

Research Framework

META/MORPHIC LIMINALITY

DISCOVERING THE PRODUCTIVE LIMINALITY

AND METAMORPHIC CAPACITY

OF SPACES THROUGH THEIR GENIUS LOCI

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Title: Meta/Morphic Liminality. *Discovering the productive liminality and metamorphic capacity of spaces through their genius loci*

Keywords: *liminality, meta/morphosis, threshold, in-between, water, formation, space production and consumption, material ecologies, atmosphere, genius loci*

Introduction and problem statement

“If there is to be a “new urbanism” it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form”
(Rem Koolhaas, 1994)

Initial fascination

The city is ever-changing and evolving. It grows, mutates, reorganises, deforms, and reforms. Every change is triggered by a certain condition, which initiates a chain reaction of continuous transformation.

Problem definition

In the last 50 years, a tendency of **population growth** in the majority of the leading metropolitan cities in Europe marks their development but also navigates the newly formed demands. (The Business of Cities, 2024). Madrid makes no exception. The **city’s growth** presupposed its further development outside the central area to the suburbs. This led to relocation and change of relations between the financial cores, and business areas compared to the historic core (*The Evolving Urban Form: Madrid | Newgeography.com*, n.d.). This poses an increased demand for transportation efficiency, accommodation, better distribution of the production and consumption cycles, energy and goods, and a reconfiguration of the city’s network. A big role in Madrid’s development and growth has played in its **transport system**. Changes in the location of important network nodes influence urban spatial dynamics. New ties form while old ones wane. The undergone changes in the city’s railway system have led to kilometers of either traces of **removed** infrastructure or **abandoned rails** scattered around the city region (*¿Cómo Sería España Si No Hubieran Desaparecido 7.600 Kilómetros de Vías de Tren? Este Mapa Lo Muestra – Rebelion*, 2024).

Even if the rails are unused or dismantled, their long-term effect on the city’s landscape is felt. In some territories, the railways become a **separator** rather than a connector.

The new **discontinuities** which mark the deterioration of urban spaces often have a negative impact on the inhabitants' **quality of life**. This poses the urgent need for reestablishing connections between existing functions and territories. The life quality is not only influenced by spatial discontinuities but also by interruptions of production-consumption cycles and resource management. This relates to another issue Madrid is currently facing.

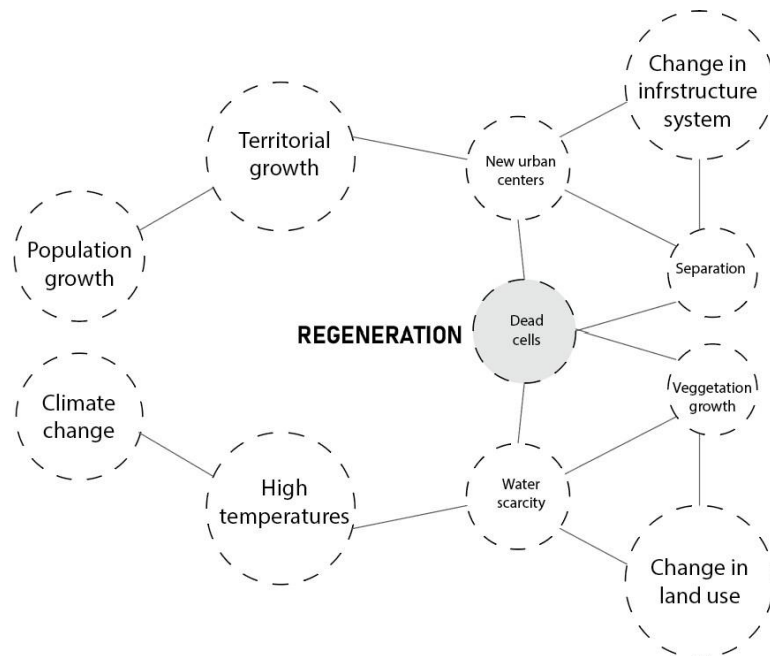
The ongoing climate change leads to unfavorable conditions for the city’s environmental development. Just in the 21st century around 60% of the hottest summers ever in the country have been recorded (Serrano-Notivoli et al., 2023). The record-high **heat temperatures** and precipitation scarcity in the whole country have led to disbalance in the urban flora and fauna. This phenomenon leads to noticeable water scarcity and thus drought. Affecting on its turn the vegetation growth this causes problems regarding food production and introduces changes in land use.

