CUSTODY OF AMBIGUITY

Learning from terrain vagues

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Architectural Design Crossovers

2024/25

Definitions

The following glossary provides a framework that can be useful in creating familiarity with crucial concepts derived from the theoretical framework which subsequently inform the paper.

Ambiguity The state of having more than one possible meaning.[1]

Affordance The relational and dynamic potential inherent in an environments or object, perceived by an individual based on their capabilities and intentions. It denotes the interactive possibilities that the environment offers, which shape and are shaped by the ongoing process of individuation or becoming of the individual. Affordances highlight the reciprocal relationship between the individual and their milieu, emphasizing how perception, action and consciousness are continuously negotiated and transformed through engagement with the world.

Becoming In Deleuzian philosophy it is the transformative process through which an individual or entity undergoes a metamorphosis by engaging with and integrating aspects of something different from itself.

Deterritorialisation The fracturing of and freeing from repressive fixations and despotic arrangements of a certain milieu, be it conceptual, social, affective or linguistic.[2]

Duration Refers to the qualitative, lived experience of time, which is continuous and flowing. Duration emphasizes the subjective experience of time, where past, present and future interpenetrate and form a continuous whole. It is grasped through intuition rather than intellect, highlighting a

1. Oxford English Dictionary, "ambiguity (n.), sense 3," March 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7475551561.

2. Henk J. Houtum and Mark Bevir, "Deterritorialisation," essay, in Radboud Repository (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010), 377–78.

3. Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," essay, in Posthuman Glossary (Bloomsbury, 2018), 339–42.

dynamic indivisible flow.

Environment Assemblage of human and non-human actors that interact and co-evolve.

Mapping Productive diagramming tracing intensities, flows and affects through nonlinear methods and open to change.

Posthuman critical theory The defining features of posthuman critical theory are then that it rests on a neo- materialist philosophy of immanence, which assumes that all matter is one (monism); that matter is intelligent and self- organizing (autopoiesis); that the subject is not unitary but nomadic; and that subjectivity includes relations to a multitude of non- human 'others'. In this framework 'life' is not only defined as bios , but also as a zoe -centered, non- human process. [3]

Porosity Material and conceptual condition of openness and permeability. Suggests a world in constant exchange.

Re-pair Re-pairing involves restoring or re-establishing a broken or dis¬rupted connection, often returning to a previous state. It focuses on reconnecting elements that were previously separated or opposed, aiming to overcome dualisms and blend diverse components into novel configurations. There is also a re-pair within itself, it means cutting of connections that were desired to change.

Re-territorialisation The process of establishing new territorial boundaries structures, or identities in response to or following deterritorialisation. It involves the reformation or reorganization of territories and identities, often in a different context or with altered meanings and configurations. Reterritorialisation can occur as a response to the destabilizing effects of deterritorialisation, aiming to reassert or create new forms of stability, meaning, and order.

Threshold Site of transformation and change of conditions.

Tracing Following and reproducing already existing structures, of static nature and reductive.

Abstract

This thesis investigates ambiguity as a productive architectural condition, particularly through the lens of terrain vagues: urban spaces defined by contradiction, indeterminacy, and temporal fluctuation. Based on critical philosophical frameworks, the research examines how ambiguity, often regarded as a lack of clarity, can instead become a catalyst for more sustainable spatial practices. The study begins by tracing the inherent qualities of terrain vagues and identifying their potentials. It then moves toward a design-oriented investigation, exploring how empirical analysis can abstract these qualities into operative tools. Ultimately, the paper proposes a framework for integrating ambiguity into the design process—not as an aesthetic byproduct but as a deliberate mode of engagement that challenges conventional binaries and embraces multiplicity, adaptability, and ecological sensitivity in architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

Human demand has been met with useful, efficient, and usable solutions, however often times reductive to the issue at hand. This reduction is due to modernist assumptions rethinking ecologies as separate and independent. In the long run, the perceived separation between human and environmental ecologies, has led to damage on both, revealing there is no separation between nature and culture.[4] The dualism proposed by (post-)modern thinking has tended to neglect discourse regarding morphology of change and matter.[5] In the sensitive current socio-environmental context, a reductive problem-solving attitude will not bring to a symbiosis but there must be an active shift in ways of co-living and co-existing.

Neo materialist Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory shifts the center of

1 *Terrain vague in Madrid, 2024*

practice from the human to zoe, the driving force of life. This shift challenges anthropocentric standards further embracing a interconnected and inclusive approach to ecological and cultural frameworks. Her neomaterialist approach further calls for a non-dualist approach, breaking through dualisms regarding mind-body, nature-culture, representational-material. The posthuman, however, is also a highly adaptable being. The nomadic spirit, as described by Braidotti, is in constant flux, always in a process of becoming. To move away from static and redundant architecture into a nomadic and flexible one, responsive design is required, which can better become a catalyst for change. Responsive design does not aim to search for solutions in high-tech innovation but can leverage possible generative properties of matter.

To free oneself from the boundaries of conventionality, a process of deterritorialisation is necessary, refusing fixed norms and embracing a nomadic attitude that accepts the continuous flux to which all things are inevitably subjected. Deterritorialisation produces ambiguity by removing stable meanings, roles, and relations, opening a space or concept to multiplicity, uncertainty, and transformation. Ambiguity, understood as the openness to multiple interpretations, is already an existing phenomenon of everyday life. Yet only recently has the architectural discourse opened to its potential. When used deliberately, ambiguity can become a generative force within architecture, shifting the discipline away from static solutions and toward more dynamic, adaptive forms of design. Following this definition, the deterritorialised space becomes the one of unclear significance, the fluctuating and beyond societal conventions: the ambiguous space.

4. Bruno Latour and Catherine Porter, We Have Never Been Modern (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

5. Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "The Transversality of New Materialism," Women: A Cultural Review 21, no. 2 (August 2010): 153–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2010.488377.

UNDERSTANDING
AMBIGUITY

Tracing human behavior in its willingness to (de-)territorialise space, two sides of the spectrum should be considered: from the unambiguous to the ambiguous. The unambiguous space is the well-defined and rigid space. This becomes a space of extreme behavioral subjugation, where the individual's agency is removed, becoming an intentional limitation of one's behavior. The extreme would be the prison cell, where the barrier planes become intentional, immutable and a clear exertion of a societal top-down spatial limitation.

