Urban transitions, boundaries and the non-lieux

A comprehensive investigation of Brussels as the patchwork city and its in-between spaces

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Introduction:

This introduction begins with mainly describing the problem statement based on literature research. After this the research goal and method will be discussed.

Brussels is a practically beyond comprehension, somewhat surreal-looking city landscape that is distinguished by heterogeneity, multilingualism, and fragmentation (Studio Open Stad, 1998). It can also be referred to as the 'patchwork city' (Smets, 2018). Every patch is unique, with a distinct identity and an individually tailored strategy for both economic and spatial development (Périlleux et al. p.22, 2008).

Possible representation of a patch work city.
Art piece by Jennifer Davis (n.d.)

The phenomenon of bronxification, or the city's depopulation, is becoming an issue for contemporary Brussels (Studio Open Stad, 1998). Numerous causes contribute to and prolong this migration; the urbanicide of Brussel is an issue that has to be addressed. The city has fragmented into numerous neighborhoods with limited interaction with one another. According to Studio Open City (1998), Brussels can be compared to a wounded body with hardly a distinguishable corpus. Even at the micro level of a single street, there is a clear fragmentation of lifestyles, cultures and nationalities, financial gaps, and housing types.

In a wider urban network, this fragmentation leads to the establishment of smaller neighborhoods. This has the unintended consequence of making residents only explore their own neighborhood, making the boundaries of these fragments identity-less. What is the significance of these locations and how can they be found?

According to a proposal by Smets (2018), public areas such as stations, parks, and stadiums should be created nearby those boundaries for public gatherings. Furthermore, Brussels has a significant demand for additional public facilities, including exposition spaces, big commercial and cultural facilities, infrastructure for conferences, and sports facilities, according to the Plan de développement international de Bruxelles (2007). Only the city has few potential locations to accommodate these facilities.

Smets (2018) also argues that passages and short connections between fragments provides connection and can give rise to a new urban identity. The spaces in between different fragments may be separated by infrastructures, building structures, or other physical barriers. However, there are also subtle boundaries, including ground/soil differences, walking routes, and natural boundaries. Municipal boundaries are among the less obvious yet equally significant boundaries. Urban boundaries are significant because they often result in different developments of urban life on either side of the barrier (Smets, 2018). You can construct a new part of the city on such border, reachable from both nearby areas, by removing such a barrier, building new passages and creating smoother urban transitions. The challenge, consequently, is creating that connection in a way that facilitates interaction between residents and passersby and permits structural communication across different user groups (Smets, 2018).

With multiple attempts to improve urban space, spaces are being 'disneyfied' (Studio Open Stad, 1998). Disneyfication is the process of transforming urban areas into locations for consumption. The value of the historic city then no longer lies in its history, but in its sociability (Smets, 2018). Locals long for the past, and Brussels has to focus once again on finding its identity. Fundamentally, individuality finds its origin in the history of the city: its basic form, its economic foundation, its surrounding landscape, its social characteristics, and so on. And all this is increasingly overshadowed by globalization.

Research goal:

According to De Petit Robert's 1992 historical dictionary of the French language, the word "frontière" (1213) in French for border comes from the word "faire front," which essentially means "to make a front against the enemy." (Périlleux et al. p.60, 2008). According to its origins, the term has a military past. Nowadays, it symbolizes protection and seclusion. A person may orient himself, provide clarity, and place himself against the material and symbolic worlds due to this demarcation, which also helps him make sense of the areas around him and know how to behave (Périlleux et al. p.60, 2008).

The study's main objective is to investigate various kinds of boundaries and border regions between various pieces. What is a boundary? Is it tangible or intangible? Can they change over time? What is the relation between identity and boundary? What spaces does it create; public, parochial, collective or private? What is a space? What is a place?

Furthermore, what do boundaries do? What kind of spaces are being defined? Are these territories? Are these owned by anyone? How do people make a place their own/claim their territory? When do we intentionally surpass these boundaries? What is the correlation between the type of boundary and the corresponding human behavior?

