

SPACE FOR DISORIENTATION

*finding, creating and allowing other urban directions*

ACT I

# WELCOME TO THE SURFACE



PART OF GRADUATION COMPENDIUM

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*the arrivals and belonging  
of bodies and objects*

*their moving and longing*

*how we value  
beings and becomings*

*by diving in and emerging from  
force fields flowing*

*in moments of  
passing and fleeting*

*there is space for  
learning living with*

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

*We all live on a Surface. There is a Surface within each and every one of us. Within each and every one of us, there is a Sea.*

*In his Torch Song Trilogy, Harvey Fierstein wrote the following prelude to the scripts.*

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*There is a gay bar in New York City called The International Stud. It boasts a pool table, a pinball machine, and the jumpingest backroom in town. I clearly dedicate these plays to all who made it their home.*

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*I wish for each of them the courage to leave it when they can, and the good sense to come back when they must.*

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*In the same gesture, I would like to invite you all to do the following.*

7      *In reading these acts, scenes and dialogues, you can find the Surface as a longing-for, a trying-to-hold-on, a not-wanting-to-lose; as related to our eternal dependence on a sense of security, comfort and more generally: belonging.*

*I wish you all the courage to leave the Surface when you can, and the good sense to come back to it when you must.*

## VOICES

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>the soul</i>        | the broken individual                                |
| the academic           | the ones piecing it together (and breaking it again) |
| <i>the inspiration</i> | the imparaphrasable outing                           |

## SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

*p. 9 SCENE ONE: THE SURFACE* opens (up) the project.

*p. 17 SCENE TWO: THREADS/THREATS* introduces problems spanning experience, use and discourse related to spatial challenges of our contemporary built environment.

*p. 25 SCENE THREE: RIPPLES AND TEARS* introduces the potential for an other way of approaching the problems and reconsidering what could be(come) through challenging them.

*p. 29 SCENE FOUR: SOMETHING SMOOTH ABOVE SOMETHING*  
... underpins the ephemeral nature of the project and the congruence of its expressions.

*It is  
easier to see yourself, and  
others, in everything that  
you are not.*

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#### SCENE ONE: THE SURFACE

*The Sun rises from wherever, and her low altitude allows for the light to gracefully reflect on tightly interwoven cotton fibres which make up the Surface beneath your feet. The pristine white-washed fabric, appearing untouched and manufactured carefully, has turned a golden yellow as it lets the sun's rays soak into the individual threads. While the Surface cushions your feet (it slightly bends with the tread of your feet), it tenses frenetically.*

