

THE ARCHITECTURAL INTERMEZZO

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The qualitative nature of the liminal place in a transitional space.

BORDERS&TERRITORIES GRADUATION STUDIO | AR3BO100

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Date: January 10th, 2021

ABSTRACT

This theoretical thesis will dive into the ambiguous nature of a place transitioning from one way into the other. This transition can happen in many ways. It can come by radical shifts, by splits, as a smooth transition, by co-existence of two opposing elements, as a fusion, an ephemeral occurrence or as a transition with a liminal experience. The latter comes forth from the passage from the one into the other which creates a new anti-structural (Turner, 1967) type of condition with a set of specific characteristics.

While liminality is often described from the anthropological realm, we should be able to trace it back to architecture as well. Therefore we should look at liminality from a psychological as well as a physical point of view. To create a better understanding of the matter, the thesis will first explore the psychological side of liminality. The ideas of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep about the special phase in the 'rite of passage'. Physical examples can be found in the non-place proposed by Marc Augé. In these non-places we find generative elements that evoke the same ambiguous feelings people experience during the liminal phase. From this the definition of the Liminal place comes in, or, a physical place where the liminal experience is created by the generative elements of the non-place. This liminal place is in a transitional phase where it has passed the point of no return and has segregated from its previous state but is not yet aggregated to its next state. This place does still have elements from its former status and begins to show signs of its future status, but in its place becomes something particular with its own characteristics.

To find the non-place elements that create a liminal experience, James Turrell comes to mind. His work with experiencing light is, especially with Roden Crater a good example of the psychological experience of liminality. A physical example can be found in the deserted mine 'Staraya Linza' close to Yekaterinburg, Russia. This mine became deserted and since the pumping house stopped working, filled up with water, with the industrial mine transitioning into a recreational lake. The in-between period shows examples of different movements and by tracing this in the same manner as Bernard Tschumi has done with the Manhattan transcripts, the non-place elements can be easier spotted.

The case study city for the project will be Yekaterinburg. The city of Yekaterinburg is still in the phase of transitioning from a post-industrial city into a service oriented city. This has created some liminal places where there has emerged a specific type of urbanism. At these specific places a intervention could emphasize or make the liminal experience more visible.

KEY WORDS

- Anti-structural
- Co-existence
- Liminality
- Liminal place
- Mine
- Non-place
- Roden Crater
- Transitions
- Threshold
- Yekaterinburg

INDEX

1. Opening		p. 3
2. Part 1 (segregation):	<i>Categorization of types of transitions</i>	p. 4
3. Part 2 (limen):	<i>Liminal space & non-place as liminal place</i>	p. 6
4. Part 3 (aggregation):	<i>Liminal places in Yekaterinburg</i>	p. 11
5. Closing		p. 12
6. Bibliography		p. 13

OPENING

INTRODUCING THE LIMINAL

One of my big passions is scuba-diving. My father was already doing scuba-diving and because of my mom's claustrophobia he always missed a diving buddy. That buddy became me and I remember the first boat-dive in the south of France. From the boat I saw the red rocks of the coastline of Théoule sur Mer and the sun reflecting on the waves. Because it was just a small boat, you had to sit on the edge and let yourself fall backwards, just like a trust fall. Before I knew it we were descending holding the anchor line tight, me even tighter. Here something strange happened, because around 10 meters before we were at the reefs, I saw a wrinkle in the water, like there was another layer of the sea. Later I found out that this is called the thermocline, or, a rapid shift in temperature because of different currents. This simply explained natural phenomena caused me to feel colder, but also mentally it felt I was in a phase of disorientation. This ambiguous experience gave a new dimension to how I perceived the quality of transitioning from one place to another, being more conscious of the effects it creates.

In the architectural profession the threshold is often viewed from the notion and characteristics of the differences from your starting point A to your destination point B, however, the characteristics of the in-between are not often that well pointed out. What this creates is a space focussed especially on the qualities of A and B, but, as I pointed out with the thermocline, it is well possible that the highest quality is in that threshold phase itself.

The transition of the thermocline can be seen as an liminal experience. Liminality often stays in the realm of the anthropology because it is, most of the time, a phycological occurrence that Victor Turner (1964) described as the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal phase, structurally, therefore not physically, "invisible".

However, if we would take the notion of the liminal to the more "visible" or "physical" (image 1), what kind of examples then show up? While 'Limen' is Latin for threshold or margin, it should be seen as a place on a threshold or as a place on the margin. The latter is described by Rob Shields (1991, p.3) as follows:

"Marginal places ... are not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, ..., they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other."