Many questions arise. The aim is to research the effect that a physical or invisible barrier has on its surroundings. Perhaps a demarcation could establish a non-lieux space: a place where humans stay anonymous (Wikipedia, 2023). With this, a secondary research is essential. What is the nature of non-lieux locations, how do they develop, and how has the boundary impacted these locations?

The French anthropologist Marc Augé created the neologism "a non-lieux place" to describe anthropological areas of transience where people stay anonymous and don't have enough importance to be considered "places."
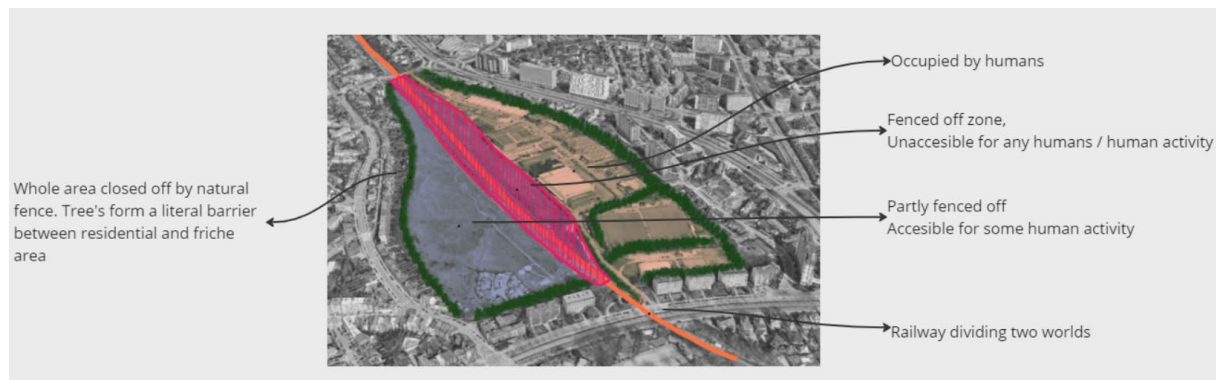
(Wikipedia, 2023)

Method:

The research will be twofold. Initially, a mapping of the fragments and border regions will be conducted. After this it will be analyzed what impact boundaries have on human behavior.

The first part of the research will be a retrospective on a topic from a previous industry-focused research part of this project. Previous literature studies have shown that the textile industry had a great influence on the formation of Belgian cities for example brussels. Therefore, for this study, an attempt is made to combine the identity of brussels history with this research method.

In order to better understand the patchwork city and its fragments, textiles will be used in this research to deploy the urban fabric of Brussels. Once the various fragments have been mapped, it will be investigated where these fragments can experience improvements and on what scale this seems possible. This will indicate a scale, after which the urban fabric will be studied using threads representing various layers.

