



THE WILD PLANT LIBRARY

Approaching the urban wilderness

Gabriela Chuecos

Tutors:
Armina Pilav
Ferry Adema

“California poppies (Eschscholtzia californica), giant hogweed (Heracleum antegazzianum), tibetian rhubarb (Rheum paluratum), japanese knotgrass (Fallopia japonica). Carried by the wind, by animals or on the soles of our shoes, these vagrant plants have conquered with boldness and vitality our gardens, our embankments, our neglected spaces.”

Gilles Clement, *In praise of vagabonds*



Image 1: Klimt, G., (1907). *Country Garden with Sunflowers*.

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COEXISTENCE

The fact of living or existing together at the same time or in the same place.

DEBRIS

1. Broken or torn pieces of something larger.
2. A collection of loose material derived from rocks, or an accumulation of animal or vegetable matter.

DECAY

To become gradually damaged, worse, or less.

DISTURBANCE

The interruption of a settled condition.

EVOLUTION

1. Any process of formation or growth.
2. Change in a population of living things by such processes as mutation and natural selection.

HYBRID

Anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of elements of different or incongruous kinds.

INTERSTITIAL

Relating to the space or time between things.



NATURE

The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.

NON-HUMAN

A creature or living organism that is not a human being

PLANT

A living organism of the kind exemplified by trees, shrubs, herbs, grasses, ferns, and mosses, typically growing in a permanent site, absorbing water and inorganic substances through its roots, and synthesizing nutrients in its leaves by photosynthesis.

RUIN

The process or state of being spoiled or destroyed.

TRANSGRESSION

An act of passing over or beyond; to overpass, as any rule prescribed as the limit of duty.

UNFAMILIAR

Not known or experienced; strange.

URBAN WILDERNESS

The ecosystem formed by spontaneous plants on urban areas once human occupation has ceased, growing over the remains of previous activities and usually happening on ruined, disturbed or abandoned land.



Image 2: Author, (2018). *Visiting the Partisans' Memorial in Mostar.*

PROLOGUE

Between October 22nd and November 3rd, 2018, I stepped in Mostar for the first time. Before travelling there, I read as much as I could about the city, about its river and its bridge, about the war that torn it apart. Still, it was hardly enough preparation to face the sequels of the conflict haunting everyday life in the city. Earlier that year I had visited Sarajevo, what sparked my interested in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in a war that happened in my lifetime but of which, oddly, I hadn't heard before. However, both experiences felt very different. In Mostar, the present and the past appear to live side-by-side, with numerous ruins standing exactly as they did when the war ended, almost 25 years ago. This made the conflict feel much closer, much more real.

The challenge was, then, to look past this first impression, past the post-war destruction-division that became the only defining features of Mostar ever since and find other readings to the city. The proposal was to approach the city through its river, Neretva, to understand the urban, social and ecological transformations unleashed in 1992, the material and immaterial consequences this brought and the reactions to the initial event.¹ Through the exploration of the river and its surroundings, contained in a stone canyon punctuated with trees and plants, I realized how uncommon it is to find a landscape so natural (at least to the eye) in the middle of a city, and how captivating it results against the backdrop of the buildings. Then I started looking more carefully and realized that that seemingly untamed nature was everywhere, growing in the river and spreading into the city itself; on the sidewalks, in abandoned lots, in many of the ruined buildings.

This last sight became particularly fascinating, for the almost symbiotic assemblages' nature and matter made. Trees and plants were not only growing inside the remains of buildings but also on them, covering walls, breaking through cracks, peeking through windows and doors, topping mountains of rubble. And with this came an increasing number of unexpected experiences: the texture of soil, puddles and mud, birds chirping next to a construction site, the smells of plants and dampness in a seemingly urban setting. Nevertheless, what I found unexpected at the beginning, ended up becoming a constant in my experience of Mostar. Those little patches of spontaneous vegetation resulted so ubiquitously spread around the city that it is evident that the landscape of destruction has already turned into something different, ultimately pointing to a greener and wilder

¹ De Wit, S. and Pilav, A. (2018). Joint Research and Design Graduation Lab - Neretva Recollection: Materiality of War, Flowing Memories and Living Archive (pp. 6).



Image 3: Author, (2018). *Nature taking over the ruin.*

Mostar than it was ever planned.

After a while, however, came the realization that it is unfeasible to pretend that wild vegetation taking over multiple spots around the city, without human disturbance or plans for its management, will offer a solution for a city that is still in need of many of the spaces it lost during the war. As captivating as untamed vegetation results in the middle of the city, or precisely because of that, it seems necessary to find the balance between the needs of humans and non-humans, between the preservation of plants and the reactivation of abandoned spaces, as a way to guarantee a long-term coexistence. So, while I see an opportunity in the comeback of wild plants to the city, I also believe that is important to address both the issues this new situation creates and the old issues that were hidden by it, thinking of the best alternative for all the parts affected by these sites so that neither one primes over the other.

“Cities have rich ecosystems, often with higher bio diversity than areas considered nearly natural, such as agricultural land. (...) The question becomes whether these spaces can be designed to increase their cultural and economic benefits, without compromising their ecological value.”²

² Desimini, J. (2014). Notions of Nature and a Model for Managed Urban Wilds. In Barron, P. and Mariani, M. *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the End of the Pale* (pp. 177-178). New York: Routledge.



Image 4: Author, (2018). *Life growing on the remains of war.*

*“A forest is an ecosystem
A lichen is an ecosystem
An edge...
A bark...
A mountain...
A rock...
A cloud...”*

Gilles Clement, *Manifest for the Third Landscape*

INTRODUCTION

“Will the cities with which I am bound by hundreds of visible and invisible threads, whose beauty I have absorbed, whose wisdom I have admired, the cities of so many of my friends - will Vukovar, Sarajevo, Mostar in the topography of their ashes ever to find a sign of hope? Will they even have the desire to live again?”³

Mostar contains a multiplicity of ruined, abandoned and contested spaces, a consequence of the war in which it was involved between 1992 and 1996. But to define those spaces today we cannot think only of the violent changes that originated them, or of the extensive landscapes of ruins and debris that follow every war. The fact that war ruins remained long after the end of the armed conflict, becoming blank spots in the city, allowed them to slowly transform into something else. The abandonment of those structures enabled the processes of ruination and decay to progress, making them less appealing to humans and giving space for non-human actors to start reclaiming portions of the city.

Today, new and renovated buildings stand between neglected ruins and stalled constructions, many of the latest overgrown by spontaneous vegetation. Plants have taken over the leftovers of war, shaping a new kind of space that is neither completely urban nor wild: the urban wilderness. And if we look even closer into this combination of apparently dissimilar conditions, we will find a kind of coexistence that goes beyond the sharing of spaces in the city. What was once an area of general destruction is now covered by plants growing directly from war debris and contaminated soils. With time, man-made and plants have further entangled, forming hybrids where matter and life intersect and support each other, turning ruined areas into the perfect ground for blooming ecosystems of increased biodiversity.

But what happens when this extraordinary situation becomes the norm? What when cultural spaces, residential buildings and public places are all violently emptied of their functions and conquered by plants instead? What when the buildings lined on the sides of the streets disappear and wild vegetation takes their place? What when the city is dotted with large extensions of ruined, (programmatically) void space?

The repetition of this phenomenon on a city-wide scale certainly has an impact on the perception of Mostar as a whole. While the spontaneous vegetation thriving all over

³ Bogdanović, B. in Mačkić, A. (2016). *Mortal Cities Forgotten Monuments* (pp. ?). Zurich: Park Books.

Mostar is fascinating in many ways, it can't hide the past. Trees and plants can conceal the void, but the ruins they have grown from are still there, haunting the city with their presence.⁴ Moreover, the presence of mature ecosystems in the heart of the city also signifies absence: the absence of action, the impossibility to face the extensive damage of the city, the neglect that allows nature to conquer and the void left by the disappearance of what used to be in its place. And so, the city, an environment that we are all familiar with, suddenly turns strange, disconcerting, startling. That makes the urban wilderness a rather unsettling place for some.

