

Living forces: A Visual Exploration of Nature's Principles at Friche Josaphat's Water Pond



Urban Architecture
Last Green in Town

Michalina Dębska
5863309

Research Plan
November 2023

Contents

Introduction	4
Research Aims	5
Themes	6
Methods	20
Agenda	24
Sources	26

"Nature talks, but we just don't listen."

Steven Vogel

keywords
water pond, parliament of things, non-humans, time,
temporality, wetland, socialising nature

← the cover:
waterpond sketch during the second visit on the site
by author

Introduction

The Josaphat Friche area is a topic of debate among urban activists, ecologists, developers and municipalities with varying visions of its future¹. The area, in 2012, was prepared to become a ground for new housing estates that would solve the major housing crisis in Brussels. Meanwhile, the non-decisional discussion gave space and time for creating a unique, biodiverse environment in this remote area. The removed soil was supposed to clear it from post-industrial chemicals. However, this intervention helped unintentionally the life to happen and brought conditions for the enormous amount of species to accommodate. While humans can't access the land, it's highly attended by bees, birds, and foxes. It is a house of many we cannot ignore. This has raised concern: how to give those entities attention through the resources of the master architecture student?

The first step towards including non-human actors in the Friche area as active users of the land was the creation of a catalogue of stories and visual representation on maps prepared as part of group work for the P1 exhibition „The Last Green in Town”. Inspired by the history of the land, I recognized the water pond on the site as a crucial element incorporated with its soil. The terrain becomes mud land every winter, which once caused the activist to accumulate water more efficiently throughout the whole year by digging a hole in the ground². This action helped to create a permanent water feature, rich in various kinds of dragonflies, bees, insects, and as a result, birds find peace in the quiet area. The water pond has become the most valuable part of the Friche area from an environmental

1. Friche Josaphat is one of ten zones earmarked for housing expansion in Brussels. Owned by an urban development corporation (Société d'Aménagement Urbain), the intention is to create a diverse urban space with amenities such as a train station, residences, retail outlets, and workplaces.

2. According to images found at the facebook group Sauvons la friche Josaphat / Red de friche Josaphat and the field trip lecture with Hananah- an urban activist.

perspective This started raising questions: How to value the worth of Friche soil? What is the perspective of the Friche on its own future? What will happen with the growth of its water body? What will happen if the land dehydrates? What are the nature forces and how to understand them? **Finally, how to include and respect those forces and use them in the architectural design language and what this architecture is going to do with nature?**

The research aims to discover the force of non-human protagonists of the water pond in Friche Josaphat in Brussels. This brings the main concern: how to understand the nature bahavoir and represent it to the public?

Research Aims

The goal is to create a high-sensitivity visual book that maps the principles of the ecosystem of the chosen water pond. Through this essay, the pond would enter the Parliament of Things³. Including the words of the speechless things in a non-hierarchical relationship with human voice is a new form of constitution according to Bruno Latour philosophy. My research will follow this approach.

This will be done to develop architectural solutions that include the principles of the ecosystem of The Friche Josaphat and create a delicate spatial intervention on this vulnerable site. “The Embassy of the North Sea” is a major reference for this vision.

The „Parliament of Things” is a conceptual framework proposed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour. It suggests a hypothetical scenario where both human and non-human entities have a voice in shaping decisions regarding the environment and society.

main theme - wetland

Wetlands, as outlined in „Cities and Wetlands,” serve vital habitats for a diverse range of plant and animal species. They provide a unique ecological niche that supports biodiversity and contributes to overall environmental health.

In today's cities, particularly in Brussels, there's a growing recognition of the importance of blue-green infrastructure in mitigating the effects of the climate crisis. Reopening the Senne river is a significant step towards creating a more sustainable urban environment.⁴ Looking at the ecosystem related to water pond - soil, inhabitants and the broader context of livability of Brussels water is the answer for the main theme of the studio - The Last Green in Town. Here it will be the Last Blue-Green in Town.