Common features of the abovementioned problems are their interdependency on various factors incorporated in the city's complex network but also the need for better spatial planning in the city which to accommodate the necessary balance in the social, economical, and biological ecosystems.

Another thing that connects the cases is one of their **byproducts** – the overlooked spaces and structures within the urban fabric.

The development process of Madrid influences the urban spatial flow and causes certain **interruptions**. Following the intersection of the physical and non-physical city systems which overlap **glitches** and urban **voids**, **thresholds** are formed. Along the transformation, certain areas develop while others are left out. They become the “**dead cells**” of the city's organism.

Being in a seemingly frozen state the leftover spaces often hold an **undiscovered potential**, and are saturated with cultural, atmospheric, historic charge - **genius loci**.



Those situations of **liminal nature** are on the edge between “what was” and “what is going to be” and this could make them nodes for the reactivation and **transformation** of the city. The liminal situations are where the production of new space and organization in the city is made, they are **regenerative nodes, and portals**.

These are the places where a potential catalyst could be conceived or intensified activating **meta/morphic processes** within the urban fabric which makes them key actors in improving the quality of the spaces within the city.

Better development and strengthening of the relations of the already existing systems could be a vital step towards enriching the city and providing the necessary better **supply chain, resource management, spatial interconnection, production, and consumption**. The following research aims to investigate the presence of different liminal spaces, structures and situations throughout the city of Madrid and identify the conditions needed to reactivate them and produce **new spatial organizations**. This would help fight against the emerging isolation between the elements of the fast-growing city by while using ‘**genius loci**’ to strengthen the sense of community.

Research questions

Main question

What if architecture could be used as a framing device to unleash the power of **genius loci** and how can it be used to trigger a process of spatial **meta/morpho/genesis**?

Operational questions

The need to create conditions for bridging the gap between the existing potential and the metamorphic process leads to the following investigative questions:

Liminality

Where is liminality present in our lives?

How is liminality detected?

What are the signs of liminality in architecture?

What could be defined as a liminal atmosphere?

When is the effect of architecture liminal?

What/Who can produce a liminal space?

Which elements are liminal?

What are the roles of the architect, nature, and the people in the process of change?

Meta/morphosis

How to trigger metamorphosis?

When does a transformation happen?

Where are morphic processes taking place in the city?

What are the necessary conditions for change?

What are the stages of metamorphosis?

Who are the actors in the process of architectural metamorphosis?

Genius loci

What is 'genius loci'?

What are the signs of its presence?

Who is 'genius loci'?

How do we perceive it?

When and **where** does genius loci exist and for how long?

How do we measure the intangible value of a place?

Theoretical Framework

Liminality

The term liminality comes from the Latin's "limin" which means "threshold" (Dictionary.com, 2019). It is defined as the "between", neither one thing nor the other which makes it function as a threshold between **states**. In architecture, liminality could be seen as the spatial connection between destinations which makes it a threshold between **spaces**. The term could be investigated in both immaterial and material – social and physical aspects.

An interesting perspective on liminality is offered by Arnold van Gennep as he describes the passing of an individual from one social group to another. The act itself he calls "**a rite of passage**" which is the sacred ritual or ceremony taking place (Van Gennep, 1960). The rite of passage is structured in three different parts – separation, transition and incorporation. As he proposes "to call the rites of separation from a previous world, 'preliminal rites', those executed during the transitional stage 'liminal (or threshold) rites', and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world 'postliminal' (Van Gennep, 1960).

We can therefore draw the conclusion that liminality occurs in our lives marking important social transitions or daily behavioural changes and can be identified by the "postliminal rites" ceremonies and rituals that are performed in accordance with these changes.

