

# CITY OF THRESHOLDS

RESEARCH BOOK





*This booklet shows the progress of my research work throughout my graduation year. Rather than a final product, it tries to bring together my thoughts and inspirations.*

# **INTRODUCTION**

Through the feelings evoked from being on site, and from the ongoing analysis of La Friche, the importance of the space, and the nature of it being a void, or better, a terrain vague has solidified the importance of maintaining the characteristics of the site being a threshold space between the predominantly capital oriented, constructed majority of Brussels.

The tension between states of regulated and wild presents a possibility within urban space. In the contemporary era, our lives are all too industrialised, we find ourselves emersed in industrial networks, when in fact our needs and daily lives are really quite conventional. Due to the ultra-controlled nature of modern-day cities, where little room for participation and spontaneity is provided, particularly in Western Europe, the urban dweller has lost agency on having an influence on surroundings. This leaves the city dweller repressed from basic needs not even known to them, as our daily life is free of inherent contest and tension.

We find ourselves in a limbo between the completely private and the super sanitized public. The role of the architect in designing spaces has all too often been reduced to designing without room for contest. Spaces are often built for a specific set of requirements, and to be regulated by either the private user, or the public authority, users of the city lack authority and agency in shaping the urban environment, and thus lose connection, and a sense of ownership on the city. Allowing people to have agency over the city nurtures community, and, provides a platform for people who may be otherwise marginalised. I too find myself in a position where I feel like I don't have agency, or a sense of ownership on spaces outside of the private. This is something I may not notice daily, but I feel a longing for such devices is triggered through being engaged with La Friche, hence I would like to investigate these topics to raise awareness for the importance of them to all inhabitants of urban environments in the contemporary Western city.



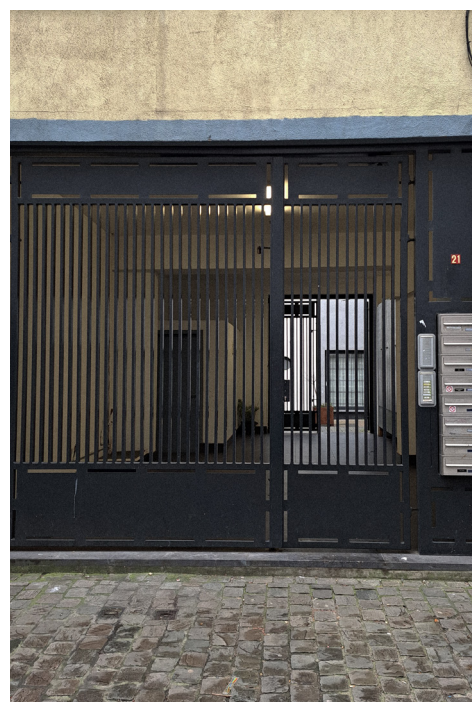
Due to the ultra-controlled nature of modern-day cities, where little room for participation and spontaneity is provided, particularly in Western Europe, the urban dweller has lost agency on having an influence on surroundings. This leaves the city dweller repressed from basic needs not even known to them, as our daily life is free of inherent contest and tension. We find ourselves in a limbo between the completely private and the super sanitized public.











Coming across barriers when exploring Brussels, I found myself doing site visits in the rain, and struggling to find any form of refuge or shelter to take a break





Prior to visiting the site for the first time, I wrote a short story on what I imagine the project site to feel like. I found myself being surprised by the influence of imagination on my perception, and often come back to the note throughout the duration of the project.



12/09

### TRAIN RIDE ENTRY - Speculating La Friche

I am passing through La Friche, a wild-western grassland traversed by no one but those who know it.

My view is clouded by the plumes of smoke pouring out of the locomotive. It all seems a dream.

A break in the rhythmic, heavy puffs of smoke opens up a clear view into the vast, desolate landscape. In the backdrop lies the verdure of Brussels' mountain range like skyline. Thought to be inhabited by a vast range of peoples, a diverse hustle and bustle. I am fascinated by how they live together.

The next stop is announced by the conductor passing through shabby, clinking carriage. I don't know why he raised his voice so harshly, there is no one to listen to his voice.

I get off at the next stop, on the edge of this unknown grassland. I am ready to explore this anticipated landscape.

## SITE: LA FRICHE JOSAPHAT



Located in the North of Brussels, in the diverse, neighbourhood of Schaerbeek, lies La Friche Josaphat. A site which is largely defined by its “terrain vague”, the result of a former marshalling yard, abandoned to allow for nature to flourish. The South-West of the site is occupied by a commons and a travelling circus company. Both of which are engaged with the site in different ways, and contribute towards the unique atmosphere which defines La Friche.

La Friche is highly discussed, with multiple development plans proposing construction on the site, to cater towards the need for social housing in Brussels. Yet, parties involved with the ecology on La Friche counter this development, providing strong arguments for the importance of such spaces in the city. This has left the current situation of the site to be in stalemate, where additional plans are being drawn up to mitigate the opposing parties.

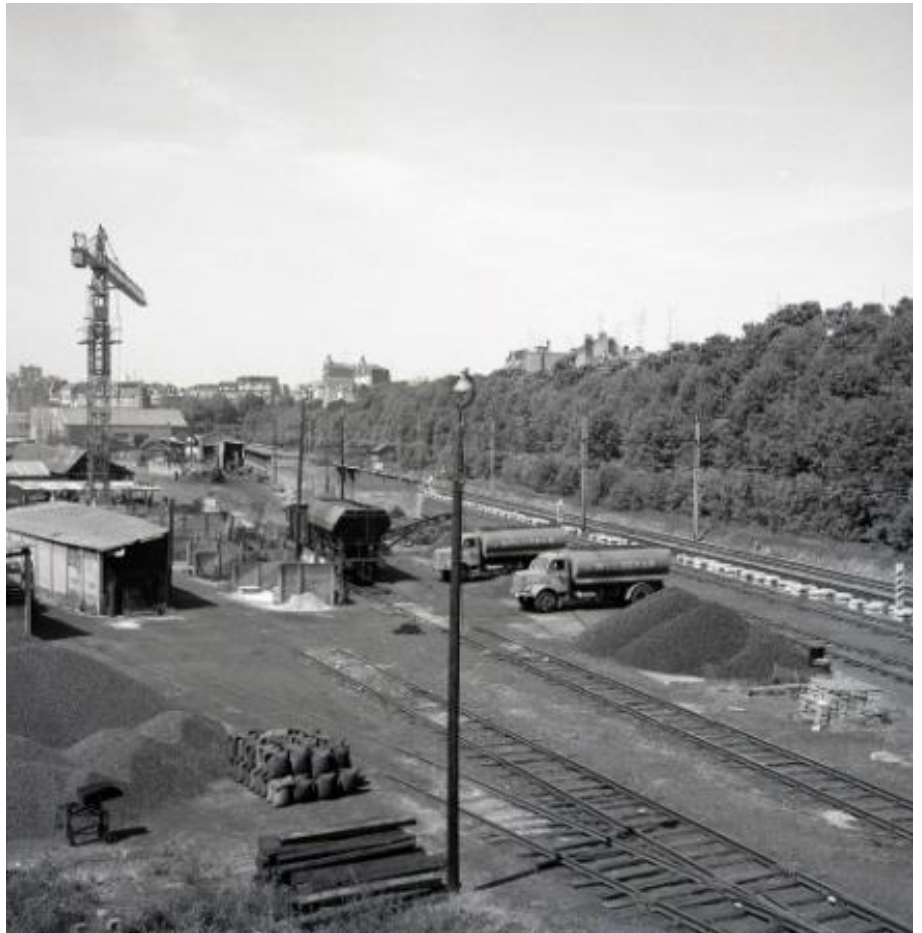
The current state of La Friche has allowed for ecology to flourish on site. Boasting over 1200 species, with over 200 different species of bees. Furthermore, La Friche is a vital point for migrating birds to use as a “landing strip”.







## HISTORY



La Friche Josaphat owes its shape and topography to its history. A former marshalling yard which was abandoned after disuse in the 1980's





## POLITICAL CONTEXT



Due to its unique nature, the site is highly contested, and there are big discussions going on between parties which want to preserve the site and its ecological value, as well as sides which see the site as an ideal space to construct housing, which, as in most contemporary western cities is a big crisis. Currently there are further negotiations going on to improve the proposals, as they do not adequately take the needs of citizens into account. The future of the friche is unknown.









Currently, La Friche feels like a vast grassland. A train line runs through the middle of the site, where the train station is the only public access to the site. Slightly hidden behind a row of shrubbery is an industrial area, housing larger industries and storages. A walk through La Friche feels rural and wild, a unique feeling in the contemporary western city.









A small section of the South-West of La Friche houses the Commons Josaphat. A collective which in part cares for the ecology on La Friche. The commons takes part in collective gardening, and hosts small events, amongst other things. We as a group of Urban Architecture students were granted access by members of the commons, and shared a meal. The commons functions as a threshold space in the city.















# FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA

## PROCESS



Pinning and laying out information, a common mode of representation throughout the project. Having the diversity of found information laid out on a table helped to draw connections between the various topics researched. It allowed us as a group to provide a comprehensible narrative on the topic of Friche Void Vedute Phantasmagoria.



# **FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA**

## **TERRAIN VAGUE**

In 1995, the Catalan architect and theoretician Ignasi de Solà-Morales published an article which was titled “terrain vague”. In this article, Solà-Morales states that it had become difficult to look at the contemporary city through purely analysing individual buildings, or the skyline, but it was rather more adequate to look at the contemporary city through focusing on empty, abandoned space. Through this attraction to the empty space, Solà-Morales needed a term to best describe the nature and qualities of such spaces. The French term “terrain vague” seemed to do so best. Where it is to be noted that the French word vague, could be translated as either ‘void’ or ‘uncertain’ or ‘wave’, and that the word terrain connoted a more positive urban quality than the English word ‘land’. The outlining of new vocabulary to describe urban voids led to a changing in tide, where benefit was seen in the cities’ empty and leftover spaces. “terrain vague” encompasses the qualities of La Friche quite well, and is therefore a more adequate term than the negatively connoted “void”.



DEVOLVER PAKA EXPO!



Bardone

M. Lugini



La et alia volores exceatur sumenditet as volo venientia

# FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA

## FRICHE IMAGINATIONS

'I cannot find the Potsdamer Platz.  
Here? This can't be it.  
Potsdamer Platz, that's where Cafz  
Josti used to be.  
In the afternoons, I went there to  
chat and to drink a coffee... and to  
watch the crowd.  
Before that I smoked my cigar  
at Loese and Wolf... a renowned  
tobacconist.  
Just across from here.  
This can't be the Potsdamer Platz.'

Being on site for the first time evoked imaginations. Imaginations of an at the time unknown past, and a vision of the future. The vast landscape is hard to comprehend, and invites time for contemplation on what is to take place in the graduation year to come.





*An outtake from the movie "Wings of Desire" directed by Wim Wenders. Unpacking memory and the Friche, the image reminded me of a moment on site visit*

## **FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA**

### **FRICHE IMAGINATIONS**

Imagining “phantasmagorical”  
projections on La Friche in a postcard  
format.







# FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA

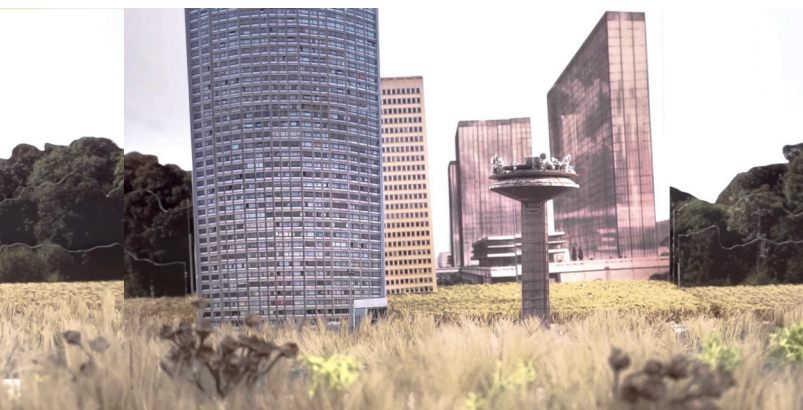
## SHORT MOVIE



The phantasmagorical visions stirred up by the characteristics of the Friche, resulted in a video projecting a multitude of imaginary circumstances onto the site. The video functioned as a final product for the analysis done as part of a group, working on the theme of Friche void vedute: phantasmagoria.







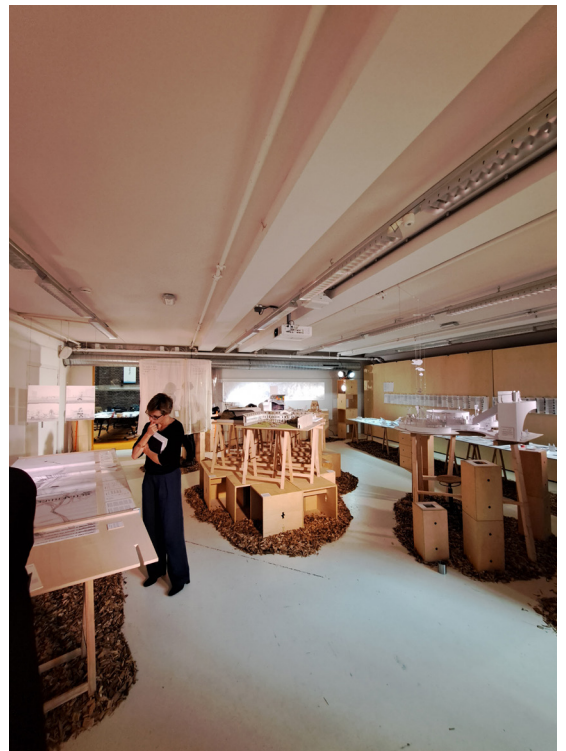


# FRICHE VOID VEDUTE: PHANTASMAGORIA

## P1 EXHIBITION



The video contributed towards part of an exhibition displayed by the whole group of Architecture. The exhibition functioned as a presentation of research conducted on the site and surroundings up until the P1 phase of the project. The exhibition was curated to mimic entering La Friche, spiking curiosity from the outside, and giving people the feeling of being in an enclosed, natural space, away from the norm.







*a piece of La Friche in the faculty.*



## EXCURSION: GENEVA



Going to Geneva served as a refreshing inspiration after a push for the P1 exhibition. What stood out the most was the “river chronicles” project, an approach to harnessing nature in a beautiful manner. Also getting acquainted with the rich cooperative housing culture of Switzerland peaked my interest.







## VISION DAY

For the “vision day” we came together as a studio to present different “visions” we had for the development of the Friche, in response to the requirement for a masterplan included in the brief.

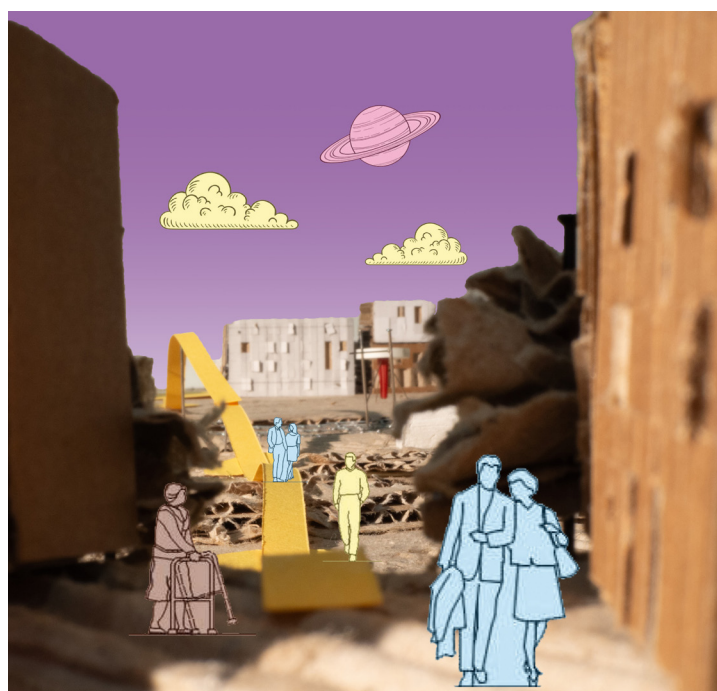












*La et alia volores exceatur sumenditet as volo venientia*

## **PERSONAL RESEARCH TOWARDS P2**

The personal research stems from feelings evoked through being on site, and from analysis on the nature of La Friche being a void, or better, a terrain vague. The terrain vague that La Friche presents, has solidified the importance of the threshold in the city which works hard to mitigate against spaces for individual agency.

We find ourselves in a limbo between the completely private and the super sanitized public. The role of the architect in designing spaces has all too often been reduced to designing without room for contest. Spaces are often built for a specific set of requirements, and to be regulated by either the private user, or the public authority, users of the city lack authority and agency in shaping the urban environment, and thus lose connection, and a sense of ownership on the city. Allowing people to have agency over the city nurtures community, and, provides a platform for people who may be otherwise marginalised.

The following analysis doesn't follow a linear pattern, and case studies can be observed independently from one another, yet relations can be drawn between observations. Assemblage theory is used to make sense of the whole, in order to inform design decisions.



Can the city of “thresholds” offer possibilities to transcend the dominance of the smooth city?

- What is a threshold space? What are the properties of a threshold space? And how can these be seen as valuable?

- What is the smooth city? And its consequences?

- How can threshold spaces provide a stage for interaction between humans and nature in the city?

- How can thresholds accommodate people with the possibility of relating to the city?

