

P5 Reflection

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The Urban Architecture graduation studio for 2023/24 situated itself at the Friche Josaphat in Brussels

An Introduction :

In the transforming urban life of a multicultural Schaerbeek, sits a piece of fallow land or "friche". Once a marshaling yard, it ceased to operate about twenty years ago and fell prey to an ongoing debate about its future development. Authorities found themselves at odds with locals, ecologists and naturalists who advocated for the emergent landscape to be left to its own devices, eventually leaving the friche in a state of limbo and uncertainty. And therefore, a "heterotopia" or counter space in the city was born. The heterotopia of the friche is completely removed from the constructs of traditional time and space, embodying its inherent atmosphere of magic, enchantment and beauty in the absence of a regular unfolding of life and human involvement. -The future of this heterotopia is, however, threatened. Its potential to truly embrace its unique offerings of time, space and rest for human and non-human beings remains untapped. The friche constantly dwindles between the pressures of urban acquisition and its own qualities of "otherness" in the traditional functioning of Schaerbeek, which continues to grapple for space and quench its needs for housing. -In addition to this, the urban culture surrounding nature in the immediate east of the site lacks rigor. The friche is unexplored and uncharted by the local communities because it is inaccessible to them. While parks and public spaces exist around the site, the relationship with nature and its restful offerings is rather subdued.

A) Reflection on themes, methods and media :

The theme of the Heterotopia emerged almost instinctively for me as a fascination during the first phase of our collective research where our group delved into the "Friche, Void, Vedute and Phantasmagoria" of the site through a rather offbeat lens. Our approach aimed at assessing the intangible yet omnipresent qualities of the friche through film and cinematic explorations. We imagined the friche in scenarios - Apocalyptic as a dead zone, serene and bountiful as the garden of eden, empty and vulnerable as a fallow piece of land - and asked ourselves the question, " What is it about this friche that evokes the senses and piques the imagination?"

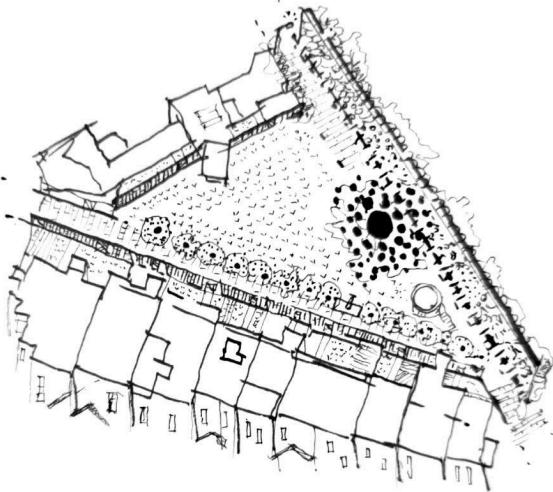


In order to understand the friche and its inherent qualities, I would have to look beyond it, towards other Heterotopias. Where are they hiding in the city? How do I find them? Do they appear and disappear? Are there certain moments when I could catch them? *Is the Heterotopia phantasmagorical - a construct of time?*

My initial research expanded and traveled to the different Heterotopias that I had encountered in my life - A secret garden near my home in India, a buddhist shrine in Hanoi, the pantheon - in a quest to collect and inventory what was found there - people, things, spaces, objects, textures, smells, sounds. Each of these cases was collective and public, yet felt intimate and personal. Each was tucked into the city, shrouded by borders and enclosing a sanctum within. The research

culminated in an inventory of the Heterotopia which would further inform my design and its position in the larger tussle between the "Urban" and the "other". In addition to this, I employed writing and narratives as my tool for exploration. While on one hand, the inventory becomes a log of the tangible, the stories of these heterotopias are evocative, bringing to the surface, the hidden magic of these places.