The in/-between

On the other hand, a **spatial liminality** could be found within the connective tissue of the city. Diving into the **interstitial** waters, the “anti-space” between the city blocks we often find moments of interruption and disconnection. This results in **undefined** urban **voids**, **abandoned** places or structures and **malfunction** in the city fabric.

Urban space and anti-space

If space could be defined as differentiated, formed, discontinuous, charged with presence. It is identifiable, capable of plastic form and it has tangible characteristics (scale, shape, size, proportion). It is the form of the in-between. Anti-space is the opposite. It is infinite, continuous, formless, singular. It appears empty (Peterson & Littenberg, 2020).

Urban coincidences

The spaces as a result of unplanned spatial alignment or social connections we could call coincidences. They are designed not by the design of what is around them.

Abandoned structures

These structures are the by-product of production and transportation mechanisms. The liminality of abandoned structures is expressed in their state of stagnation. They are no longer what they were but also have not become what they will be.

In-/between

Between two destinations, between “here” and “there”, between two states. “Where between is liminal, in-between is arterial; where between is intermediate, in-between is midstream” (Ingold, 2015).

Urban glitches

The urban glitches are the spaces that are not performing well in the context they exist. They mark inefficiency in the planning of the urban grid. These are the point of potential optimization of the urban network.

Urban voids

The points of ‘perforation’ into the urban fabric result in residual empty spaces with no purpose or function (Giovanni, 2018).

Abandoned spaces

Places with lost programs, they are very often marked by vandalism or absence of human activity and deterioration.

Meta/morphic power

Another important aspect of liminality is the notion of uncertainty.

“Creativity is balanced at this knife edge between predictability and randomness.” (Jencks, 1998)

The urban leftovers are “balancing” at the edge between their past and the uncertain future which an architectural intervention could influence. This is when their liminal state turns into productive **metamorphic capacity**.

One of the key aspects in the improvement and optimization of the existing overlooked situations is to explore the triggers which could initiate a process of transformation. In his book “Production of Space” Lefebvre associates space production with music making which leads to the idea of ‘**composition**’ of space where different instruments and voices or in this case – elements synchronize together (Lefebvre, 1974). The underlined multiplicity of the **actor networks** simultaneously involved in the process of space-making indicates the importance in understanding which are the present actors and their interrelations. The **crossing points** between those relations could have the potential to trigger change. The actors involved in the special processes could be categorized in different ways.

Society

One example is the Morphogenetic framework for activation of social change of M. Archer. According to her the involvement of **structure**, **culture**, and **agency** together results in a social transformation. Using the Morphogenetic Approach the interplay between these actors is specified and used to examine the level of stability in any social phenomenon (*Morphogenesis and Realist Meta-Theory*, 2014).

Technology

On the other hand, instead of looking at the social structure, the processes of change could be explained by the interaction between **infrastructure**, **architecture**, and **landscape**. In this framework, Koolhaas explains the organization of the city through the three elements of roads, buildings and nature and how their interaction generates the formation of the new urban fabric (Angelil M_Klingmann A.,1999).

Nature - Formation

In order to understand the process of transformation, the process of **formation**, **genesis** should be investigated. Looking at architecture as a living organism just like the city justifies addressing Schiller's concept of the 'living form' (Ákos Moravánszky, 2018). It aligns with Goethe's idea of the "Urform" as an original form, and the "Urplant" as a plant to which all plants are connected, even those which do not exist yet. What would then be the "Urform" in the context of architecture? Goethe's definition of "form" is underlying the ever-changing feature of nature. We could make a connection to the ever-changing features of architecture and the role of natural elements and time within it.

Goethe stresses out also the inseparability between the "form" and the "spirit":

"Nature has neither core, Nor shell, But everything at once does spell" (Ákos Moravánszky, 2018)

This relation is further explored in the concept of "genius loci".

Genius loci

"Nullus locus sine genio est" "There is no place without a genius (spirit)" - Maurus Servius Honoratus

In the so far discussed interactions between human and nature, technology and landscape, material and immaterial could be comprised within the idea of the 'genius loci' or 'the spirit of the place'.