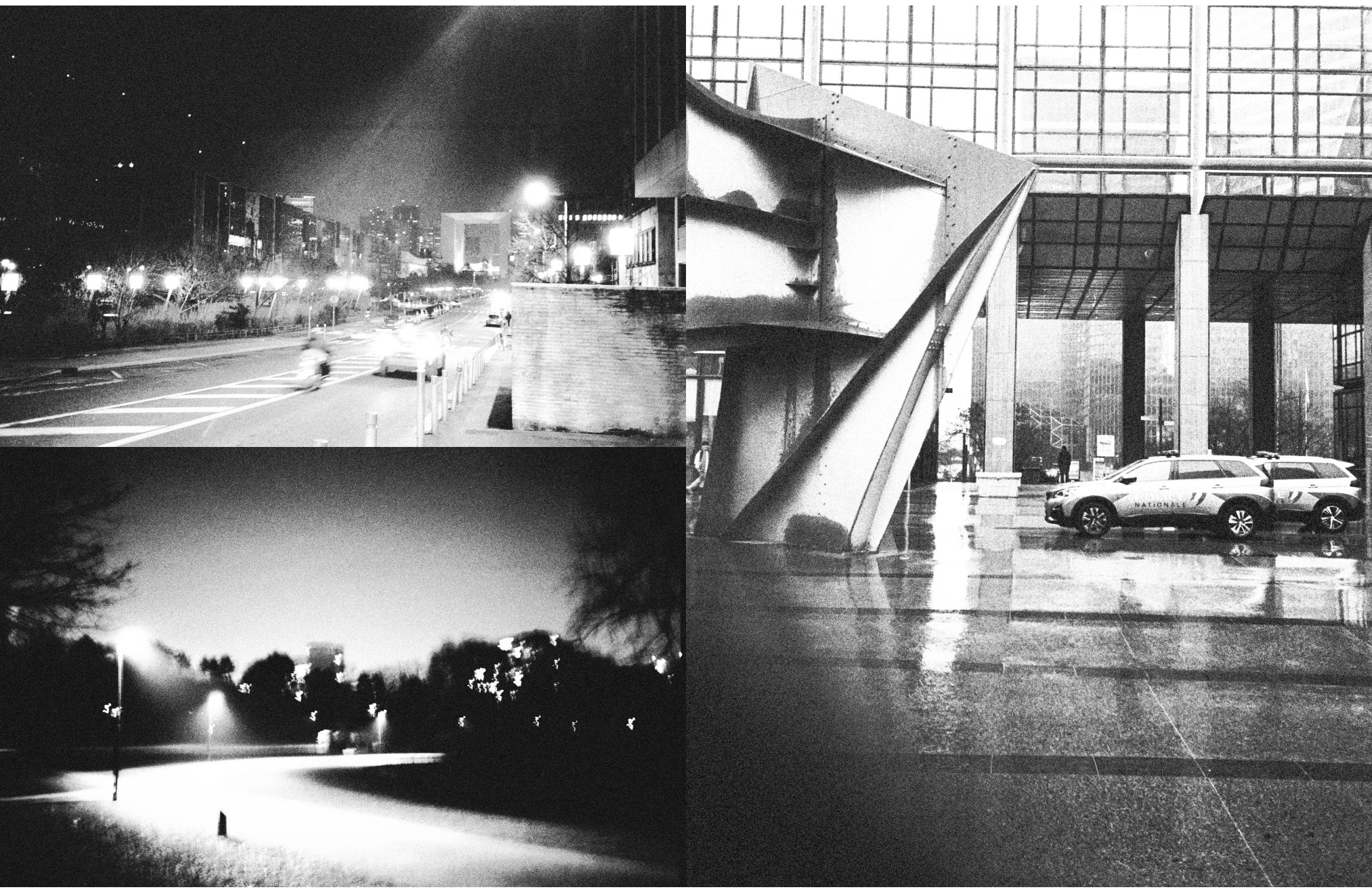
The statement on seeing yourself differently from others could come across as a twisted mantra prone to self-loathing. However, it reflects both my childhood in rural Netherlands and the starting point of this research compendium. In the case of my upbringing, I knew that I was not your average boy from the Achterhoek<sup>1</sup>; I avoided my family's tractors, cared about fashion and preferred video games and volleyball over football. While my father and brothers spoke among each other and to me in the local dialect, I was not inclined to practice that same tongue. Weirdly enough, while wanting to fit in, to be able to live 'normally' like all the other kids, time and time again, I would choose to pave my own way. These differences would take more and more noticeable forms (dyeing my hair green, among other things) and made me stand out, seemingly for the wrong reasons. Stares intensified, and my lifestyle choices started to gain more attention from family members and classmates. My father, preponderantly concerned for my safety, urged me to conform. Growing up queer, you are continuously made aware of your difference, for which a straightening of the body seems to be the easiest solution. A solution was never really found, although moving out of my hometown and into a city could be considered as one.

For many queers, refuge is found in the city.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is the region where I grew up, in the eastern part of the Netherlands. In my experience, it is best characterised by a lack of cities, intensive agricultural practices and social control.

<sup>2</sup> Lemmey, 2017; Marple, 2005; Thomsen, 2021







« Maintenant, ils ont cassé presque tous les bidonvilles à Nanterre, mais dans nos têtes et dans nos mentalités, ils existent toujours... »

(p. 49) (Photo J. Pottier.)

## SCENE TWO: THREADS/THREATS

*As the Sun goes down and casts some last shades of oranges, reds and a singular green, its circular shape disappears behind the horizon of the Surface. Only momentarily, a blue hue glows from below, mixing with a shadow above, revealing the Surface's soft underbelly.*

Urban environments offer excellent qualities for queer life, through facilitating spaces for connecting beyond identity: simultaneously acknowledging diversity and finding common ground. It is where a desire for difference can actively challenge the fear of the unknown, through anonymity and unity.