The reduction of spatial permissiveness through impenetrable boundaries makes use of architecture as a tool for exclusion. The bars of a cell are so specific to their function that they cannot be reapplied to another circumstance; they exist only to divide, contain and control. The separation between the supervised and the supervisor is then reinforced spatially,

Lost Spaces 1983	**Found Spaces** 1986	**Terrain vague** 1995	**Cracks in the City** 1996	**Interstitial Spaces** 1998	**Intermediate Spaces** 2005
Sites out of Sight 2005	**Third Landscape** 2005	**Loose Spaces** 2007	**Dead zone/ Edge** 2007	**Leftover Spaces** 2009	**Residual/ Neglected** 2010
Fortuit-tous leftovers 2010	**Vacant Urban Land** 2011	**Derilict land** 1966	**Vacant land** 1971	**Wasteland** 1977	**Il vuoto** 1984
Urban sinks 1990	**Dross** 1994	**Drosscape** 2006	**No-man's land** 1998	**Spaces of uncertainty** 2002	**Superfluous landscapes** 2002

2 *Denominations of the ambiguous space*, 2025

making clear distinctions in visibility, access, and authority. Together, these elements do not just house people but enforce a behavioral regime, making the building a mechanism of imposed order. Although the prison cell is an extreme territorialised space, using architecture to condition behavior often is tied to a certain formality of spaces, whether it is public atriums or bank entrances, linking the unambiguous with control.

As architecture is a discipline inevitably rooted in control, following the anti-architecture can become a productive way of understanding the purest form spatial manifestations of ambiguity. The anti-architecture becomes the negative of the city: the terrain vague.
The ambiguous space has had several denominations and has been part of urban discourse for several years. These urban entities have fascinated urbanists, going by different names through the years, as seen in Figure 2. They tend to be the overlooked, forgotten parts of the city. However, the qualities they share transcend nomenclature obstacles and become fruitful when applied to architecture; seeing how its ambiguous principles manifest can become key to re-pairing the environmental-human divide.

3

TRACING
AMBIGUITY

[2] Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron, Terrain Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

Landscape theorists have increasingly been turning their attention towards the overlooked spaces within the city, or terrain vagues as introduced by Ignasi de Solà-Morales.[2] These kinds of spaces can be seen as the negative of the city, leftovers from its development and growth. They are areas that expose the palimpsest nature of places, revealing them as containers of fragmented histories within cities with latent qualities that are often overlooked. Their existence creates a paradoxical situation in which the evident and visual past creates space for projections of infinite possibilities of the future. What they were, what they are and what they could be all become visually and simultaneously represented in one place. Their ambiguous nature creates real places that contest reality and have a key role in unmasking urban contradictions and disrupting urban homogeneity.

According to de Solà-Morales however, architecture's intervention within these spaces is inherently rooted in control, resulting violent. By maintaining the qualities of these spaces, an attempt can be made to respect the desire and intentions of the terrain vagues, learning from their pre-existing condition, while also activating their latent potential. The following section will analyze how ambiguity found within terrain vagues can become important in learning how to propose alternate methods of urban intervention.

Researchers' approaches to terrain vagues tend to vary, yet certain characteristics remain consistent. These spaces exist in a state of ambiguity on a temporal, experiential and social level. Although described as separate categories, these must be understood as interdependent of each other, as one is informing the nature of the next and so forth.

Their fluctuation emerges from their fleeting nature, constantly changing as a response to their context and found on all different scales of the space, from the micro to the macro. It has to do with the processes that constantly alter their form. This can be seen for example in the material and spatial degradation of the spaces due to their porosity, whether its from the degraded facades of an abandoned building or the porosity of the material itself, allowing of other forms of life to take over. The absence of maintenance in these spaces fosters an environment which is showing constant change.

3 Man Ray, *Waste Land*, 1929
4 *Characteristics of the terrain vague*, 2025

The experiential ambiguity comes from the strangeness of these spaces. Their contradictory qualities are tied to uncanny dimensions, where both future and past are not fully governing space. This can foster a sort of melancholic beauty, tying them to urban memory. To further enhance this, is the relation to the surrounding urbanization, highlighting their vacancy, which creates both fascination and unease and in turn making them the territory of the wanderer.

Both aforementioned qualities seem to stem from the latency of the terrain vague. The unclear intentions of the site create untapped potential of what it can become, filled with expectation of alternate urban futures. This dormant state creates a space which can be seen as un-safe, un-predictable and un-stable and their indeterminacy permits them to resist commodification, becoming unseen and giving freedom of agency of several actors.

Once the qualities of the terrain vague are identified, these can be translated into architectural terms to go from qualitative to spatial properties. This transition allows for these qualities to go from descriptive to operable.

Terrain vague

fluctuating

strangeness

latency

MAPPING
AMBIGUITY

Resulting from the previous section, the broader qualities of these spaces have been identified. Lars Lerup says "everything is ambiguous until acted upon", however, this is only because most often architectural elements are designed to have a static purpose.[7] Openly designing for multiple actions can become the key to a more dynamic kind of architecture. The following section will focus on how to transform these qualities into operational tools, which can be used within a hypothetical design process. By doing an empirical analysis of case studies, architectural elements have been extrapolated from the core concepts of terrain vagues.

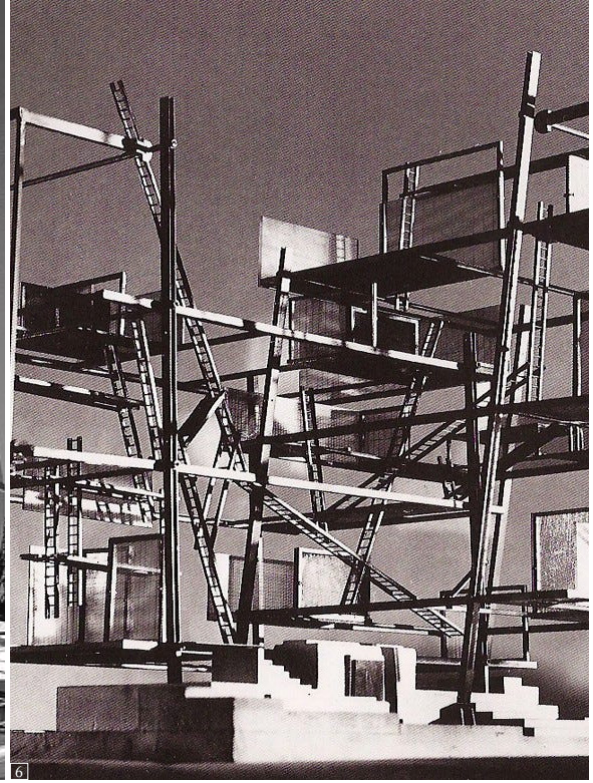
7. Lars Lerup, After the City (MIT Press, 2001).

