(Dis)enchantment of the Interstitial Space

Exploration on wonder and accessibility in urban the in-between of Rotterdam

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Exploration on wonder and **accessibility** in the urban in-between of Rotterdam

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0.1 Abandoned train switchboard (Rotterdam, 2025)

Foreword

As a child I have always been drawn to places in nature that had room for my own wondrous interpretation and exploration. Th e overgrown garden of my neighbours or the overgrown bushes in my neighborhood. Not an official playground, not really anything spectacular at all, but for me and my friends it was the most mysterious and adventurous place we could imagine to explore. When I now look back at these experiences I realize there is a peculiar sense of freedom in such places. They do not tell you what to do or how to behave. They had room for curiosity, exploration, and strangely enough I cared for them.

In 2024, I had my first conscious encounter with these curious landscapes, during an elective in which we explored Rotterdam's forgotten in-between spaces. What struck me once again was their wildness. These places are not designed, not intended, yet they host a curious mix of nature and human presence. They are urban ruins of a sort.[1] It was here that I learned to look differently: to notice the traces, the edges, the stories written into overlooked corridors, abandoned infrastructure, and fenced-off plots. Behind these thresholds a parallel city unfolds, one that escapes the rules and logic of the city.

"having lost their function they stand outside society, outside daily life and at the same time in a relationship with the real space of society." Ellen Braae

A new kind of hybrid nature emerges, one where the so-called 'unwanted' of the city coexist, plants, people, animals, all finding their place in the cracks of the orderly urban system. The ugly, the messy, the invasive - they all settle at the edges, in the fringes. This is the interstitial space, the terrain vague. A place where neither beginning nor end is clear, where programs dissolve, and rules seem to be forgotten.

I have come to care about them. Perhaps because they reveal the contradictions we hold about nature: the longing for beauty, order and control, set against the messy reality of growth, decay and adaptation. In truth, no nature is pristine; it is process, constant evolution, and humans are deeply part of it. Calling these fringes "ugly" or certain species "invasive" only hides the fact that we too are invasive, and that these interstices reflect us back to ourselves.

Instead of designing with fixed outcomes in mind, maybe we should embrace the open-ended, evolving spaces - ones that acknowledge change, time, and the unexpected. Design can do more than aesthetically structure a space, enhance biodiversity or off er a technical solution. Perhaps it can provoke reflection, challenge our perceptions and encourage new ways of engaging with the wild, messy, and overlooked corners of the city?

My fascination and the questions above are the drivers for the thesis. My hope is that it inspires the reader to get curious about exploring this urban wilderness and with that securing a place for interstitial spaces as meaningful green infrastructure beyond the formal park.

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1   Ellen Braae, 'Beauty redeemed; Recycling Post-Industrial Landscapes'. p. ... (2015)

Abstract

The research and design presented in this bundle of booklets focus on interstitial spaces in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. These left-over urban spaces are often overlooked, stigmatised, and framed as meaningless, unsafe, or in need of control. At the same time, they hold aesthetic, ecological, and experiential value, offering alternative readings of urban nature and of who and what is considered a neighbour in the city.

The research aims to understand the existing qualities of these fringe spaces from social, ecological, and experiential perspectives. Theoretical research frames the language and existing social and ecological knowledge surrounding interstitial spaces, while critically questioning the role of design and its aesthetics. An immersive site analysis is conducted across a selection of fringe spaces in north-east Rotterdam, resulting in detailed portraits of users, plants, and affordances present on site.

This research forms the basis for the design component of the thesis, which asks: *"how can interstitial spaces be accessed in ways that evoke wonder, care, and engagement, while preserving their ambiguity, freedom of use, and self-evolving ecologies?"* The project proposes that access is designed through three interrelated layers - visual, mental, and physical - allowing these spaces to be meaningfully experienced without being formalised. A city-wide vision is developed, supported by context-dependent, small-scale interventions that increase access, legibility, and engagement.

This project demonstrates that interstitial spaces can be reframed as a form of unconventional green space, capable of evoking wonder, care, and long-term stewardship.

How to read this research

This thesis is structured as a bundle of booklets, each addressing a different layer of the research and design. The Index booklet you are currently reading functions as a guide throughout the thesis. It contains a glossary that can be used as a bookmark and consulted alongside the other booklets, as well as the overall methodology, positionality, conclusions, and a reflection on the graduation year.