Cities therefore have a certain gravitational force that not only attracts queers but a myriad of minorities that hope to improve their quality of life there. Notably, many of these individuals have left places that are either uncomfortable, dangerous or outright life-threatening, making the urban environment a conceptual space of abundant arrivals.

19 Throughout this project, we can understand such contextual urbanisation through a case study of the greater urban area of Paris. In doing so, we should understand that Paris is not unique in the problems and challenges that are explicated. It is simply an example of the issues we are facing in our modern cities, essentially serving as a 'test lab'.

Now, I would like to take you to Paris. Through studying Paris - in visits, texts, conversations, documentation - one can find the modern issues that many cities, and their inhabitants, are facing as effects of urbanisation. To understand these effects, one must understand that urbanisation is not simply 'a growing number of inhabitants of cities'. It is not simply 'the cause of why cities are overcrowding'. It is not simply 'a reason to expand our cities to attempt to deal with the increasing influx of people through expanding the urban'.

Rather, urbanisation is the product of capitalist, colonial and patriarchal projects. This is, for example, illustrated in the formation of bidonville La Folie in Nanterre, a suburbs of Paris. During and after especially the colonisation of Algeria, many migrants moved to the Paris metropolitan area, where they helped with this area's development, for example in the construction of the high-rise business district La Défense just outside the city borders.

*« La Folie et La Défense »  
can be translated to  
“the madness and the defence”.*



*So when I say "It is easier to see yourself, and others, in everything that you are not.", I speak for a greater group of minorities that have their very existence being called into crisis more often than others, in varying ways and intensities.*



This development led to the formation of slums, at some point estimating over 10,000 inhabitants in *bidonville La Folie*. Due to the lack of housing facilities, many migrant families built their homes from construction site leftovers. Through documentation and accounts of the living conditions of many migrant families, we gain an insight into the unjust consequences of urban development. It becomes clear that marginalised communities are disproportionately subjected to hygienic risks and infrastructural failure as a result of urbanisation.

Given the origins of such urbanisation and the subsequent impossibility of restricting influx, these problems are aimed to be addressed within cities themselves. To address risks and failures of the urban fabric, we, as spatial designers, have developed methods to prevent these risks from emerging by top-down methods such as Haussmann's regulation of Paris with huge boulevards or homogenising areas by e.g. creating dedicated economic centres. Now, rather than seeing these developments as an undisputed improvement, we should reconsider this 'optimisation'.

[In] the same way the assembly line dehumanises its operator by prescribing their movements, in many contemporary urban scenarios, despite appearing to be a freewheeling protagonist, the individual is, in fact, consigned to a preordained track.<sup>1</sup>

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#### THE CITY AS A FRENETICALLY TENSE SURFACE

Throughout this project, the spatial concept of 'the developed city' is illustrated through the metaphor of a Surface. This metaphor helps to illustrate that the optimisation of a city does not come without tensions; it bears threats.

Firstly, the *woven patterns* of the fabric generally dictate which behaviours are (not) allowed; e.g. walking in the park is normatively done on a path and not on the grass (for which often additional rules apply such as the prohibition of sports, picnics, etc.)