Firstly, we have to define the term "place" which is best described by phenomenology. It is an environment where something "takes place", where something is being or is happening. As suggested by C. Norberg – Schulz the structure of a place could be described by using two categories – "space" and "character" (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Where space relates to the **spatial organization** and spatial elements that construct the boundaries of the place, the character relates to its **atmosphere**, and both influence the human perception. The character of the place is tightly connected to the **action** and therefore it could be said that different programs require different atmospheric conditions. It is important to note that the character of a place is not permanent, it changes through time, it is influenced even by the change in the amount of light present (day and night) (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

The atmosphere is reflected not only by what is there but how it is formed. The **process of making** and the reasoning behind it set the character of the resulting product. Similarly, Semper investigates the notion of creation and transformation through the **craft**, use of material, and its formation. The idea of the *Stoffwechsel* is represented through "the science of the changeable and the changing" (Forty, 2000). It links the structural form to its metabolic processes.

The term '*Genius loci*' comes from a Roman concept which refers to a "guardian", "spirit" that gives the life of the being – people and places (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The value of this spirit is sometimes neglected when designing architecture. However, I believe that it is of great importance to recognize the "genius" of a place and to accommodate and protect its life and transformation through time and architecture could be used for that. Thus, architecture should be in a: "good relationship" with the place both "in a physical as well as psychic sense" (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