The first booklet presents the theoretical research. Interstitial spaces are discussed across three chapters: understanding the interstitial space, the value and aesthetics of undefined space, and the role of design in accessing interstitial spaces.

The second booklet brings together the immersive site analysis and the design project in a predominantly visual format. Through drawings, mappings, and narratives, this booklet translates the research into spatial readings and concrete design interventions.

The final booklet, A Field Guide to the Interstitial Space, is developed as a public design instrument. It introduces Rotterdammers to the ecological and social roles of interstitial spaces in a simple and playful way, encouraging wandering, observation, and the formation of personal relationships with these places. Rather than offering a fixed reading, the Field Guide helps train perception: it helps noticing, reading, and navigating interstitial spaces. It is an invitation for residents to activly contribute and discuss to the wider network of interstitial spaces

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0.   Introduction

2.1 Self made shelter by young BMX'ers made out of re-used materials with grapevine growing on it, suggesting long-term commitment and care to space. Rotterdam 2025.

Introduction

Perhaps you have skipped through this bundle of research and glanced at the images, maps, and text. Perhaps you have recognized a few places, but most probably you haven't and are wondering what these images of vague spaces, unmanaged bushes, and neglected plots are doing in a graduation thesis about landscape architecture. If you are from Rotterdam, where this research is based, you might be looking at the maps, wondering what these highlighted areas are. You are pretty sure there is nothing there, right? Haven't you walked by that street at least a handful of times, still not noticing what lies behind? Surely it cannot be that special - or perhaps not?

The spaces that this research is concerned with are precisely those overlooked, neglected, and hidden places. They are not designed squares, not programmed parks, not commercial plazas, but something in-between. They are what is left over, what lies in the cracks of the city, what slips from our conscious maps. In short: the interstitial space - literally the space between spaces.

In the urban landscape, it refers to those spaces that fall between established functions, categories, or boundaries. They might be strips of grass along a railway, leftover land after demolition, abandoned industrial sites, fenced-off verges, or infrastructural thresholds. Their scale ranges from tiny patches to extensive terrains.

What unites these spaces is not their form but their ambiguity. They are not fully public, nor fully private. They are not officially programmed, yet they are not entirely empty either. Their borders are often blurred, their uses informal, their aesthetics messy. They are spaces that resist easy definition. This thesis subject resonates with a broader critique of how cities are designed and experienced. Increasingly, public spaces are programmed, commercialized, and surveilled. Access is tied to consumption; behavior is guided by design. Against this backdrop, interstitial spaces offer something radically different: looseness, spontaneity, and openness to the unexpected.

The literature on such spaces is rich but fragmented and reaches over multiple disciplines. In urban design they were seen as lost space (Trancik, 1986), defined as undesirable urban leftovers in need of redesign. In anthropology, Augé (1995) described interstitial environments as non-places; anonymous, transitional spaces of modernity, lacking identity,

history or relational depth. In architecture and cultural theory, Solà-Morales (1995) identified the terrain vague: urban voids that resist programmed use and definition, emphasizing their indeterminacy and resistance to capitalist redevelopment. Solà-Morales perfectly reflects this tension between this nature of redevelopment in the architectural and urban work-field versus the arts as the following.

"What is to be done with these enormous voids, with their imprecise limits and vague definition? Art's reaction . . . is to preserve these alternative, strange spaces. . . . Architecture's destiny [by contrast] has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, and form, the introduction into strange spaces of the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal."

While these terms differ, they share a critical framing to the subject: interstitial spaces are cast as either problems to be solved or as emptiness awaiting inscription. What is less developed in literature, however, is an aesthetic, ecological, social and experiential appreciation of these landscapes. More recently, scholars and designers have started to shift their perspective on these interstitial spaces, seeing their ecological richness and social possibilities as possible positive qualities not often found in other urban contexts.

This thesis aligns with the latter perspective: that interstitial spaces, far from being meaningless voids, hold unique experiential, aesthetic, and ecological qualities that matter for urban life. To stand within an abandoned railway yard or the scrubland beside an overpass is to experience a distinct atmosphere: wildness, openness, freedom, or even enchantment. This thesis argues that such qualities have cultural and ecological value in their own right, and deserve recognition within the scope of landscape architecture. I approaches them as potential alternative public spaces. Places that, while different in character from the city's designed parks, streets, and squares, can contribute to a richer and more diverse urban realm.