In the research project, I aim to create a new set of architectural principles for Friche Josaphat that contribute to improving the relationship human – non – human in the city of Brussels. Giving the rights to the Friche land requires creating a **new constitution** in which the land receives its advocacy. The Friche soil, reset a decade ago, brought thousands of protagonist whose forces will be heard. How and who will it bring in the next decade? The delicate but meaningful changes will be **presented over time** in the next decade. How would the proposed architectural transformation affect the biodiversity and ecological health of the water pond and its surrounding ecosystem? What strategies can be implemented to ensure the long-term sustainability and maintenance of the transformed

water pond, including considerations for ongoing ecological management and community stewardship? What is sustainable, and what is resilient? The era of taking control over nature has ended. Nature got the voice, and nature got the power. **Acceptance of decay** and letting nature take over is the unpredictable element of the new agreement. And finally, will it become the last of the first town in the green?

The design would centre around small-scale, soil-sensitive interventions, potentially floating or temporal with minimal environmental impact and easily buildable. The landscape design would prioritise native vegetation and habitat features to support local biodiversity. Accessibility would play a crucial role. The area would be divided into part accessible for people ensuring pathways and seating and those accessible only for former, speechless inhabitants of the Friche.

It will become a versatile space—recreational, educational and cultural. The culture and nature will coexist there together. The main question is what this architecture will do with the nature? Can the sensitive way of conducting research lead to generic architecture?

4. The Senne along whose banks the Belgian capital developed and blossomed for a thousand years, disappeared from view between the 19th and 20th centuries. It was encased in giant pipes below the surface to protect residents from the rivers' filthy waters and frequent floods.

