

Investigating the importance of Threshold Spaces in the City



Last Green in Town
TU Delft
Urban Architecture

Research Plan
Luca Carstanjen
5637236

Introduction

Through the feelings evoked from being on site, and from the ongoing analysis of La Friche, the importance of the space, and the nature of it being a void, or better, a terrain vague has solidified the importance of maintaining the characteristics of the site being a threshold space between the predominantly capital oriented, constructed majority of Brussels.

The tension between states of regulated and wild presents a possibility within urban space. In the contemporary era, our lives are all too industrialised, we find ourselves emersed in industrial networks, when in fact our needs and daily lives are really quite conventional.

Due to the ultra-controlled nature of modern-day cities, where little room for participation and spontaneity is provided, particularly in Western Europe, the urban dweller has lost agency on having an influence on surroundings. This leaves the city dweller repressed from basic needs not even known to them, as our daily life is free of inherent contest and tension.

We find ourselves in a limbo between the completely private and the super sanitized public. The role of the architect in designing spaces has all too often been reduced to designing without room for contest. Spaces are often built for a specific set of requirements, and to be regulated by either the private user, or the public authority, users of the city lack authority and agency in shaping the urban environment, and thus lose connection, and a sense of ownership on the city. Allowing people to have agency over the city nurtures community, and, provides a platform for people who may be otherwise marginalised.

I too find myself in a position where I feel like I don't have agency, or a sense of ownership on spaces outside of the private. This is something I may not notice daily, but I feel a longing for such devices is triggered through being engaged with La Friche, hence I would like to investigate these topics to raise awareness for the importance of them to all inhabitants of urban environments in the contemporary Western city.



Figure 1 - Found North of La Friche, a common gardening collective inhabiting the threshold space between housing and train tracks. The gardens function as a barrier, but also as an informal community space

Definition of Threshold Space in the Context of Research

In short, a threshold space can be seen as a space between spaces. However, the term can still take on a variety of meanings. In the context of this research, the threshold is seen as a space within the city which counteracts formality, and presents itself as a democratic space, apart from the private or the public. Public spaces are primarily created by a specific authority (local, regional or state), which controls them and establishes the rules under which people may use them. Private spaces belong to, and are controlled by specific individuals or economic entities that have the right to establish the conditions under which others may use them (Stavrides, 2015). Due to the broadly encompassing definition of the terminology, the use of the term “threshold space” suits a plan of action for further research, in which multiple subsidiary terms will be established under the umbrella term of “threshold spaces” to better describe individual cases.

Research Aim

The research aim is to discover how threshold spaces which are often seen as minimal in the hierarchy of the city, are appropriated and created by people of the city to regain agency on an urban environment. And how people of the city may work to counteract the effects of hyper capitalism on producing the smooth city.

So called “threshold spaces” will be investigated both for physical attributes and the management required to manifest and maintain a space as a “threshold space”.

La Friche presents characteristics of a site with potential for counteracting the creation of an ever more “smooth city” (Boer, 2023). Against the worrying notion that a space like La Friche is coined as undesirable by actors who shape the larger urban environments we find ourselves in. The research not only aims to investigate threshold spaces, but also strives to highlight their potential.

Furthermore, the research is to accompany a design proposal, providing a continuous flow of information to inform design decisions at different scales of the project. Where the research provides inspiration, and a backbone for design-based decisions.

Research Method

La Friche can potentially be labelled as a dead, leftover wasteland, especially if one had not been previously engaged with the physical site and its surroundings. The impression La Friche had on myself and others involved in the studio came due to being directly confronted with the site through the means of a visit. Therefore, research methods which involve being directly confronted with the realities of site and surroundings provide a framework for an engaged, conscious research.

Exploration of the threshold spaces investigated is to be conducted through the means of a multi-faceted approach. As stated in the research aim, the investigated spaces are to be understood through their physical being, and their social impact. Hence interaction with people as well as documentation through multiple methods is important.

Photography will be used as the dominant medium of research. It is a great tool to express a reality which cannot be condensed into a drawing, it is a method to present an existing reality. Also, photographic evidence provides a great basis for further investigation off site. Where characteristics of a space can be reviewed and analysed for their qualities, through in-depth analysis of existing photography, post site visit. Also, photography can be used at multiple scales. When evaluating photographs, it must be taken into account that the image taken is frozen in time, and is a crop of what is actually there. The crop is influenced by the gaze of the photographer at a specific time. This should be considered when photographing sites, and engagement with the subject matter is to be prioritised.