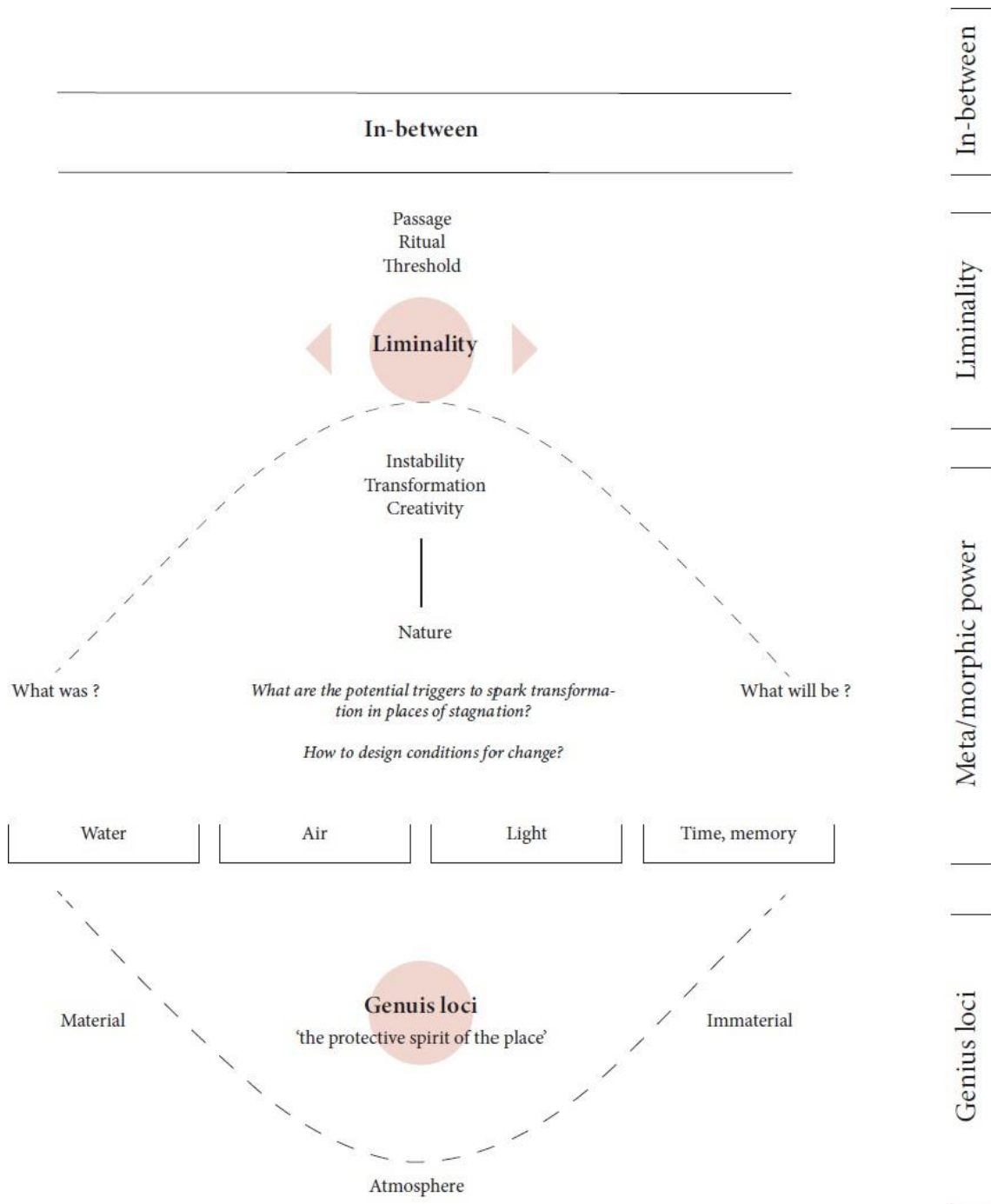


Diagram Theoretical framework

Methodological positioning and description of research methods

The research methods which are going to be used could be categorized in two groups.

Off-site investigation

A **literature review** would be used to construct the base and define the main theoretical frameworks according to which the methodology of the research would be constructed.

Mind mapping and diagramming would help find the red thread connecting the theories and defining the points of interest. This would be then applied on the city of Madrid by **cartographic mapping** which would result in specific case study areas. **Historical analysis** and the use of **archival material** would help for a more thorough analysis of the development of the areas, spaces or structures throughout the years and the change in topography, function and their socio-economical importance.

A better awareness of the existing forces, ongoing processes, inhabitants and actors involved in the formation but also change of the places is needed. Following the Actor-Network Theory introduced by John Law and taking advantage of its descriptive nature would help construct a detailed **actor-network systematic diagram** (Turner, 2009).

On-site investigation

Since we are going to deal with atmosphere and character of spaces it is vital to sense, observe, feel the spaces and translate the experience by working with different analytical tools. Through **photographic analysis**, an **image catalogue** describing little details, materials, and signs of human or non-human presence would be made.

Sketching on site would also be beneficial for capturing the main features that make the place look or feel a certain way. It is a good method for processing information since the act of drawing itself implies already filtering which surrounding elements caught our attention.

Interviews with locals or a questionnaire would be essential for the analysis based on human perception. A person who associates a location with a historical event, has recollections of the location, or has some other connection to it would experience its character differently than someone whose knowledge of the location is limited to what he sees and feels in the moment of visit.

Section drawings could be beneficial for the analysis of the topography of a place but also the definition of vertical spatial relations between the present elements.

An **example** of a possible methodological framework could be described in three parts:

1. Detecting the presence of liminality in our lives
2. Categorizing and mapping the “in/-between” in Madrid for potential further analysis
3. Analysis and detection of genius loci on three levels

The main aim of the analysis would be the description of the present *genius loci* on both vibrant and neglected urban spaces within the city. Forming a better understanding of what is lacking and where is the potential future development of certain areas.

Referring to “Rites of passage “by Gennep the first part deals with the rituals that take place in our life. A distinction is made between a ritual of life and a daily ritual.

Ritual of life

event of either in important change in social status or an irreversible change in human physiology. Usually, those rituals are marked by a ceremony. Therefore, they could be defined as a “religious behaviour associated with a social state, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance” (Turner, V. W., (n.d.).

Daily ritual

a certain type of activity or behaviour which implies a change in a person’s physical, emotional state or behaviour.

Using **listing** and **diagramming** the rituals would be compared in multiple categories such as the space they take place in, the present architectural elements, the present atmosphere and the feeling it provokes. Trying to define a relationship between those things the presence and importance of everchanging

elements such as **water, light, and time** would be noted. Through the use of **collages** a comparison would be made to famous places known to give the “feeling of the city”.

Continuing with locating the neglected spaces within the city by cartographic mapping would give potential places of intervention. Their relationship to the liminal elements could be a guiding device on the choice of areas of further investigation.