Rotterdam as Location

Rotterdam is an exemplary city in which to explore this subject. Its urban fabric is marked by destruction and reconstruction: the 1940 wartime bombing, followed by decades of rapid infrastructural and industrial development. The result is a city full of seams and gaps. Unlike older European cities with continuous historical cores, Rotterdam is characterized by modernisation, expansive infrastructure and a rich industrial harbour history. Large infrastructural corridors - rail, road, and port-related industry - divide districts, leaving behind a mosaic of unprogrammed land. Interstitial spaces are everywhere in Rotterdam, yet they remain largely unacknowledged.

At present, Rotterdam's development agenda focuses on densification, mixed-use redevelopment and extending public green space. Initiatives such as the Central District (around Rotterdam central) aim to produce multifunctional and climate-adaptive public space with a lot of space for green. While standing in the midst of a national housing crisis, Gemeenteraad Rotterdam (2025) is "working towards a climate-neutral, fossil-free city and explicitly pursues climate-adaption measures" that aims to provide all inhabitants a greenspace within a 15 minutes walk and is resilient for the future.

Many recent projects are designed to do multiple things - recreation, water storage, biodiversity and sport - often within a tight and legible design language. Examples of this include water squares (Benthemplein watersquare, 2013) and redevelopment parks (eg. Dakpark, 2015) that balances technical infrastructure with landscape programming. This tendency favors programmed and sometimes commercialized public spaces that can be defended politically and budgetarily (Peinhardt, 2021).

Rotterdam's ambitions are admirable and progressive, setting high goals for their green public development in a city that is currently very paved. Formal green spaces are highly valued and perform important functions for urban inhabitants and the non-human. They can offer a wide range of activities concerning social life, health and proximity to nature (Rupprecht & Byrne, 2014). What is also an important factor is the perceived safety by users, especially by minority groups, woman and elderly.
—> public spaces are great but...
While these more formal greenspaces contribute to economic growth and a polished image, they risk erasing the city's informal and ambiguous landscapes. It is in this context that interstitial spaces appear both vulnerable and significant: vulnerable because they are prime candidates for redevelopment, significant because they embody an alternative form of public space: open-ended, less commodified, and more unpredictable. In this context, the interstitial offers not only a spatial but also a political alternative.

Fig 2.1
Rotterdam's official greenstructures (parks, forests, singels)

Fig 2.1
Rotterdam's official greenspaces + unofficial greenspaces. (grown on own accord, not planned)

Problem Statement

Despite their abundance and richness, interstitial spaces are largely invisible within planning and design discourse. When they are addressed, it is often in terms of redevelopment potential, ecological compensation, or temporary use. Framing them as placeholders rather than valued landscapes in themselves. This tendency risks producing an urban environment where only controlled, commodified, and legible spaces remain.

While structured parks, squares, and programmed public spaces remain crucial to urban life, they tend to privilege order, consumption, and predefined uses. Interstitial spaces, by contrast, offer looseness, unpredictability, and informality. This thesis positions them not as replacements, but as alternative forms of public space that work hand in hand with the city's formal green infrastructure. Together, these two modes - the structured and the interstitial - can create a richer, more diverse urban public realm.

The problem this thesis addresses is therefore twofold:
* Recognition: the experiential and aesthetic qualities of interstitial spaces are undervalued and under-theorized.
* Access: even when recognized, these spaces are often inaccessible; physically fenced off or visually obscured.

Without addressing these issues, interstitial spaces will remain vulnerable to erasure, and cities risk losing a dimension of openness and wonder essential to urban life. Not every place needs to be finalized and polished, and as interstitial spaces already have great qualities they should especially not be over-designed. This leads us to the Research Question this thesis will try to answer.

Research Question and Objective
"A whole repertoire of spaces can be reclaimed as part of the public realm by mobilizing the forces of design." (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996)

how can interstitial spaces be accessed (mentally, visually & physically) in ways that evoke wonder, care, and engagement, while preserving their ambiguity, freedom of use, and self-evolving ecologies?"