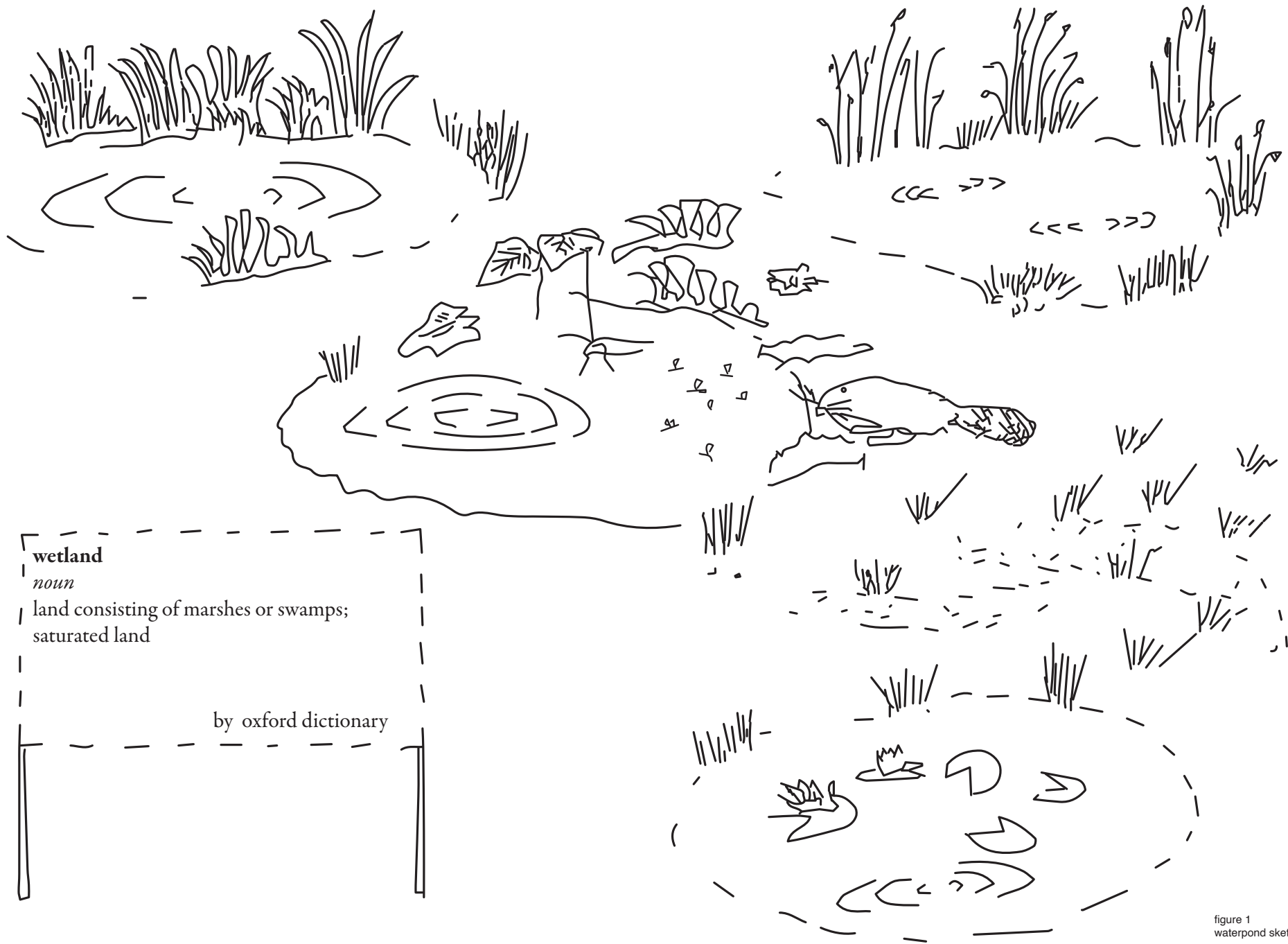


figure 1
 waterpond sketch by author