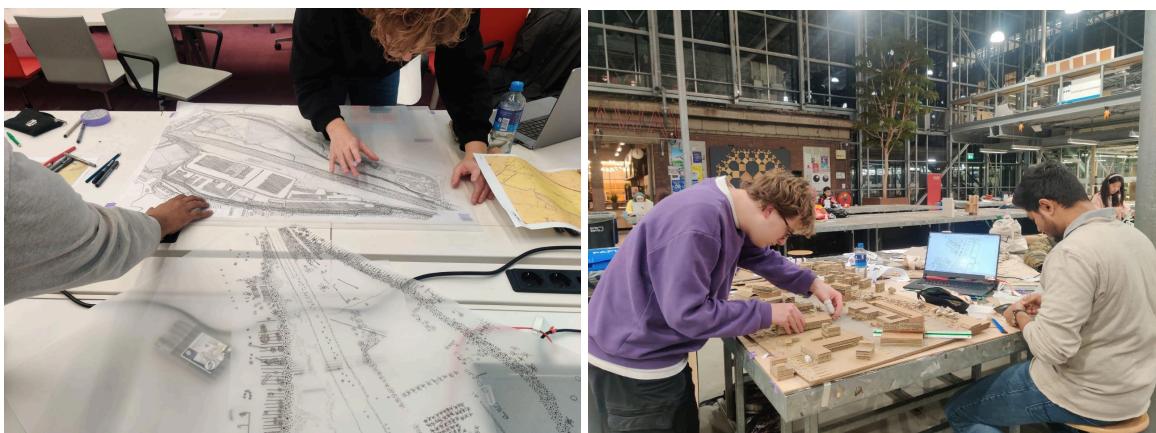
1. *The secret garden back home*
(New Delhi, India)



Two labyrinthian passages lead to a garden,
Paths less travelled,
Grasses less traversed.
Once a play zone, it is now forgotten.
Here is a list of all that is found :
Walls, on all three sides.
A long wall of stone with barbed wire
And two short walls of brick
A banyan tree,
An idol of Buddha,
A small well,
A hand pump,
Thickets of bougainvillea that engulf the barbed wire
Wrought iron gates of backyards - rusted.
A single lampost at the entrance of one of the passages
Relics of flowers that once bloomed and swayed with the wind.
Short mango trees planted at the edges of the grass,
Steps that lead up to the well.
Silence.
The cries of cicadas
The occasional chirping of sparrows
The smell of a hearty meal
The sizzling of a pan from a distant backyard kitchen.
The slow and steady passage of time,
only silence,
And a pause.

Secret garden (Image by Author)

B) Reflection on collective masterplan and the "as found":