Sub:
1. *"What aesthetic qualities define the interstitial space?*
2. *"How are interstitial spaces used, experienced and accessed "*
3. *"What kind of interstitial spaces does Rotterdam hold to test these questions?"*
4. *"How can design make the interstitial spaces accessible (mentally, visually, physically) without fully erasing their defining character?"*

Research Objective
The objective of this thesis is to develop a design framework for engaging with urban interstitial spaces as alternative forms of public space. This involves:
1. Identifying the aesthetic and experiential qualities of interstitial spaces through site analysis and theoretical study.
2. Understanding how these ecological, social and aesthetic qualities can foster emotional attachment, wonder, and care.
3. Testing design strategies that provide different forms of access while preserving the undefined and evolving nature of these spaces.

Structure of the Thesis
The thesis is organized into three bundles, each reflecting a different mode of inquiry.

* Bookmark: Glossary of the interstitial space

* Small pocket book : Field Guide to Interstitial Rotterdam
A guided walk and site analysis that maps, documents, and narrates the interstitial spaces of the city, focusing on their aesthetic and experiential dimensions.

* Booklet 1: Theoretical Research
The main body of the thesis, structured into four chapters:
1. Understanding interstitial space — definitions, categories, and theoretical debates.
2. The value of undefined space and messy aesthetics - why ambiguity matters.
3. Emotional attachment and enchantment - how interstitial spaces evoke wonder and care.
4. Accessing the interstitial — design precedents and strategies.

* Booklet 2: Design Implication
A citywide strategy that frames interstitial spaces as an alternative network of public space, complemented by a zoom-in intervention testing different modes of access in a specific site. These design experiments test how interstitial spaces can be made accessible , mentally, visually, and physically, without being formalized.

The Design Paradox

If the defining quality of the interstitial space lies in its undefinedness, its vagueness, then to define it through design is to risk its disappearance.

This is what Sitong Luo (2021) [1] calls the design paradox of indeterminate spaces: any attempt to articulate or formalize them may compromise the very conditions that make them valuable. The designer thus finds themself in a contradictory position: drawn to these spaces precisely because of their vagueness and openness, yet aware that design itself can so easily overwrite that quality.

This dilemma is clearly visible in projects such as the High Line in New York. What began as a spontaneous urban wilderness, an elevated terrain vague where plants self-seeded between the rails, has, through redevelopment, become one of the most curated public parks in the world. Its roughness and unpredictability have been replaced by maintenance and spectacle. The project's success in terms of accessibility and popularity also demonstrates its loss: the interstitial character that once defined it has been transformed into a controlled aesthetic of "designed wildness".

However, acknowledging this paradox does not mean abandoning design altogether. Rather, it calls for a more attentive approach, one that recognizes the interstice as a self-transforming condition. As Linde Kneip (2021) [2] writes, " - , even if the interstices are essentially undefinable, they are not untouchable for design, on the condition that designers are mindful of the self-transforming nature of the sites. It is the self transforming interstices that make interstices so inspirational for designing.".

To engage with these places is not to fix or complete them, but to reveal their existing dynamics and to make visible and accessible what is already there, and to support the processes that sustain their vitality. Accessibility, in this sense, does not mean formalization. It means creating the possibility of encountering, of seeing, entering, or sensing these spaces without erasing their spontaneity. The challenge for design is to expose the inherent value of the interstice without enclosing it; to open paths,

views, and interventions that allow people to experience them while keeping their looseness intact. By finding the right forms of minimal and potentially reversible intervention, interstitial spaces can become not merely leftovers, but living additions to the urban landscape: places that continue to evolve, self-organize, and invite wonder and a bigger empathy for nature and society.

1   Luo, Sitong, Disclosing Interstices: Open-ended Design Transformation of Urban Leftover Spaces, A+BE Architecture and the Built Environment, no. 16 (2021), pp.1–370, doi:10.7480/abe.2021.16.6070
2   Keip, Linde. Intentions for the Unintentional: Urban Interstitial Spaces as Additional Type of Public Green Space. Master's thesis, Wageningen University, Landscape Architecture Group, January 2021

Methodology

The research methodology combines immersive fieldwork, spatial analysis, theoretical grounding, and design experimentation. Together, these approaches build towards an understanding of how interstitial spaces can be accessed and experienced in ways that evoke wonder, care, and attachment without formalising or erasing their inherent looseness.

