

Entering the Interstices

Research Plan

2021

AR3A010 Research Plan

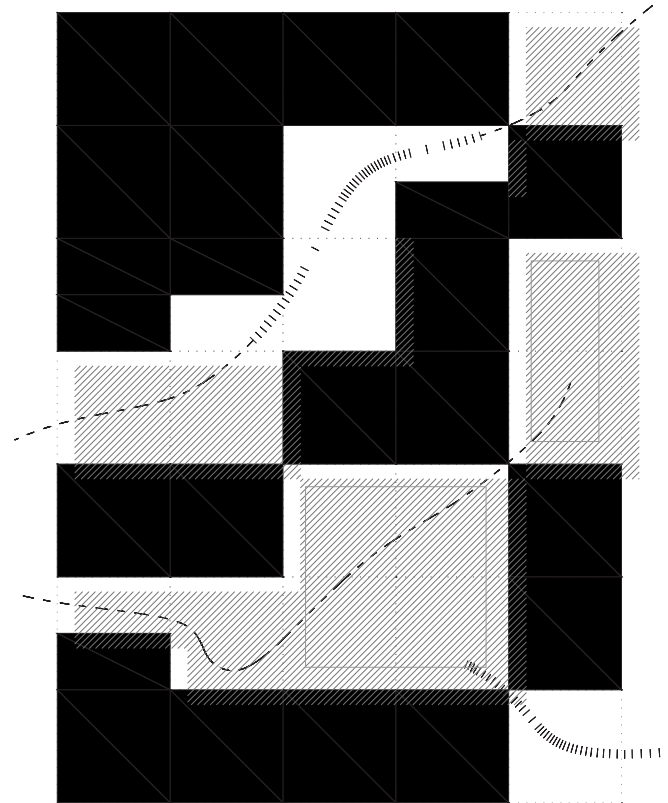
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Theme



“... an empty and mostly invisible stage, not to be entered if one does not want to risk being labeled as out of place. However, this frame must be constructed upon an actual and recognized lack of function of the interstice and [derelict]. There should therefore be a collective and observable effort to establish and maintain this frame.” (Tonnelat, 2008)

Figure 1: A conceptual representation of the manmade urban fabric, comprising of the built(black), designed voids (hatched) and leftover undesignated interstices (white space).

The urban fabric of cities is shaped by “spatial forms and urban compositions, built over time,” influencing the fabric of life within it. This fabric or physical texture of urban areas- cities and their fringes – comprises various natural features, built and unbuilt voids, both planned and unplanned. Voids are both the space deliberately left by carving out squares, piazzas in a city, or public passages, and courtyards in buildings as well as the leftover undesignated interstitial space, spaces in, around or enclosed by built forms, vacant land parcels, abandoned or derelict-defunct infrastructure. These spaces left out – accidentally, intentionally, and designedly – in the urban fabric, all play a crucial role in shaping its overall environment and experience.

The deliberately designed spaces often serve as shared civic places, transitions between public and private, connectors and thresholds between the inside and outside, and extensions of the interior. The permeability of these spaces is knowingly and unknowingly appreciated. On the contrary, as Andrea Mubi Brighenti – the editor of *‘Urban Interstices: The Aesthetics and the Politics of the In-between’* emphasises, leftover interstices “imagined essentially as vacant lots, terrains vagues or decaying ruins” (Brighenti, 2013, p. xvi) have negative connotations attached to them. However, “[they] can take a more positive aspect [when seen as] rooms for manoeuvre or [spaces with] possibility for action...” (Levesque, 2013, p. 23)