- How can a design utilize thresholds to create a desirable tension in the urban environment?

# **METHODOLOGY**

In order to immerse myself in the city, I decided to not follow an itinerary, only sticking to certain points of interest which I thought could appeal to my research. This allowed me to come across spontaneous points in the city, points at which one would usually come across lived thresholds, away from the eyes of the average visitor of Brussels, I was able to view the city from the perspective of the flaneur.

I made sure to photograph and document things I found interesting, so that I could later delve into the assemblies found within the photographs I take. Throughout the research, putting together an array of photographs helped me in using principles of the assemblage theory to make sense of patterns I find within the thresholds. Beyond photographs, I made sure to apply a variety of methods to highlight characteristics of the threshold. This is in turn all supplemented by theoretical investigation. Theory really helped me to understand what I am looking at, and what to look for. As well as that, existing theory also helped to define the notion of what I was looking at.



'While navigating the metropolis  
without following obligatory  
iteneraries, one can potentially  
discover ruptures in the uniformity  
of the urban phantasmagoria'



The pinning up of the pictures I took helped me to make sense of them, and to categorise my research. The act of pinning up has helped me throughout the project, not only as a mode of representation, but also as a method of sorting.





## DEFINING THRESHOLDS

Thresholds blur the lines between the:

Urban Inhabitant as:

**SPECTATOR**

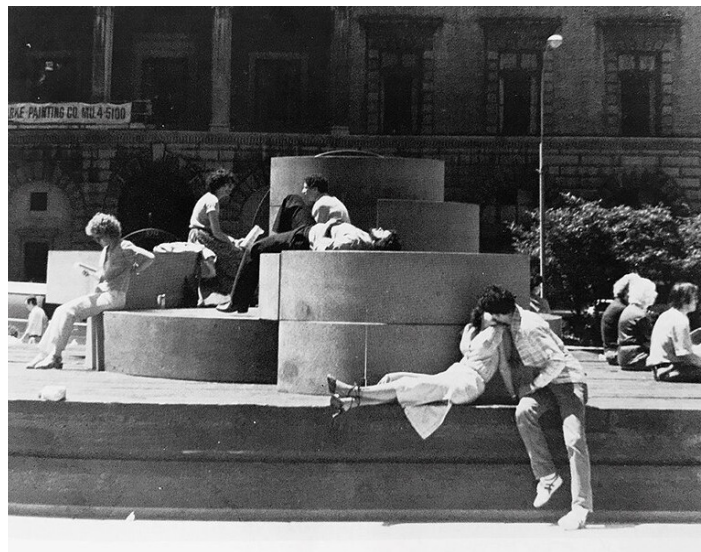




'Thresholds unite what is separate,  
and separate what is different'

Urban Inhabitant as:

**ACTOR**

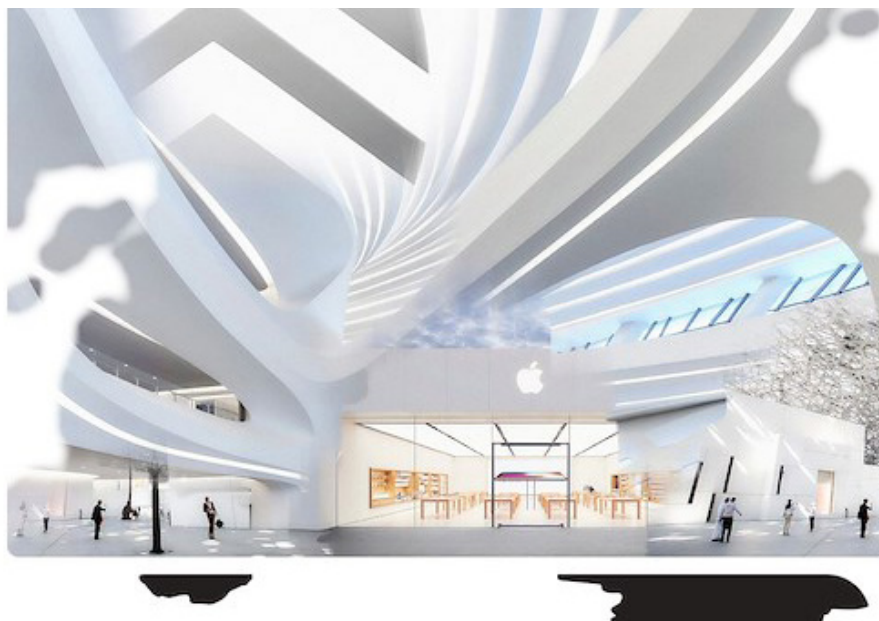
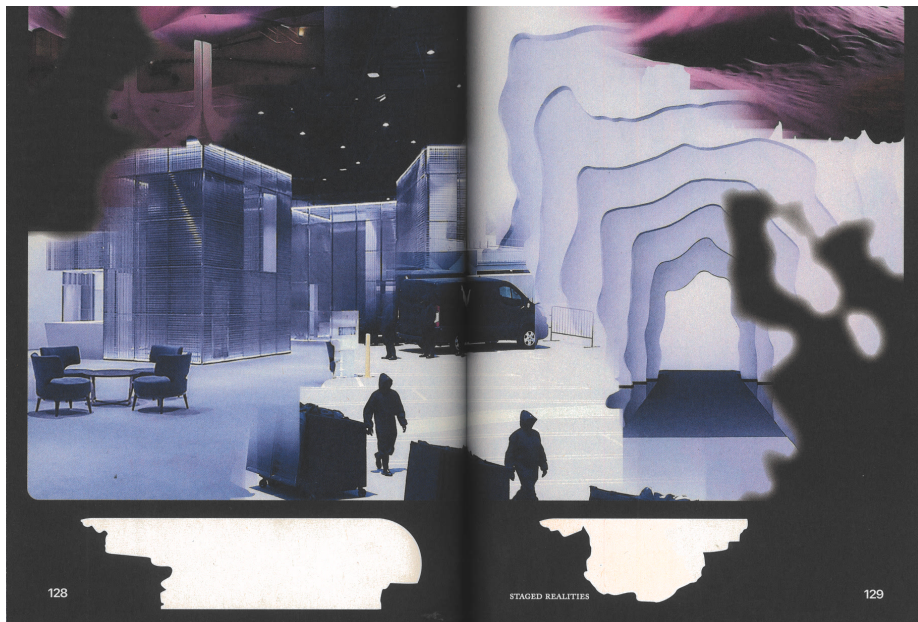


# SMOOTH CITIES



Stemming from what was perhaps initially a personal desire, I was inspired by René Boers book on the smooth city. In the book they talk about Amsterdam, and its “smoothness”. The book gave me a term which I want to counter in my design. The collages included in the book express what smoothness may mean very well. All too many architecture projects end up contributing towards a “smooth”, sanitised, ultimately unfaceted city. I don't want to create a “perfect” project.





## **SMOOTH CITIES RELATING TO BRUSSELS**

Brussels manifests an urge towards smoothness through the erection of borders and defensive spaces in retaliation to the complex fragmented city scape, which unless bordered would create “undesired” undefined spaces.





## A FRUSTRATION WITH GATED BRUSSELS HOUSING PROJECTS



Walking through Brussels searching for inspiration in existing projects I all too often found myself coming across closed off areas. There are harsh divisions between the public and private. Walls and fences close off communal areas, and there is little relationship to the street.





*'Mexico' and 'Cheval Noir' housing projects*

## CASE STUDY: ZWICKY SÜD

The cooperative housing project Zwicky Süd designed by the studio Schneider Studer Primas served as the first inspiration on how thresholds can facilitate a comfortable living environment, while providing a high density of housing. Design principles on the mediation between public and private, as well as the facilitation of communality in this project provide a great source of inspiration.