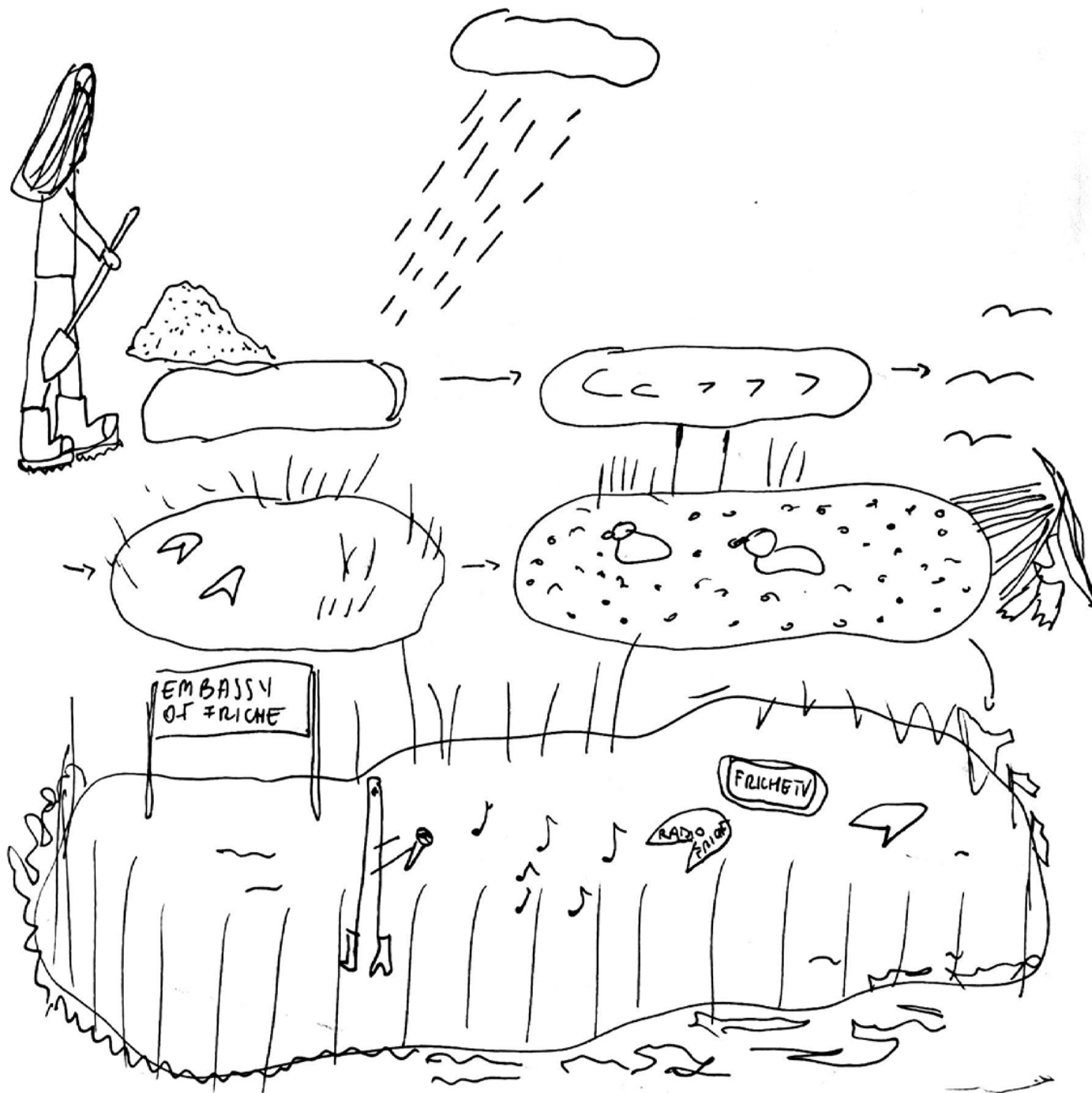
figure 2 Collecting the Friche water foto by Stefan Sinnige