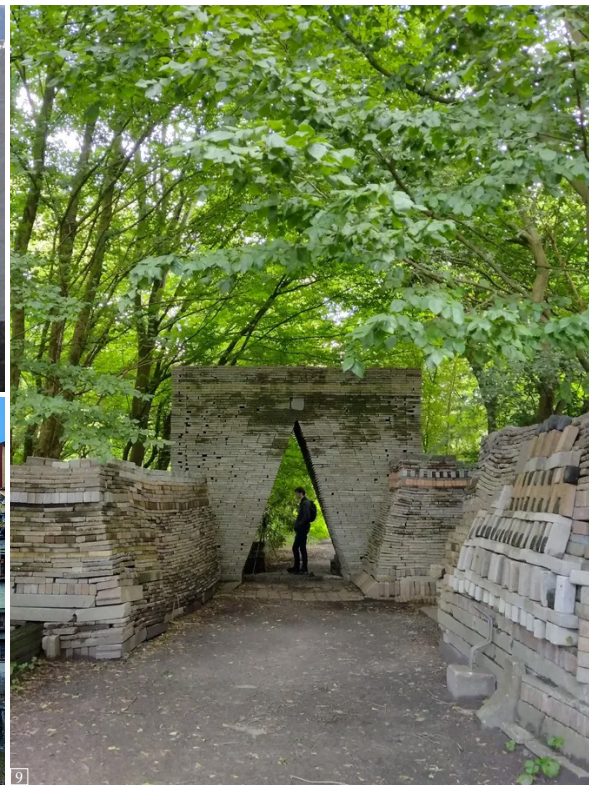
Fluctuation

Fluctuation implies the necessity of a temporal dimension, allowing an object to morph from A to B, from B to C, and so on. In this process of continuous transformation, the object becomes amorphous by never settling into a singular or final form.

Within architecture this can be introduced through intentional change within a building, such as the Prada Transformer pavilion by OMA which, when rotated on each of its sides, would offer a new type of spatial experience. This metamorphosis of the building is always relational to what it was in the previous phase, creating a sort of linear sequence of change. In this sense the initial state A is completely different to B, resulting in a complete transformation of the element by just changing its relation to the ground. Constant Nieuwenhuys, however, brings this to the extreme with his New Babylon exploration, where the complex is designed for constant growth according to the needs of its inhabitants. Desire therefore becomes the leading catalyst for change, rendering it a fully bottom-up dynamic project. This operation frees terrain from being viewed as a commodity or a fixed surface to be divided and sold, making it a politically shifting entity.

The relational aspect of amorphism becomes a topic of its content. It however can be differentiated in the container and the contained. While the metamorphism is regarded as the change of the container element, framing has an ambiguous meaning; framing and being framed occurring simultaneously. The frame becomes a means of exclusion and inclusion, with constant fluctuation in its content while retaining a fixed boundary.





5 Iwan Baan, *Prada Transformer / OMA*, 2009
6 Constant Nieuwenhuyst, *New Babylon*, 1959
7 Le Corbusier, *Villa Le Lac*, 1923
8 Hisao Suzuki, *Theater La Lira Public Space/ RCR Architects*, 2004
9 Simon and Marjolijn, *EcoCathedral / Louis le Roy*, 2021

This can be seen in the massive frame at Villa Le Lac by Le Corbusier. The massive stone wall framing the view creates in a way an ever-changing painting by excluding the entirety of the landscape. On a different scale, La Lira Theater by RCR arquitectes uses the vacant lot between two buildings to reconfigure an infill space as a public space. The frame becomes the separation from the residential adjacent buildings and the framed is the public square in which different activities can take place.

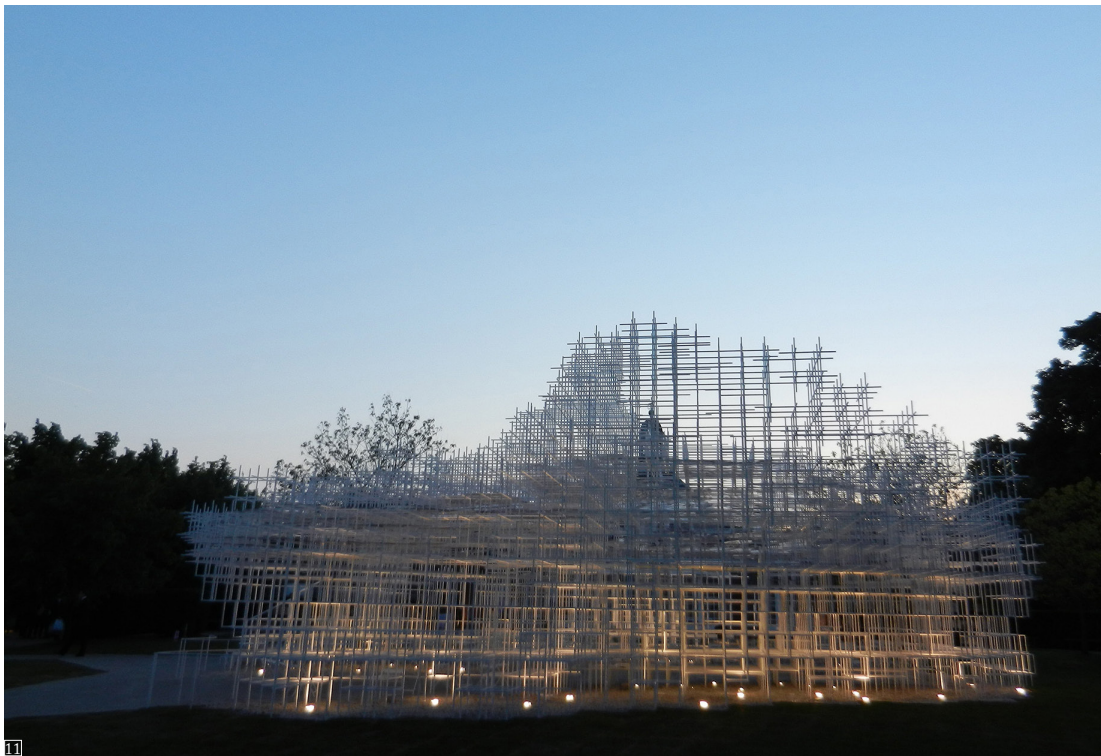
Metamorphosis, as a condition of continuous change, is not limited to spatial configuration but it can also manifest on the material level. Decay can be seen as the deterioration of a material, which depending on its porosity, will be affected in completely different and unpredictable ways. Modernist architecture set a standard to use materials that do not age, however the visual representation of time becomes a gradient from the what a material once was to what it could become. The Ecokathedral project by Louis le Roy intentionally "decays" the material by allowing it to have different layers of significance to different actors. This is achieved through the active participation of the ground as a contact point between the architecture and its environment. Rather than being seen as a stable base to be built upon, this work sees it as a dynamic, layered and affective agent, and coexists in its process of becoming, dissolving the possibility of a single narrative. It becomes a symbiotic relation between the humans who interact with the space giving them the ability to alter the piece while offering more surface for nature to expand and push back, making the two grow in tandem. By intentionally creating decay, one paradoxically leaves space for unintentionality.