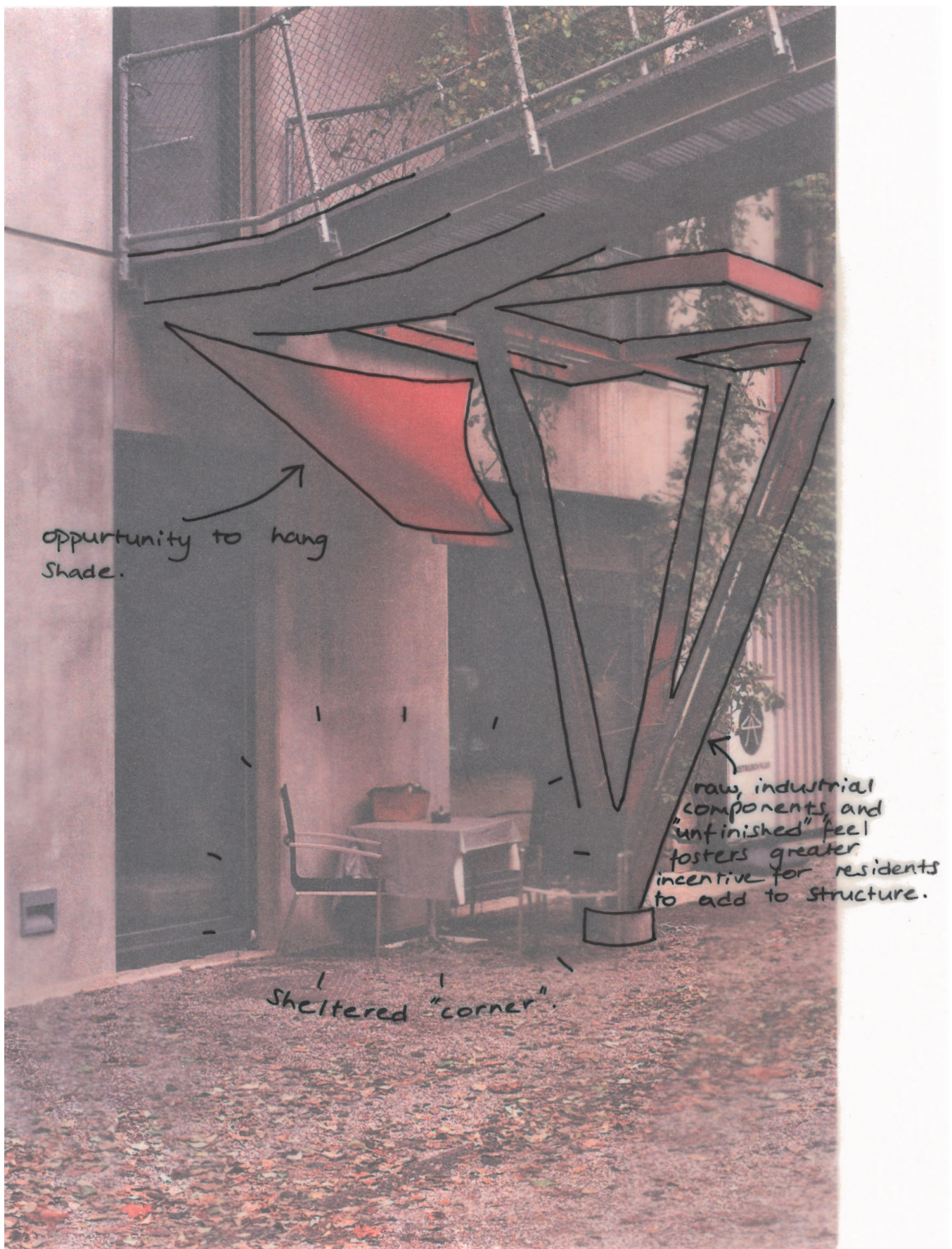






The project provides ample room for shelter, at different scales. These spaces are open, and are accessible to all.









An elevated "threshold" above street level is mediated by a small staircase. A scaffold-like structure allocates space and a structure for appropriation





opportunity for various  
degrees of "shelter".

← modular, "unfinished"  
structure with a unifying  
language. The structure  
is interpretable.





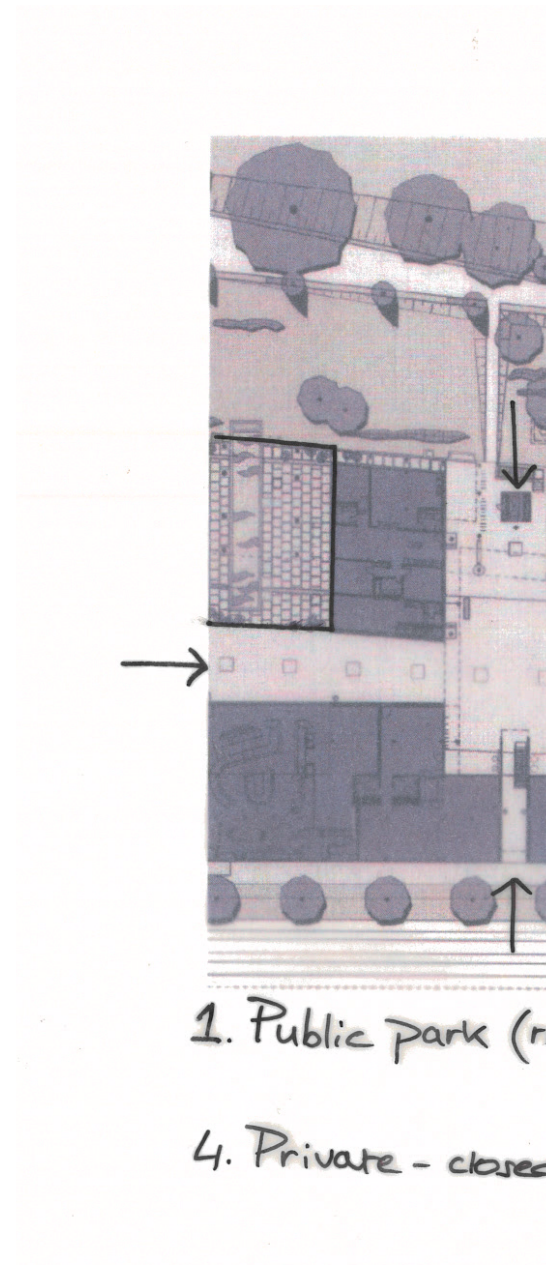
The perimeter of the project is not harshly defined, leaving people to appropriate the space, building small structures.





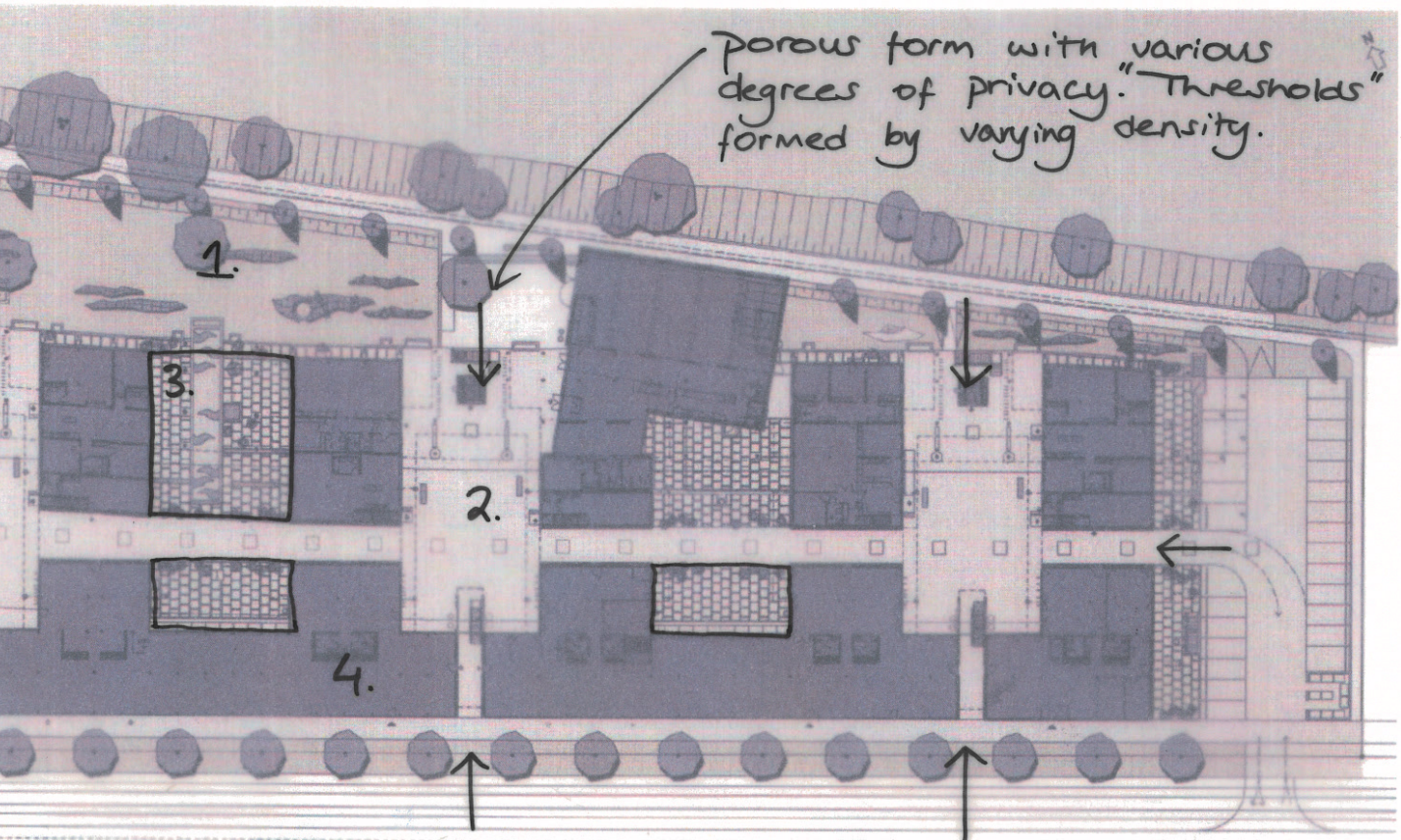


## CASE STUDY: LIMMATWEST



Another project in Zurich, designed by Kuhn Fischer Partner Architekten, Limmatwest utilises density to create thresholds, which blur the line between what is public and private. I found walking through the project to be very pleasant. I found these thresholds to exist on multiple scales, where a variety of architectural gestures grant inhabitants the agency to appropriate spaces, while providing a varied environment to pedestrians.





riverfront)  
interiors.

