2024—2025
Urban Architecture Studio, TU Delft.

AR3UA100
Research Plan

05 November 2025

Cristina Nistor

TRACES OF TRANSITION

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INITIAL FASCINATION

During my first encounter with Blikfabriek, I instantly felt a sense of sadness over its potential demolition and unavoidable end. How could such a structure—filled with valuable local history, preserved through honest intentions, and created with the purpose of giving back to the community—ever be torn down? Ironically, how can it be demolished for the sole purpose of profit? Will its history and collective memory disappear along with its walls?

Although these are still very relevant questions in today's built environment and should not be ignored, I soon realized that Blikfabriek's temporality is, in part, central to its essence. The impermanence of the space is what enables freedom, creativity, and adaptability. Blikfabriek's temporal nature allows for temporary interventions and agile responses to social and cultural needs, which permanent structures might not support. The ephemeral nature of the space encourages continuous reinvention and spontaneity. It is important to mention that in the case of Blikfabriek, the private ownership model as well as its nonprofit approach also influence the organizational freedom.

Urban nomads are individuals or groups who adopt a mobile lifestyle, choosing flexibility and adaptability over permanence. They move between different iterations of the space, creating temporary solutions to meet immediate needs while leaving behind traces of collective memory and cultural value. Their approach to living and creating within the city is marked by a give-and-take philosophy—an ethos that recognizes that all individuals contribute to and take away from the spaces they inhabit.

During the second fieldwork visit, I stumbled upon a poster placed on one of the columns inside the factory, titled "Urban Nomads". The poster's text ended with the paragraph:

URBAN NOMADS
The "Give & Take" philosophy

"Urban Nomads look for spaces with different functions, underutilized space or 'leftover space' in the city. The space is rethought and experimentally filled, often with a sustainable view of life and the city. This filling is provisional and temporary. After the necessary adjustments, it is given a new shape and then they move on, to the next place and city to improve. In this way they travel around the world and make the world more round."

This passage resonated deeply with the realization I had about Blikfabriek—that its impermanence is the source of its freedom. Is Blikfabriek an urban nomad itself? It occupies space without the intention of staying indefinitely. Much like the urban nomads described in the poster, the factory functions as an evolving entity—one that is always in transition, continuously reinventing itself, and contributing to the city in temporal but meaningful ways, with a long-lasting impact. It encapsulates the essence of temporary appropriation, where the value lies not in permanence but in the connections formed within its dynamic framework.

Blikfabriek can also be seen as a metaphor for the city itself. It embodies the idea that cities are never static; they are an organism; always in a state of transition. As stated in the book Spaces of Uncertainty, Margaret Crawford mentions "Cities are never static, but constantly transform themselves. […] New populations arrive, relocate, and depart." (Cupers & Miessen, 2018)The factory is an evolving entity, constantly shaped by those who pass through it, who take what they need and leave their unique mark behind. Its impermanence is not an endpoint but a continuous process of becoming.

How does the architecture of impermanence enable individuals to take ownership of spaces, transform them, and eventually move on, leaving behind layers of experience and identity that continue to enrich the space?

THE ARCHITECTURE OF IMPERMANENCE

The architecture of impermanence refers to buildings or spaces that are meant to be transformed and adapted by their users rather than remain static and unchanged. It can be seen as a response to the critique to the monumental city. As Cupers and Miessen mention, once an architectural project moves from design to construction, it becomes fixed and immovable, resulting in static and unchanging structures. As a consequence, the city becomes a collection of "frozen moments of solid architecture", where the inherent rigidity of buildings seems to stifle the dynamic energy and fluidity of urban life. (Cupers & Miessen, 2018) Impermanent architecture offers an opportunity for a symbiotic relationship between people and space—where people shape the building, and the building in turn shapes those who inhabit it. I see value in such exchanges taking place on the site. Therefore, further, I would like to focus on how to keep the site as a fertile ground for citizens to leave their mark—a trace of transition that makes the city richer, not through monumental permanence but through the beauty of continual change.

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I have chosen the works of Ken Isaacs to help me explore the topics of temporality, more specifically impermanence and adaptability, that are central to my investigation into urban nomadism and temporary spaces. Isaacs challenged conventional design standards, advocating for environments that adjust to human needs rather than enforcing rigid norms. His approach to modularity resonates with my aim to explore how impermanent, flexible structures can provide spatial freedom. By incorporating Isaacs' principles as well as using his work as a reference for my research method, I hope to explore how concepts such as adaptive reuse challenge the static and profit-driven nature of conventional urban development.