figure 3 The Friche water takeaway. foto by Stefan Sinnige.jpg



figure 4 Friche water pond in sunny day. photo by author



time

noun

the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.

by oxford dictionary

figure 5
waterpond development sketch by author



figure 6 Waterpond in january 2021, photo by Benoit De Boeck



figure 7 Frozen waterpond, photo by Philippe Massart

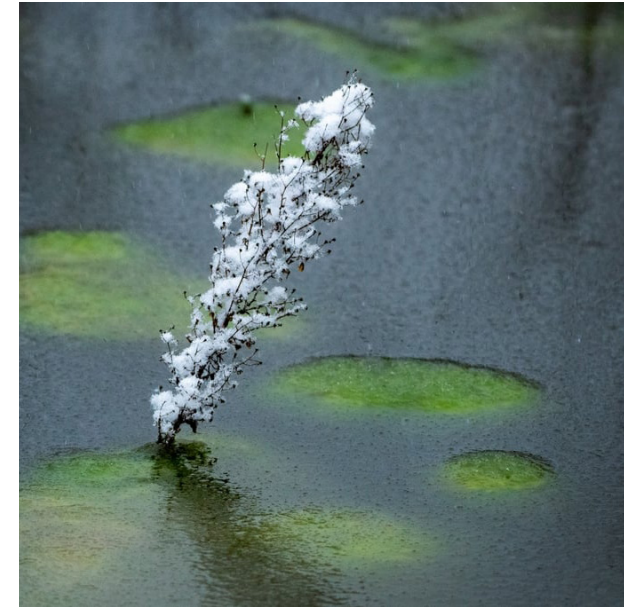


figure 8 Frozen water pond in closure, photo by Philippe Massart

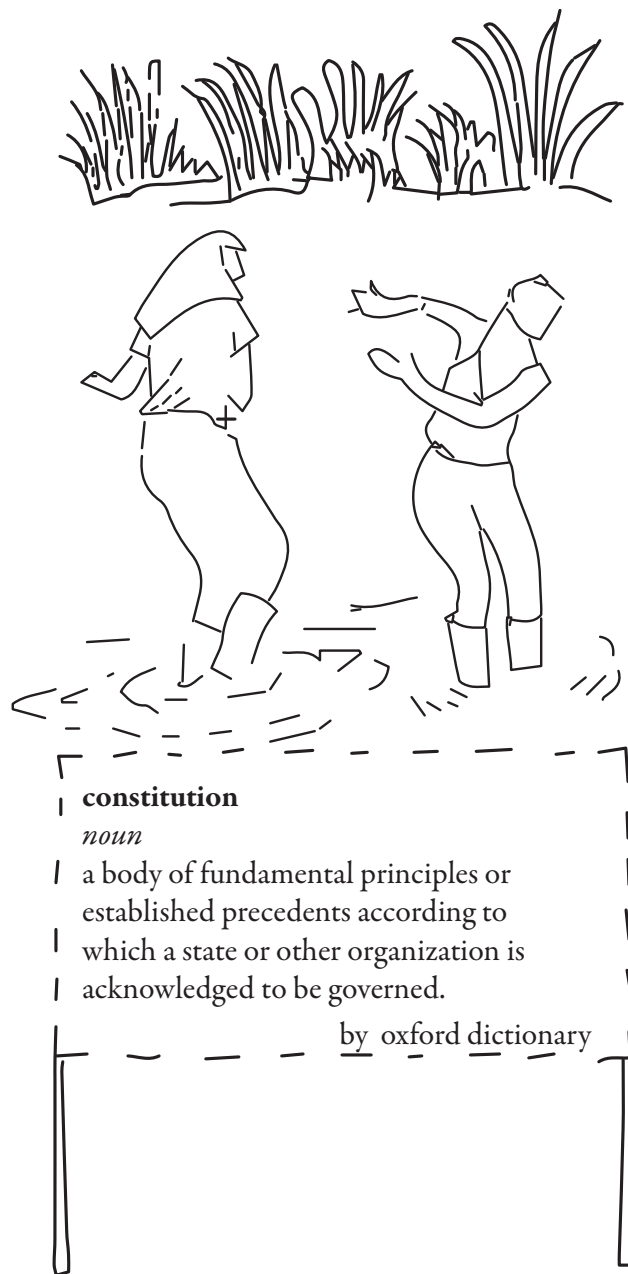


figure 9 Understanding the nature principles, sketch by author



decay

'noun

the state or process of rotting or

decomposition

by oxford dictionary

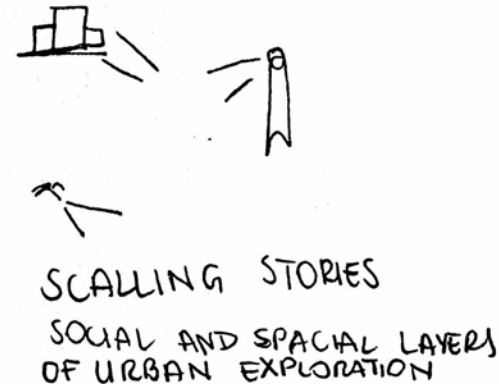
Methods

I would create a hybrid of methods that would contribute to the medium – drawing. The methods are implemented basing on methods chosen from book „Repository: 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places.”



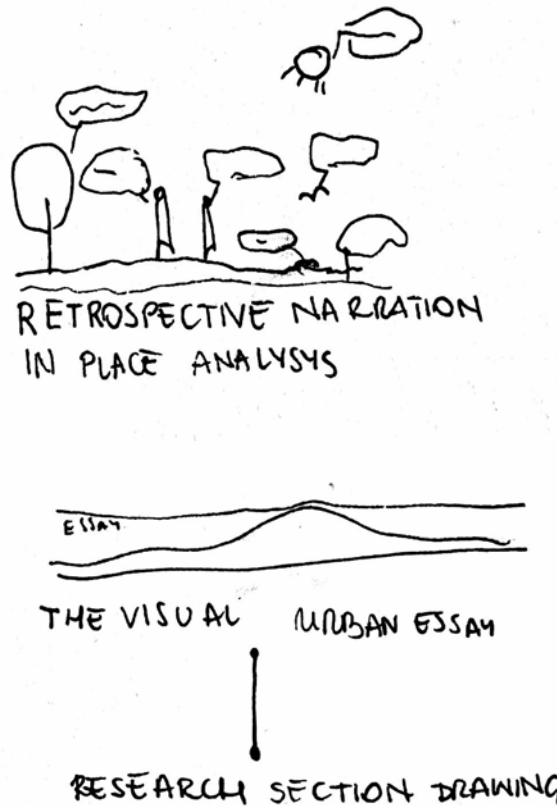
Imagined dialogue with the waterpond

I would conduct a thorough study of a water pond at Friche Josaphat. I'll select a specific part of the pond for focused observation. By closely examining its dimensions, transparency, and unique features, I will aim to understand its perspective. The findings will be documented with photos, sketches, and notes. This process will be repeated for all sides. I will also immerse myself in the pond's viewpoint, noting textures and marks. Changing the perception points and position: standing, sitting, laying down will help me reach non-standard perspective. Through this, I will engage in a mental dialogue with the pond, gaining insights into its perception of the Friche environment.