2. Stairwells, letterboxes etc...  
publicly accessible, a space  
for encounters between residents  
& passers by.

3. Inner courtyard  
Semi: public, space  
for appropriation  
by residents.





Particularly interesting is the generous allocation of gallery space, which residents often appropriated. These galleries are also publically accessible.





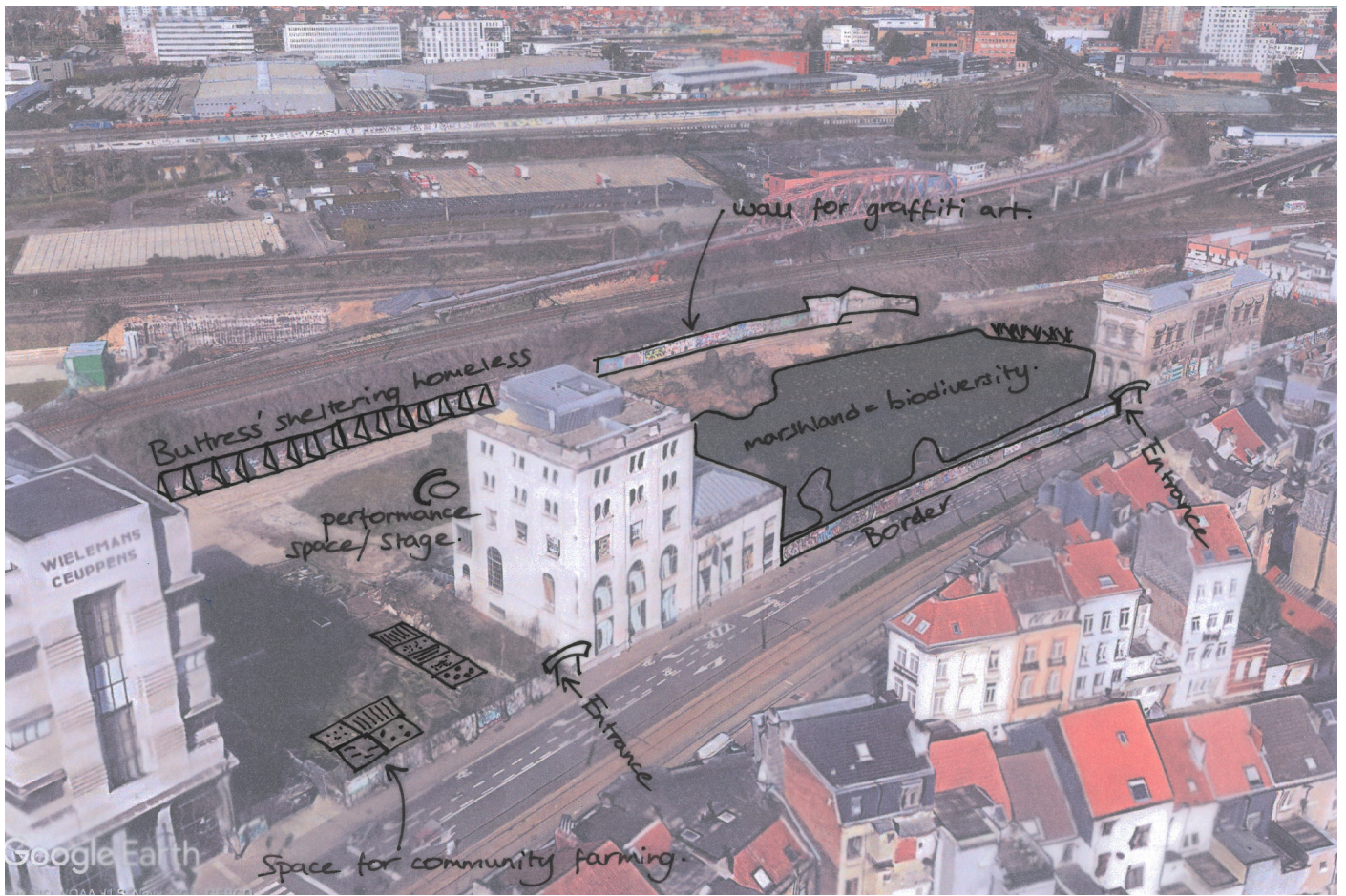


## CASE STUDY: MARAIS WIELS



A case study I initially stumbled upon served as a leitmotiv to understand the threshold. This is due to the fact that all categories are found within this space in the city, and also due to its undoubtable connection to the friche, as it grapples with similar contests. Marais Wiels is a former brewery, which flooded, and is now very valued by activists, and is a vital site in the city to harbour otherness. In the following pages the emancipatory qualities of Marais Wiels as a threshold space in the city are displayed in a series of photographs I took.