This research departs from the idea that the ruined spaces taken over by plants in Mostar could be a valuable addition to the city. Yet, their opportunities are hard to explore when humans are either not aware of its value or not appealed by the current state of the sites. Therefore, the project seeks to mediate the contact of humans with the urban wilderness as a way to highlight and preserve its value; understood as a haven for vegetation rarely seen in the city, as a programmatic void that allows for the introduction of new uses in the city and as a place for the interaction of a variety of things and species. For this, the project deals with questions as the right measure for an intervention that makes visible its potential and possibilities without destroying the ecosystems in it, the management of such spaces in a long-term perspective, the options to tackle its widespread presence in the city or the role and treatment of war ruins appropriated by plants.

Committing to these tasks is not only important to provide an answer to the issues found in the context studied. On a wider look, we will realize that the entanglement of plants and material remains seen in Mostar is far from being unique. And although the sight of trees growing through half-standing buildings and amidst the extensive destruction of the city is a recurring image in the aftermath of armed conflicts, the ways to deal with it are still unclear. As it happened in Berlin once, as it is happening in Mostar, as it might eventually happen in places going through war right now, like Syria or Yemen, the debris that accounts for man's destructive capacity has the potential to be the beginning of a new life re-covering the city⁵. In that way, the abandoned, derelict sites of the past can be more than a reminder of trauma, constituting starting points from where to explore new relations with the world around us, between the man-made and the wild, between human and non-human beings, between the planned city and the spaces that escape its control.

The exploration of hybrid sites in Mostar is also important in the quest for alternative ways of designing that leave spaces for a diverse, wild nature, a scarce sight in an increasingly industrialized world. The presence of undisturbed vegetation in the gaps of our cities acquires an unsuspected relevance if we considered that the "outside" areas with which a pristine, unspoiled nature has been traditionally associated with, are not free of human influence anymore. Rural landscapes are engineered to such extent that only a few selected species are able to survive in them. Meanwhile, the species growing spontaneously in the city, often in highly hostile environments, are consistently labeled as invasive and chased away. This contradiction forces us to rethink the way how we react to and how we

⁴ Tim Edensor argues that until the XXth century ruins had a rather romantic or picturesque meaning, seen as reminders of a glorious past, places to dwell on melancholy or representations of appealing decay. This notion, however, was shaken with the advent of modern wars and the experience of a new magnitude of destruction. Modern ruins are too many, too recent, too painful, to be a pleasant experience.

⁵ The appreciation of these landscapes was widely documented by botanists such as Cornel Schmidt or H. Pfeiffer, in Germany after World War II, who described the fascination produced in them by the coming back of life to the extensive fields of rubble left in the city in the aftermath of the war.

deal with the plants reconquering the city.

About this report

This report follows a process triggered by the acts of war in 1992. It starts drawing from what Mostar was before that moment, to a look into the consequences of the war, and then to a perspective of that ongoing transformation, read through the present hybridization of man-made structures and plants. It ends with an alternative for what those spaces could be, reflected in the design assignment that accompanies this this research. The structure of the report is divided in seven chapters, offering a chronological overview of the events mentioned above.

In Before I and II it gives a look at what Mostar used to be in the past, offering first a historical view and then a second reading through its changing relationship with nature throughout time. This not only symbolizes a change on our way of living that encompasses much more than Mostar, but also fits in theorizations of how this process has happened and what are its possible outcomes in the future. In Disturbance, the middle point of the research, an account of the events of war is given, emphasizing on the immediate aftermath, particularly the effects of war and destruction on the built fabric and the creation of spatial conditions that were not familiar for the city until that moment. In Futures, the report draws on a possible alternative to the current situation, seen while visiting Mostar, offering answers to the issues found through the exploration of the design proposal. To end with, the epilogue contains a reflection of the one-year journey that led to the final products shown, disclosing the thinking process, the crucial points of the research and finally the arrival to a possible (temporary) solution for these sites.

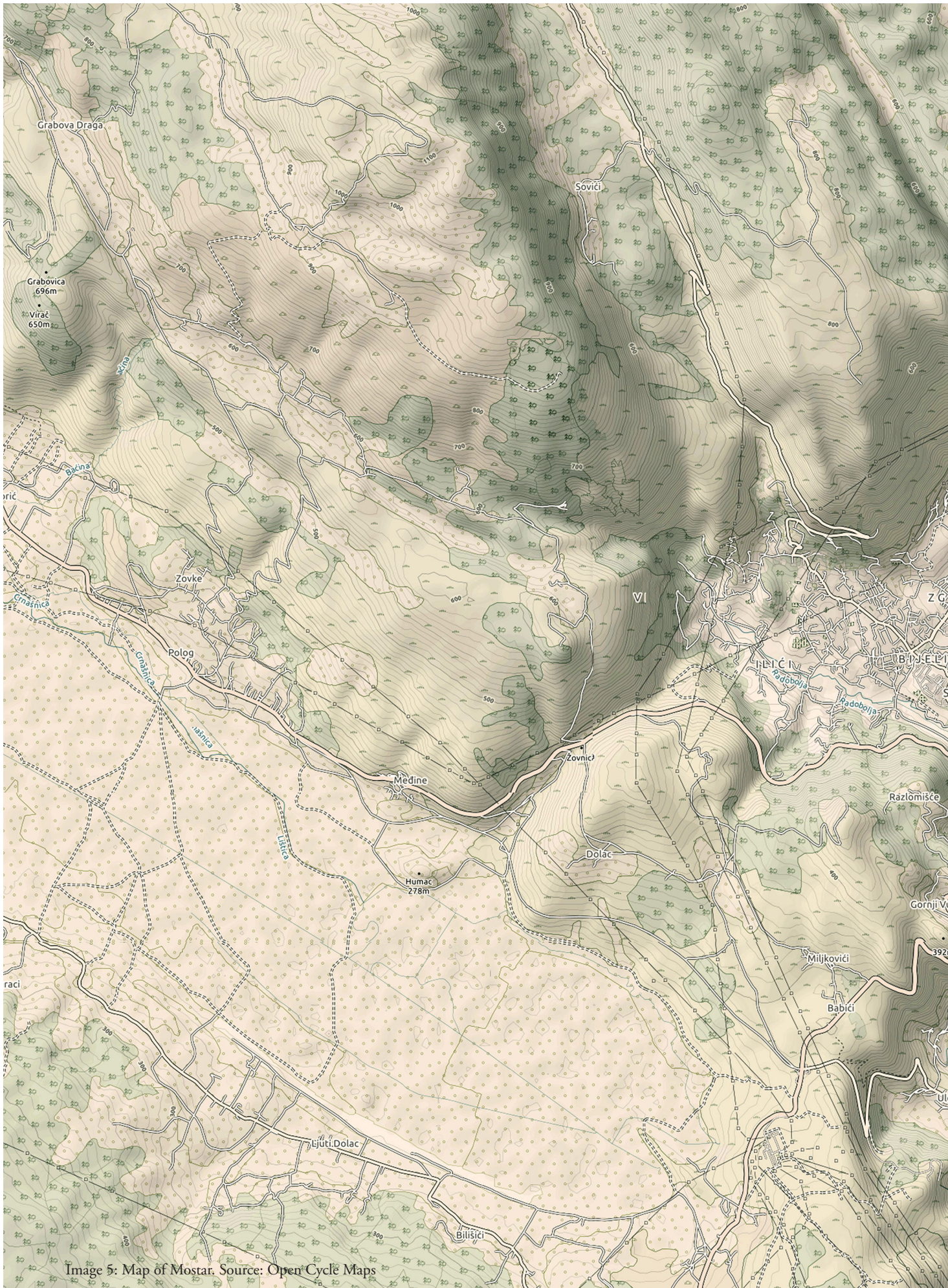


Image 5: Map of Mostar. Source: Open Cycle Maps



before I - Mostar



Image 6: Author, (2018). *Mostar, Neretva and the new Stari Most*

BEFORE I:

The context

Mostar is a city located in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is the capital of the region of Herzegovina, as well as its cultural and economic center. The city sits on the Neretva river valley, crossed by the vertical line drawn by the waters of the river, a natural feature that has been an indisputable part of the identity of the city throughout its history. There are several bridges spanning over Neretva and joining the two sides of the city, among which, the Stari Most (literally the Old Bridge), a magnificent piece of Islamic architecture, is particularly important. The name Mostar derives precisely from this relation, from the keepers that used to guard the first bridge over the river, the *mostari*.