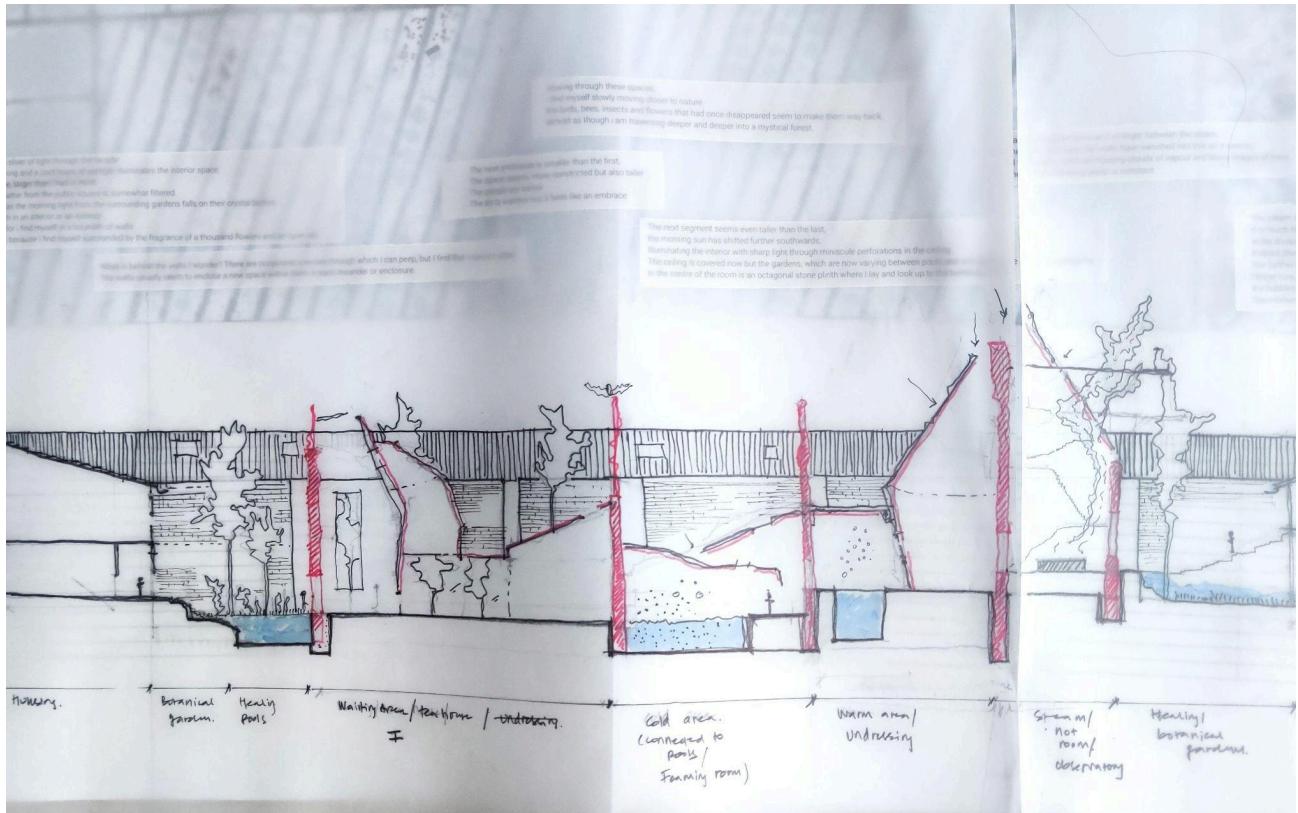
What became an anchor for the genesis of design ideas and a proposal was the analysis of the friche as a heterotopia "as found" which dissected the friche in its physical attributes - the borders, tree lines, soil and water analyses as superimposed layers. The analysis was in the form of large scale drawings, drawn deliberately by hand with my colleagues Nino and Prajwal as a method of careful and precise investigation. The next layer would be the designed masterplan which would have to mediate between the city and the friche. This "mediation" became the point of departure for all three of us, where we saw the possibilities of our proposals as mediators between the ecology of the friche and the growing need for urban expansion. We also saw this as a moment of collective ideation, where a manifesto of the as found would lay down some rules and principles for approaching the designs. All three individual designs would share this umbrella of the as found, regardless of their separate and unique stories.

My chosen mediator function became a complex - a collective housing, an "alt"(ernate) house and a bathhouse that would be nestled and hidden within the borders of the housing.

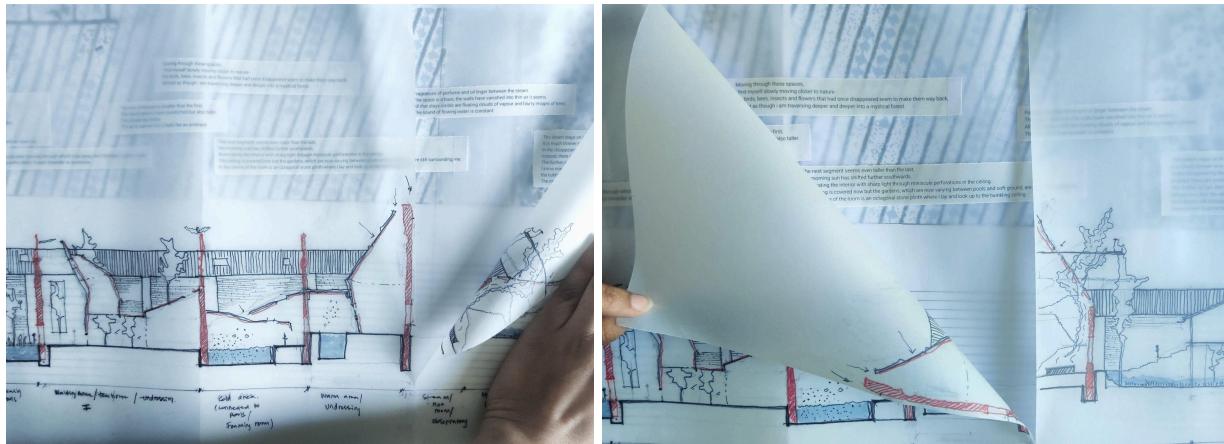
C) Reflection on design :

