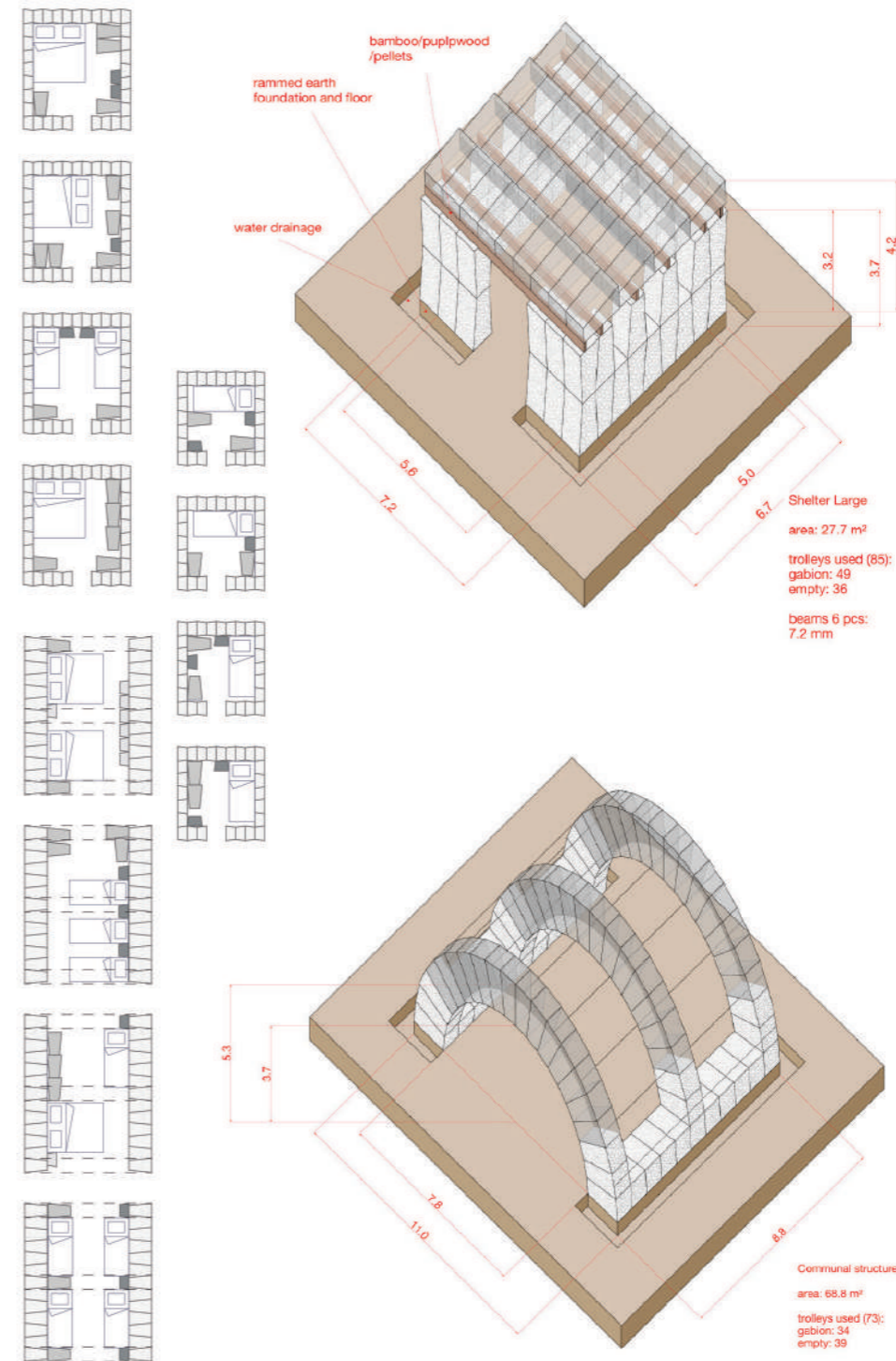


Trolley-land is much more than a shelter for the homeless. It is a model—a way to reuse a very common object in countless ways: providing shelter, water, heat, and many other possibilities. Ours was simply an exploration of the material's potential, which can be further developed in practice.

During the site inspection, two things stood out: the countless shopping carts left in the woods, surrounded by trash, and the homeless community, which had found creative ways to build shelters.