I could try to identify protagonists at the site at different scales: insects, animals, and activists on the site. Through photos, notes, and sketches, I will document their perspectives. Then, I will write narratives from each character's viewpoint, highlighting important aspects of their everyday lives. Next, I will consolidate the findings for each scale, perhaps by overlaying maps, photos, and text or even creating a graphic novel-style page to illustrate their daily journeys. Finally, I'll present the insights in a triptych of three panels, showcasing the diverse perspectives on the Friche.

I would like to try different techniques of drawings (sketching with pen, coal, crayon, dry pastels, mixed techniques, putting water on the medium - paper to enable unpredictable final result of the image) and writing (poem, notes, narrative) that will correspond to the atmosphere in the analysed place at the Friche. The final medium will be paper (in form of book).

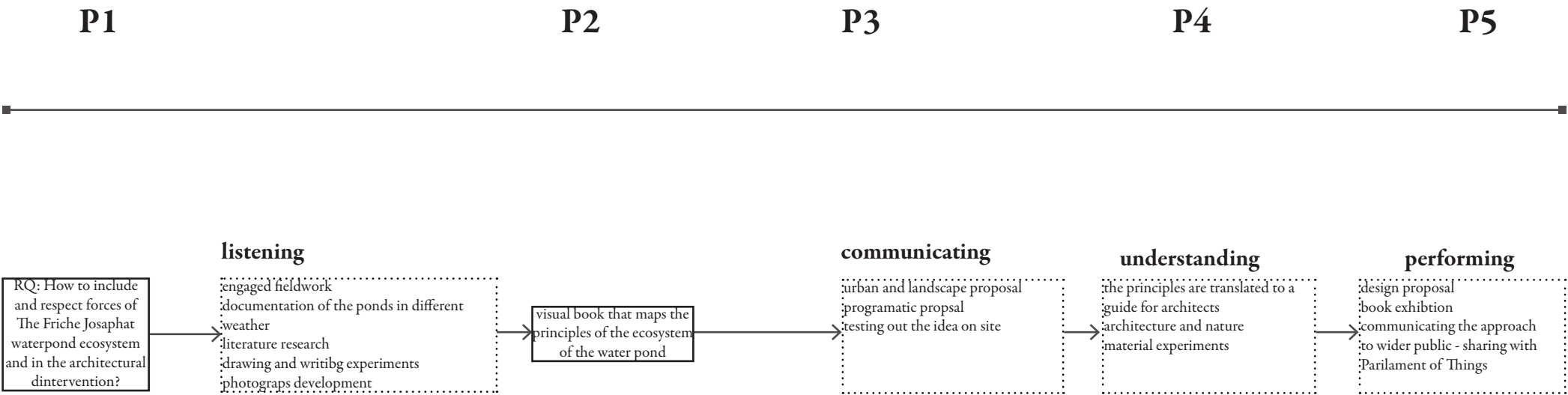


My first entry to the Friche Josaphat

I see a bush,
Bees working here,
Crickets.
The machine's breathing,
Stirring the whole system.
Obstruction.
Dog barks.
The space seems endless.
But I must be careful.
I squeeze through an opening in a fence,
A little gymnastics.
Who can see me?
The ground has started to creak.
As if I've changed position.
piles of rubble.
puddles of light.

Brussels, 13.09.2023

Research agenda



Annotated bibliography

The Parliament of Things (n.d.). Retrieved 20 October 2023, from <https://theparliamentofthings.org/>

The „Parliament of Things” is a conceptual framework proposed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour. It suggests a hypothetical scenario where both human and non-human entities have a voice in shaping decisions regarding the environment and society. In this imagined assembly, entities like animals, plants, ecosystems, and even inanimate objects would be granted representation, challenging the traditional human-centric view of governance and decision-making. The idea emphasises the interconnection of all things in our world and acts as a thought exercise to promote a more inclusive and holistic approach to environmental and social issues.