Immersive Site Analysis

At the core of the project is first-hand, bodily engagement with the chain of interstitial spaces in Rotterdam. Repeated site visits form the backbone of the research, allowing a deep reading of the spaces' aesthetic, experiential, and ecological qualities. Observations are collected through photography, note-taking, listening, informal conversations, and sensorial reflection. Walking, wandering, lingering, and occasionally trespassing enable entry into these spaces without predetermined judgement. This method reveals not only physical characteristics but also the subtle uses, personal interactions, and emotional responses that define these sites.

Modes of Access and Affordances

To understand how different users engage with interstitial spaces, the research develops a typology of access rooted in affordance theory. Elements such as fences, gaps, overgrown paths, signage, desire paths, and improvised crossings are documented and interpreted as invitations or constraints, depending on who encounters them. Rather than treating them as static thresholds, the study positions them as dynamic affordances that shape experience. These modes are later distilled into visual descriptions, each linked to a spectrum of user perspectives.

Field Guide Development

To make the hidden chain of spaces in Rotterdam accessible (physically, mentally, and visually) a small-format Field Guide is created. The guide compiles photographs, site stories, fragments of local history, found objects, and profiles of human and non-human actors. It functions simultaneously as a record of research and as a speculative tool for future engagement. By inviting readers to learn, wander, and reflect, the guide aims to open these leftover spaces to broader publics who are not part of the usual user groups.

Theoretical and Precedent Research
The site analysis is grounded in theoretical work by authors such as Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Franck & Stevens, and Ingo Kowarik, which help articulate both the social importance and ecological ruderal benefits . It positions leftover spaces not merely as ecological or historic residues, but as atmospheric landscapes with distinct aesthetic, and emotional

qualities. Precedent studies of ambiguous or informally used public spaces further support a critical lens on how design can either enable or suppress looseness. These precedents inform the designerly approaches taken to make interstitial spaces accessible without overwriting their identity.

Speculative Representation of Voiddwellers

To explore the plurality of meanings embedded in interstitial spaces, a set of fictional-but-research-based characters - voiddwellers - are developed. These figures synthesize real encounters, interviews, gestures, and observed behaviours. Through narrative perspectives, they animate the research findings and reveal how different users perceive and appropriate the same spaces differently. This narrative device highlights the emotional, political, and experiential complexity of access.

Design Experiments

Early-stage design experiments like collages, sketches, and spatial diagrams serve as exploratory tools to test how modes of access might be designed without disturbing the existing qualities of the sites. These prototypes investigate thresholds, invitations, navigational cues, and subtle forms of support. Rather than specifying fixed interventions, the experiments search for ways to guide engagement while preserving the interstitial character that defines these spaces.
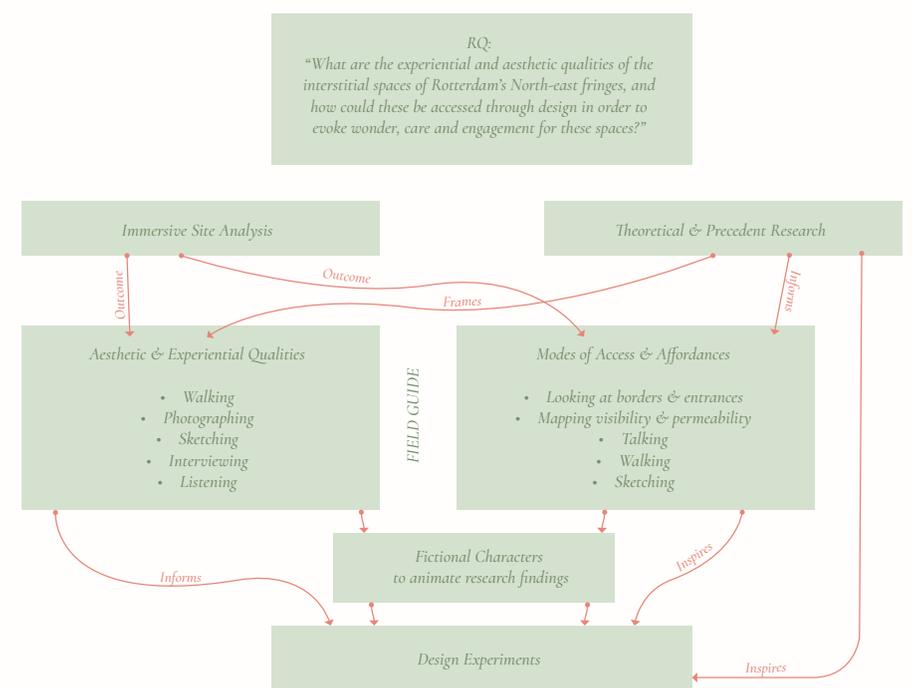
Position in Landscape Architecture

What can landscape architecture do?