Strangeness

The sense of strangeness comes from the contradictory elements of terrain vagues. By placing an element A next to an element B, the strangeness happens where the two elements collide at the boundary. When the boundary is questionable, it becomes unclear where A ends and B begins, creating a state of liminality between the two elements. This liminal boundary can be achieved both by blurring the edges of A, or by blending an element A into an element B.

The act of blurring creates a boundary condition where there is uncertainty as to where thresholds are precisely. This effect is often associated with illusory effects, where materials and systems are purposefully integrated to create a dissipated effect of an object. This can be observed in quite a literal manner in the Blur Pavilion by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, where a fine mist was sprayed over the building to create the illusion of a fog mass on the lake. The fog became unpredictable yet displayed certain tendencies towards specific climactic conditions. In a less literal way, the blurring effect can be created also through the extreme repetition of one individual element creating a mesh, similarly to the Serpentine Pavilion by Sou Fujimoto. By playing with its density throughout the pavilion, the mesh like structure can create both solid forms and almost dissipate into the surrounding environment. Therefore, using a simple individual element, repeating it and playing with its density can create different spatial qualities which are not easily observable from the outside. Blurring therefore becomes a matter of losing perception through repetition.

Blending, on the other hand, brings in a new separate element into the



10 Diller Scofidio + Renfro, *Blur Pavillion*, 2002
11 Sou Fujimoto, *Serpentine Pavillion*, 2013

13

equation. So rather than blurring itself out, two elements of different nature blend together, creating an ambiguous threshold between two separate materials. In examples such as the Leça Swimming Pools by Álvaro Siza, the edge between the pools and the ocean becomes unclear. By blending together the natural rock formations and the concrete walls, the limit between the artificial and the natural becomes an ambiguous zone, emphasizing the impossibility to separate nature and culture. As seen in the House NA by Sou Fujimoto, blending spaces can also be achieved spatially by creating fluidity between rooms while also differentiating the individuality of each space by placing it on an individual platform resulting in "a unity of separation and coherence". The house is both a single room and a collection of rooms.

12 Álvaro Siza, *Leça Swimming Pools*, 1966
13 Iwan Baan, *House NA / Sou Fujimoto*, 2012

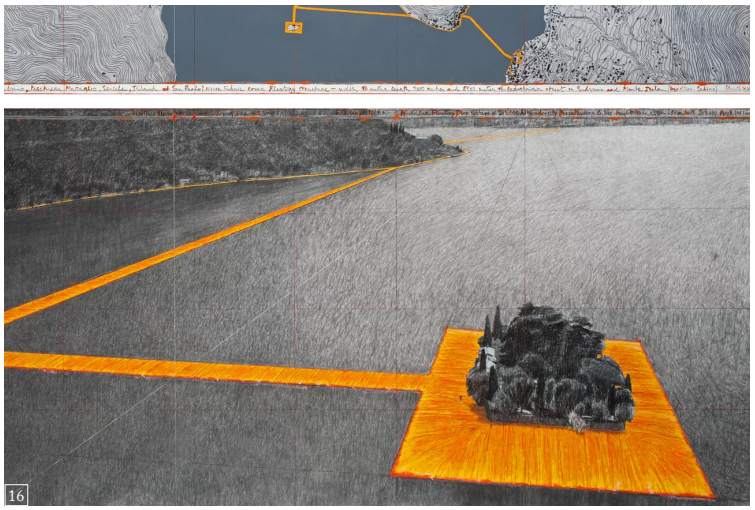
Latency

The concept of latency refers to uncovering the dormant potential of architecture. This requires a process of deterritorialisation by breaking away from conventional understandings to reinterpret the meaning of familiar elements. While strangeness works with a loss of significance because of ill-defined thresholds, deterritorialisation operates on a gain of new meaning due to a separation to its original function, by using something for a new found potential.

Material reconfiguration makes the detail the key for alternative architectural interfaces. An element typically associated with function A might unexpectedly serve functions B,C, and so forth. For example, the Ningbo Historic Museum by Wang Shu reutilizes tiles and bricks from demolished farmers' homes in the surrounding area, both being able to create a connection to local material and craftsmanship. Reutilizing 'waste' as a design resource often is used as a reuse sustainability technique, but rethinking how the hidden reveals itself also contributes to new material reconfigurations, such as in the Centre Pompidou by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, where the building systems are turned inside out, making them shell of the building while still recognizable for their function. In this sense, the topic of material reconfiguration does not deny the object's original use, but just takes into account new possible affordances of the material's surfaces.