The bathhouse intends to serve as a vessel for the purification of the being (human or non human) as one transitions from the surrounding city into the haven of the heterotopic friche, purged from the weights of regular life and time. The "bathhouse of enchantments" is a physical and metaphorical place where people and the other migratory guests of the friche come to rest their weary minds and bodies, away from their traditional time. They enter the enchanting world of the heterotopian friche and are refreshed anew. The bathhouse is not only a spiritual vessel of wellness, but also performs a social function of synergizing communities and rekindling an intimate relationship with the nature of the friche that is so far missing. In the bathhouse, all are equal. It is a democratic space. In addition to the bathhouse itself, the design also becomes a water collection and management system for the east side of the friche, where it can facilitate the growth of a constructed wetland as a habitat and resting place for the growing species of migratory birds, bees, dragonflies and others.

The design unravels in layers - from the urban-ness of the housing, to the transitory nature of the collective alt-house and finally to the heterotopia of the bathhouse and its gardens. It showcases the complete journey of moving through the city, into the sublime.



Writing the heterotopia, in addition to drawing and detailing it by hand through the design process, has perhaps been the key method of tapping into the more physical attributes of the design. Narrating the tales of the bathhouse compels one to imagine its experiential qualities. The design of the bathhouse completely follows these cues, becoming not a singular building block, but a collection of smaller spaces that are sequentially arranged to direct the gaze and to hide what may happen next. In addition to this, the narratives have helped shape the design's relationship to time - in years, seasons and days.



Will the bathhouse disappear and disintegrate over time while the housing remains?

Is the bathhouse temporal as per the seasons? Does it switch its function to the alt-house during certain times of the year? Do its landscapes swell up in the first rains?

Is the bathhouse a fleeting moment of the day? Constantly changing and shape shifting in its appearance with the changing sun?

Perhaps, the three questions on the three scales of time have constantly found answers in the planning, material choices, construction methodologies and experiential qualities of spaces.

D) Reflection on the studio and relevance of the graduation project in the larger social, professional and scientific framework

The last green in town calls for an immediate response to the burgeoning crisis of urbanization and its effects on ecology, nature and everything that they encapsulate. The design of the bathhouse is an attempt to truly understand and value this last green in town as a heterotopia "as found", by dissecting in detail its innate qualities of peace, leisure, surprise and enchantment. The proposal questions the role of architecture in such a case, where it can have the power to uplift and enhance these qualities of the site, mediating between ecological stresses and the needs of humans in the city

This project is perhaps an urge to look at a new narrative of derelict and industrial plot development, shifting the focus from looking at sites as always preparing for top-down human appropriation schemes to a more sensitized framework of intervention. The need for development cannot be disregarded, however, the kind of solution that is born out of this need can become a driving force in maintaining an equilibrium between ecology and human need. With a keen eye for the "as found" worlds within the heterotopia, a careful approach towards mediating between the city and the counter space, and finally, a symbiotic means of building - where human and non-human actors benefit in synergy, the heterotopia shall prevail. Is architecture as a discipline only meant to inhabit, obtain and colonize spaces of emptiness? Where is the breathing space of the city? spaces of reflection, pause and surprise like paradise gardens? Spaces where ecology flourishes?