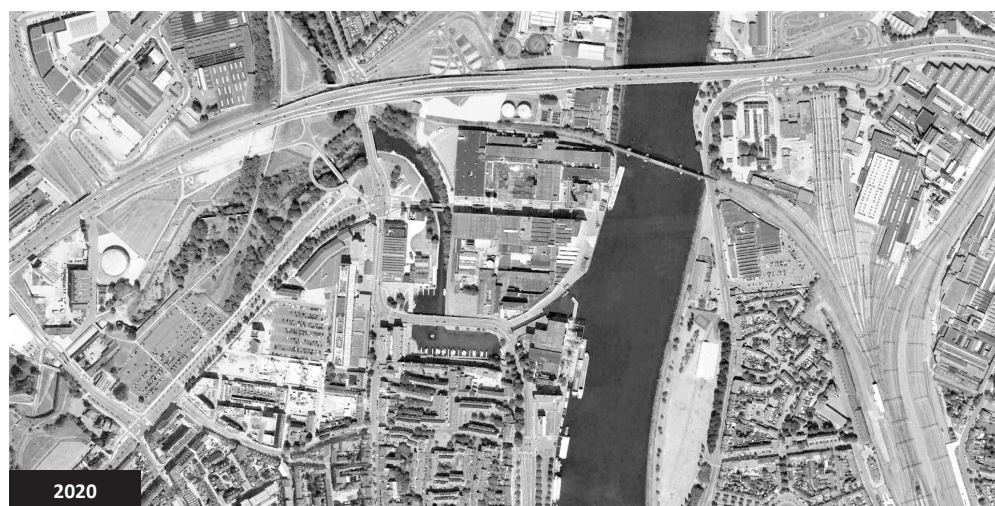
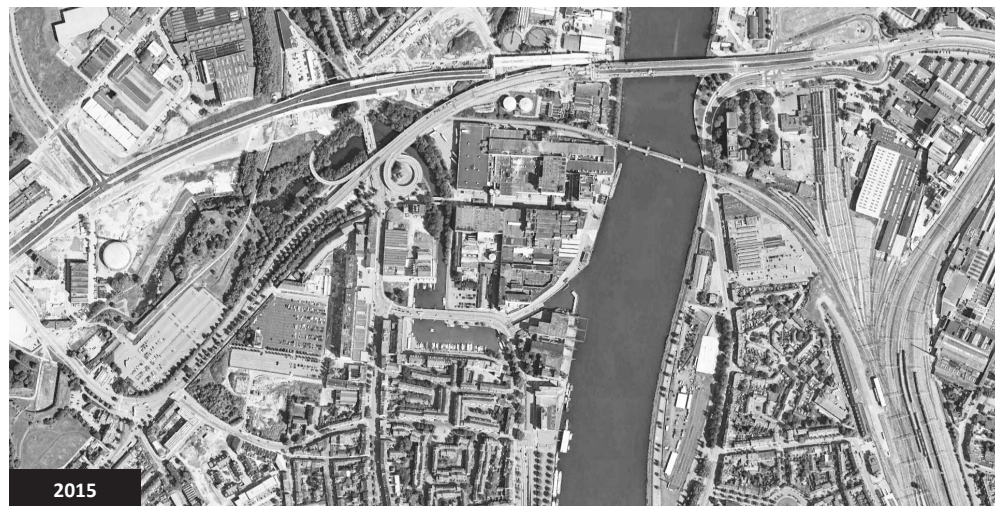
These interstices are often results of discontinuous urban plans, rapid urbanisation, and have become common sights in urban areas in the process of transformation. Often, abandoned or derelict-defunct infrastructure are by-products of de-industrialisation, facing loss of intended function and value, or are under threat of demolition, or pending redevelopment. Nonetheless, as “place making always starts in the in-between”

(Kärrholm, 2012), such interstices can be “usefully conceptualized as a form of spatial production through transformation.” (Brighenti, 2013, p. xviii)

The network of playgrounds that Aldo van Eyck designed on derelict leftover spaces in post-war Amsterdam serves as one of the early examples of sensitive reforming of interstitial space that was appropriate for the neighbourhood while having a quality to be appropriated. This resulted in a network of shared public places (playscapes in this case), at the neighbourhood level, dispersed throughout the city. These playscapes in the interstices became “points where the seeds of community were sewn, where the city was not to be viewed or consumed but experienced.” (van den Bergen, 2002) As most of the playgrounds were temporary interventions, and are long gone, this project also entails a dimension of temporality, often associated with repurposing leftover, second hand, in-between or vacant places.