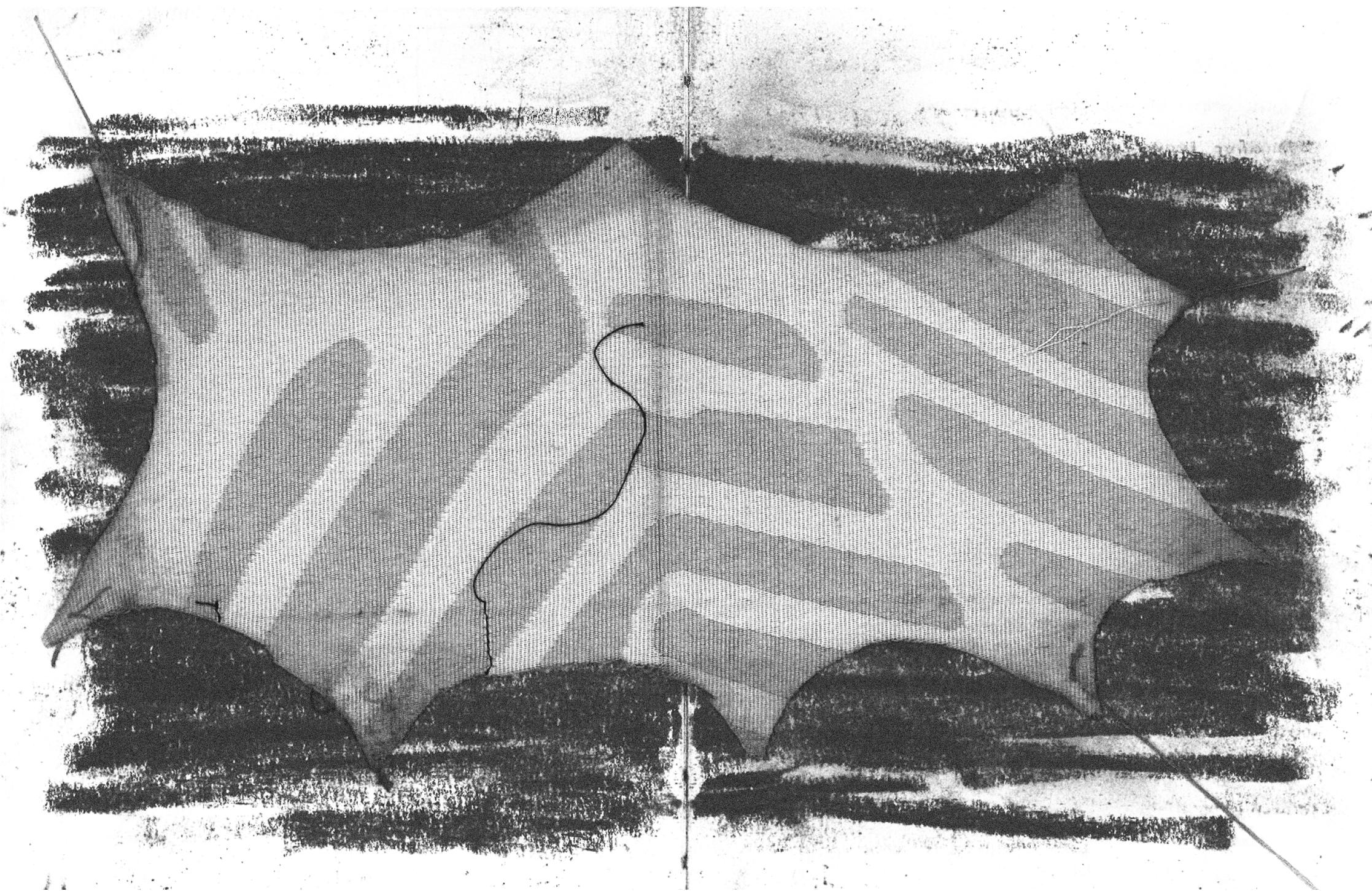
Secondly, the Surface has virtually become a *shallow plane*. It has created situations that virtually do not allow for multi-dimensional encounters; e.g. commuting to work has become a simple road from A to B and supermarkets are equipped with efficient self-checkout counters.

Thirdly, the Surface is secured with *reinforced edges*. The fragility of the city system is protected by many individuals; e.g. the police enforces the law, and individuals on the train make sure that silence in the quiet compartment is properly respected.