Embassy of the North Sea Retrieved 20 October 2023, from <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/>

The Embassy of the North Sea project is founded on the belief that diversity is essential for the well-being of all life forms. It advocates for direct political representation of the sea and its inhabitants. The core principle is that the North Sea possesses its own intrinsic value. This initiative prioritises listening to the voices of plants, animals, microbes, and human communities connected to the North Sea. The project has set a trajectory until 2030, beginning with the imperative of understanding the sea’s perspectives before engaging in dialogue with it. Ultimately, the aim is to advocate for the North Sea and the entirety of its diverse ecosystems.

Collective Work. ZOEpolis - Budując Wspólnotę Ludzką-Nie-Ludzką. Bęc Zmiana, 2020.

„Zoepolis” envisions a community that transcends the human-centric perspective, where plants, animals, and fungi are granted civil rights and actively participate in shaping their environment. This ambitious project seeks to interweave humans’ and non-humans’ experiences and needs. In the book ‚ZOEpolis: Building a Human-Non-Human Community’, a diverse group comprising humanists, architects, designers, lawyers, curators, and artists collaboratively explore the practicalities of establishing such a community.

This endeavour serves as a tangible exercise in crafting a utopia, pushing the boundaries of what is deemed achievable. Simultaneously, it acts as a guide through the intricate spaces of ‚Zoepolis’, where healing plants thrive amidst cobblestones, and even fruit flies are provided with their share of wine in a secure vessel.

Giblett, Rod. Cities and Wetlands - The Return of the Repressed in Nature and Culture. Bloomsbury, 2016.

The book delves into the intricate relationship between urban environments and wetlands, shedding light on their historical, cultural, and ecological significance. The book explores how urbanisation has often led to the neglect or repression of wetlands, resulting in their degradation and loss. Giblett’s work invites readers to consider how the reintegration of wetlands into urban landscapes can contribute to a more balanced and harmonious coexistence between cities and the natural world.

Gilles, Clément. Planetary Garden and Other Writings. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

In this work, Clément introduces the „planetary garden” concept as an ecological philosophy and approach to gardening and landscape design. The central idea of the planetary garden is to view the entire Earth as a garden that requires thoughtful stewardship and care. Clément emphasises the importance of biodiversity, the interconnectedness of ecosystems, and the need to preserve and protect natural habitats.

Latour, Bruno. Down to Earth - Politics in the New Climatic Regime, Polity Press, 2018.

„Down to Earth” by Bruno Latour explores the urgent challenges posed by the current ecological crisis. Latour argues that traditional approaches to understanding and addressing environmental issues have been insufficient, as they often fail to recognize the complex interconnections between human and non-human entities. The book proposes a shift in perspective, advocating for a new mode of thinking that acknowledges the Earth as an active and interconnected participant in global affairs. Latour emphasizes the need to reevaluate our relationships with the environment, other species, and the Earth itself.

Latour, Bruno. Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Politics of Nature serves as a provocative exploration of how to bridge the gap between the sciences and democratic governance, offering insights into the reconfiguration of political practices to accommodate better the complexities of our technologically advanced and interconnected world.

Latour contends that traditional political theory has inadequately accounted for the role of non-human entities, such as ecosystems and technologies, in shaping political and social realities. Latour advocates for the inclusion of these non-human actors as active participants in political discourse, challenging the conventional boundaries between nature and society.

Latour, Bruno. We Have Never Been Modern. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.

In the book, Latour contends that modernity has not fully achieved the stated goal of creating a distinct realm of science and technology separate from the social and natural world. He asserts that the modernist project of purification, which seeks to isolate and elevate scientific knowledge above all else, is ultimately flawed and unrealistic. Latour introduces the concept of ‚hybridity’ to describe the intertwined relationships between human and non-human elements. He argues that these hybrids are prevalent throughout history and continue to shape our understanding of the world, despite efforts to categorise and segregate them.

Lefebvre, Henri. The Production of Space. Oxford, OX, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991.

“The Production of Space” provides a profound and comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between society and urban space. It has significantly influenced urban studies, architecture, and critical theory and remains a foundational text in these fields. Key themes addressed in the book include:

Social Space: Space is a social construct intertwined with power dynamics. It includes perceived, conceived, and lived dimensions.

Everyday Life: Daily routines shape our experience of space, especially in urban areas.

Spatial Triad: Understanding space involves considering perceived, conceived, and lived dimensions.