Figure 1.
Beach Matrix, installation view in Westport

Connecticut, c. 1967
Photo courtesy Ken Isaacs

KEN ISAACS

Ken Isaacs is and American artist that revolutionized and challenged concepts such as individualism, capitalist expansion, and material consumption in the postwar period. He dedicated his life to a populist form of architecture accessible to anyone. (Isaacs & Snodgrass, 2015) His designs were based on a three dimensional matrix 'which would become the cornerstone of his design output for the duration of his career'. Isaacs created complex furniture that "adjust[ed] to people rather than people to it." Ken Isaacs' Living Structures were born from his belief that normal design standards were irrational and that living environments should adapt to the user rather than conforming to tradition. He envisioned a multi-functional, free-standing unit—a "culture-breaker"—that combined several domestic functions into a single adaptable structure, challenging the conventional separation of rooms and furniture. (Cranbrook Art Museum, 2014)

RESEARCH METHODS

Through my research, I aim to investigate the leading principles, beliefs, needs, frictions, and overall flows of life of the urban nomads, but not only, currently working and residing in Blikfabriek. Specifically, I seek to understand who identifies as an urban nomad and why, their perceptions of Blikfabriek's ephemeral quality, and their views on both the future of the space and their personal future.

I also hope, through my research, to clearly define who my target demographic is. What precisely defines an urban nomad? Are they artists, campers, circus performers, students, or digital nomads? Each of these groups interacts with space in different ways, and understanding these differences will help determine how the urban nomad ethos manifests on site.

I want to focus on direct engagement with the community from Blikfabriek. Therefore, ethnographic fieldwork is a crucial research method for my proposal. By spending extended periods on-site, I will be able to observe and understand the rhythms of daily life, spatial use, and social interactions within the space. This approach allows for both participant observation—where I actively engage with the community through interviews, events, and hands-on activities—and non-participant observation, where I take a more detached perspective to better understand the broader environment.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted for an authentic understanding of the lifestyle. These interviews will focus on topics such as personal identification as an urban nomad, experiences of impermanence, aspirations for the past/future but also any other topic that is important to be able to fully grasp the community. During certain periods, I will take a more observational role, documenting how people move through and adapt the space, how they interact with each other, and the spatial dynamics that develop over time. I will achieve this through written notes, photographs and videomaking.

Figure 2.
Microhouses

c. 1972
Photo courtesy Ken Isaacs

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Drawing inspiration from the works of Ken Isaacs, and as a means to create a tangible outcome from my fieldwork research, I intend to build a temporary installation on-site, documenting the interactions it sparks. This installation will be a collaborative effort, constructed in part with the help of the community to whatever extent possible, and will serve as a symbol of the trace I leave behind—contributing to the evolving narrative of the space.

MOVING FURTHER

The direction of my research is still unfolding. I hope to gain more clarity as I immerse myself deeper into the site and engage with the people who inhabit it. I hope that these methods will guide me organically towards a meaningful design proposal; an architectural object for those who dwell in transit; drawing from the place's essence then leaving their own; they take what they need, give what they can, and then move on.

**ANNOTATED
BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Isaacs, K., & Snodgrass, S. (2015, November 16). Enter the Matrix: An Interview with Ken Isaacs [Interview]. https://walkerart.org/magazine/enter-matrix-interview-ken-isaacs/

In Enter the Matrix, Ken Isaacs reflects on his career, specifically his exploration of modular living systems and the concept of adaptability in design. The interview provides first-hand insights into his design philosophy, particularly focusing on the relationship between individuals and their living environments. The interview is particularly relevant for building a theoretical basis for my research into impermanent architecture and fluid, adaptable domestic spaces.

Cupers, K., & Miessen, M. (Eds.). (2018). Spaces of Uncertainty—Berlin revisited. Birkhäuser. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035614404

In Spaces of Uncertainty: Berlin Revisited, authors Kristian Cupers and Markus Miessen explore Berlin's urban landscape after the fall of the Berlin Wall, delving into how the post-industrial cityscape was transformed through temporary appropriations. It provides historical examples and theoretical reflections on the topic of temporality. This piece of literature is highly relevant to my research as it provides insights into experimental urbanism in resisting the pressures of gentrification and capitalist redevelopment—themes that are highly pertinent to Blikfabriek's ongoing struggles.

Brand, S. (1994). How buildings learn: What happens after they're built. Viking.

In How Buildings Learn, Stewart Brand delves into how buildings change over time, examining the evolution of architectural spaces based on their use and adaptation. The book challenges traditional views of architecture as static, instead emphasizing the ways that buildings evolve, respond, and adapt to the needs of their users long after construction is complete. Although I have not yet read this book, I am drawn to Brand's focus on adaptability and the long-term evolution of spaces, concepts that are highly pertinent to my research on impermanence.

Uffer, S. (2013). The temporary city, by Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams, Urban Research & Practice

In The Temporary City, Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams explore the growing movement of temporary urbanism and how short-term uses of space can drive creativity, innovation, and community engagement in cities. The book highlights various case studies of temporary projects that illustrate how flexible, short-lived interventions can create meaningful and lasting impacts on urban areas.