Figure 2: van Eyck's playground in an interstice in Dijkstraat in Amsterdam. (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1954)



Yet, such leftover spaces and structures have the potential to be valuable for neighbourhoods, if articulated thoughtfully. Such articulation of the leftovers in the urban fabric into spaces that can become meaningful for the neighbourhood/urban area also resonates with the studio's theme of Gleaning. The term Gleaning which was traditionally associated with gathering leftover crops or "the second harvesting of the land's produce by ... those who had no land of their own" (Gunderman, 2014) is now interpreted as collecting, picking up and revaluing all kinds of objects – forgotten, unused, left out, imperfects or seconds, as seen in Agnes Varda's film 'The Gleaners and I'.

Such small leftover spaces and structures can be gleaned from a city, in which value can be reinstated through use, reuse, revitalisation and reprogramming. In keeping with this, the research will delve into the theme of interstitial spaces, derelict-defunct infrastructure prevalent in urban areas which are in the process of transformation and de-industrialisation and try to identify the potentials of such interstices for intervention while preserving traces of their past.

The Sphinxkwartier in Maastricht is undergoing a similar phase in its urban history. This fringe area in north Maastricht that initially housed several industries is slowly being transformed into a second city centre for Maastricht. The plans for its renewal have been drawn and redrawn since the 2000s and its implementation has been discontinuous and interrupted by several factors like the economic crisis etc. This has resulted in some interstices, defunct infrastructure, and abandoned buildings, which makes it a relevant place for inquiry into interstices.

(left) Figure 3: Changing fabric of Sphinxkwartier. 2005, 2015, 2020. (Google earth, 2021)

Field, Renewals, Consequences, Connection with the Theme and Research Questions



Figure 4: Changes in the Urban fabric and its effects on social life after renewal (Author- group research, 2021)

The city of Maastricht that fans out on both sides of the river Maas in Limburg in the Netherlands, has throughout history been a prominent place for the Euroregion. This city that began as a crossing point and meeting place on the river Maas evolved into a Roman settlement and then a medieval religious stronghold. By the 19th century, it turned into one of the first major industrial and manufacturing centres in the Netherlands. During this period, the production of ceramics, paper and glass dominated the city’s economy. But soon, the postwar era saw the decline of these industries. This resulted in a shift in the economy with a growing interest in service, science, education as well as reforming the city into a place that could appeal to the Euro region and beyond.

This translated into the city slating several renewals for uplifting the different districts of the city, which were realised at different points in its urban history. From them, three precedents, each representing a distinct approach to renewal were chosen for the group research during P1. Each renewal aimed to impart a specific identity to the place or enhance characteristics of the city or its block; to do so, the creators, planners and authorities of those times dealt differently with what existed on site – both the urban/ architectural and social constructs. While one of the first Urban renewals in Maastricht at Stokstraat aimed to revive the inner city’s medieval character by preserving the ornamental facades lining its street, rest of its cluttered inner core was scooped out, and the community was relocated, their houses replaced by highend stores; the renewal project for the Ceramique wiped out most of the industrial infrastructure, replacing it with new high-end buildings by star architects. Whereas the renewal at Hoogfrankrijk was humbler in approach and scale, people-oriented. Its structure respected and was responsive to the immediate context, enhancing the public space in, around and within the project.

While the renewals at Stokstraat and Ceramique were successful in creating architecturally impressive structures and attracting recognition, the existing social dimensions on site were sidelined. At Hoogfrankrijk the social dimension, common spaces, collectivity and the existing fabric were deemed important during the renewal. A similar approach to Hoogfrankrijk can be observed in the recent renewals chalked out for Maastricht that are currently in process, in which the existing infrastructure, industrial traces and social aspects are being given due consideration.