Landscape architecture's aim should be to create 'A good public realm' - Garret Eckbo[1], which of course poses the question of what makes 'good' design. I think in the matter of (urban) landscape architecture, the 'good' should reflect on the following aspects - the environmental, the socio-behavioural and the aesthetic of space. Landscape architecture operates at the intersection of ecology, urbanism and architecture, where we mediate between environmental processes, social or urban life and the spatial experience. We should be capable of integrating the processes of ecology with the infrastructures of the cultural, emotional and aesthetic elements of human life. It stands apart from architecture as it inherently deals with process and change over time - as for ecology, in usage and the way it looks.

What should landscape architecture do in the framework of this project?

I believe the resistance to fully control, program or fix the landscape should come landscape architects naturally, but in the aim of this project - researching interstitial spaces within the urban fabric - I think it is of utmost importance. The landscape architect should be able to work with the existing qualities, their ecological spontaneity and informal uses. I think the role of the landscape architect in this realm of our practice is to do less, and to listen more and put process over fixed outcome.

Where am I standing?

My stand within the landscape architecture practice is one that prioritizes context and site, its specific ecological processes, aesthetic experience and ethical inclusivity. I believe design can create meaningful landscapes that invite attachment and engage towards a more interwoven relationship between humans, non-humans and the natural world.

I find that aesthetics are a large element in my design practice,

not as a surface level addition, but as an outcome of context specific design that fosters a deep attachment to its context and users. That means that its aesthetics might not always follow the classical norms but might rub or provoke the audience in such a way that the outcome be a better understanding of the landscape in which we live or use. Design should be translated into memorable spaces that often challenge, expand and alter our conceptions of beauty. [2]

Ecological processes are also vital to my thinking, but I resist 'green' fixes that separate sustainability from context and meaning. Just as aesthetics, ecological processes should be woven together with the fabric of a place, its culture and its memory. Aesthetics and ecological processes both unfold and change over time, tying human stories into natural processes. As Meyer says: "The intrinsic beauty of landscape resides in its change over time."[3] It highlights the importance of interweaving these elements together in process, not only ecological. This aligns with James Corner's notion of landscape as a medium that performs over time. "Not only for what it is—a scenic or ecological amenity—but for what it does, how it works as a process over time, how it acts as a medium through which ideas, practices, and outcomes flow." [4]

1   Gerrit Eckbo, 'Landscapes for living', p. (1950)

2   Elizabeth K. Meyer, 'Sustaining beauty, the performance of appearance', p. 15 (2006)
3   Ibid., p. 19
4   James Corner, 'Recovering landscape: Essays in contemporary landscape architecture' p. 98-118 (1999)

Conclusion

This thesis set out to make interstitial spaces legible as a meaningful part of the urban landscape. Spaces that are often overlooked, stigmatised, or framed as problems to be solved are here approached as places with aesthetic, ecological, and social value. The central ambition was not to fix or formalise these spaces, but to understand their existing qualities and explore how they might be accessed, experienced, and cared for without losing what makes them interstitial

Through theoretical research, immersive site analysis, and design experimentation, the project demonstrates that perception plays a decisive role in the fate of these places. Fear of the unknown, unfamiliar aesthetics, and dominant narratives around order and safety contribute strongly to their bad reputation. By unpacking the aesthetic, experiential, and ecological dimensions of interstitial spaces, this research positions these landscapes within a broader body of knowledge on ruderal ecology, social use, and the ambiguity of left-over spaces.

The on-site research confirmed that interstitial spaces can only be understood from within. Wandering, observing, and documenting revealed qualities that cannot be captured from a distance or through purely analytical tools. This approach informed the design question: how can interstitial spaces be accessed in ways that evoke wonder, care, and engagement, without erasing their ambiguity, freedom of use, or self-evolving ecologies?

The answer developed through the project as following; access is created through interconnected layers, mental, visual, and physical. These are worked out in a design toolbox that allows these layers to be translated differently at each site.