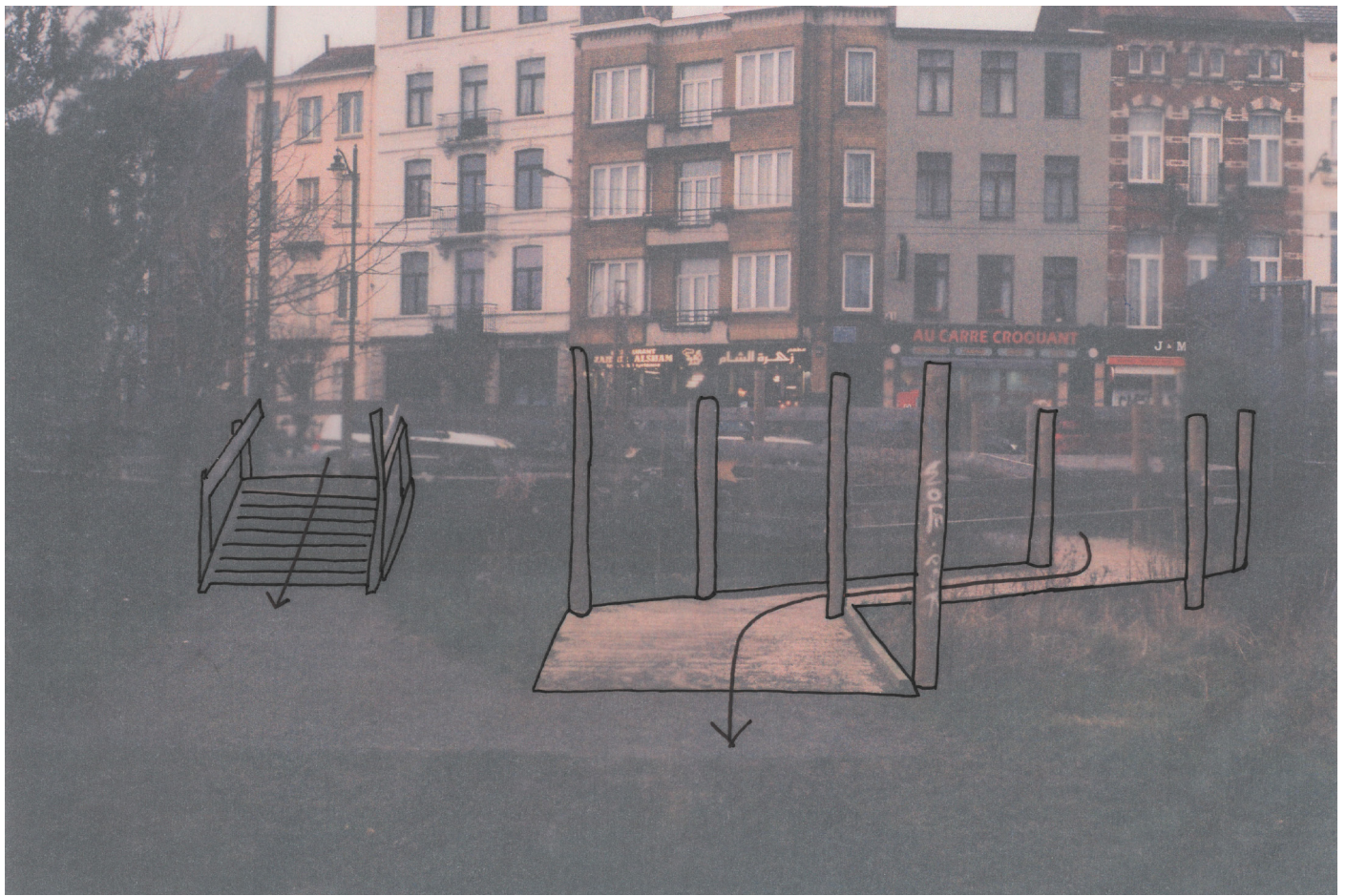












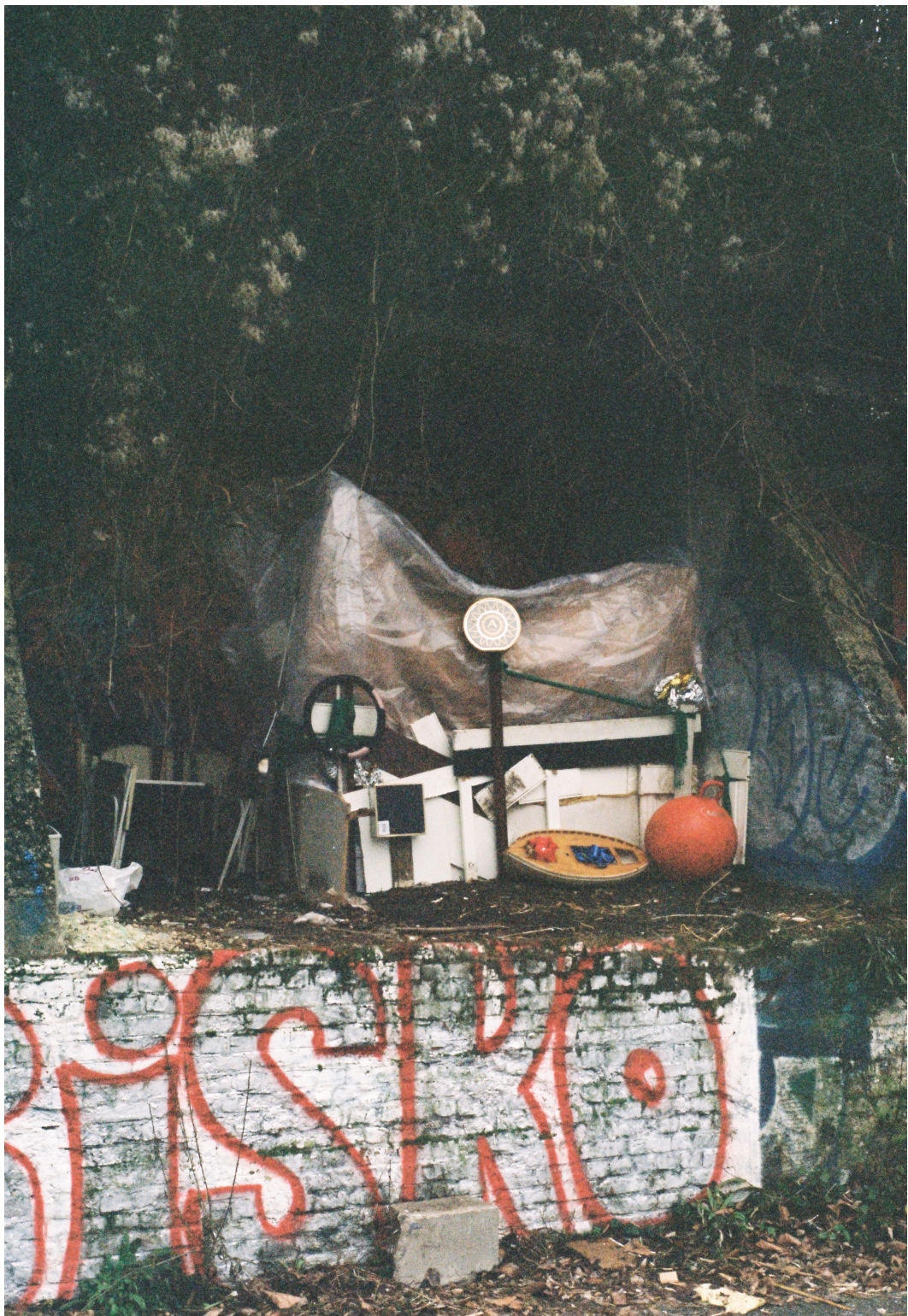








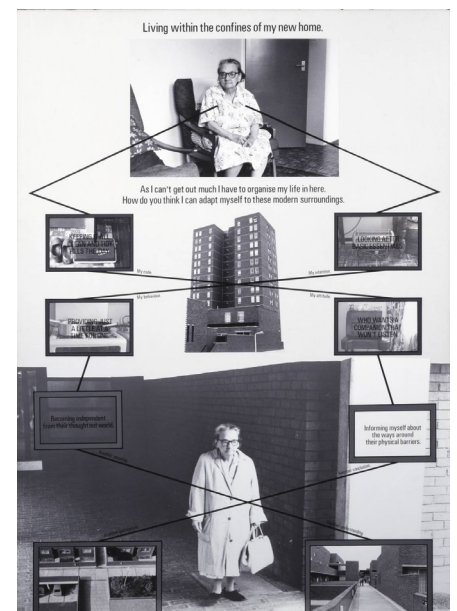
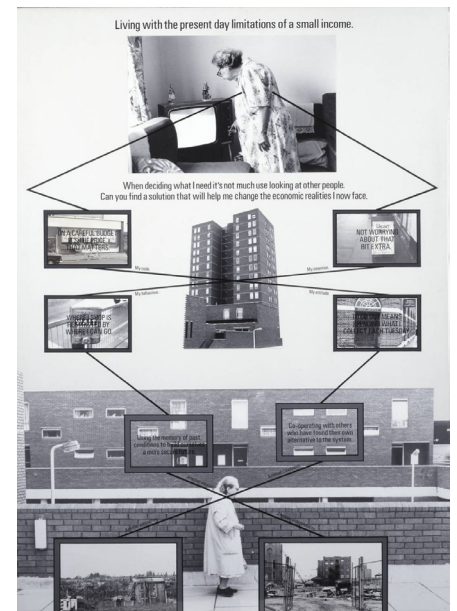
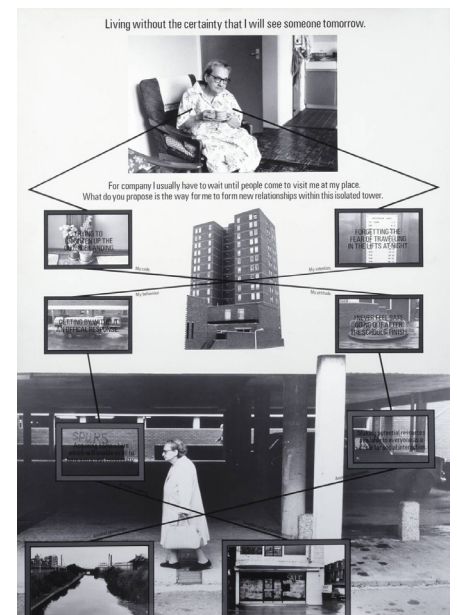






# TOM OVERTON METHOD TO MAKE SENSE OF THRESHOLD SPACE CATEGORISATION

To be seen is a poster I created, inspired by the work of British artist Stephen Willets. The poster serves as a tool to understand and quantify the categories, where, a series of borders and crossings engender a multitude of threshold conditions. As a result of this certain encounters are produced, at this stage for performances, interaction is fostered, as well as a stage to encounter otherness. What I named proximate satisfaction, occurs due to small urban farming setups, where informal personalization can take place. Finally, the threshold space can serve as a space to serve urban justice, where in the case of Marais Wiels there is shelters for the homeless, as well as walls where people can graffiti or post emancipatory slogans, without the risk of persecution.