The Sphinxkwartier – previously a predominantly industrial area around the Bassin – is being transformed into a mixed-use, culturally diverse, and dynamic space. **The city envisions the Sphinxkwartier as an expansion of its city centre, But as its renewal has been ongoing in fragments since the past few years, the discontinuous urban restructuring and simultaneous de-industrialisation have resulted in by-products like leftover and left out fragments in its urban fabric.**

Some of these are the small interstices between new developments, undesignated land parcels, large scale defunct infrastructure like the part of the highway near Boschstraat/ Frontensingel that remains after redirecting the A2, the temporary parking lot behind the Eiffel building, the Landbouwbelang and area that encircles it including the riverfront, and the parts of premises of the SAPPI factory oriented towards the Bassin that are no longer in use. Some of these spaces remain undesignated, functionless, accessible, while some have been appropriated or have temporary use. As these spaces are situated in-between already active places and are traces of its industrial past, they inherit value in them that can be enhanced and developed. They could be revitalised to support and suit the locals, their needs, and the immediate context.

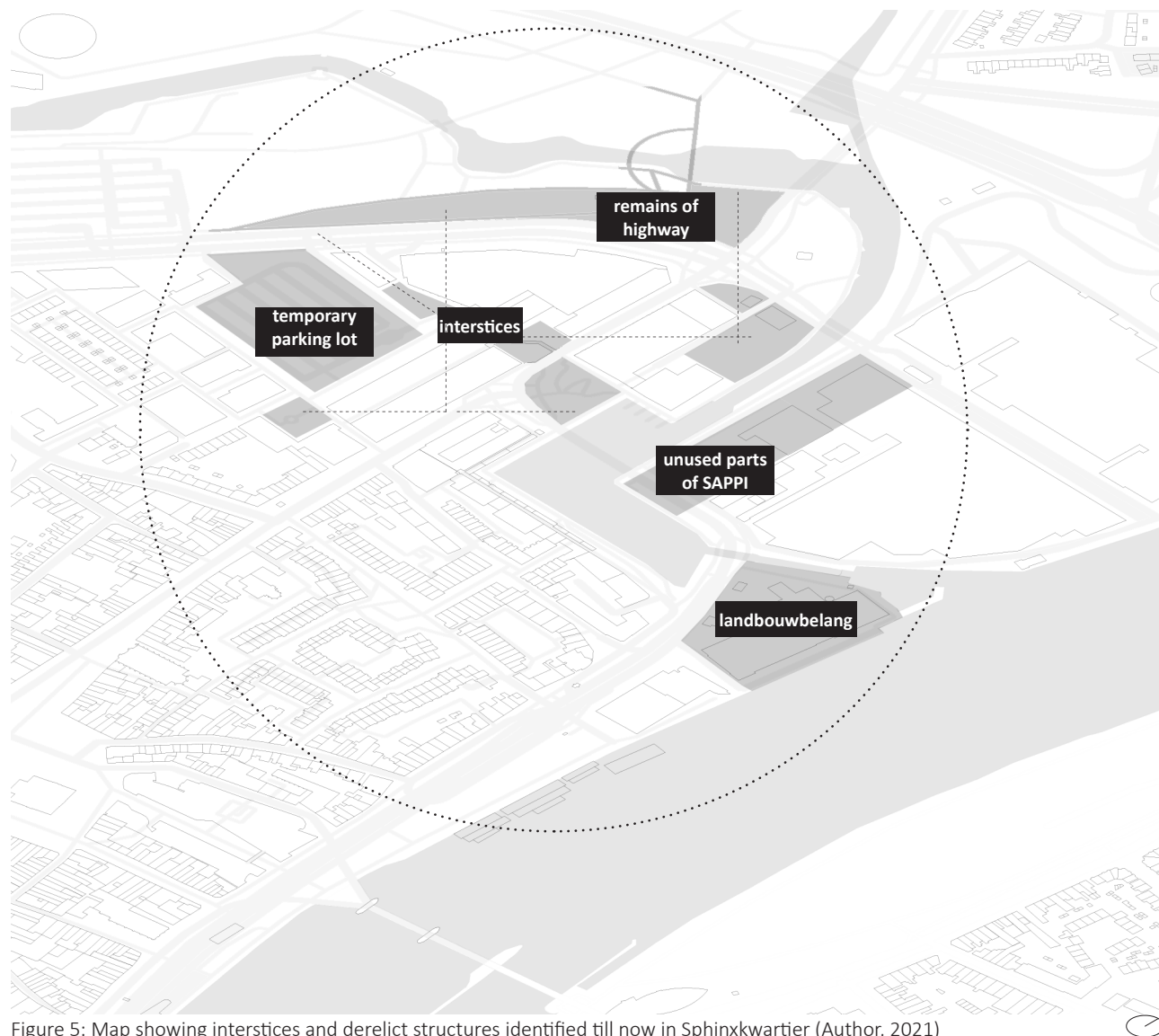


Figure 5: Map showing interstices and derelict structures identified till now in Sphinxkwartier (Author, 2021)

Thus, this research will explore:

‘How can the leftover interstices and derelict structures in the Sphinxkwartier in Maastricht be designed, articulated and revitalised to become valuable for the locals and neighbourhood?’

How this could be accomplished while preserving traces of its industrial past?’

The research will start by delving into the sub-questions:

Where are the interstitial and derelict/defunct spaces in Sphinxkwartier?

What is the history, character, value of these spaces?

What potential do these spaces behold for possible interventions based on their position in the quarter?

Can these spaces be permeable and reintegrated into the urban fabric and everyday life in the Sphinxkwartier?

The research will aim to identify the potential users. It will also try to discover who could be using these spaces and to what ends?