The area along the river has been populated by human settlements since prehistory and throughout the Middle Ages, but the history of Mostar as a city starts in 1468, when the region first comes under Ottoman rule. Being part of the Ottoman Empire, the settlement starts transforming into an urban area, with the organization of the city in commercial and residential zones, the *čaršija* and the *mahalas*, the construction of a market on the left side of the river and a first wooden bridge leading to it. In 1566 the Stari Most is built to replace the previous structure, with a single stone arch joining the two edges of Neretva, a construction feat that has been a symbol of Mostar ever since.

The city continued developing as part of the Ottoman Empire until the 19th century, when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy takes control over Bosnia and Herzegovina, which joins as part of their Empire. The change of rule signifies a great industrial expansion for the city, what starts a building boom that rapidly increases the pace of urbanization, especially towards the west. The new buildings follow both the modern Austrian standards and the grand formal styles from Vienna, adding a new image to the city. Mostar is then defined by its combination of old and new parts, linked together by a new axis running from east to west, the Bulevar, a physical and metaphorical connection between the past and the present.

By 1918 World War I is over, resulting in the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and consequently ending the rule of monarchy over Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country then becomes part of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, an ensemble of nations that would later turn into Yugoslavia. After World War II, Yugoslavia goes from being a monarchy to a federal republic, with the establishment of a new government by

the communist party and its leader, Josip Broz Tito. The rule of Tito marks an era of great prosperity for the city, which turned into a major economic center and a popular touristic destination. By this time Mostar is also known for being an enormously multicultural city, housing a varied mix of ethnicities and religions in the same spaces. Muslim Bosniaks, catholic Croats and orthodox Serbs lived together, in peace, under the same flag, making the city a symbol of tolerance for the entire Yugoslavia⁶.

The smooth coexistence between different ethnic groups was made possible by the presence of Tito, but this ideal situation would start to crumble shortly after his death, in 1980. Tensions between Croats, Bosniaks and Serbians kept building up for years, until they finally led to the separation of Yugoslavia. In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence following a successful referendum, while the Serbian and Croatian governments were meeting secretly to agree the partition of the country between them. This was the last of a chain of events that confronted the three main groups in the city, ultimately unleashing war in the country.

Today, the mention of Mostar is mostly associated with events that are, one way or another, a product of the war. The political and geographical division of the city, with Bosniaks east and Croats west, has become a recurring topic when studying Mostar. The image of the Stari Most being hit by shells until it fell in pieces into the river has given one of the most symbolic and widely spread depictions of the horrors of the war destroying the country. The newly built old bridge, standing as an exact replica of the destroyed old bridge, is not anymore, a 400-year-old piece of heritage, but a reminder of the efforts to put together what the war broke. And even though the reconstructed Mostar is undeniably charming, again popular among tourists, its image seems to be frozen in a few stills, hiding other stories from arising to the surface.

As I said before, I'm particularly interested in one of those hidden narratives, in an element that is frequently seen in the reality of Mostar but still missing when talking about it: the wild vegetation silently conquering the multiple abandoned and ruined spaces of

6 Mačkić, A. (2016). *Mortal Cities Forgotten Monuments* (pp. ?). Zurich: Park Books.

*“ This is my country
my footpath, my blackberry and stone.
I was born here - the mountain was falling
says my mother...
The Neretva, big, troubled and horrid
was carrying away the trees and everything alive,
everything dead...
This is my country,
my thorny bush, sands and stone.
Both of my green eyes
bear green and die green
like Neretva...
Here the sun is born from the earth
where my sad soul is from
where the sky blue breathes.”*

Mirsad Denjo

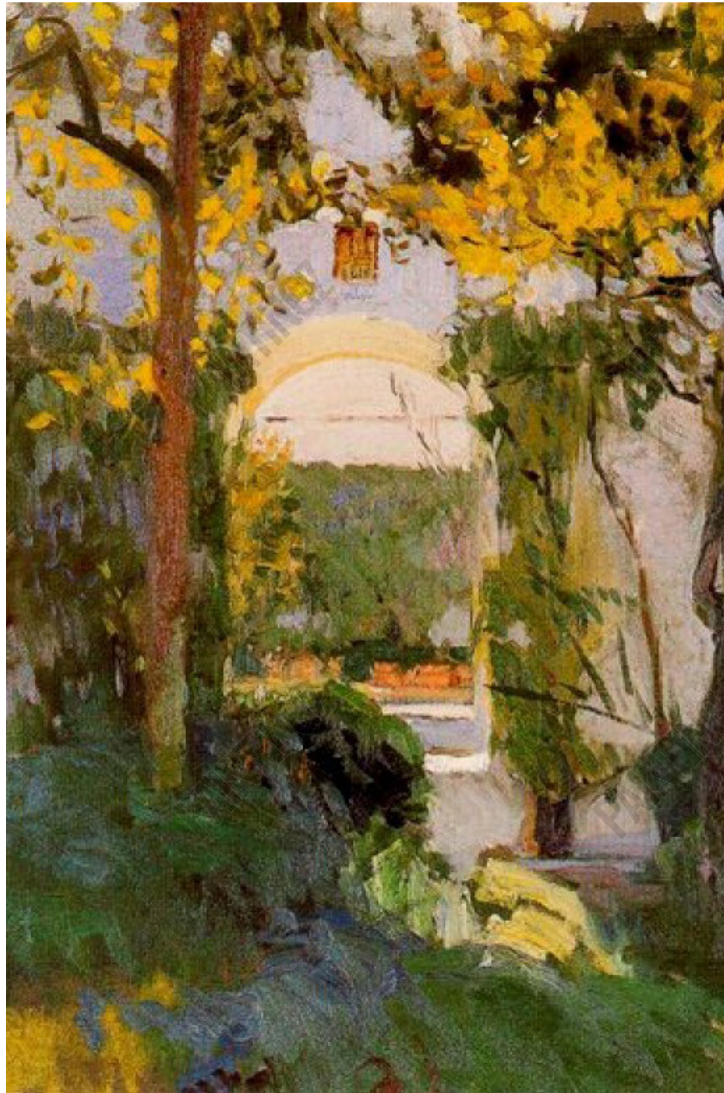


Image 8: Sorolla, J., (1910). *Old garden of the Alcazar in Seville*.

The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an axe or a saw—even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships. The tree in the garden could easily have sprung from the same seed as the tree in the forest, and we can claim only its location and perhaps its form as our own.

William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*

BEFORE II: On cities and nature

the city. To understand that combination found today, it can be useful to look at the relation between the city and its nature, to the changes it went through to become what it is now. Indeed, the story told in the previous chapter, about the evolution and development of Mostar under a succession of empires and leaders, can be retold from a different perspective if we look at what those changes driven by humans supposed for the geographical place where they happened; for the environment, for nature and particularly for plants.

Neretva is a karstic river, found in Mostar at the bottom of a steep stone canyon. In and around the canyon grow several species of plants that are adapted to the rocky terrain. The climate in the area responds to the humid subtropical climate, with hot and dry summers and mild winters.⁷ If we go further away from the river, we find a valley surrounded by mountains, located between 40 and 70 meters above sea level, characterized by fertile, alluvial soils densely vegetated with native forests of pine, beech and oak.⁸

With the first settlers on the Neretva valley, and up until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the built area was mostly limited to the east side, on the narrow strip of terrain between the river and the mountain, and the sides of the Radobolja river, running from west to east. Human influence, however, extended further to the west of the river, with a significant portion of land destined for agriculture and a series of irrigation canals built to sustain it. So, even when nature was largely present in the area back then, it has been a long time since it was only that original, wild nature that covered the mountains. Ever since humans first inhabited the valley, nature around, or at least the area on the immediate vicinity of the settlement, has been modified to turn it into a part of the productive system of the city, a vital function to support human life around it.