These observations became our starting points: how can we reduce and reuse waste in a productive, architectural way? And how can we improve the living conditions of the homeless using what is already available? These questions led to Trolley-land. What initially began as a sketch of shopping carts reused as showers, stoves, or sinks quickly evolved into a modular system with limitless potential. The trolley (or shopping cart) is imagined not only as a design or furniture object — a shelf, chair, or table — but also as a mobile infrastructural nucleus, enabling access to drinking water,

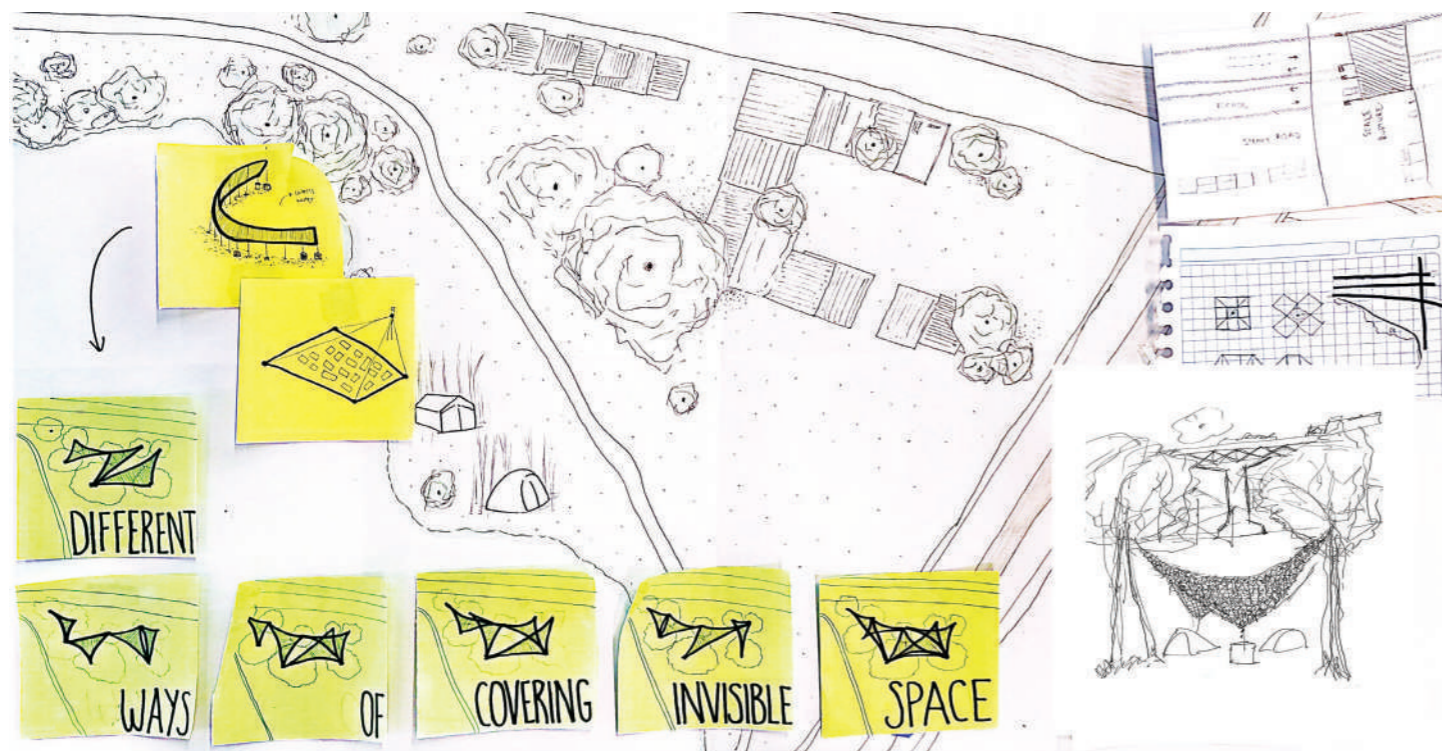
a shower, or a cooking stove. Furthermore, the trolley also becomes a structural material: when filled with stones found in the area, it functions similarly to gabions, providing stability and strength to the shelters. Once these trolley-gabions are stacked on top of one another, they form walls or arches that can be covered with plastic sheets. The shelters also allow for the organic and efficient development of these settlements, offering anyone with access to trolleys the opportunity to replicate this model of designing and living.