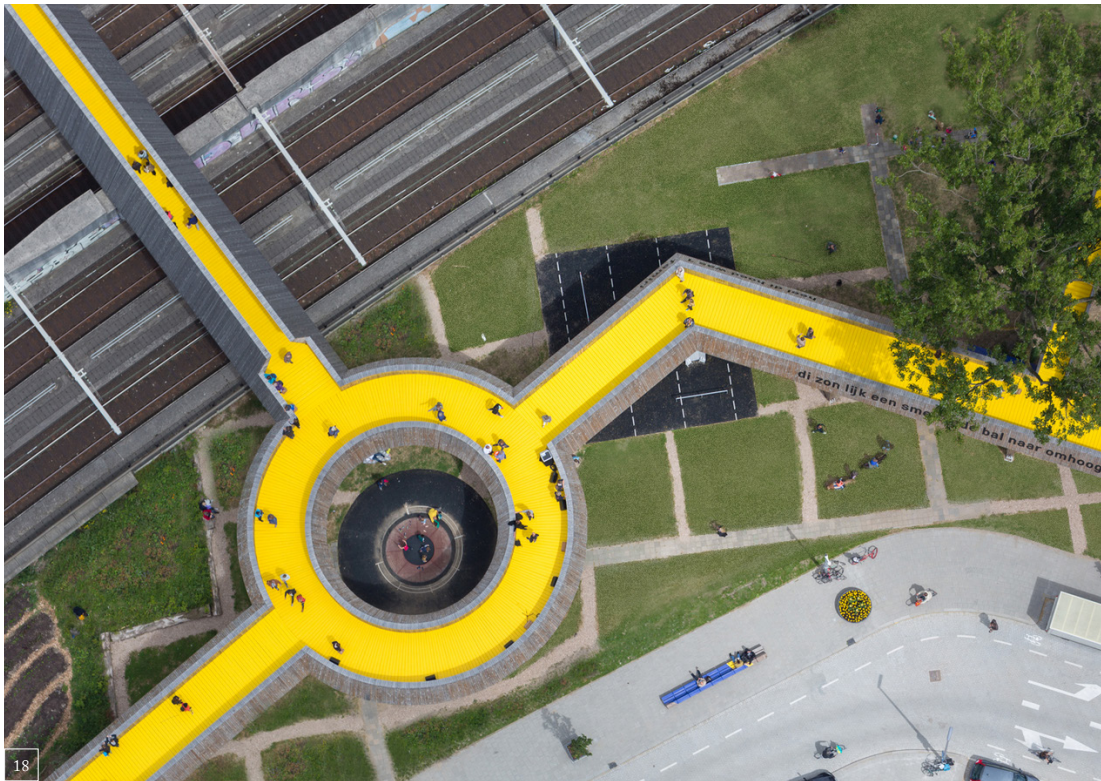
This kind of heterogeneous mixture of two different systems can be on the larger scale introduced through hybridizing them and overlapping. Overlapping two systems above each other with the clear intent of separating

14 Iwan Baan, *Ningbo Historic Museum / Wang Shu, Amateur Architecture Studio*, 2008
15 Sergio Grazia, *Centre Pompidou / Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers*, 2008



them becomes an act of superimposition, where the independence of the two systems from each other is crucial to their performance. Most cases of superimposition show a solution to an obstacle, making the layering very clear in section. Whether is it crossing a water body like The Floating Piers by Christo and Jean-Clause, or cutting through the water like Cycling through Water in Bokrijk. Or when relocating pedestrian movement on a different height to pass above large infrastructural nodes such as the Luchtsingel by ZUS. This act of jumping over an obstacle can further be reconnected to the movement of the wanderer, but removing them from their known ground plane.

By hybridizing two systems instead, from their independence there is a shift to one of interdependence. Translating elements of one system to fit into the other, one element is able to have two meanings from different



16 André Grossmann, *Floating Piers / Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, 2016
17 Luc Dalemans, *cycling through water*, 2016
18 Ossip van Duivenbode, *The Luchtsingel / ZUS*, 2015

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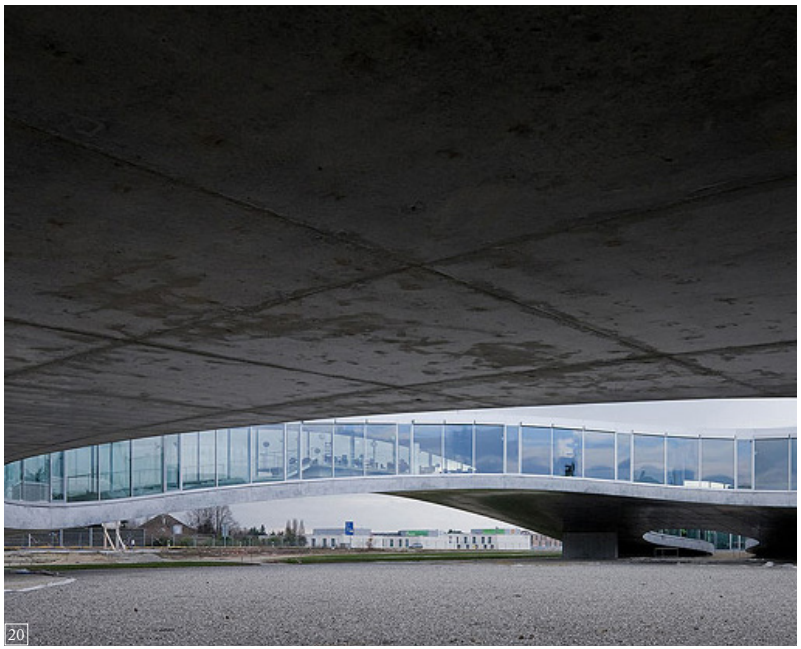

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19 Ingo Mehling, *Ponte Vecchio*, 2021
20 Iwan Baan, *Rolex Learning Center / SANAA*, 2010
21 Iwan Baan, *The High Line / Diller Scofidio + Renfro*, 2019

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systems. A is B as much as it is C, but B and C are not the same thing. Famously Ponte Vecchio in Florence created a new typology by making the street both the passage of a market and a bridge over the river. Otherwise in the Rolex Learning Center by SANAA where the elevated floors of the building become a roof over the public square. Translation becomes also a very useful tool into the reuse of abandoned structures such as the High Line by Diller Scofidio + Renfro where the unused elevated train tracks were repurposed into a public park. One surface develops multiple significances in its same context.

By taking the deterritorialisation of space even further, decontextualization can happen by inserting something that clearly does not belong within the proposed context, where A is usually in context B but is placed in C. Using this method starts questioning what the context actually is. Whether it is with the tree of the Nordic Pavilion of Sverre Fehn where the indoor placement of the tree seems like a paradoxical act between interior and exterior. Or in other instances such as in the Red Bull Music Academy by Langarita Navarro, where the intervention within the abandoned slaughterhouse nave was made by using the larger building as a container of many little containers, similar to a matryoshka doll, placing architectural structures within one another.