Fourthly and lastly, the Surface has been constructed as an almost *impenetrable structure*. This is a product of gentrification and the centralisation of power, through which it becomes harder to participate in the built environment; e.g. a human rights organisation cannot be run by volunteers if everyone needs to work extra hours to pay their rent to live in a city like Paris.<sup>23</sup>

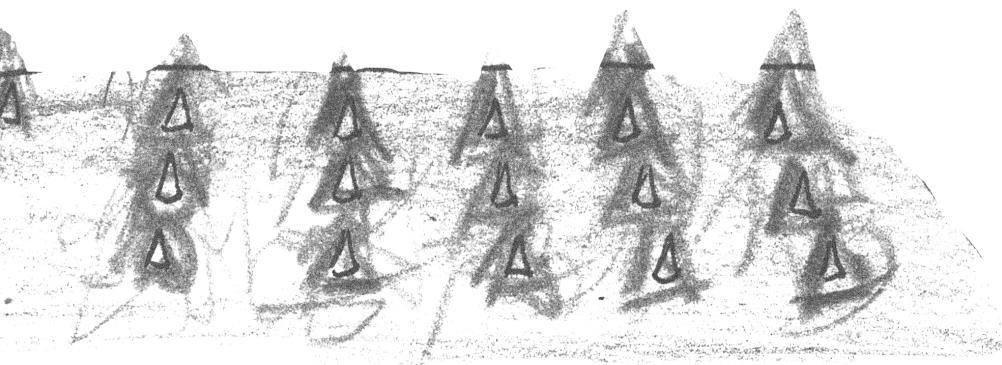
So, the optimisation of the city is presented as the problem statement. The city has become a frenetically tense surface, a system that offers a seemingly perfect solution to the problems that happen below, but in reality creates forcefields based on a specific hegemony. The idealised urban environment that is envisioned, is increasingly being eroded by a process similar to the aforementioned straightening of the body that had urged me to leave my hometown. This straightening of the built environment has been framed by René Boer as the Smooth City.<sup>2</sup>

*The tightening and keeping tight of the Surface not only affects the shaping of the city; it requires continuous and repetitive contortions of the body and the mind.*



what  
scrapes  
tears  
(un)zips  
the Surface?

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### SCENE THREE: RIPPLES AND TEARS

*Illuminated only momentarily by the Sun, there is a vast Sea stretching herself out towards all directions towards which the unruly gusts of wind blow her waters. Her body is a deep blue, almost glowing, almost solid, but still transparent. Her body is continuously, carefully rearranged; trench-filling, wave-toppling, mind-boggling. She can touch the clouds or crush you from within. But still, the Sea is sometimes still, and yet, often instilling fear in many an individual. She has the power to tear the Surface apart and pull you under her own.*

In the urban fabric of the Smooth City, we find moments in which its Surfaces are, sometimes unconsciously, opens up, revealing the unjust power dynamics that it is built upon. In more recent times, such moments have been identified in relation to the implementation of hostile architecture.

This urban design strategy sparked quite an uproar with the expression of anti-homelessness through the placement of spikes in a nook of a London street. The spikes are no more violent than previous forms of exclusion and coercion of demographics that do not conform, socially or legally, to contemporary capitalist society, apart from being visually intimidating. More interestingly, the response of the public revealed an embedded and longstanding humanitarian ambivalence towards everyday images of hardship and vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

At the sight of the spikes, this ambivalence was temporarily ruptured as the public chose to foreground compassion for the vulnerable body over the apathy and resentment that is often related to encounters with homelessness in urban landscapes. The spikes exposed the previously mentioned hegemonic norms that have been instructing urban planning principles for centuries. It gives a glimpse into the ways urban design could relate to the critique of public space itself, albeit temporarily. It invigorates the re-evaluation of the norms and values that have instructed the manifestation of such interventions and brings to light the crises that certain individuals experience daily.

Seeing as the (re)production of the Smooth City leads to exclusion, repression and deterioration of alternative lifestyles and the lived experience of marginalised communities, it calls into question in what ways urban design could expose or even counteract these issues in public spaces.

This project aims to do this through applying Sarah Ahmed's pioneering work of *Queer Phenomenology*<sup>2</sup> to foreground these moments. It centralises queer<sup>3</sup> experience as something that is ultimately defined against a background of an existing orientation.