Furthermore, will the effect of different kind of boundaries be examined through case studies. Different types of boundaries will be chosen and then with an observation based research conclusions on human behavior will be drawn. Possibly will the territory and claiming space also be a part of this research, with ROVA (a location on our assigned research location), as a case study.
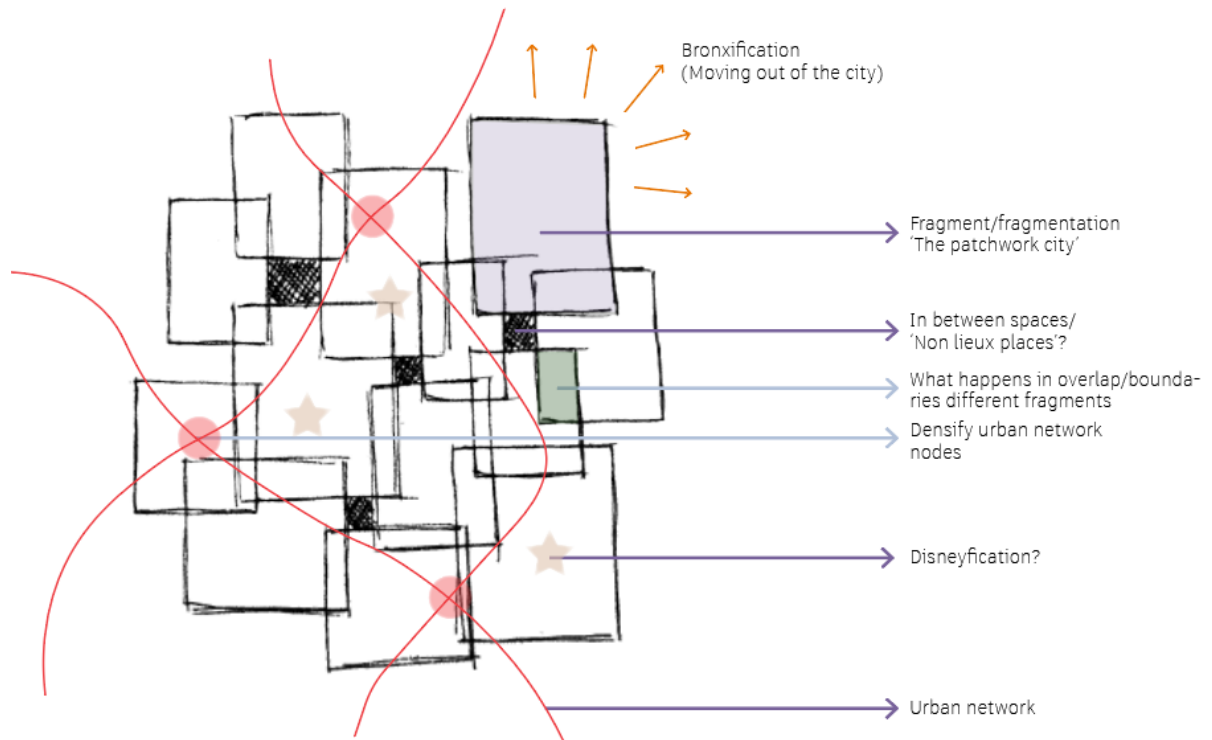
The research subject of boundaries has been chosen because the Friche (site location) can be seen as a patch as well, with a very clear natural boundary but also a physical fence closing of the site. In the end the conclusions from the aforementioned research will perhaps explain or predict human behavior around this specific site.

Sketch of the Friche with it thusfar discovered boundaries and divided area's
Own work (2023)

Summary:

This research will be about boundaries and how these affect human behavior. The boundaries can be either very obvious and visible or less visible. Why is this important? Brussel is very fragmented city, which could be a reason for the bronxification of the city. There had been attempt to modernize the city but in the end these parts were disneyfied. The image serves a visual summary.

Visual summary of analyses of thusfar conducted research
Own work (2023)

The goal of this research is to discover the different fragments and see how these can be better merged into one another by softening the boundaries. Because of this border area's will no longer be non-lieux places but will develop their own urban identity. This will be examined by making a patchwork with textile and representing the different fragments of the city. Also the urban network with different layers can be mapped with the use of threads recreating the urban fabric.

Sources and inspirations:

Boundaries/borders

1. *Van harde naar zwakke grenzen*
    a. Doctoriaalscripte Sociale Geografie & Planologie
    b. Rijk, C.
    c. 2005
    d. This is a written thesis about different kind of boundaries and what places it defines. And the area's in between: transitions.
2. *On the limit – The experience and representation of boundaries in architecture and urban design*
    a. Book
    b. Bauzá, M.M.
    c. 2018
    d. Seeing boundaries as limits, limitations. A discussion about the word 'limit'
3. *Cities made of boundaries – Mapping social life in Urban form*
    a. Book
    b. Benjamin N. Vis
    c. 2018
    d. This book uses GIS (Geographical Information Systems) for understanding the boundaries that compose built space
4. *Walls, borders and boundaries*
    a. Book
    b. Eigler, F., Goldberg, A., G.M. Hega., Melton, J., Wade, M.R., Wierling, D., Wild, C.J.
    c. 2012
    d. It is a book about literary criticism, history, cultural studies, political science, and anthropology