Research Methods and Methodology

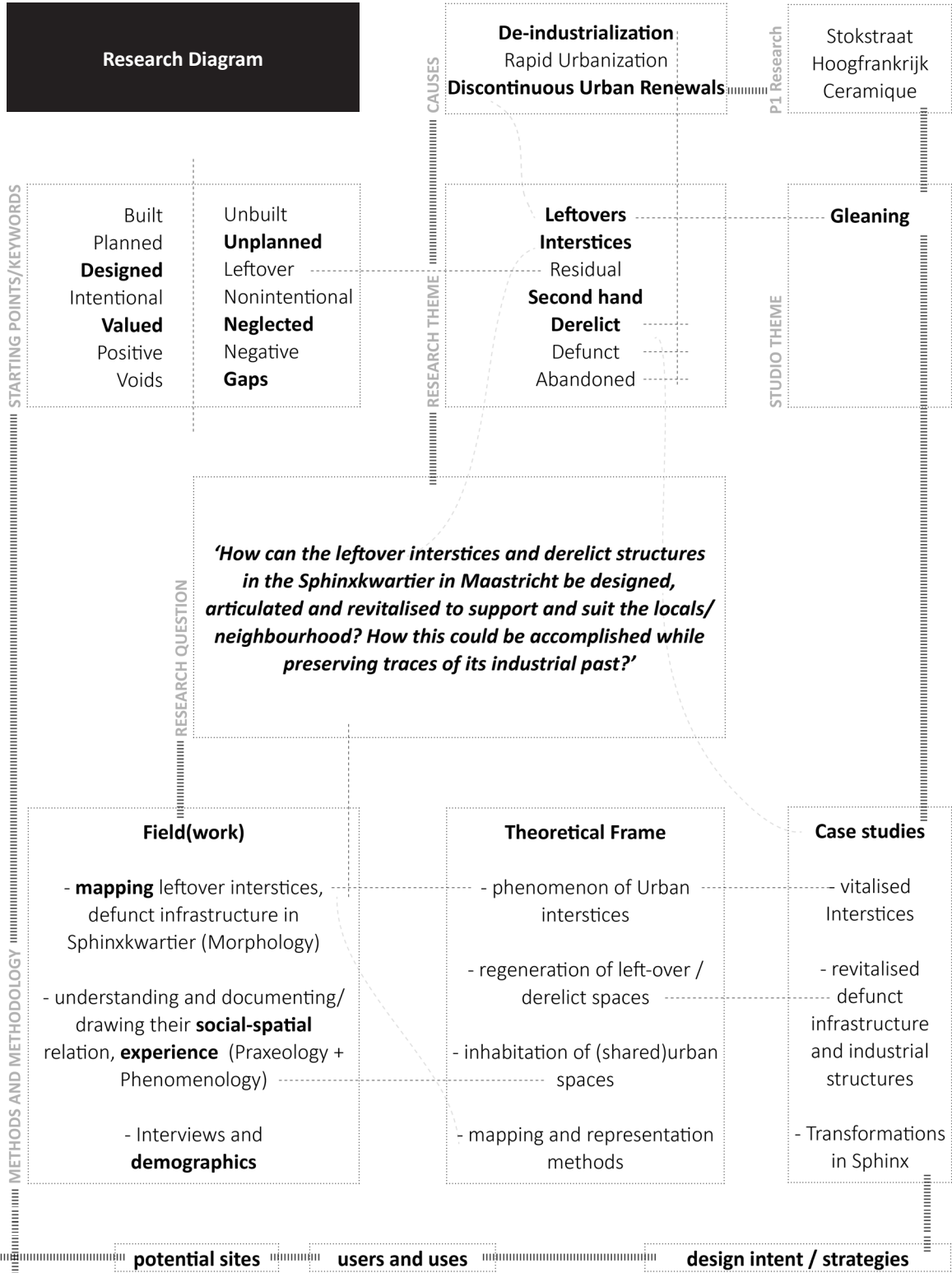


Figure 6: Research Diagram (Author, 2021)

During the first phase of research (P1), archival research was conducted to study the architectural histories of urban renewal in Maastricht. In addition, site visits were undertaken to view the current situation in Maastricht, especially in the areas that have been renewed, and to examine the consequences of the renewals on both the urban fabric and social dynamics. Interviews were also conducted to find out the creator’s perspective on the city and its renewals, which was presented by means of a short film.

In the next stage, the research will focus on the epistemes of Morphology (form) and the combination of Praxeology (social-spatial relation, human behaviour) with Phenomenology (embodied experience).

The research would delve more into the Sphinxkwartier, understanding and mapping the area in relation with the theme, for which the following methods and methodology will be adopted:

Fieldwork

The research would start by identifying and mapping leftover spaces, defunct infrastructure, derelict buildings in the Sphinxkwartier in Maastricht. After which the nature of these different leftover spaces in Maastricht will be studied, this will include its spatial characteristics, the social activities that currently take place at such spaces and value. This will be documented and represented through photographs, sketches, and drawings that portray the character and experience of the place.

Moreover, the contexts of these leftover spaces, the communities that thrive around (demographic study), the activities that take place will also be analysed. This would help to discover who could be using these leftover spaces and for what purposes.

Additionally, shared public spaces in the vicinity and inner city will also be studied, noting the boundaries, thresholds, objects of such spaces, their inhabitation, activity mapping around it to find what works or does not work in the case of Maastricht.

Furthermore, the vision documents/renewal plans for the Sphinxkwartier will also be reviewed to find out whether any specific functions or users have been assigned for these leftover spaces and to understand the overarching vision the authorities have for the Sphinxkwartier and city, as well as critically examine its viability.

Interviews

Some of the information and insights gained during interviews in P1 with two architects: Fred Humble, based in Maastricht and Ninke Happel, knowledgeable about the architecture and urban design of the city – will also be carried over in the further research and more interviews will be conducted to understand the Sphinxkwartier from the perspective of practising architect(s) of the city.