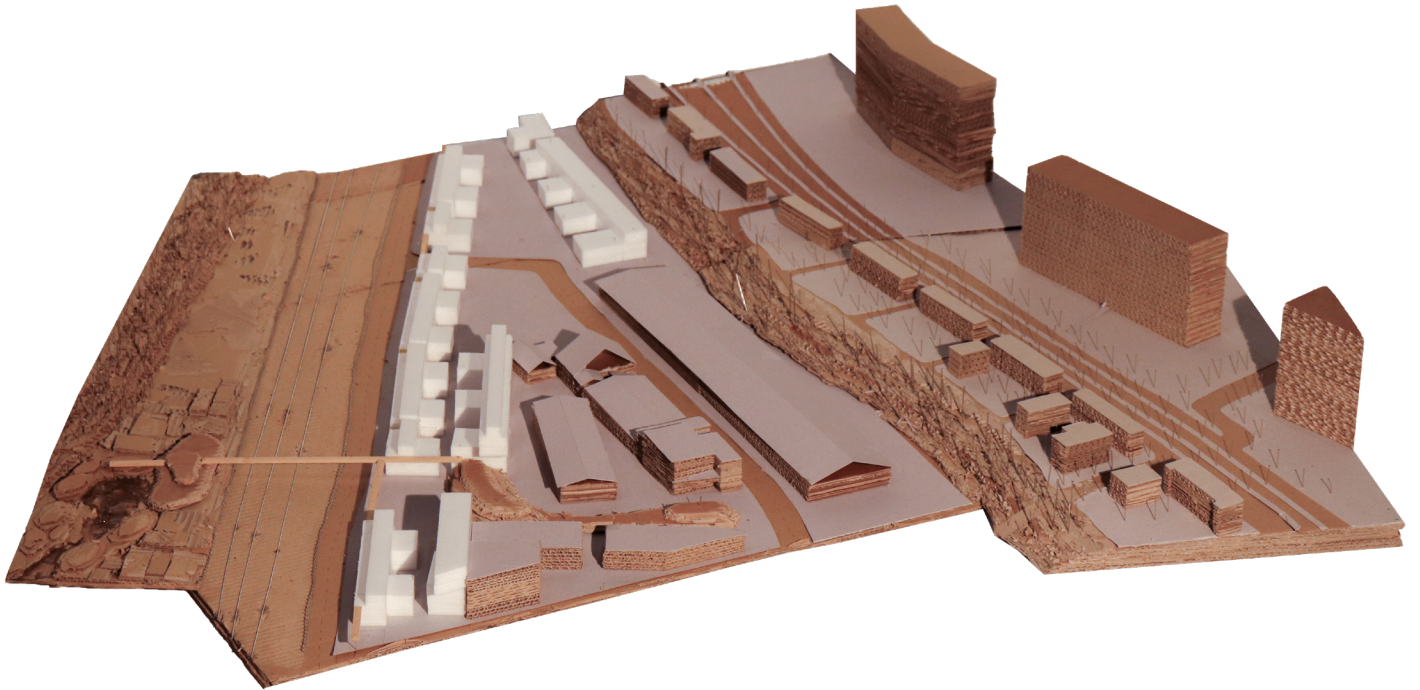
A study of **Marais Wiels** to highlight possibilities of the urban threshold



a series of *borders/crossings* engenders...



## P2 - MASTERPLANNING



Working together with group partners Giacomo Pimpini and Puck van der Pluijm on a masterplan, while maintaining the value of the threshold. A variety of urban spaces are created through high density. The plan follows the linearity of the plot.







## TO THE DRAWING TABLE - LAYING OUT AND MAKING SENSE OF INFORMATION - PROCESSING P2



Focusing on the boldness and urbanity of the design, the masterplan is brought forward with consideration for the individual assignment





## P3 AND FRAGMENT MODEL



The P3 required a huge jump in scale, a 1:33 model forced me to think about the expression of the construction more. In the end I felt like it was too rushed, but will keep the principle of the model in mind





## BACK TO BRUSSELS - EXCURSION



Going back to Brussels allowed me to come back to the brief. As a studio we viewed projects at a more architectural scale. The last push of inspiration.





## MODEL AS A SET - INSPIRED BY MOVIE SETS



As part of the final product a “movie set” model of my project aims to show the implementation of thresholds in the project, based on research conducted. The technique of model building is inspired by movie sets, shown in picture is an outtake from the movie ‘synechdoche New York”





## GARAGES AS SPACES FOR EXPRESSION



Garages present a space for a microcosm of expression. Their openness allows for a world to be created within them. The theatricality of the opening garage doors captured in the Documentary 'Garagenvolk' by director Natalija Yefimkina presents itself as an inspiration.







Garage doors to be seen in project.







On the threshold nearest to the street, these kinds of space are often appropriated, and interact with the outside. This is replicated in the model.















## MICROPOLITICS OF BALCONIES - BALCONIES AS A THRESHOLD



Balconies provide a stage for expression, and an interaction with the street. They exhibit certain micropolitics, and function as a threshold of interaction in the city.



**THE MICROPOLITICAL BALCONY**

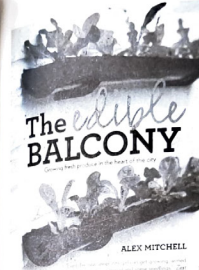
After its bloated, bloviating role in the 20th century's political dramas, the 21st century balcony operates on a micropolitical level: the balcony is a platform on which individuals can try to change the world on a small scale, carving out a personal ecotopia...



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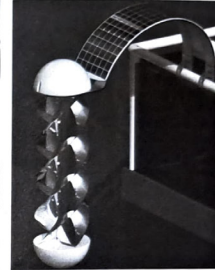
**PET PROJECTS**

In the gentrifying city, the balcony (along with the rooftop garden), is taking on a suburban coloring as a small territory in which individuals can try to act locally and think globally, installing high-design chicken coops and micro-farming arrays. Meanwhile animal sanctuaries have reported a surge in abandoned chickens due to fickle locavores (Daniel Alacchia, "Backyard chickens dumped at shelters when hipsters can't cope, critics say," NBC.com, July 7, 2013.)

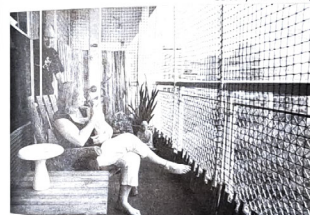


**THE EDIBLE BALCONY**  
ALEX MITCHELL

FARMING The balcony makes possible everything from container gardens to urban bee-keeping.

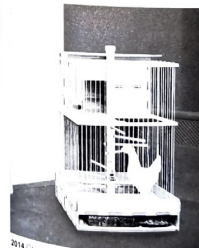


**GREENERATOR** Industrial designer Jonathan Globerson designs a balcony attachment that collects solar and wind energy, transforming the balcony into an ecological asset.

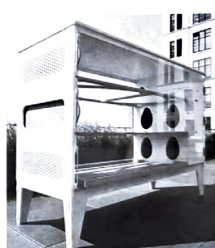


**THE CATIO** The New York Times reports on the latest in urbanism: the urban catio. The fab screens allow petowners to turn idle balconies into feline utopias. "Cattos have made inroads in the suburbs, where they range from small practical structures — like a box made of wood and chicken wire — to all-out fantasy cat playgrounds, replete with tunnels and scratching posts." (Dennifer A. Kingdon, "Cattos: Bring Cats Outdoors," New York Times, June 18, 2010)

"The cats, they like to sit out there."  
—Stefanie L. Russell, catio owner, to The New York Times



2014 Chicken Coop made for balcony living, by NCHS, Anker Bak



2011 Chicken Co-op: Luxury Chicken Living by NCHS, Anker Bak



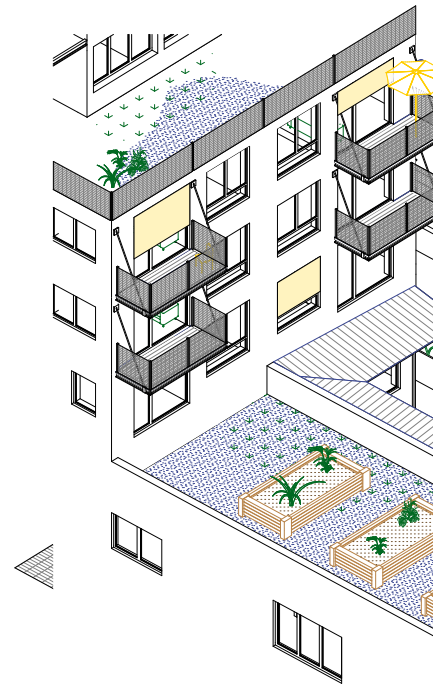
2010 Nogg Chicken Coop: Matthew Hayward and Nogg