The displacement of architectural concepts however, can also be borrowed from other disciplines. In fact, the most pure form of ambiguity is the metaphor. Approaching architecture from an interdisciplinary dimension and deterritorialising spatial conventions, concepts from other disciplines can be translated and repurpused into an architectural interface. The Par-

22 Åke E:son Lindman, *Nordic Pavillion / Sverre Fehn*, 1962

23 Anne Bousema, *Las Palmas Parasite / Korteknie Stuhlmacher Architecten*, 2001
24 Miguel de Guzmán, *Red Bull Music Academy / Langarita Navarro Arquitectos*, 2011

asite by Korteknie Stuhlmacher Architecten, becomes a parasite not only in its name, but it fully adapts to its host. It is temporarily, proportional and makes use of the systems of its host in order to function, making it not only act like a parasite, but actually be one.

From the empirical research it is possible to observe there are many ways to connect ambiguous themes to a spatial manifestation due to ground, boundary and surface conditions. However to become operable, it is important to reduce them to simple concepts which can be adapted based on necessity and context. This action results in a more flexible analysis method, which can become a guide on how to incorporate ambiguity into design.

DECAY

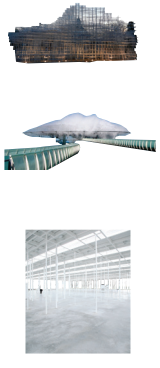
process of change of material

AFFORDANCE OF SURFACES AS MULTIPLE INTERPRETATION OF DIFFERENT ACTORS

FRAMING

to be framed, to frame, to be a frame;

LIMITATION ON WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT SEE



BLURRING

fading object edges (1 element blending with surroundings, context doesn't matter)

UNCLARITY OF OBJECT, BOUNDARIES BECOME NOT A LINE BUT A ZONE

BLENDING

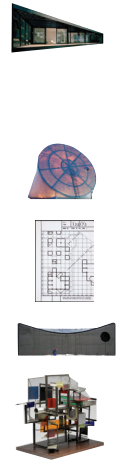
objects made both by a and b, b being the context, a being the architectural object

CREATING AN OBJECT WHICH IS A HYBRID

MATERIAL RECONFIGURA-TION

using materials for a function they were not originally intended for, architectural detail becomes the architecture which becomes the landscape

ALTERNATIVE CONFIGURATION OF MATERIAL EXPRESSION AND ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL



METAMORPHO-SIS

architecture which changes based on the temporal or spatial relation to it

OFFERING AN ADAPTABLE AND CHANGING STRUCTURE, FLEXIBILITY AND MALLEABILITY OF ARCHITECTURE

SUPERIMPOSING

overlapping two systems on different levels

CREATING INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN SYSTEMS BY PLACING THEM ON DIFFERENT LEVELS OF THE SAME CONTEXT

TRANSLATION

Hybridyzing; appropriating elements of a different system depending to one's relation to it

CREATING AMBIVALENT OBJECTS. ONE SURFACE HAVING MORE THAN ONE SIGNIFICANCE FOR ITS CONTEXT

METAPHOR

Using metaphorical comparison to make the concept of elements

SYMBOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION IN ORDER TO CONVEY CERTAIN PROPERTIES

DECONTEX-TUALIZING

creating new context through use of architectural objects

PROVOKE REINTERPRETATION AND STIMULATE ENGAGEMENTE WITH CONTEXT

OPERATING
AMBIGUITY

Similarly to the previous chapter, a further analysis of reference cases was made to investigate various manners of manifestation of ambiguity. Once the case studies were collected as seen in Figure 25, they were dissected into more comprehensive architectural approaches introduced in Figure 26. Through a comparative analysis, architectural approaches were extrapolated from the precedents. These approaches aim to create a framework into designing with ambiguity as an architectural tool. To create a comprehensive analysis, the approaches will be described based on the previously established categories.

Decay is a result of a process which, as seen in the Ecocathedral, is a result of surface affordances. These affordances are strongly linked to the porosity of the surface, which allows various actors to engage with a material on different scales. By using materials with different scales of nooks and crevices, these can house different elements, redefining decay not as a negative quality, but rather be seen as a increase of activity of different actors, therefore activating the surfaces. Porosity therefore becomes a element which gives multiple meanings to surfaces depending of the scale.

Framing in itself is already an ambiguous word: to frame or to be framed. Its ambiguity comes from the contradiction between one element as static and dynamic at the same time. From the references the elements that are framed can be divided into two different categories: sight and light. By creating a sight framing the exterior, or the framed, becomes part of a space in way by flattening the view. However, due to the fact that the image is not still, a contradiction is created between the fixed frame and the constantly moving object. On the other hand, the light framing, removes the interest from the view, but only deals with fixed entry of light, but a constant flux in its direction.

Metamorphosis deals with a constant flux of the morphology of a space. This can have to do with the movement of surfaces and thresholds. As a movement of surfaces it can have to do with temporality and ephemeral structures. By creating structures that are subject to change from their surroundings they are not limited to one form. This change has to do with porosity of edges, allowing them to expand and shrink depending on the circumstances.

Blurring becomes a purely visual effect, and it is mostly due to perceived illusions. This effect also has to do mostly with loss of clarity regarding

threshold surfaces. To create this effect, repetition of a small module until it is not countable anymore in combination with playing with its density becomes an opportunity to blur. This is also related to an object's porosity, but rather than a surface changing, it is more related to the threshold.

Blending, while also a threshold condition, involves fading into another element rather than simply fading away, creating a gradual and relational transition between two distinct forms. This once again relates to the edge's porosity but becomes a question of relating between two separate objects and extending the threshold into a zone. In this threshold then, two surfaces take on the same transitional meaning.

When superimposing, an incompatibility of two systems is resolved by separating them into split levels. These incompatibilities mostly result from issues arising from navigational systems, therefore separating them adds a third dimension to the movement: verticality resulting from tilting surfaces.