On a site-specific level, the design demonstrates how careful spatial decisions can open up interstitial spaces without deleting their terrain vague character. At the design location Spoordijk Spangen, height differences are used to curate experiences and visual sightlines, allowing people to look into or out of the space before entering it. Visual access proves crucial: seeing into a place that has a design language lowers thresholds of fear and invites curiosity, following the Cues to Care theory of Nassauer. A hierarchy of entrances, larger and smaller portals that allow for different degrees of engagement rather than a single formal entrance. Materiality emerges as key design conclusions. By working with rough

materials and ruderal surfaces while showing intentionality, the design resists conventional aesthetics.

Certain situations demand more pronounced gestures. In this project, larger interventions such as a walking bridge are introduced where they connect the site to a wider wandering network. These gestures are only considered successful when they do not overwrite the openness of the space. Connection to a larger network can strengthen interstitial spaces, as long as it does not neutralise their ambiguity or turn them into fully programmed routes.

The Ailanthus nursery system functions as both a practical and symbolic intervention. It introduces an active ecological component while acting as a symbol of care as well as critique.

At the same time, the project recognises the inherent paradox of designing interstitial spaces. Intervening risks formalisation, while doing nothing risks disappearance. Whether these interventions truly preserve interstitial qualities can only be tested through time and use. The project therefore operates as a form of thinking-through-design: first learning to read these spaces, and only then carefully deciding where and how to touch them.

The conclusion of the project extends beyond spatial design alone. The Field Guide responds to the understanding that access must also operate on a cultural and perceptual level. It supports people in noticing, reading, and navigating interstitial spaces, and helps frame public discussion around their aesthetics, ecologies, and social roles.

Not every interstitial site requires such an extensive approach. Sometimes, a few small gestures, or doing nothing at all may be sufficient. By engaging in this public debate, and taking a clear position on the value of these spaces, understanding can grown, and is therefore also part of the landscape architect's role.

Interstitial spaces are inherently contradictory. Some frictions cannot and should not be resolved. Rather than harmonising them away, this project argues for a more humble yet assertive design position: one that attunes closely to what a place already offers, while taking a stand for its future existence. If perceptions of what counts as proper nature, beauty, or messiness begin to shift, the

Reflection

Since the beginning of my master in Landscape Architecture, I have found myself seeking a more critical and plural field in landscape architecture than designing for fixed sustainable outcomes with narrow ideas of what experience in landscape architecture could mean. This discomfort sharpened when I was introduced to interstitial spaces and to the narrative and aesthetics of invasive and ruderal vegetation. What fascinated me was how these places and plants are consistently dismissed because of how they look or how they function, while at the same time their existence and appearance is a direct result of (bad) urban planning and design. They resist control, efficiency, and clear function - qualities that a capitalist society and planning culture strongly desire. Their character is layered, vague, messy, ever changing and difficult to categorise, and I often felt that landscape architecture is slow to develop alternative ways of valuing such forms.

Living in Rotterdam for the past five years intensified this concern. The lack of accessible green spaces where one can wander or withdraw from the city became increasingly frustrating. At the same time, through work and involvement with places like Stadspark West, I saw how difficult it is for people living and working at the urban fringe to make the municipality recognise on-site qualities that cannot be captured from maps, aerial views, or spreadsheets. These experiences shaped a central conviction in my project: interstitial spaces can only be understood from the ground up, through direct experience, and must be represented in ways that make their value legible to a larger public.

Combining these concerns led to the backbone of my thesis. I wanted to understand what the qualities of interstitial spaces actually are and how they could be acknowledged. Moving beyond my own intuition and affection for these places required grounding this interest in theory. Much of the existing discourse treats interstitial spaces as problems to be fixed, but more current theory and work on ruderal ecology and spontaneous vegetation offered an alternative lens, which helped articulate why unprogrammed space, ambiguity, and unmanaged growth can be valuable.

The research itself unfolded through an open and often uncomfortable process. My site analysis relied heavily on walking, wandering, noticing, and documenting, methods close to a "stalker" movement, rather than a predefined analytical framework. Only by repeatedly moving through the space and allowing it to reveal itself did certain qualities become visible. At the same time, this lack of structure challenged me. I struggled with translating ambiguous and sometimes contradictory observations into something coherent, and I felt resistance toward a process without a fixed outcome. In hindsight, a more structured ethnographic approach could have helped, and the research area may have been too large. However, living nearby allowed the site to become part of my daily rhythm: cycling past, noticing seasonal shifts, and talking to friends who grew up there. This unintentionally brought oral histories into the project, knowledge that cannot be found in archives.