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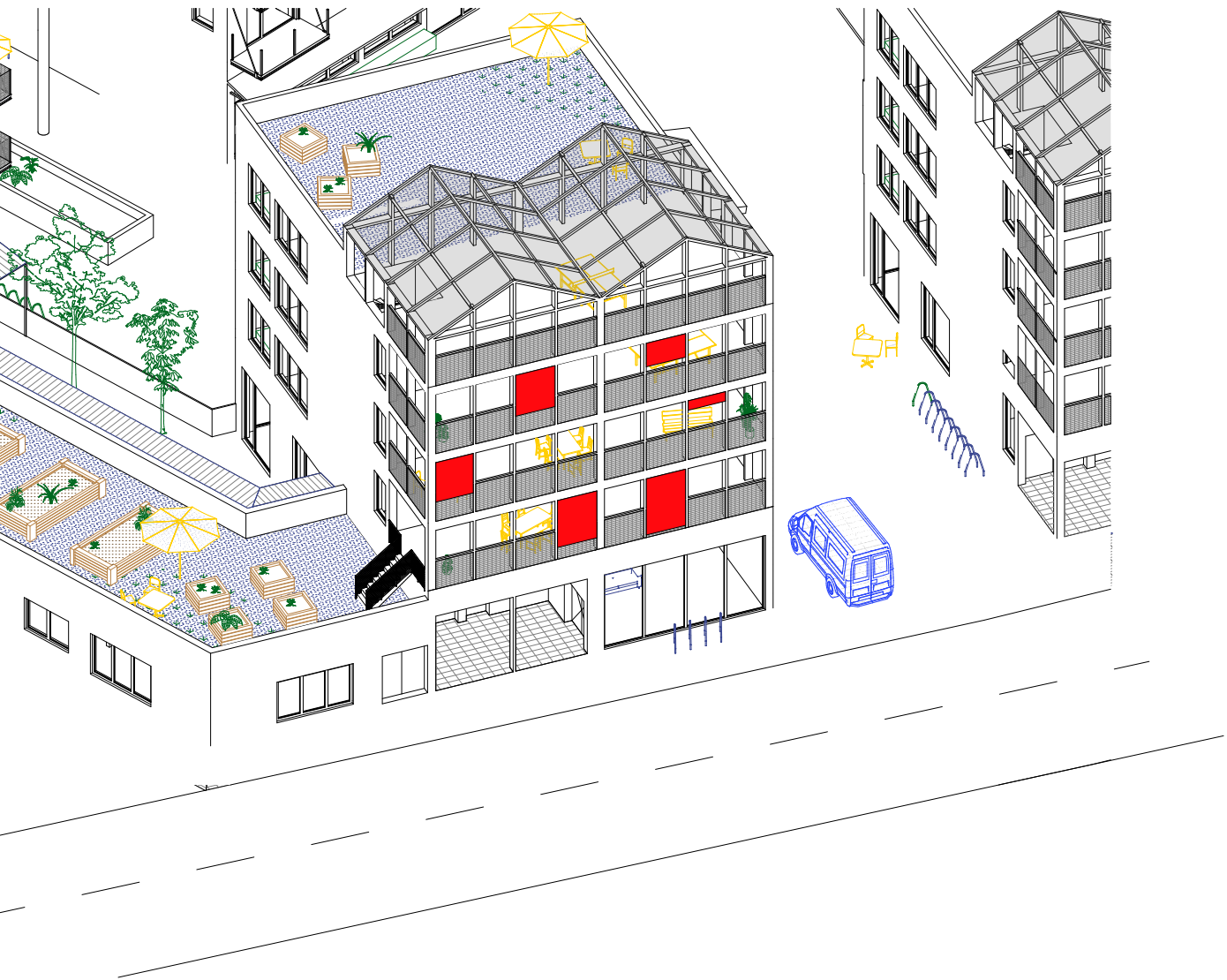


## THE TRESHOLD BETWEEN DAILY LIFE AND INDUSTRY - AN EXCITING INTERACTION?



Industry often comes together with housing in Brussels.





## A SMALL GESTURE FOR A BREAK



Small moments define our daily lives, even if it is a gesture as simple as a small sheltered bench.





## ENCLOSURES



Enclosures, some more public than others define various threshold conditions, and provide spaces of coming together, or spaces of retreat.





## REFLECTION

I initially decided to choose the Urban Architecture graduation studio for my graduation year due to an interest in the freedom that the studio presents in terms of project brief, as well as the site specific approach. However, beyond my initial understandings of the studio and its teachings, I decided to approach the year with an open mindset, to learn as much as possible, and to develop myself, not only as a student of Architecture, but also as a person.

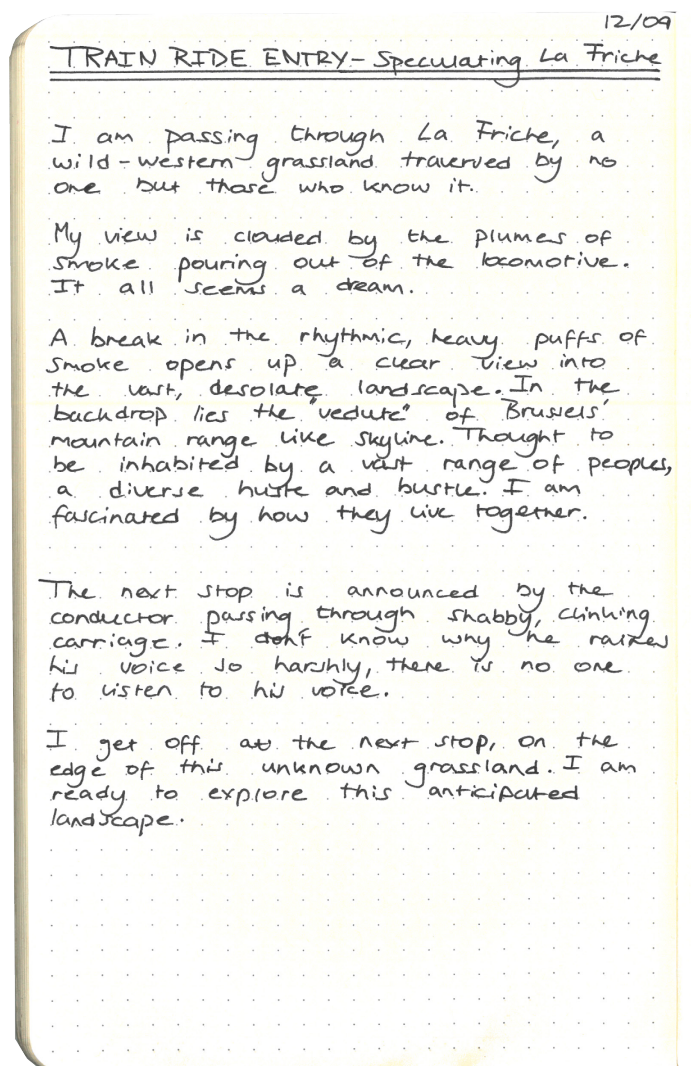
The graduation year started with a group trip to Brussels, where the project site for the year was to be visited for the first time. The site, La Friche Josaphat, a “wasteland” found in the neighbourhood of Schaerbeek spiked my curiosities, but I decided to not investigate into the site prior to the visit.

The first product I decided to produce for the forthcoming graduation year was a piece of writing, in which I intuitively speculated the atmosphere of the site (to be read in the image below). Based upon my knowledge of La Friche being a large open area, and having a train line splitting it through the middle, the writing resulted in an imagined wild, mystical atmosphere. The way in which the Friche is faced turned out to influence my perception, where throughout my project, this theme came back. Most prominently reflected in the video I produced for the P1 presentation.

During the first visit to Brussels, we as a graduation group were introduced to La Friche Josaphat through a commons initiative found in the south of the site. Learning about the site from this perspective introduced me to the fact that La Friche is not only a place of ecological value, but a place which carries a significant social value, as a space of otherness, not only on the scale of the neighbourhood, but on the scale of Brussels. I decided to maintain this important sentiment throughout the process of my project.

This sentiment is especially influenced in my research of threshold spaces in Brussels. Where through the year, I found myself interested in looking into spaces between the public and private, all of which had some sort of an emancipatory quality. The interest in this topic stems from my daily observations, as well as a longing for expression and informality in my day-to-day urban life.

I found myself researching as a continuous process as the last months have gone by. I feel like I do it somewhat subconsciously through taking in what goes around me. My thoughts are





influenced by things I see, and are thus image based, the best modus for me to capture these thoughts physically is through photography. I am most often interested in the more banal day to day things, which, although I say banal, I find very interesting, as these are the interactions with the built environment that accompany us the most.

This research has influenced my design greatly, as I have strived to include these moments I observe in my project, and this is reflected at all scales. The inclusion of these elements in my project have been a continuous imperative process. My design is influenced by my surroundings, and the elements that I design also have an influence on what spikes my interest. However, I must state that this continuous process has also been difficult to map and make sense of immediately, it most often requires me to take a step back to realise the inevitable correlations. Throughout the year I have ordered my thoughts on a large digital board, consecutively, in order of dates, this has allowed me to make sense of my thoughts. However, the huge disperse in information also makes it difficult for me to produce a product which I see as a unity.

After the P4 I have managed to take a little bit more time for myself and have fun with the work I am producing. Throughout the process of the year I had always wanted to build a model. In lead up to the P5 I built a model which for me brings the project together, as it is the combination between the research, the design, and building technology aspects too.

I have never worked on a project for as long as a period as the graduation year. This has led me to allow myself to spontaneously allow the project to flow in the order of my thoughts. My process has been guided by a constant reconsideration of what I am working on. This reconsideration is often put into perspective during the weekly tutoring sessions, which have allowed me to not only focus on the input I receive, but to also intuitively allow myself to take a step back. The space and time given to me to view the project from a different scope, and to also just follow the rhythm of life, which naturally changes throughout different times in the year, has been of utmost importance in supporting my process. I have greatly valued allowing myself to take time on things, and to trust a process which has its ups and downs. I hope to take this with me beyond the graduation year.



*A timeline of images I pasted on a digital board to gather my thoughts .*

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# CITY OF THRESHOLDS

GRADUATION LUCA CARSTANJEN

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