This important to keep in mind because it calls into question the belief that nature can only be such if it is untouched by humans, as if only what is commonly understood as wilderness⁹, found mainly in remote, inaccessible areas of our planet, is natural enough to be fully appreciated. Accepting the existence of a better or more “natural nature” and a

7 Description according to the Köppen climate classification system, where Mostar falls in the subtype Cfa, or humid subtropical climate, defined by at least four months of average temperatures above 10 °C, at least one month of average temperature above 22 °C and the coldest month averaging above 0 °C. The precipitation does not significantly differ between seasons and there are no dry months in the summer.

8 Maslo, S. (2014). The Urban Flora of the Region of Mostar (pp. 101). *Nat. Croat.*, 23 (1), pp. 101–145.

9 The Oxford dictionary defines wilderness as “an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region.”

rest, perhaps represented by those areas that are considered not sufficiently pure, suggests that there are parts of it with an implicit higher value that should therefore be protected, while all others can be manipulated, moved and cleared to suit human purposes. But maintaining such a perspective “*is possible only if we accept the wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine—remote from humanity and untouched by our common past. In fact, everything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing.*”¹⁰

In Mostar, the transformation of the landscape has only become more evident after that first appropriation of land for buildings and agriculture. If the footprint of the city was rather modest at the beginning, the rapid growth since the Austro-Hungarian Empire necessarily meant that the surrounding nature would experience major changes in the middle of the transformation taking place. What used to be cultivated land was largely repurposed to accommodate new urban areas, remaining only a few spaces along the Radobolja river. This tendency was further accentuated with the flourishing of Mostar as an economic center in Yugoslavia, what made the urbanization of the valley almost total. By 1990 both sides of the river had been built over, with nature seen in the city mainly in the form of domesticated vegetation. Only the mountains and the riverbeds of the Neretva were left for wild plants to survive in the city.

In that city that Mostar had become, the park and the garden appeared as the spaces given back to nature after the area had been urbanized, allowing people to feel the benefits of being close to nature, mostly plants from now on, without having to travel far. Those parks and gardens, laid down in specific areas as part of the planning of the city, offered an experience that was tailored according to their purpose: leisure, ornamentation or private enjoyment. In them, vegetation was selected and arranged to offer fruits, shadow, or a visual spectacle. Paths were created to connect the different features included in the space and allow humans to move easily between them. And this, of course, gave an image of a much less wild area, linking back to the idea of the more and less natural natures mentioned before.

At the same time, the designation of spaces where plants were allowed to live and the selection of species suitable for urban spaces created a second category with all other species that resisted human control, marginal plants spontaneously growing in the gaps of our cities and creeping in agricultural settings, breaking the boundaries that humans assigned for them. These so-called invasive species or weeds, became an undesirable presence wherever they appeared, signifying a disruption of the tightly planned framework that characterizes the places where we live. Weeds, as David Gissen defines them, “*are those plants that get in the way of the programs, agendas, or desires that we project into spatial constructs*”.¹¹ And so, efforts are constantly made to remove them and keep them under control.

In a way, the story of Mostar up until this point tells the story of almost every other modern city, where the relation with nature has gone from living in it, through its productive use, to the final attempt to dominate it. And as this change takes place, “*the*

10 Cronon, W. (1996). *The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature* (pp. 14). *Environmental History*, 1 (1), pp. 7-28.

11 Gissen, D. (2012). *Subnature* (pp. 150). New York: Princeton Architectural Press. See also for other disruptive presences in urban settings such as insects and debris.



Images 9, 10, 11: Unknown. *Mostar before the war.*
Source: Centar za mir i multietničku saradnju Mostar, Mostar.

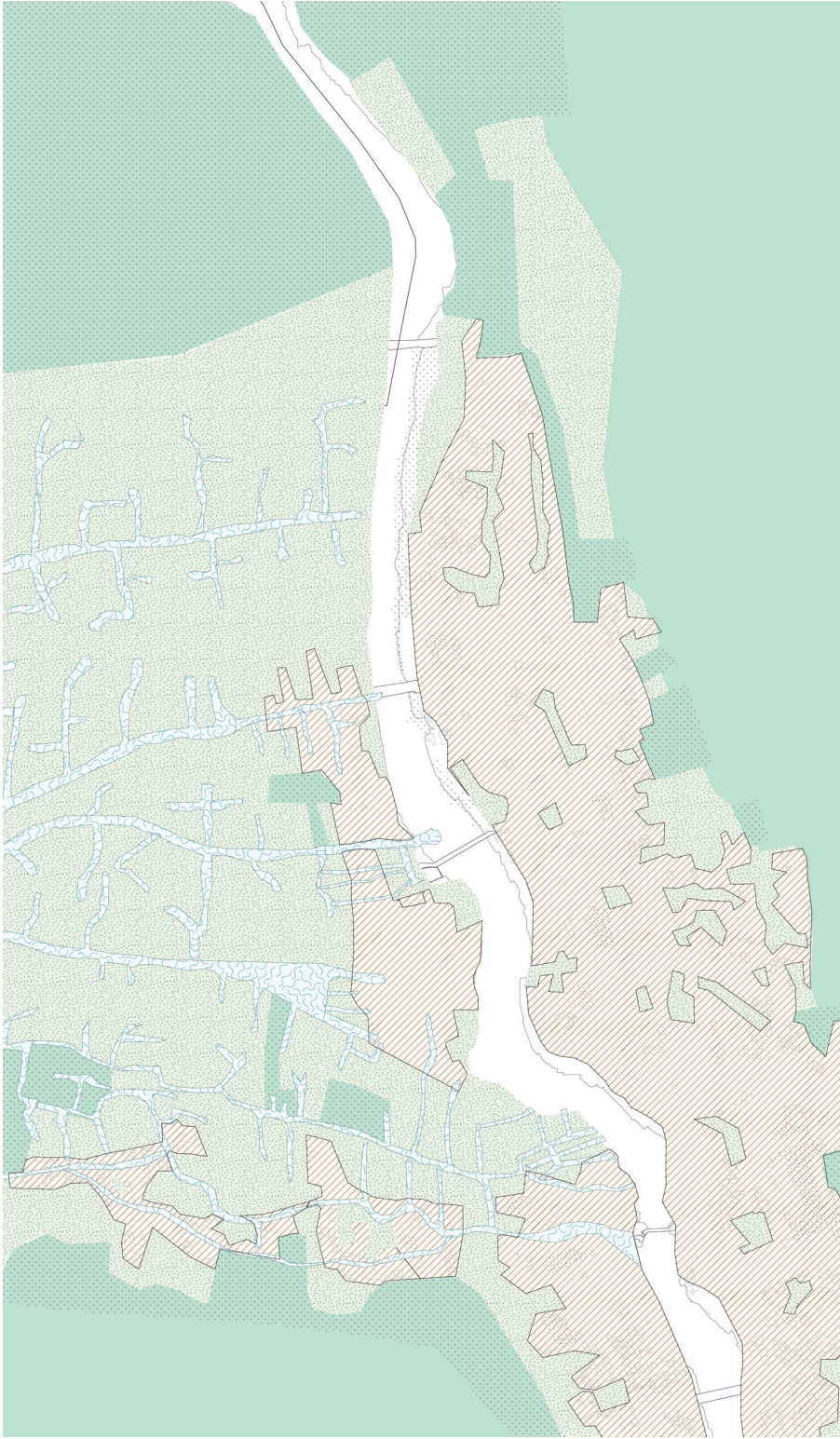


Image 12: Hammond, S and Chuecos, G. (2019). *Nature in Mostar during the Austro-Hungarian Empire*