Other mediums will be utilised to support photographs. The medium utilised depends on what is most suited to gain certain information. For example, investigating how a threshold space is managed may be best done through conducting interviews on site.

All information will at first be compiled in the form of an organically flowing pin-up. This pin up will provide a continuous framework for research throughout the graduation project. Clusters of information at different scales and mediums, will be placed in relation to a map, pinpointing the location of areas of research, establishing a connection between the location of investigated points, and La Friche, the site proposed to be developed (or not). Mapping helps to inform demand, and a potential network of management of threshold spaces.

Furthermore, the method of pinning of information allows for an organic growth of research, while an overview is kept. The research is to be seen as a continuous work in progress throughout the project, where different stages of design are to be informed by evolving information found. The detail level/scale of looked into threshold spaces shall be in tune with that required by the phase of design in the project. Threshold spaces exist at multiple scales, and can be a continuous source of inspiration for design choices.

As the pin up is predominantly a visual means to compile multimedia information, the pin up will be elaborated upon in the form of a booklet, where sections of the pin up are described, and presented in a manner which makes information accessible to readers willing to inform themselves on the found research. An example of how this may be represented visually, to compliment the organic flow of research, can be seen in the investigation by the collective "TOESTAND", a collective focusing on establishing communities through temporary occupation and development of sites around Brussels. Not only is TOESTAND's work a great inspiration for representation, their engagement is also a valuable source on the appropriation of threshold spaces in Brussels.



Figure 2 - A start on mapping both threshold spaces and commons organisations around La Friche. This map informed a walk around the area, which in turn inspired my research plan. I plan to extensively expand upon this pin-up, adding different forms of media, investigation and scales. Potentially also expanding the geographical scope of investigation. The pin up will serve to keep an overview over research collected, and a fundament for an organic flow of research, which eventually aims to inform design decisions in producing a threshold space.

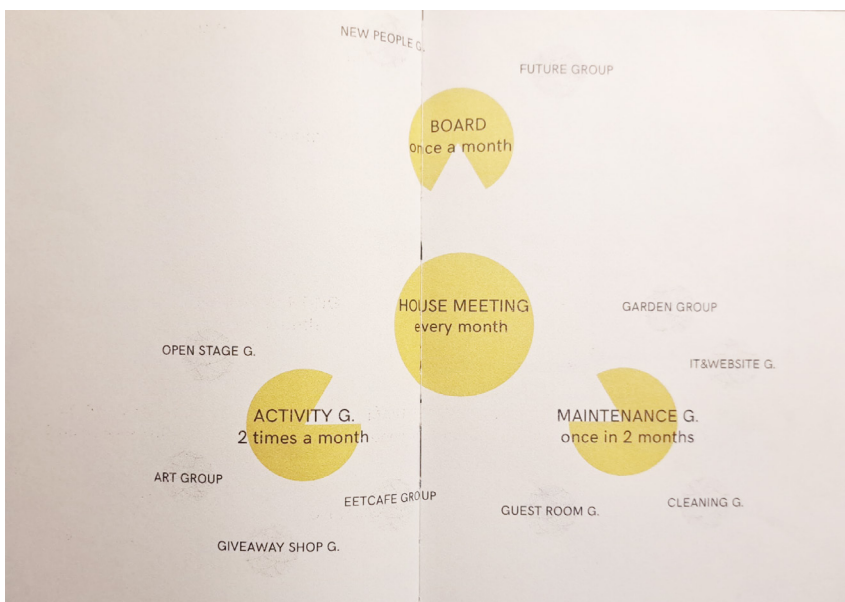
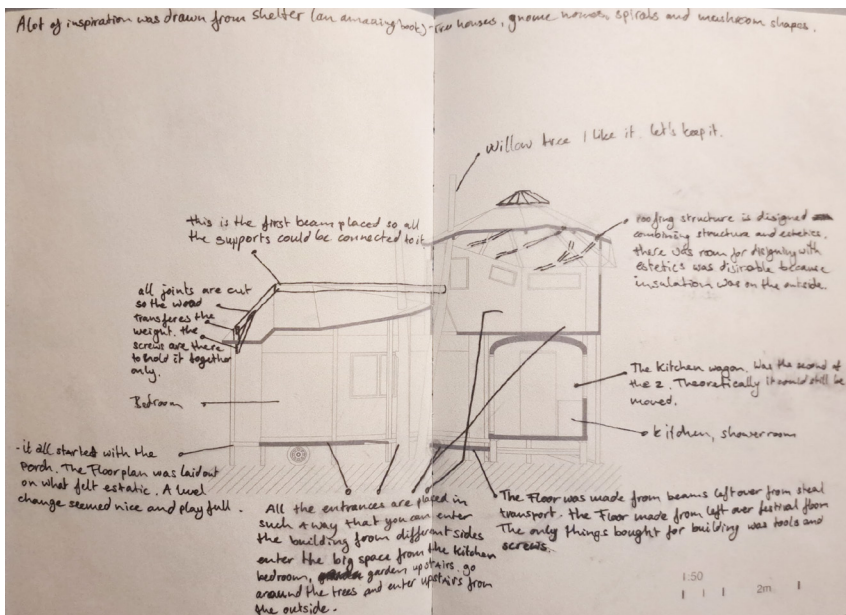