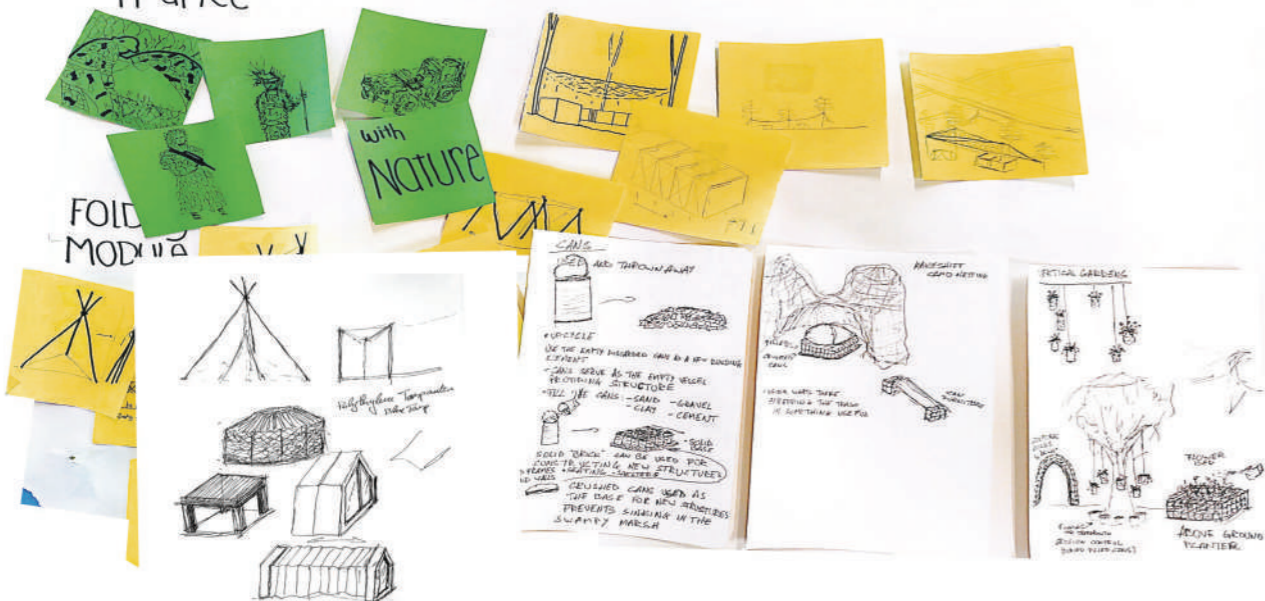
# Invisible Architecture

Concho, Ruth; Lona, Carolina; Merino, Silvia; Padilla, Melany; Savimägi, Samuel

Teachers: De Rivero, Manuel; Sánchez Merina, Javier; Umani, Vittoria



Camouflage in France



At the intersection of Bordeaux's A630 and E5 ring roads, a sunken, shielded park reveals a hidden homeless community. Through observation, an existing spatial organization emerged, characterized by improvised shelters, a close connection to the woodland, and a constant presence of discarded food cans.

This context exposes a fundamental paradox: improving these living conditions increases the risk of eviction. Visibility becomes a threat. How can architecture enhance living conditions through discretion rather than exposure?

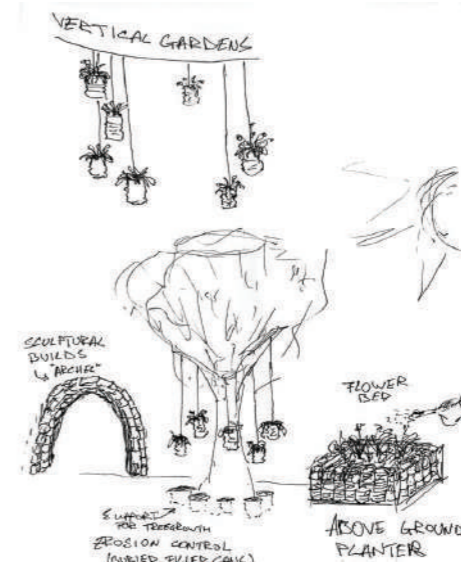
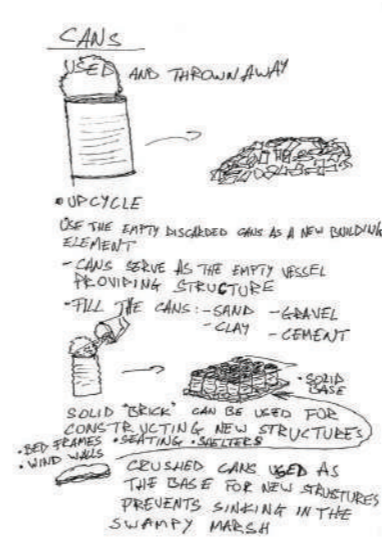
The hypothesis proposes a tactical architecture balancing dignity, anonymity, and mobility.