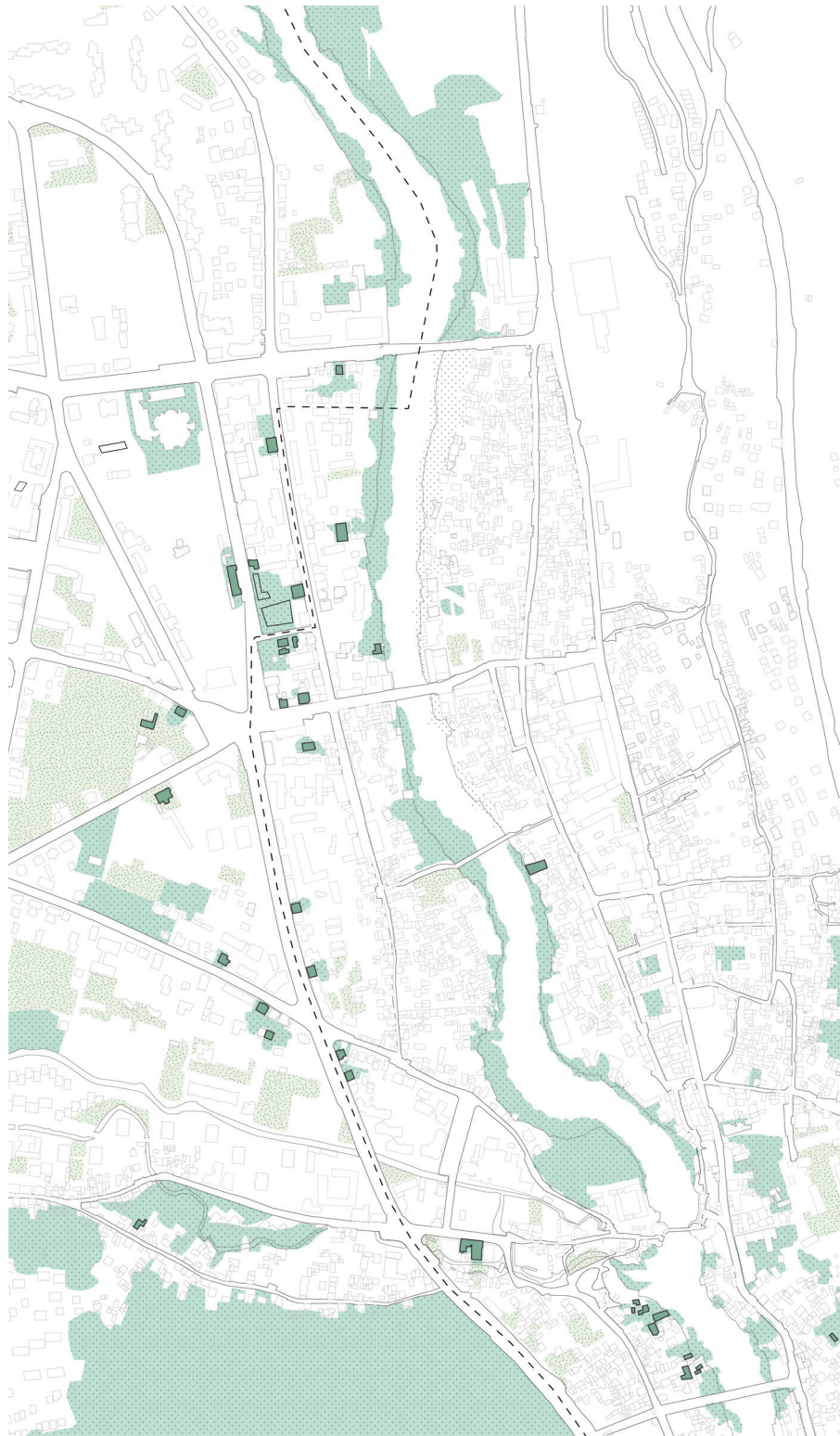


Image 13: Hammond, S and Chuecos, G. (2019). *Nature in Mostar during the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*

*city stops being in the landscape, as a sort of monumental signature, to become, progressively, in and of itself, landscape. In less than a century, we go from the enclosed city profiled against the horizon of a fairly cultivated countryside, to the spectacle of the big city from which our eyes can no longer escape”.*¹²

Then, that earlier discussion on how we assign value to nature depending on human standards of purity and wildness is relevant now more than ever, because in a time when there is no corner of the planet that hasn't been influenced by human activity, unspoiled nature is a rare sight. If plants are already punctual elements in the middle of an extensive urbanization, islands in a largely built space, we could wonder what will be left to preserve, where will nature be found, when all those areas have disappeared. Hence the need to reexamine the long-established division between the urban and the wild, between man and nature, between human and non-human, because the lines on which that separation was based are not so clear anymore.

In that sense, Gilles Clement¹³ says, the entire world, seen as that heterogenous mix of natural and built areas, can be understood as a garden, garden meaning the place where the best plants have been historically kept. The difference is that, whereas in the traditional garden the plants were together, in a bounded area that facilitated their protection, now the garden has lost its limits and spread all around the planet. The world as *“the planetary garden is a place where all diversity subject to evolution accumulates. Today it is guided by human activity and hence in danger”*.¹⁴

With the last big political shift in the country, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, the transformation of Mostar and its surroundings into an urban region was finally complete. In this city with a set of defined and more or

12 Picon, A. (2000). *Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust* (pp. 67). *Grey Room*, 1, pp. 64-83.

13 French gardener, landscape designer, botanist and writer, known by his observations of nature as a system in movement, what translates into gardens with plants that are constantly changing, evolving and, following their own path. In his writings he introduced important concepts as the planetary garden and the third landscape.

14 Clement, G. and Morris, S. (2015). *The Planetary Garden and Other Writings*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.



Image 15 *Aerial view of Mostar after the war.* The inside of buildings can be seen due to the destruction of most roofs. Source:

DISTURBANCE:

The war

less stable conditions a particular ecosystem thrived, with humans and non-humans evolving simultaneously in separate spaces designed for each. Humans would maintain their gardens and parks and take care that nature developed according their plan. In exchange, they could enjoy this domesticated nature; experience it, eat its fruits, smell its flowers. This settled state, however, came abruptly to an end when a major disturbance changed the dynamics of the city.

After the death of Tito, the differences between the three main ethnic groups in the country, Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks became more patent than ever, eventually escalating into a war. Between 1992 and 1995 the conflict was manifested through violence all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, with sieges, genocide and urban destruction becoming the main language in a society that had lived together peacefully shortly before. By the end of the four years that the war lasted, the relations between the different groups had been irreparably broken and many cities entirely devastated. And even though Mostar was just one of the cities affected by a much larger conflict, it was probably one of the places where the consequences were seen more dramatically, lasting long after the end of the war.

In Mostar, the war was fought in two successive stages between 1992 and 1994. In a first moment, from April to June 1992, Bosnians and Bosnian Croats confronted the Yugoslav People's Army, then commanded by Serbs, who were trying to take control of the city. The attack by Serbian forces put the city under continuous shelling, what forced many people to flee the city and caused the destruction of a great part of the infrastructure, including most of the bridges over the river and many cultural and religious buildings. Still, the Serbs were finally defeated, what led to their expulsion from the city.

After this first victory, Mostar was in peace for a short while, but the relations between the two groups that had fought together, Bosnians and Croats, continued deteriorating. By April 1993 the tensions had led to the division of the city, with Bosnians on the east and Croats on the west. One month later the armed fight resumed, with intense and continued shelling destroying the only bridge remaining, the Stari Most, and almost all buildings that had survived the previous assault. As a consequence of the war, *“40.000 people left the city and one-sixth of the inhabitants had fled abroad. 70% of all homes were*



Image 16: *View of the area of general destruction along the war frontline.* Source: U.S National Archive



heavily or completely destroyed."¹⁵ Even nature had a role to fulfill in the conflict, with trees being strategic elements to block or allow views, and gardens becoming a vital space for survival in a city that had cut its food supply.

In 1994, when a cease fire agreement was reached between the two parts, the central area of Mostar was completely devastated. The impact on buildings, happening from the air, with shells landing on the upper part, and the front, from the bullets fired to them, caused damage beyond any reconstruction efforts in many structures, as both their loadbearing capacity and their ability to stand the weather were seriously reduced. Vast extensions of urban fabric were turned into ruins and formerly used spaces into no-man's-land. And as buildings lost their enclosure, with roofs and facades being the most exposed and therefore the most prone to collapse, an odd situation appeared: the inside of buildings suddenly became visible to the outside, showing fragments of interior spaces standing among mountains of rubble and bullets.