Figure 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 - Taken from the book: "Architecture of Appropriation" Focusing on informal living in squatted residences in the Netherlands, the book uses photography as a leitmotiv of research, and representation. Photography is combined with sketches, studies, interviews, stories and news articles, these guide the reader on the intricate nature of squatting practices, and make their qualities clear. The book was written to raise awareness for the importance of such spaces. I believe the nature of habitation of squats to be similar to the threshold spaces I aim to investigate, hence this publication is a great inspiration.



Figure 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 - Taken by Japanese photographer Hayahisa Tomiyasu who spent four years observing a ping pong table from his window. A simple construction which became a framework for informal practices. His works capture specific moments in time, and focus on the construction as well as its immediate surroundings. Here, photography as a method to examine the use of, what is in fact a very simple space, is a powerful tool. The ping pong table functions as a sort of threshold space. The series is an inspiration to how photography can be used as a tool to portray the use of space.

Charlie [18] *Quand tout le monde
arrêtera les conneries,
comme vendre des
stupéfiants. Quand tout
le monde se repantit à
l'Islam.*

*Mon chien. Et les gens
que j'ai fréquentés tous
les jours. Ça ne s'oublie
pas hein.*

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Hoe gaan we terugkijken op het
Rauterproject?

We hebben ons niet de hele
tijd comfortabel gevoeld
binnen dit project. Wat is onze
legitimiteit hier? Worden we hier
geïnstrumentaliseerd? En zoja,
door wie? Werken we hier mee
aan schijnparticipatie? We stellen
ons veel vragen, en vinden niet
altijd de goede antwoorden.

Amine [25]

We hebben wel gezorgd dat
onze passage in de Rauterbuurt
zo positief mogelijk was. Door
te vertrekken van wat er al was,
ons bescheiden op te stellen,
weinig te beloven en vooral dingen
te doen. Kapotte schommels
repareren samen met de jongeren,
koffie en sap uitdelen, frieten en
pannenkoeken bakken, er zijn,
luisteren.

Dag één gebeurde samen met wie
er al was, de jongeren. Het was
vanaf het eerste moment ook
hun plek.

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Wat hebben we geleerd?
Dat er bijzonder veel solidariteit is
onder mensen. In daden, eerder
dan in woorden.

Figure 5.2 - Transcribed interviews of children are combined with notes written by the authors, information follows an organic flow.