Places and spaces articles

1. *A Space for Place in Sociology*
    a. Article
    b. Thomas F. Gieryn
    c. 2000
    d. 'The point of this review is to indicate that sociologists have a stake in place no matter what they analyze, or how: The works cited emplace inequality, difference, power, politics, interaction, community, social ments, deviance, crime, life course, science, identity, memory, history. After of definitions and methodological ruminations, I ask: How do places come to be the way they are, and how do places matter for social practices and historical change?
2. *Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation*
    a. Article
    b. Andrew Merrifield
    c. 1993
    d. 'This paper offers a dialectical interpretation of place. It argues that much of the confusion in the literature from its failure to engage with the ontological.'

3. *Human Territoriality: A theory*
    a. Article
    b. Robert D. Sack
    c. 1983
    d. This paper discusses the meaning and definition of 'Territoriality'.
       'Territoriality is a means of affecting (enhancing or impeding) interaction and extends the particulars of action by contact. Territoriality is defined here as the attempt to affect, influ- ence, or control actions, interactions, or access by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific geographic area.'
4. *The power of place and space*
    a. Book
    b. Robert D. Sack
    c. 1993
    d. This PDF is a part of book, and describes the definition as space and place with main difference of geological aspect.

Non-lieux:

1. *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*
    a. Book
    b. Marc Augé
    c. 1995
    d. This book will describe the neologism 'Non-places' coined by Marc Augé.

Textile:

1. *Textieltoepassingen in architectuur*
    a. Thesis
    b. Louis De Mey
    c. 2014
    d. This source is about different ways to implement textile in architectural designs. It proves the relevance and relation textile and architecture holds.
2. *Woven into the urban fabric*
    a. Book
    b. Jim van der Meulen
    c. 2021
    d. A deep investigation of the development of Flemisch (textile) industry

Brussel:

1. *Bru – Planning a Capital city*
    a. Book
    b. Périlleux et al.
    c. 2008

POSSIBLE ADDITIONAL TOPICS RESEARCH:

In addition to the general research topic, some extra personal topics might be included.

Biodiversity - (the natural ecosystem)

This section contains more in-depth research of the analysis of two contradicting worlds (nature and industry). I would include a review of important species and their survival requirements in the research to support both the biodiversity and the understanding of the industrially produced human aspect. This sub-research focuses on the significance of biodiversity in the undeveloped part of Friche. Key species in this area and that are needed in a general urban context will be investigated.

- What key/threatened species are there in this urban area?
- Which species are essential for improving biodiversity?
- What resources are required to accommodate these species in an urban setting?

Industrial History Belgium/Brussels/Brussel

This sub-research will focus on the textile industry in Belgium and Brussels. The artistic and historical context of Flemish textiles aroused my curiosity. This has been a huge and important part of the overall economy of Belgium. For this research, I would like to delve more into the history of the Flemish textile industry and textile factories-related architecture.

With this I can apply textile in many ways to my design. I could apply architectural elements that derived from textile architecture in the design. This gives the Friche an extra dimension related to Belgian history, where the industry in this area gets an extra emphasis. Furthermore can textile serve as possible (flexible) boundaries, or serve as climate installations etc.

Multifunctional building – Public building

The main theme of the prior research is strongly tied to this sub-research. In order to determine the best way to integrate industrial and productive activity back into the city, I can also research the multifunctional buildings. My presumption is that connecting various users through a building's amenities can be a great value to this kind of location. It facilitates the exchange of knowledge, brings together the users, invigorates the neighborhood, shortens logistical distances, and contributes to the circular economy.