There was a strange sense of unity in the landscape of destruction, in which all the damaged structures appeared to be more or less the same: public and private buildings were equally harmed, losing their distinctive characteristics after the sustained shelling of their enclosures. Clusters of building fragments appeared grouped randomly, creating new combinations of spaces that broke previous divisions and notions of ownership. In the ruins left standing, there was no public or private anymore, just semi-open or semi-enclosed spaces available for anyone who dared to enter them.

But the war not only meant the physical destruction of buildings. Once the infrastructure was damaged, the functions taking place there couldn't be resumed when the war ended, leaving the city with an enormous amount of unclaimed ruins. So, what before the war were blocks with facades lined to the street, in the aftermath became a collection of open buildings and scattered rooms connected through void, unutilized spaces.

15 Mačkić, A. (2016). *Mortal Cities Forgotten Monuments* (pp. ?). Zurich: Park Books.



Image 17: Unknown. *The interior of a building shown to the outside*
Source: Centar za mir i multietničku saradnju Mostar, Mostar.



Image 18: Author, (2019). *The city*



Image 19: Author, (2019). *The void*



Image 20: Author, (2019). *Coexistence between humans, non-humans and ruins*

FUTURE: Coexistence

Transformation of the (scattered) block through the intervention and connection of the remaining pieces, creating new arrangements that enhance and preserve the particular qualities given to the site by the diverse natural and man-made elements accumulated in it over time.

A new structure of three different areas is identified in the site, responding to the different degrees of entanglement between the natural and the man-made in them, pointing to the most prominent features for each part of the site. These are used as a guide to define the parameters under which the transformation will occur, finally arriving to a first area that relates to the human, the man-made and the new, one for the interaction with the existing, for humans, ruins and plants, and one for the wild plants taking over the city.

The experience of the site is given by those three areas identified, which are understood as a sequence or a gradient that takes the user from the most recognizable/relatable surrounding, the man-made, through the combination of decaying man-made and plants and finally to the wild. This is used as a strategy to help create a more aware or positive relation with the urban wilderness, giving a space for the first contact with the site and gradually reintroducing humans to the presence of wild plants in formerly built spaces. The three areas mentioned above are threaded by a path that goes through the entire site, positioned in a way that directs the user to the most remarkable features and experiences in each of them, making the visit a journey through all the built and natural elements, through the present and the past of the site. The path is made of timber on its entire length, keeping a consistent language that allows the users to recognize it as a continuous element

In the first one, the most heavily urbanized part in the past, the ruins from the war have been thoroughly removed, leaving after them a heavily disturbed area with signs of heavy metal contamination, where mainly plants and small trees grow. In the same part of the site a newer building, dating from 2008, is present, left in an unfinished/abandoned state, giving the possibility of reusing it for the introduction of new programme. Due to all the aforementioned characteristics, this first area is seen as the most appropriate for the insertion of new elements that can house the spaces of the plant archive, enabling the concentration of (newly) built structures in close proximity to facilitate the connection between them and their understanding as part of the same programmatic block. In this way, the weight of the built intervention is also put over the area that has already been

disturbed.

The language used for these interventions relates to the idea of quickly recognizing something familiar, the built, between all the plants growing in the site. For that reason, the choice of materials leans towards an appearance that is distinct from the natural. At the same time, the intention is still to try to minimize the impact of the intervention on the site, for which a lightweight structure is preferred. From those considerations, comes the choice of steel as the main material for the new pavilion and bar/building inserted in this area, while brick and cladding are used to create enclosures when needed. For the floors, tiles are laid on a sand bed, avoiding the need to pour concrete over the soil, making it possible for plants to still grow in that area, in between the tiles or in the case that the pavement is eventually removed.

The second area recognized is where ruins from the war are still standing, all of them having lost roofs and other parts of their enclosure, making them work more like outdoor rooms than buildings. This is where the man-made and plants have radically intertwined, creating hybrids that aren't found anywhere else in the site. For that reason, this area is seen as the perfect place for the interaction of humans with plants, ruins and the processes taking place. Therefore, the rooms and the spaces in between the ruins are used as viewing points to witness those, as gardens to reproduce the seeds kept in the seedbank and as working spaces to prepare the seedlings.

In terms of the intervention needed for this, the idea is to reduce even further the weight of the new intervention, seeking to maintain the equilibrium between the natural and the built. The new additions rely on the spaces shaped by the elements already present, using the existing divisions, enclosures or covers and adding only pavements, furniture and equipment for the maintenance of the gardens and ways to move through to visualize the features of the area. The materiality is consistent with that of the first area, relying on a tile pavement that facilitates movement without creating a solid cover over the ground. To reach the viewpoints, a lightweight steel structure is attached to the ruins, making them accessible while also helping to stabilize them. A greenhouse, wood tables, benches and storage furnish the spaces and enable their use as planting/plant keeping areas.

The last area identified, without any built elements and now completely overgrown, is characterized by three types of vegetation: a dense cover of bushes reaching between 2 and 3 meters over the place where a building stood before the war, an area with mature trees growing in what used to be a courtyard in the old block (therefore never built on), and a portion of soil used as parking where only a few small plants grow. Since plants have grown mostly undisturbed there for the last 25 years, the proposal is to preserve this area for the experience of different types of spontaneous vegetation, reducing the intervention in it to the creation of a way to move through that allows to experience all of them. In this part of the site the path is raised over a steel structure, limiting the contact with the ground to its supports and restraining the influence of humans in the area to the path that has already been defined.



Image 20: Author, (2019). *Experiencing nature with the path.*

future - man and nature



Image 21: Author, (2019). *Coexistence of plants and tuins*

EPILOGUE

Since my research topic hadn't been completely defined by the time I visited Mostar, the choice was very much guided by my experience of the city. I spent an entire week visiting daily the same area, roughly covering the neighborhood where my site is located. It turns out that that area, being where the frontline used to run during the war, has a very high proportion of ruined and abandoned structures, making it an ideal place for spontaneous vegetation to grow freely. And so, it was there where I first came across wild plants blooming over the leftovers of the city, a sight that left me surprised and intrigued in equal measures. After repeatedly walking past them, I came to the conclusion that, even though it is an odd combination to have schools, cultural centers and residential buildings among war ruins, the plants growing in them gave a certain character to the neighborhood, making the experience, paradoxically, rather pleasant.

I find that the time I spent visiting such a small portion of the city had a great influence on how my research would develop later. With each day I started to look less into the ensemble of the neighborhood and more into the particularities of each ruin, discovering new things every time. After a first visual recognition of the surreal assemblages of debris and plants, I realized that the fascination I felt was not only about their image but about the overall experience; that the presence of such spaces brought sensations, textures, smells and sounds that were not so common in the middle of the city. Therefore, the understanding of the immaterial dimension of these places became an important thread to follow, pointing towards the use of phenomenology as one of my main research methods.

That initial encounter in Mostar was followed by an extensive documentation about the places that became my object of interest, but of which I had little knowledge beyond the observations made there. First, I started to gather a theoretical background to understand the transformation taking place, trying to follow both the decay of the man-made and the evolution of plants until the complete hybridization of the site. At the same time, I made an analytical account of the conditions affecting my site, trying to see how much that theory reflected on the reality I experienced. The development of the design project only came about after I felt I had gained enough knowledge on the possibilities and constraints of working with such sites. Since then, the process has been a continuous back and forth between trying to develop a proposal and finding the place for that hypothetical future in the multilayered story of the site. For that reason, I think that research and design are inseparable, feeding each other until the very end.