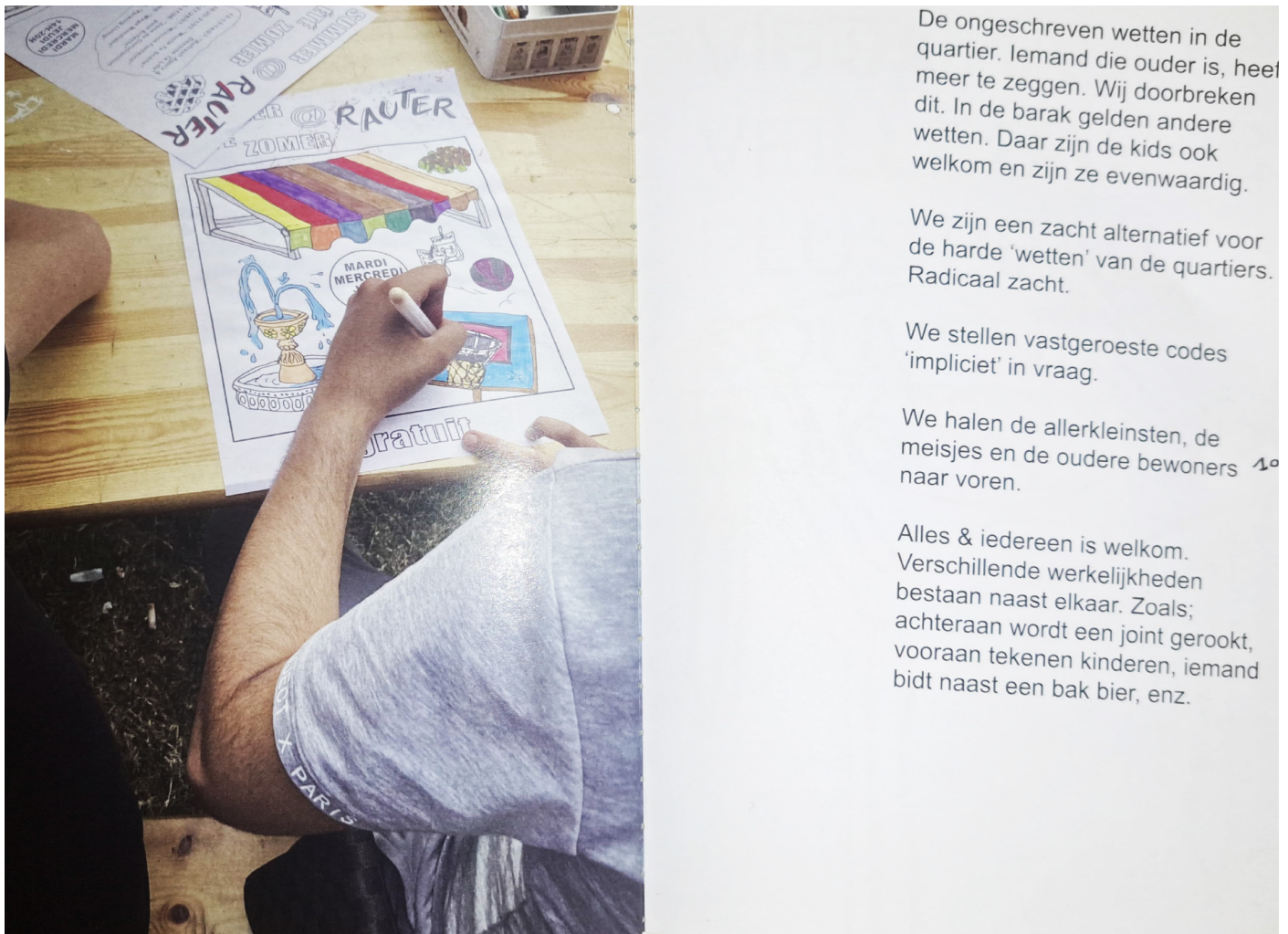


Figure 5.3 - Photographs combined with reflections of authors, again with an organic, informal flow between mediums.

Design Proposal

An architect needs to be good at predicting, yet there are limits to the authority a design should have upon its use for it to offer speculation, contest, and to provide a framework for activities which would not be detrimental towards the perseverance of the qualities La Friche offers.

An urban, and architectural project nurturing, and potentially intensifying the wild qualities of La Friche being a threshold space can be imagined. Currently, La Friche's , lack of porosity and awareness of the site in relation to surroundings results in lost potential. The proposed design can make use of this potential to protect La Friche's unique quality.

Hence, the design proposal could present itself with characteristics of a ruin. A ruin can observe traits which don't refer to a process of collapse, death or dereliction, but rather to a precarious and unachieved state of construction (Hertweck & Katsikis, 2018). Consequently, inviting users to inhabit and manage the building in a polyvalent manner. Furthermore, ruins and their porosity also invite nature to appropriate their structures. This has social, ecological and aesthetic potential, and promotes provides a framework for the establishment of a threshold space.

Uses of the project are not to be entirely defined or predicted, yet the architecture should provide a framework for informality. Research is to continuously inform the design, where, as the design develops, the research does too, this happens at all scales, where the research complimenting design is to be tailored accordingly and vice versa. It is important that the agenda of the architect is not superimposed on the potential users of the site, as this goes against the notion of the threshold to be framed in this project.

The design is to be viewed as a shared resource with potential for confusion, risk and discomfort, as well as positive desired narratives, allowing for the cohabitation of multi layered realities.



Figure 6.1, 6.2 - 'Ruins, for me, are the beginning. With the debris, you can construct new ideas.' Pictured are ruins constructed by artist Anselm Kiefer. These can be seen as an inspiration for a potential future design proposal.

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