To achieve this, the project draws on the origins of modern concealment. Born in France during the First World War, camouflage was developed by artist units who designed patterns to blend objects into landscapes—avoiding detection rather than completely disappearing. Today, we repurpose this principle not for war, but to protect a peaceful, fragile community from urban scrutiny.

The proposal unfolds through

three actions. First, a protective camouflage tarp applies these historical principles, merging with the woodland to significantly reduce exposure. Second, a lightweight, demountable housing module introduces tactical mobility, allowing for rapid relocation if displacement occurs.

Finally, the site's food cans are upcycled into "can-bricks," filled with earth to create structural bases. Rather than imposing a new order, these interventions reinforce the existing one, providing tools for a resilient way of inhabiting the margins.



# Bordeaux 2100

**Bell Torrens, Aixa; Pérez del Solar, Alejandra;  
Souaf, Nada; Valera, Saúl**

Teachers: De Rivero, Manuel; Sánchez Merina, Javier; Umani, Vittoria

*Bordeaux 2100* imagines how the city could transform under accelerating climate change. Rising sea levels and dependence on limited fossil fuels cause permanent flooding and the collapse of infrastructures designed for another era. Highways, bridges, and fuel based mobility systems become obsolete.

Instead of resisting, the project proposes adaptation. The Pont d'Aquitaine is reimagined as an elevated, sustainable structure that compensates for the loss of habitable land. Its transformation unfolds in two phases.

Phase 1 focuses on ecological restoration and collective resilience. The bridge becomes a green corridor that restores biodiversity and improves environmental conditions.

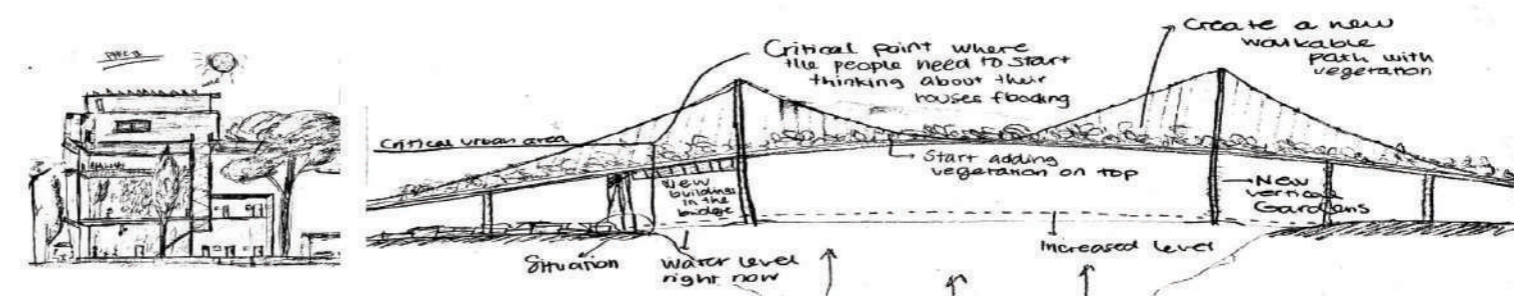
Light, temporary shelters appear for displaced populations. The first inhabitants are gypsy communities, whose mobile lifestyles align with this transition. Shared spaces and vertical gardens strengthen social bonds and support daily survival.

Phase 2 introduces autonomous infrastructure and long term adaptation. As flooding intensifies, the bridge evolves into a self sufficient community. Housing becomes permanent and integrated with natural systems. Mobility shifts to bicycles, boats, elevators, and aerial transport. Energy comes from renewable sources. Vertical organization distributes functions, while farming ensures food production.

Overall, the project demonstrates how adaptation can transform crisis into opportunity, creating a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable model for future living.



Bordeaux 2100



Bordeaux 2050



Bordeaux 2100

# An Idea for Vítězné Namesti

## An Urban Water Project for Prague

**Cuva, Matteo<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, Italy.

Teacher: Valerio Morabito

The project “An Idea for Vítězné Náměstí – An Urban Water Project: Prague, Czech Republic” stems from a specific need: to transform an underused area in the Dejvice district into an ecological corridor, while taking two landscapes into account in its development. The project site is situated at a key junction, sandwiched between the ČVUT campus, the NTK, and the major traffic arteries converging on Vítězné Náměstí.