Theory

The theoretical framework and literature review will focus around:

a. understanding the phenomenon of Urban interstices and the studio theme (Gleaning) using the texts:

Urban Interstices: The Aesthetics and the Politics of the In-between. Specifically the essays: Trajectories of Interstitial Landscapeness: and Action, The Urban Fringe as a Territorial Interstice. ‘Out of frame’: The (in)visible life of urban interstices.

The Gleaners and I.

Gleaning in the 21st Century. Article by Mark Gunderman.

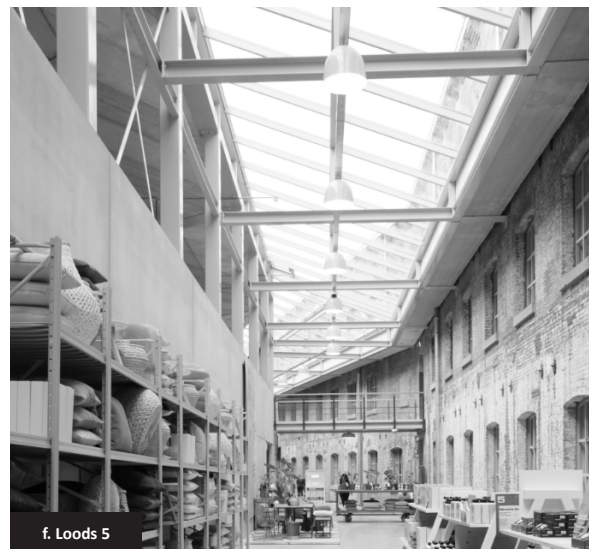
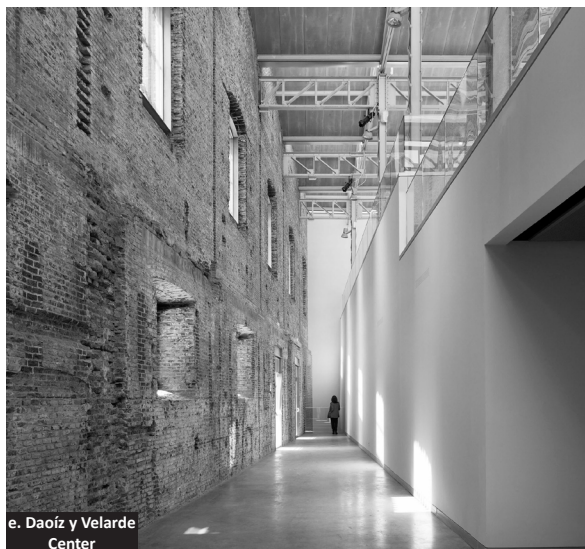


Figure 7: Catalog of Case studies for design of interstices and revitalisation of derelict structures identified till now.

b. the regeneration of such left-over spaces and defunct/derelict structures using the texts:

Second Hand Spaces

Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality.

c. References that give insight into the inhabitation of (shared)urban spaces:

The Spaces between Buildings.

Life Between Buildings.

The Social Life of Small Urban Places.

Practical Precedents / Case studies

The translation of this theory of harnessing the potential of interstices and revitalisation of defunct/derelict structures into practice will be studied through analysis of projects that range across scale, from the urban to architectural to material.

Some of these will include:

Projects that vitalised Interstices: Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds, Paley Park (New York)

Projects that revitalised defunct infrastructure: Promenade Plantee, Highline Project

Projects that revitalised derelict industrial structures: Daoiz y Velarde Center

Transformation projects in Sphinx: The Timmerfabriek, The Eiffel, Loods 5, The Lumiere.

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List of Figures

- Figure 1: Author. (2021)
- Figure 2: Stadsarchief Amsterdam. (1954). Dijkstraat. Retrieved from <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/>
- Figure 3: GoogleEarth. (2021)
- Figure 4: Author. (2021)
- Figure 5: Ibid.
- Figure 6: Ibid.
- Figure 7: a. Stadsarchief Amsterdam (1956)
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