From this analysis, the design aim gradually became clearer. The core question was not how to redesign these spaces, but how to make them accessible and appreciable without fully formalising them or stripping away their interstitial qualities. Studying a wide range of precedents, ranging from large post-industrial landscapes to small left-over plots and both formal design projects and informal, self-organised spaces, helped me test this boundary. These references became tools rather than solutions,helping me to explore what kind of interventions had for effect on the accessibility as well as the interstitial character of a space.

These tools helped me experiment on my own site and let me explore a balance between constantly trying to curate access, while trying to change perception of its viewer, while making sure the interstitial character didn't get disturbed too much. In hindsight, this paradoxical goal has made me truly furious and totally stuck on occasion, giving yourself as designer so much constraint on what is possible or fitting. Dealing with this was a year long process, but has made me much more comfortable in designing with complexity and non conclusive and open-ended outcomes. I think it made me a more research driven and critical designer rather than relying on instinct and inspiration.

Through this process, I learned that the role of the designer in such contexts often lies exactly in this restraint. Even though I always had the tendency to design more, define more, sometimes the most meaningful intervention in this context is minimal or non-existent. Reflecting on the project, I see that its value lies less in the final design proposal and more in the methodology and attitude it developed. Designing interstitial spaces is inherently

contradictory: the more one understands their qualities, the stronger the desire becomes to leave them untouched. And this tension is a very challenging and fun topic to train yourself as researcher and landscape architect.

The project also raises ethical questions that remain open. Drawing attention to marginal spaces risks displacing the marginal communities that use them. Designing ambiguous spaces also means accepting that they may never feel or be safe and accessible to everyone. Leaving invasive plants unmaintained or even spreading them around the city could potentially harm other plant communities. Interstitial spaces are full of contradictions, and this project has been about navigating them. Some contradictions cannot be smoothed out. They are part of reality. And things, in my opinion, shouldn't always be softened into total harmony. As The Harm of Harmonising article argues, not all friction should be erased; 'Harmonisation of social and environmental friction may present misleading and consequently undemocratic and negative social impact.' [1]

Looking forward, I see interstitial spaces as laboratories for social, ecological, and aesthetic experimentation. This project demonstrates that engaging with complexity, ambiguity, and open-endedness is not only challenging but also productive. What I take forward is not only a deep understanding of a subject I wish to continue engaging with, but also an approach grounded in careful contextual reading, a humble attitude of restraint, and the courage to remain critical.

1   "The Harm of Harmonising," Landezine, accessed December 1, 2025, https://landezine.com/the-harm-of-harmonising/

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Theory Building

1. Understanding Interstitial Spaces

Terrain Vague – Ignasi de Sola-Morales (1995)
Terrain vague as abandoned, undefined, ambiguous places in the city.

A glossary of Urban Voids – Sergio Lopez-Pineiro (2020)
A critical collection of over 200 terms for describing the 'terrain vague' or 'buffer-zone'

2. Value of messy/undefined spaces

The cute, the bad, the ugly – Zas Bresar (2023)
Argues that imperfect spaces can challenge aesthetic norms and create opportunities for new relationships between people and their environment

Manifesto of the Third Landscape – Gilles Clement (2004?)
The Third Landscape is made up of all the places neglected by human beings. These margins bring together a biological diversity that has not yet been classified as richness.

3. Enchantment & Emotional Engagement

Enchantment of Modern Life – Jane Bannet (2001)
She sees enchantment as a political and ethical tool: if people feel enchanted by the world, they are more likely to care for it.

About the emotional bond between a person and a particular place.
It develops through experiences, memories, meanings, and personal or collective identity.

4. Design tools for engaging with the Int. Space

Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames – Joan Ioersson Nassaue (1995)
Argues that a need for minimal intervention of maintenance to make people see 'messy' nature as valuable

A glossary of Urban Voids – Sergio Lopez-Pineiro (2020)
Argues that, in order to keep Interstitial spaces established, one should design the borders

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