The two landscapes, whose processes will be replicated and amplified in Dejvice, are: wetlands and Adrspach sandstone formations. The latter are the result of millions of years of erosion on vast slabs of Cretaceous sandstone, a sedimentary material that has solidified into horizontal layers. From these, key concepts are reworked, such as the idea of a monumental vertical mass emerging from a dense landscape and the texture of the rock. Wetlands, on the other hand, represent a fundamental ecological heritage; these freshwater ecosystems are at the heart of the country's biodiversity and hydrological balance, acting as a natural biological filter by absorbing excess nutrients, heavy

metals and other pollutants. The project therefore, seeks to unite the human sphere with the natural and ecological aspects of the landscape, emphasizing, as the landscape architect wrote, the role and purpose of the most significant traditional urban landscapes, their capacity to function as important containers<sup>1</sup>, while setting aside the vision of an urban landscape that is purely aesthetic.

Worth noting is the project's dual dichotomy linking the two landscape archetypes. The first is ‘wet at the bottom, dry at the top’; the buildings are in close contact with the water, moisture-resistant at the base as they are situated within the wetland, yet with a surface suitable for bio-colonization at the top, much like an Adrspach rock. The second, however, is ‘horizontal fluidity, vertical monumentality’, which encapsulates the project's conceptual foundation.

The design response was a gesture of organic composition. To translate this vision into a site plan, we drew on the artistic legacy of Alphonse Mucha; the route's lines are, in fact, sinusoidal, creating a fluid ribbon that winds its way along the ecological axis. The structures