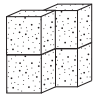
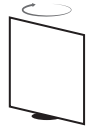
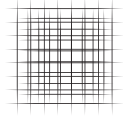
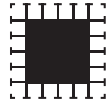
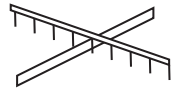
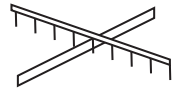
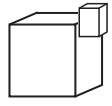
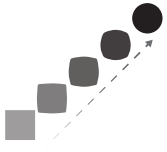
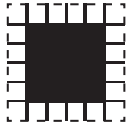
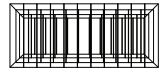
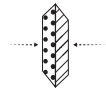
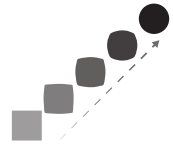
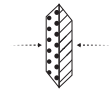
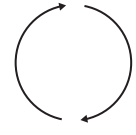
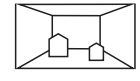
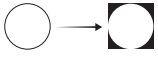
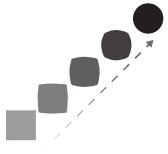
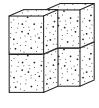
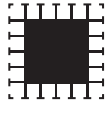
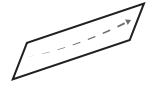
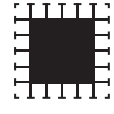
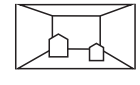
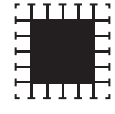
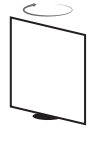
Translation relates once again to this idea of separating two systems, but using the overlapping surface as having a dual meaning. The two systems then inform each other, creating porous edges between the systems and the forementioned dual intermediate surface. This often derives from noticing some overlapping qualities of two different systems.

Material reconfiguration deals with the untapped potential of the architectural detail. This results from a reuse of surface qualities for functions they were not meant for. Once again dealing with surface qualities, materials are removed from their original context. By simplifying them, they can be reused and released from their meaning, revealing and inverting surfaces inside out.

Decontextualizing, similarly to material reconfiguration, removes contextual conventionalities and breaks through spatial norms. This can be visualized as breaking through the threshold by perforating through the space. In this way the hole that gets created becomes a contamination of the external on the internal or vice versa. Achieving it however can be a more violent act, such as perforation, or a soother transition by creating porous boundaries. The context can be inverted as well, by bringing the outside inside, which questions the experience of spaces.

Since metaphors can borrow concepts from different disciplines, they can become quite hard to generalize. However, an interesting quality that emerges from the analysis questions the meaning of the object in relation to its discipline. Exemplifying it, how much is the handrail at the Laban Dance Theater a handrail, and how much is it the dance it actually symbolizes? If it makes you move as you move throughout the building, the differentiation between the object and the thing it metaphorizes are not that far apart at all. The metaphor is the true dissolution of dualism and therefore the ultimate form of ambiguity.

From the empirical research, ambiguity is a question of ground, threshold and surface conditions. By freeing these from dualist conventions, their gradients can be expanded into spaces of negotiation. By dislocating materials from their conventional uses, dissolving boundaries through visual

decay	framing	metamorphosis	blurring	blending	superimposing	translation	material reconfiguration	decontextualizing	metaphor
 Porous material	 Light framing	 Moving surface	 Mesh density	 Porous edges	 Split Levels	 Split Levels	 Un-hide	 Perforation	 Parasite
 Dynamic	 Sight framing	 Porous edges	 Repetition	 Dual surfaces	 Dynamic	 Dual surfaces	 Material reuse	 Inversion	 Metaphorical translation
 Bivalent surfaces	 Dynamic	 Porous material	 Porous edges		 Movement	 Porous edges	 Inversion	 Porous edges	
			 Moving surface						

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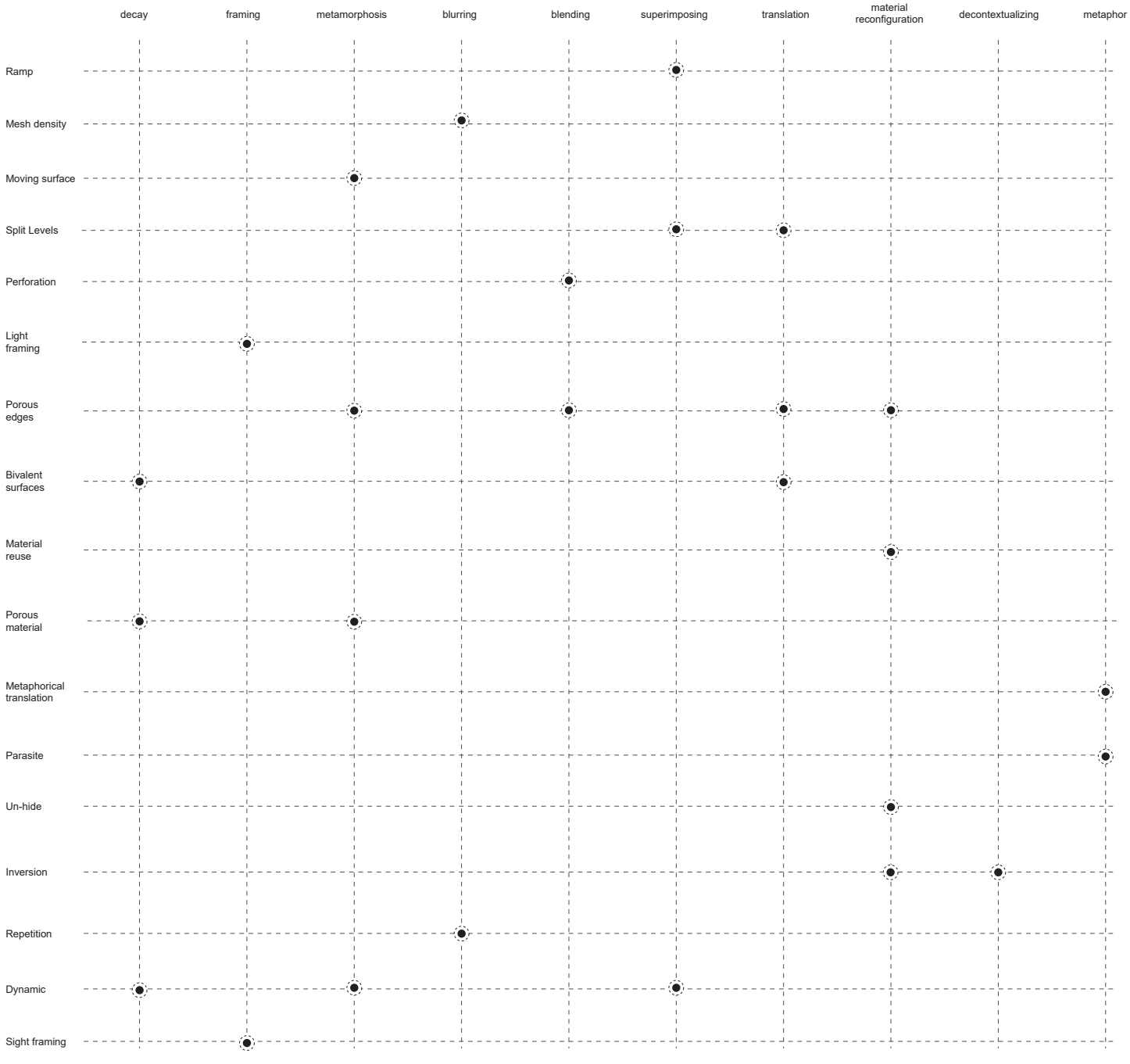