Critique of Capitalist Urbanization: Lefebvre critiques how capitalism prioritises profit over community needs in urban planning.

Right to the City: Urban spaces should be shaped collectively, not dominated by private interests.

Vogel, Steven. 'The Silence of Nature'. In *Environmental Values*. The White Horse Press, 2006.

This book challenges the conventional belief that only humans possess the capacity for language and communication, consequently leading us to overlook the potential for other species to share this ability. Vogel argues that our failure to perceive nature's communication diminishes our connection to the environment. He contends, „Because we do not hear what nature has to say, nor even that it is saying anything at all, we treat natural entities as mere things rather than as other subjects with whom we share a common world. Vogel advocates for active listening to our surroundings to demonstrate respect for nature. By engaging with nature in an empathetic manner, it becomes possible to establish an environmental ethic that transcends anthropocentrism.

Appendix - Further and Related Readings

Descola, Philippe. *Neyond Nature and Culture*. The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Elkin, Rosetta S., *Landscapes of Retreat*. K. Verlag, 2022.

Moura, Carlos Machado, Dalia Bernal Miliàn, Esteban Restrepo Restrepo, Klaske Havik, and Lorin Nicuale, eds. *Repository: 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places*. Rotterdam: nai010publishers, 2023.

Von Frisch, Karl, *Animal Architecture*. Harcourt, 1974.

Exhibition: Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes.

<https://framerframed.nl/en/exposities/court-for-intergenerational-climate-crimes/>

Facebook group: Sauvons la friche Josaphat / Red de friche Josaphat.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/frichejosaphat>

Research work of Nienke Schachtschabe titled: „How can I, as a designer, contribute to the greening of the world, to help reduce global warming?“.

<https://blog.schsch.nl/>

Reference methods

Route 2030

It is the development plan of the North Sea Embassy project, where authors divided the research into three parts: Listening / Speaking / Negotiating

PHASE 1: LISTENING (2018–2022)

They began with a question: ‘What does the North Sea do?’ The aim of the Embassy is to listen to the sea as closely as possible. Research teams consisting of artists, scientists, authors, marine biologists and policy makers listened to the sea during four projects: A Voice for the Eel, Underwater Noise, Future of the Delta and Offshore Wind Farms.

PHASE 2: SPEAKING (2023–2026)

Using the listening techniques developed in phase 1, the North Sea can now be seen, heard, felt, smelled and tasted in a new form of political activism. In this phase, the focus shifts to representing the North Sea and increasing its presence in politics and society.

PHASE 3: NEGOTIATING (2027–2030)

After the speaking phase, the Embassy will commit to diplomatic means of bringing about a more North Sea–inclusive democracy. An important part of this phase involves implementing newly gained insights into the current web of human laws, interests and regulations.

FUTURE OF THE DELTA

The research team Future of the Delta, consisting of Professor in Biogeomorphology of rivers and estuaries Maarten Kleinhans, sociologist Darko Lagunas and artist Theun Karelse were considering the question how we can best listen to the various delta communities and how we can enter into dialogue with non-humans. The dialogue was done through the fieldwork, entering and walking on the border of water and using performative dress up.



figure 11 Theun Karelse as seaweed, photo by Darko Lagunas

‘A first test to try and experience floating like seaweed in the Oosterschelde estuary. Tough wind played its part, but an interesting experience nonetheless. Being seaweed seems intensely disorienting – I lost all sense of direction until I spotted a cloud.’ Theun Karelse as seaweed

Becoming a Goat

Thomas Thwaites, a researcher from London, transformed himself into a goat and left to live in the Alps. Ending up at a goat farm where he, armored in a prosthetic suit, lived as a goat for three days. The reason he chose to be a goat is to try a peaceful life of a goat instead of experiencing stress and depression as overwhelmed human being. Before the on-site try, he studied the goats behaviour, and made prosthetics that were supposed to make the experience realistic walking on four legs. The researcher also tried to make an artificial goat stomach to eat grass like his new friends.



figure 12 Thomas Thwaites as a goat, photo by Tim Bowditch



figure 13 Thomas Thwaites as a goat, photo by Tim Bowditch



figure 14 Thomas Thwaites as a goat, photo by Tim Bowditch