Furthermore, “genius loci” would be analyzed as a meta-concept in which it consists of 3 layers (Vecco, 2019).

*The **visible** and tangible material layer – spatial organization, materiality*

*The **invisible** experience created – atmosphere, character*

*The underlying **formation processes** of human and environmental activity and their interrelations*

In relation to the first layer an adaptation of Schirmbeck’s approach from “On the Analysis of Spatial Concepts” (Egon Schirmbeck et al., 2011) is proposed in which the following analytical parameters would be used:

***Spatial topography:** proportion, materiality*

***Spatial function:** use, memory*

***Spatial definition:** geometry, boundaries*

***Spatial narrative:** cinematic analysis, space sequence, accessibility*

***Spatial interactions:** proportions, proximity and distance*

Subject Relevance - *What could be learned and how the research could be used in the future?*

The research could propose a new method of spatial analysis trying to capture the presence of *genius loci* and suggest how to incorporate it into a potential architectural intervention. A combination and reinterpretation of different methods of analysis would result in a consistent analytical framework which could be then applied to different sites in Madrid or other cities worldwide.

It would also underline the importance of the city’s neglected areas. A method would be suggested about how instead of becoming the places of degradation they could be turned into places for innovation, strengthening the relation between the human and the environment but also mediators for sustainable coexistence of different systems.

A main goal then would be the optimization of the city by triggering integrative design processes that help improve the future urban spatial development and thus build a more resilient city.

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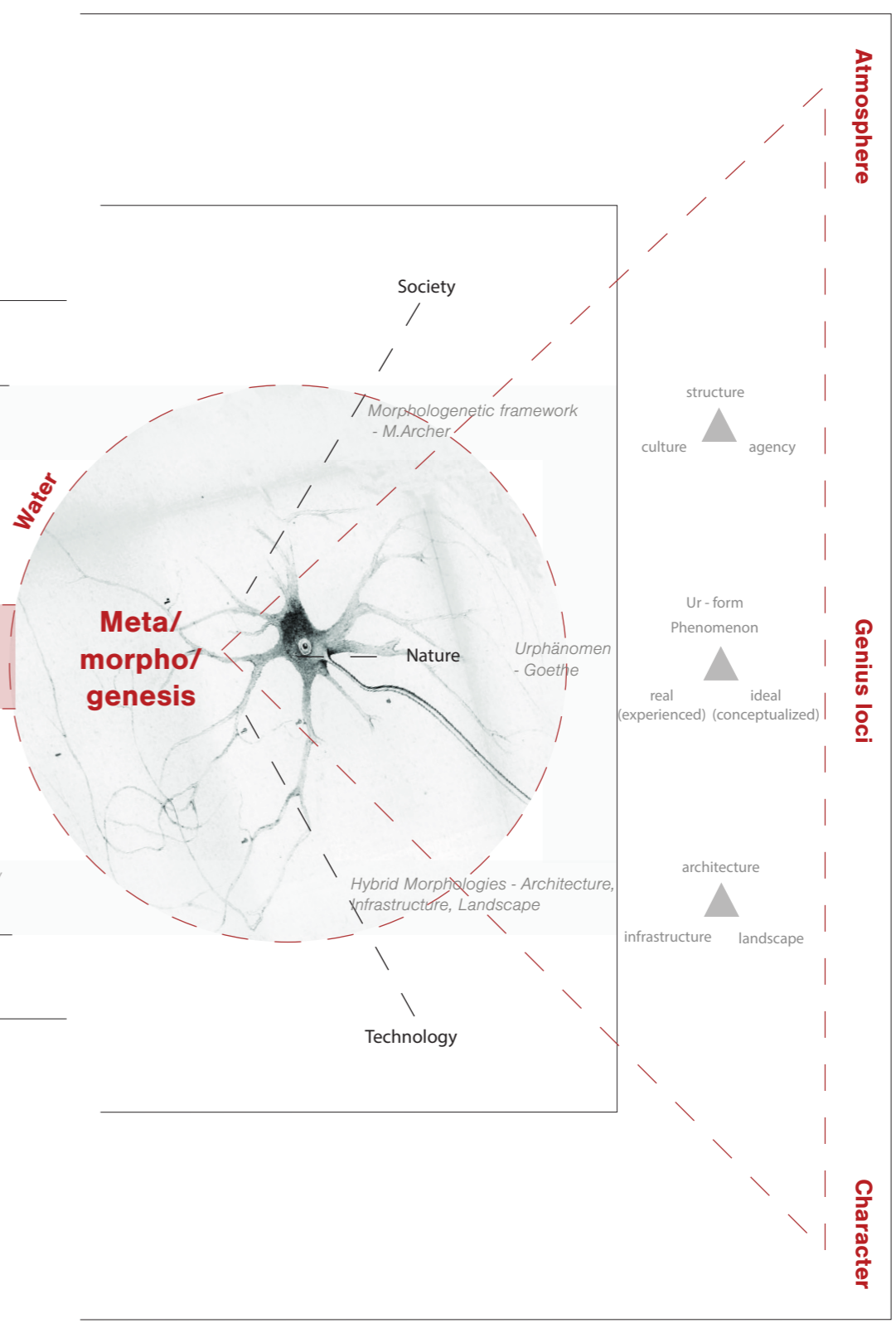
Meta/ morphic liminality