27 *Abacus*, 2025

and spatial blending, and designing for temporal transformation, ambiguity becomes a tool for rethinking architectural agency. As a design method, it resists static interventions, allowing architecture to remain in constant flux. This capacity to express plurality without collapsing it into singular meaning, positions ambiguity not only as a representational element, but as an active driver of spatial and ecological complexity.

CONCLUSIONS

In times of uncertainty in relation to rapid technological advancements, spatial homogenization, social tensions and environmental degradation, the paper argues for the relevance of architectural ambiguity as an alternative approach to spatial conditions. Rather than being seen as a problem to be solved, open-ended architecture can become a tool to incentivize the use of agency and interaction between human and non-human actors. This ends up taking in consideration temporal fluctuations, ecological processes and multiplicities of agencies.

Using terrain vagues as models of ambiguity and through the lens of critical and neomaterialist theory, in combination with empirical studies, the thesis has positioned ambiguity as a relational force that resists conventions and fixed solutions. The case studies and design speculations helped

inform architectural strategies that are responsive and responsible.

A key objective of the paper was to make ambiguity operable, and fitting to the theme, a rigid toolbox was not the solution. Ambiguity is not a quality to be represented but rather a field to be constructed. Therefore an open-ended abacus became more appropriate, illustrating spatial conditions and approaches which are associated with ambiguous design. These conditions all have to do with relations between entities and the negotiation between them.

To speak of custody is to speak of care, suggesting the role of the architect to be more of a custodian rather than a problem solver. This indicates a need to hold space for processes and plural desires and protecting conditions that allow for multiple futures to unfold. The thesis suggests that learning from terrain vagues offers a way of imagining architecture as less about control and more about attentiveness, adaptability and care.

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Figure 25 - Author's own figure, *Precedents of ambiguity*, 2025

Figure 26 - Author's own figure, *Approaches to ambiguity*, 2025

Figure 27 - Author's own figure, *Abacus*, 2025

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REFLECTION

Relevance

Ambiguity in particular has not been talked about often. However, this multilayered understanding can become the source of novelty in architecture. The Architectural Design Crossovers studio reflects on cities as constantly evolving and part of dynamic systems. From the project, ambiguity becomes a condition relevant on several scales, from the micro to the meso. It goes on to question the role of the architect and how the permanence of interventions should be approached. By designing for qualitative properties rather than programmatic ones and creating hybrids, the project renounces an individual narrative, whether it is based on a daily cycle, or throughout the whole lifetime span of the building, allowing for multiple storylines to coexist. Although the thesis is site specific, it sets a model for architectural intervention, which can be applicable on the global scale.

Process

Choosing to deal with ambiguity within my thesis was a very new approach for me. As the first time in which my project started from a perspective which was not strictly related to a material dimension, it was a really interesting challenge. Initially I came into the project with an interest for decay and some knowledge regarding critical theories. The research however, was very useful into reconnecting these interests to the topic of ambiguity, which for me was quite elusive at first, and bring it into a more concrete realm.

Initially I was a bit stuck in the theoretical aspect and semantics of the topic, as it is not a measurable and fixed entity. There were several opinions on it, however, by starting the design process and empirical research, it became a lot easier to trace ambiguity. Going back and forth between the theoretical and the practical was quite useful into reiterating the same idea several times, to understand that ambiguity is not something that can be represented but rather a condition to be fostered. This project taught me how to integrate this interest into creating urban commons that develop on both material and immaterial qualities of a site. Through the process I also needed to let go of my romanticization of the abandoned, but rather deconstructing it and seeing which qualities of it can be take into consideration in improving cities.

I believe following the terrain vague was a quite successful way of opening up the topic of ambiguous design. The results of the abacus, which substantially informed my design decisions, would be understood better if there was a larger chapter focusing on surface, boundary and ground conditions. I further think this could have been substantiated by better mapping

the intensities of ambiguity. Nonetheless, the constant reiteration of ambiguity while trying to pin down a definition, helped me let go of this need to be able to fix it, while also being able to bring it into a sensible project.

Broader Scenario

The project further deals with topics about availability of material and space an how they can be used in unconventional ways to increase their potential. By taking into consideration the different user rhythms, the building makes the most of the spaces, always giving the users interest in the site. This allows for the site to become a multigenerational urban common. The use of locally available materials such as stone go on to reflect on indigenous practices present in Madrid and how they proved to be better at tackling climate issues and can become a cheaper and more sustainable way of building within the territory. By dealing with terrain vagues, I wanted to understand as much as I could what I could be taking away, and how the site could be used to give back to the context it was in. This mentality of understanding user rhythm analysis and building on indigenous knowledge can become useful on the larger scale, informing a critical approach to new constructions which rather than disrupting existing flows, are rather aiming to contribute to them.

Future possibilities

The whole point of using ambiguity comes from an interest in forward thinking design. Focusing on having an architecture that changes with a fluctuating territory. Therefore also thinking for the site's opportunities how the actors see fit. A first step was made by considering possible change of functions. As the project is treated as a hybrid of 3 different buildings, but in actuality is one, future functions are able to change the interior spaces the expand and change as needed. Altering the park side of the site by using land art methods creates opportunity for it to be active beyond the architectural program, while also aiming to improve the site's biodiversity using regenerative methods. Negotiation becomes a key feature of the dialogue between the site and the intervention. The goal is to improve the qualities of the site compared to how it was found, creating an urban common which is able to outlive the program itself.