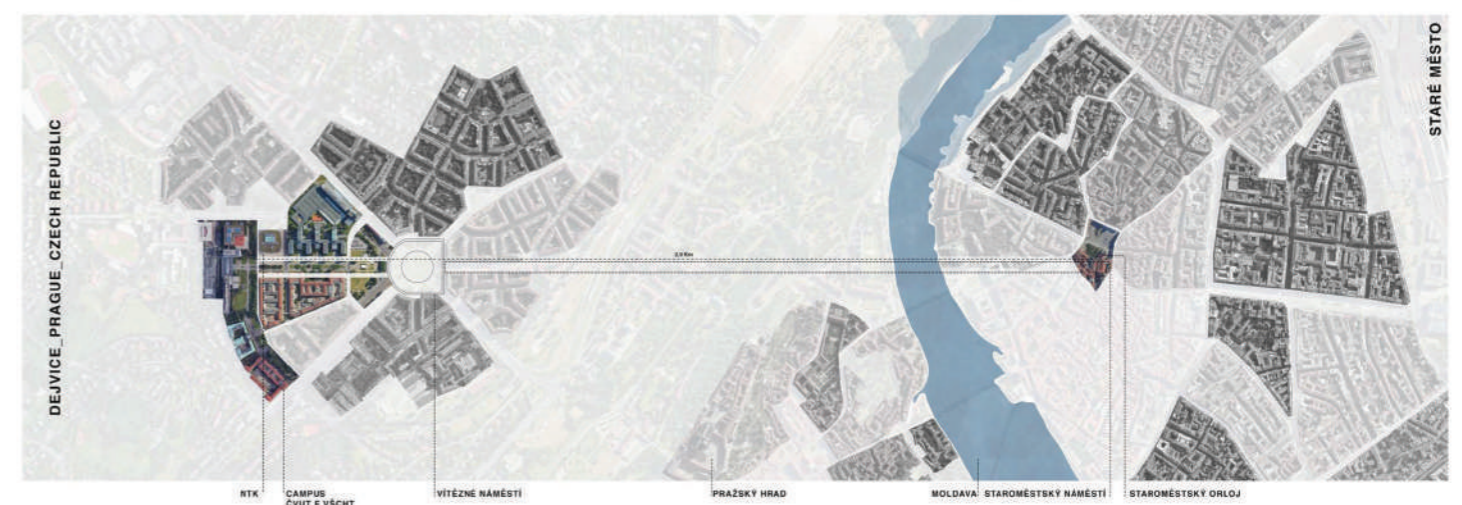
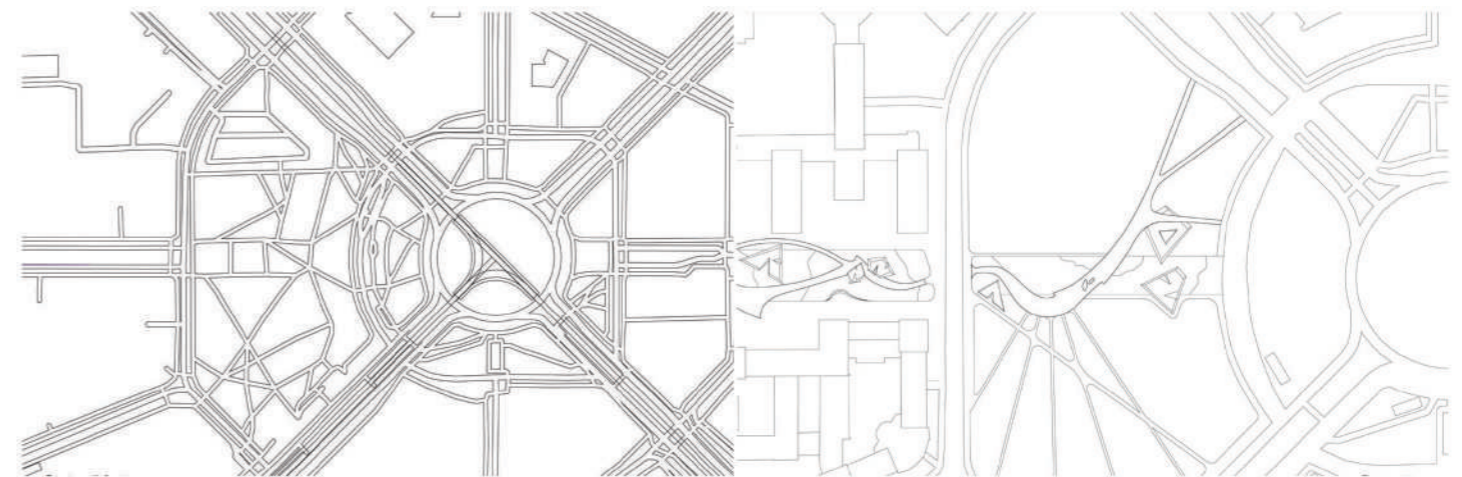
within it are conceived as a dynamic hub, an immersive retreat, a venue for workshops or even an exhibition space dedicated to the materials of the future – all, of course, spaces linked to a university context. They have, in fact, been designed to be used by students as well as residents, thereby emphasizing the project's strong social value, which, as landscape architect Ian McHarg points out, encompasses a wide range of elements such as “institutional, residential, historic, recreational and scenic values”<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the sections help make it easy to understand how the ecological axis functions. Through them, one can grasp: the dual function of the buildings—some ‘habitable’, others serving as a protective shell for the filtered water—the relationship between artificial and natural elements, and the behavior of the trees, which, of course, mirrors that of the bio-parks.

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# LATITUDES

## UOU scientific journal Issue #12 / LATITUDES December 2026

### Guest Editor

Maria Luna Nobile / Umeå School of Architecture, Umeå University, Sweden.

*10, 11, 12, 13 June 2026*

Symposium EURAU 26 at Umeå School of Architecture

### Deadline for the second phase of selected papers:

*15 September 2026*

Full paper submission for the UOU Journal

*15 October 2026*

Outcome of double-blind peer review process

*7 November 2026*

Final submission of completed papers

Research in Architecture can be conceived as a situated practice, linked to the tradition of studies, cultures, climatic and contextual conditions. Emphasising the importance of understanding architectural research as a practice situated across multiple contexts, disciplines, and cultural points of view LATITUDES encourages a research approach that is rigorous yet attentive to the diversity of perspectives that shape the world we inhabit.

This Issue of the UOU Scientific Journal LATITUDES embrace a necessary moment for widening the perspective on architectural research in relation to context.

How does LATITUDE influence architecture as a practice? How does research in architecture relate to the specific condition of LATITUDE? How does the context/s we are living in influence the way we educate future architects?

This Issue explores how architecture operates across multiple scales and conditions: from Arctic and sub-Arctic territories to Southern latitudes, from Indigenous geographies to contemporary urban environments, from material ecologies to local and global networks.

In this sense, architecture is approached not simply as the production of space, but as a critical practice capable of redefining how we understand and inhabit a rapidly changing world.

More information:

<https://revistes.ua.es/uou>

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Every issue underlines a specific topic addressed by one of the universities involved in the Research Project, with a focus on Pedagogy in Architecture.

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