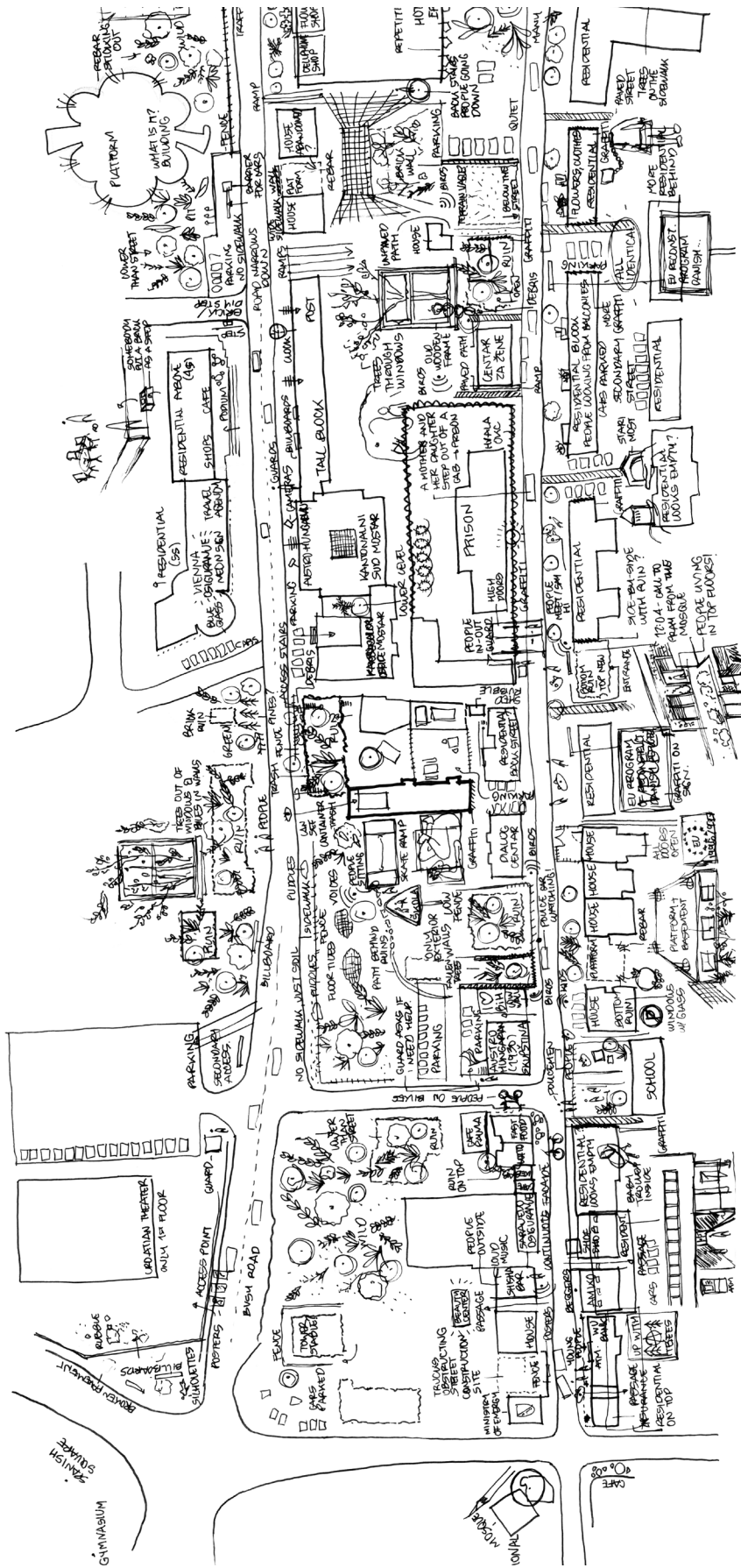


Image 22: Author, (2018). *The experience of a block of Mostar*

Development of the research

At the beginning, the research put a lot of emphasis in the value of plants taking over urban spaces, arguing for the urgent need to preserve them over other aspects or actors involved. This way of thinking led me to the conclusion that the best option was to keep ourselves (humans) from interfering with their evolution, reducing the possibility of intervening to the insertion a few elements within the existing structure. In practice that meant that, even where there was an attempt to create spaces and connections, the site did not have a structuring logic or a program for human users, because doing that would mean causing a new disturbance on the ecosystem. However, after that first experiment it became clear that the approach had a major flaw, in that it did not consider that the site is embedded in a city inhabited by humans and that nature's interests were not the only ones at stake.

The feedback received after the second and third presentations of the project was partly related to the previous point, considering that the attention I was giving to the site as an unique and highly complex place, with its mixture of plants, ruins and other elements, was keeping me from focusing on other equally important aspects; as are the influence of external factors, the relation with the immediate surroundings or with the wider context of the city. That remark would be especially helpful for the next stages of my project, because finding connections with the surroundings, with the present and past of the site, with the people living around, became one of the main guides for the materialization of the design proposal.

Another issue discussed was the ambiguous character of the first proposal presented, in terms of use and definition of the space. Even though there was a detailed analysis of all the activities currently taking place in the site, these were all taken as the programme without filtering or thinking of the implications of formalizing them. That resulted in a great need for different spaces, making the site very urban and contradicting the idea of minimizing the disturbance caused. At the same time, that variety made it difficult to associate the intervention with an existing type of space. Upon further consideration, the programme was narrowed down to the activities that could create a connection with the surrounding spaces, finally coming to the idea of the plant archive, a space of educational-recreational use that also works with the preservation of species.

Finding the balance between all the parts, human and non-human, and providing a response that is beneficial for all of them, became one of the main dilemmas encountered in the development of the project. That idealistic view I had at the beginning, where the presence of untouched vegetation was enough itself to justify the lack of action on the site, was hard to sustain for long. The reality is that Mostar still has a long road towards recovery from the war, and ignoring that, or putting the preservation of ruins and plants over the needs of the people living there, seems somehow superficial. That is why the approach shifted from the almost total preservation to a moderate intervention and management, trying to create a proposal that addresses the issues found in the area (ecological and urban) while providing a space for the use and enjoyment of the citizens.

The last piece of advice received during the presentations was about the possibility of seeing the project as one piece in a wider approach encompassing the entire city, as a

sort of test site for the many spaces with similar conditions found in Mostar. In that way, the design of one of them could set a framework for intervention, between the ruins, the plants and the present needs; a strategy to help tackle the problem of overgrown, ruined and abandoned spaces in a bigger scale. I embraced this task, considering that the replicability of the intervention was a logical consideration for the creation of awareness on the value of such sites. Nevertheless, in the end, the design required answers that were highly site-specific, making it difficult to draw a strategy to be applied on a city-wide scale.

Still, I think the intervention can be understood as a test site in the sense that it shows the benefits of taking a different approach, constituting a first step towards the appreciation, use and preservation of ruined spaces and the plants in them. Whereas the project doesn't aim to transform every overgrown ruin into a plant archive, it does attempt to illustrate how to get there, from the thinking process, the scope and depth of analyses necessary, the parameters for the insertions and finally the possible future if we stop seeing the urban wilderness as a disturbance to be controlled or removed. So, if all the spaces taken over by plants are understood as a network, the site could be a sort of center that makes them visible, the trigger for a bigger transformation of the city.

Reaching conclusions

In current times is easy to draw lines between species and bound them to their own space, usually in separate areas of the planet, with the idea that that will allow us all to live without disturbing each other. But, as seen before, the reality is much more complex, with humans and plants often competing for the domination of the same spaces and humans usually having the upper hand. A common way to restore balance, as I discovered on an earlier stage, is to try to recover spaces for nature, excluding humans from those areas to minimize the disturbance caused. But this responds to the same way of acting mentioned above, something that seems more and more unlikely as we get closer to the core of our cities.

With my research I aimed to find an alternative that allows us to coexist with non-humans, thinking that bringing species together could work the double purpose of preserving plants while also making humans more conscious of their value. That explains the evolution in the concept towards the mediation of contact of humans with the urban wilderness, a vital step for the development of a closer relationship between all actors involved. Overall, I think the final response succeeded in finding common points between humans and non-humans, expressed at first through the sharing of spaces for mutual enjoyment and benefit, and later also in the development of a programme that encourages interaction, with an experience that goes beyond passive observation. This last aspect is also important if the site is to be the first in a series of transformations involving plants, ruins and void spaces, because it has the task of causing a shift significant enough to bring about action on other spaces. For that, the introduction of the educational aspect was a great help, since it facilitates the diffusion of information to raise awareness, a direct approach that is necessary to plant the seed for a more conscious way of relating to our environment.