Literature review	<p>Space and anti-space Threshold spaces - transitions in architecture Urban voids as a Resource for the Design of Contemporary Public Spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - urban negative void - glitch - interstitial space - threshold 	Immaterial	<p>Reactivation and alternative use of already existing structures.</p> <p>Fight against the emerging isolation between the elements of the fast-growing city, use genius loci to strengthen the sense of community.</p> <p>Detect the presence of genius loci. Investigate how architecture becomes its framing device.</p>	<p>What if architecture could be used as a framing device to unleash the power of genius loci and thus trigger a process of space meta/morpho/genesis?</p>	
	<p>The Life of Lines - T. Ingold</p> <p>Metamorphism - material change in architecture Words and Buildings - a vocabulary of modern architecture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - abandoned structures - abandoned spaces - brown fields 		<p>Metamorph/ism-osis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - genesis - Urform - proto/morph 	Material	<p>Patina</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - abandonment - material memory - incompleteness
Literature review			<p>The city could be represented as an assemblage of hidden flows going through its "veins". Thanks to the intersection of the physical and non-physical systems which overlap and connect certain interruptions occur. Glitches and coincidences, thresholds are formed. These zones get 'thrown out of the loop' of the city. They become the "dead cells" of its organism. Being in a seemingly frozen state they very often hold an undiscovered potential, cultural, atmospheric, historic charge - genius loci.</p> <p>Those situations of liminal nature are on the edge between "what was" and "what is going to be" and this could make them nodes for recreation, reactivation and transformation of the city. The liminal situations are where the production of new space and meta/morphic processes within the urban fabric could be activated.</p>	<p>What? What are the signs of liminality in architecture? What could be defined as a liminal atmosphere? What are the roles of the architect, nature and the people in the process of change? What are the stages of metamorphosis? What is 'genius loci'? What are the signs of its presence?</p> <p>Who? Who can produce a liminal situations/spaces? Who are the actors in the process of architectural 'metamorphosis'? Who is 'genius loci'?</p> <p>Where? Where are morphic processes taking place in a city? Where is liminality present in our lives? Where do we feel the genius loci?</p> <p>When? When is the effect of architecture liminal? When are the liminal moments in our life - rituals? Is the building ever fully complete? When?</p> <p>Why? Why is liminality necessary for city's development?</p> <p>How? How do we measure the intangible value of a place? How is liminality detected? How to trigger metamorphosis?</p> <p>How much? How much should we plan and how much can we anticipate?</p>	

Fascination
Key words

Liminality
In-between
Metamorph/ism-osis
Trigger
Trans/formation
Genius loci

Methodology



- Literature review
- Mind mapping
- Diagramming
- Cartographic mapping
- Historical analysis
- Archival research
- Photography
- Cataloging
- Sketching
- Interviews with locals/questionnaire
- Sections
- Elevations
- Mapping of decay
- Comparative case studies