As is clear in the London spikes uproar, the orientation only becomes strikingly apparent in the moment of rupture, which could also be framed as 'a moment of disorientation'. Regarding this disorientation, Ahmed stresses that we should not focus on the permanence of such events: "*The 'what' that fleets is the very point of disorientation.*"<sup>4</sup> It begs the question to what extent we can firstly find these moments of fleeting, also outside of the discourse on hostile architecture. Secondly, it evokes the possibility of deliberately creating such situations, which seems especially impactful within the realm of public space. Thirdly and lastly, it becomes important to understand the effects of (the creation of) such situations, not only related to the ways in which they can change our beliefs on certain systems or spaces, but also the effect of the intervention itself on e.g. the lived experience of the marginalised individuals.

Finding fleeting-moments, deliberately creating situations and understanding effects lie at the intersection of three modes of inquiries; experiencing, doing and thinking. More importantly, it is important to understand that one does not go without another. Disorientation should therefore be explored as complex flows of energy that penetrate various Surfaces - spatial, emotional, ideological, and perhaps more - to uncover its full potential.

*And ultimately, the Sea will engulf the Sun, only to gracefully spit it back out the next day, as if it never left. Only now, there is a being attached to the Sun, having seemingly travelled along its course below and emerged together on the other side.*

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, 2006b

<sup>3</sup> In this case, 'queer' should be understood in at least two senses; 1) describing non-straight sexual practises as a form of social and sexual contact; and, more generally 2) that what is "oblique or off-line or even just plain wonky". Ahmed, 2006a, p. 565

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed, 2006a, p. 565

#### **SCENE FOUR: SOMETHING SMOOTH ABOVE SOMETHING ...**

*Something smooth above something that is avoided... Something pulled tight by external forces... The Sea as something natural, forceful and unpredictable, always there. Water as life-sustaining, a primal medium.*

*a break from the norm  
- a potential for more -  
or something else entirely, perhaps?*

*or we can let it grow  
with the tides and the snow  
let the rain wash away  
what the river has brought*

*or is it something else you sought  
that is not yet there  
a work in progress  
or a hunger for change*

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*what is imagination but the limit of your mind and  
what is undefined but the precursor to action*

*how wild can it be when the river is damned*

*how can the future be queer when it is change we fear*

This four-part series of acts forms a compendium as an invitation to explore how spaces of disorientation might provide possible exposure of hegemonic norms and amplification of voices that are increasingly ostracised. It responds to the desire of developing a more inclusive framework for understanding and addressing the complexities of identity, power and belonging and how they relate to the spaces we use and design. The goal of this ambitious, exploratory research project is to spatialise disorientation and subsequently develop a design philosophy against the violence of the Smooth City.

Given the scope and time constraints of this graduation project, it aims to answer two research-by-design questions: Firstly, *how do we position architecture and the role of the practitioner within the approach of disorientation?* In this case, 'architecture' and 'practitioner' are both loosely interpreted terms that open up possibilities of exploring beyond conventional notions of an architectural graduation project. The theoretical framework therefore stretches from spatial theory into phenomenology and philosophy, while carefully considering queer, feminist and decolonial perspectives.

31 Ultimately, throughout the theoretical inquiries, it becomes clear that a spatial understanding of disorientation needs further development through practical inquiries. Therefore, an additional research question is posed which takes an adequate, and perhaps symbolic, urban environment as a case study for exploration. This offers the second question: *How can we design space for disorientation within the rigid orientation of the Parisian Historical Axis?*

Put simply, the compendium therefore consists of four acts: a problem approach, a theoretical investigation, a research-by-design process and a proof-of-concept design project. Each is summarised in a separate Act, but each should not be considered without the others, they form a unity, a play. They are intrinsically connected through the core ideas of – or as an attempt to deal with – space for disorientation.

*We must fear it as much as we want to be swept away in its currents.*

## SOURCES

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<sup>33</sup> Petty, J. (2016). The London Spikes Controversy: Homelessness, Urban Securitisation and the Question of 'Hostile Architecture'. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 5(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v5i1.286>

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## IMAGES

All images are produced by the author, unless they are referred to below.

pp. 14-15 Scan of photo by J. Pottier via *Du bidonville à l'expulsion : itinéraire d'un jeune Algérien de Nanterre* by François Lefort.

p. 18 Scan of page from *Demain, Demain* (2012) by Laurent Maffre