In that sense, this research is not only relevant in solving some of the issues found in Mostar, but also in the change of perspective required to deal with wild plants growing in the city in an increasingly urban world. The possibility of giving small but multiple

spaces for the preservation of plants inside the city without having to create a division between built, human spaces and spaces for nature, presents an alternative for coexistence in the face of the loss of natural habitats to the expansion of our built areas. This attempt becomes especially challenging in the field of architecture, since accepting their unruly nature means giving up control over certain spaces of the city. It means that the cities that we work so hard to design will always have parts that won't necessarily stick to our plan. Still, this quest is not only meaningful for non-humans, because, at least in my view, the idea of enjoying spontaneous vegetation as part of a wide arrange of spaces is highly seductive, adding new dimensions to our experience of the city.

The project also addresses the recovery of spaces in post-war contexts and the re-use of derelict sites, a task of great importance given the extension of the destruction seen in recent wars. In dealing with ruins, this kind of intervention could stand along other techniques as the demolition or reconstruction of buildings, offering an alternative that enables the use of structures with different degrees of damage, in the highly probable case that not all buildings are fixed or rebuilt in a short period. Abandoned, ruined and derelict places exist everywhere, which also may make more appropriate the study of the process than the design of a city-wide master plan. In that way, such an approach can be an alternative in a variety of contexts, not only for Mostar.

Following this path marks an enormous distance with the more conventional approach of clearing out the site and starting over having (almost) all the variables under control. Working with the existing certainly entails an extra effort to label and understand all the elements and processes present. It implies expanding the basis of our knowledge to cover much more than buildings and people, going into the most varied fields and topics; from botany, to geology, to material science, to the specificity of any other elements found. But, again, I believe it is an effort that offers a valuable reward.

Final observations

The attempt to work beyond the limits of architecture maybe is an unconscious response to the Neretva recollection studio, which encourages the crossings between architecture and landscape, being the two tracks involved in the studio, but also with any other methods, disciplines or analytical processes, as a way to understand the post-war entanglements of urban and natural conditions in Mostar. The brief for the joint studio already brings up a series of topics that were key for the development of the project, as are the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, land and other materials on multiple scales, the multilayered structure of landscapes, from their visual dimension to their history and underlying processes, and, finally, the expression of time-space relations through ruins and their unlimited possibilities for constructing new stories.

Overall, I found that interaction between disciplines very productive, because it helped me find the methods and tools that were more suitable for my research from a wide arrange of options. I think that freedom was precisely what allowed me to find a new perspective to approach these sites, avoiding the urge to build as the only way to fix problems. There was indeed a great deal of advice and exchange of ideas with tutors and students from the landscape track, in a project that, at times, appeared to have more in common with landscape than with architecture. At the end, however, the project found its place within the realm of architecture, with an answer that addresses pertinent issues such as

programme, spatialization or constructive language, without forgetting all the knowledge gained from working outside our field, which is embedded in the final materialization of the proposal.

The studio also introduces the idea of disruption as a strategy to break with the “spaces of shame”, a mental and physical construct created in Mostar by the war and the posterior division of the city. Through this interpretation, the presence of plants in war ruins constitutes a disruption itself, changing the way how the spaces of trauma are perceived over time. The project, then, is born from a succession of disruptions, not in a negative, breaking-with sense, but as events that (further) stir the existing conditions, questioning the way how things are commonly understood and opening a window for change.

The research taught me a lot about the multiple topics I visited in the effort to understand the site. The encounter with the scars of war and the intervention in a post-war context were new and undoubtedly shocking experiences for me, coming from a place where the last armed conflicts happened centuries ago. The approach to the site from an experiential perspective and the study of plants in relation to buildings showed me that unconventional ways can uncover elements that are enormously enriching for the architectural project, a realization that I hope to carry with me and apply in the future projects I engage in. But more than the theoretical and applied knowledge I gained, I think that what I value the most is the process that I went through to jump from one to the other without losing key elements in the way.



Image 22: Author, (2018). *Nature blooming again*

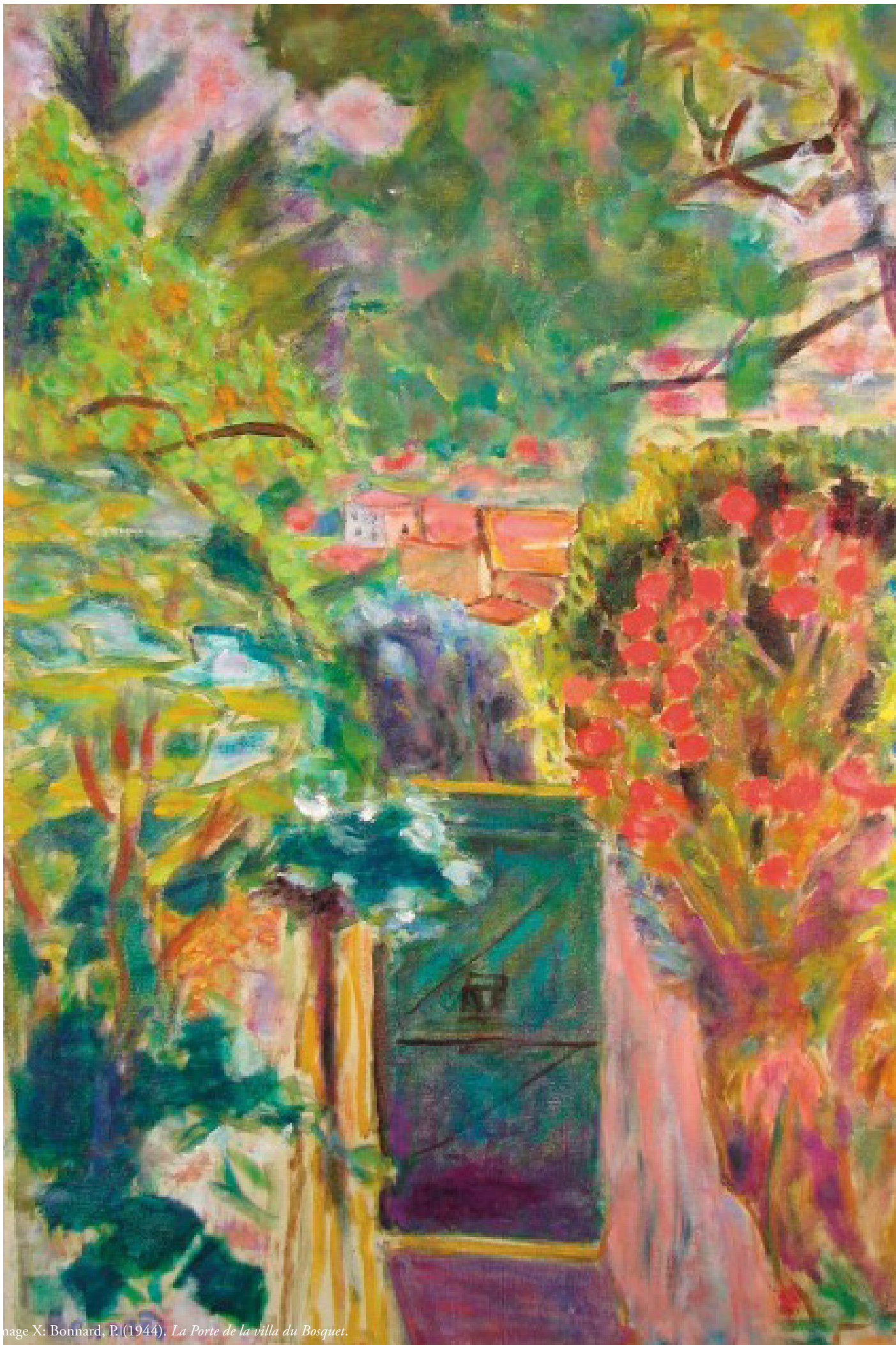


Image X. Bonnard, P. (1944). *La Porte de la villa du Bosquet*.



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