Besides the liminal transition, there is a variety of other types that are sometimes seen as liminal experiences, but are quite different in nature, because the liminal moment or the outcomes are different. However, these are rather interesting phenomena to compare with the liminal transition, especially to make clear how particular the liminal transition with all of its qualities is.

This theoretical thesis will therefore dive into the ambiguous nature of a place transitioning from one status into another, with the liminal transition is most valuable, because of the special characteristics and qualities it has. Then by looking at a city that is in a transitioning phase, I want to ask the following: "How can liminality be used in architecture to form a qualitative new phase in a transitioning space?"

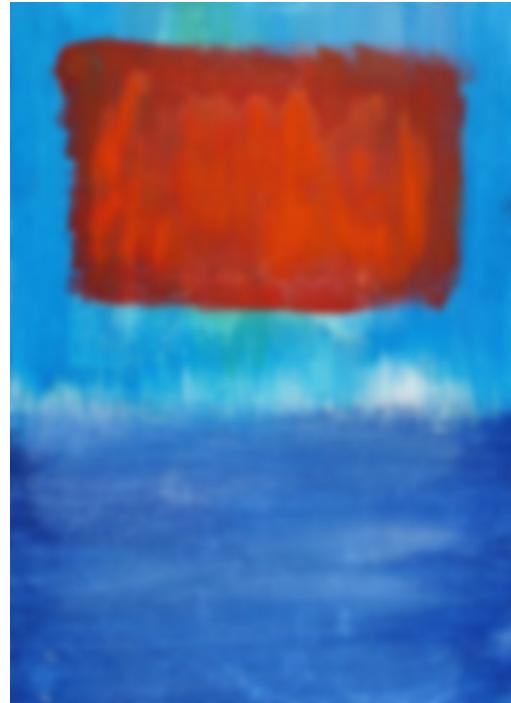


Image 1: "Thermocline: the liminal gate into the deep sea" Own work (2020)

PART 1 (segregation):

CATEGORIZATION OF TYPES OF TRANSITIONS

In our lives we are accustomed to many changes. Sometimes these changes are radical, sometimes you only find out later that you made a change. This change from one state, style, form or place to another is called ‘*transition*’ from the Latin ‘*trans*’ meaning: on the other side of; and ‘*itiō*’ meaning: go, proceed; therefore “to go to the other side”. But in that regard, there is a number of transitions. All these transitions have different characteristics and examples that need to be categorized for better understanding to how liminal transition differs from the other mentioned transition types. As can be seen in table 1, these categories can be represented by a mathematical equation and by a simplified line drawing (table 1).

1.1 Transitions (Hard, smooth, split, co-existence, fusing and ephemeral)

To start its best to begin with the hard shift. This type of transition happens during a radical shift between A to B. Physical elements are from putting on the light to the dry and rain season around the equator. This shift might disorientate you for a short amount of time because of the contrasting characteristics between A and B, like going from dark to light and from dry to wet in the brought up examples. As a psychological example, a epiphanic moment can well be regarded as a hard shift, because it is a sudden transition from being unknowing to being enlightened. The liminal period here is however, little to non-existent because it is the moment you need to get accustomed to the new reality that might feel disorientating. The smooth transition is where you go from A to B without rapid or radical shifts. The passage of time is normally, with no special occurrences a relatively smooth transition. The seasons in the northern and southern hemisphere are having smooth transitions between winter, spring, summer and autumn. Psychologically dementia and Parkinson disease are an example of a slow deuterating mind and slowly losing the grip on life. There is as well a short accumulation phase that might feel a bit ambiguous as well.

A split can be seen that point A divides in B_1 and B_2 . Especially phycological examples can be given for this transition type. For example, a divorce causes a split between two people, but in its place also between minds; people who develop schizophrenia are losing their own reality with many contrasting ‘voices’ within their head (Picchioni & Murray, 2007). Physical examples can be found in geographic occurrences where through time rivers can divide land that causes originally the same nature and species to change from each other over time.

Co-existence is a transition type that comes close to forming a bond where A and B forms AB. A coalition between two political parties but also the Cold War are good examples of political co-existences. If there happens to form a new state from A and B, say C, then we talk about fusing. Fusing happens in a broad variety of ways. This type of transition is seen in science, cuisine, mythology, etc.. Scientific fusions can create new elements from two other elements, in cuisine where different cultural cuisines might create a new type of food, like in the Netherlands, where the Dutch/Belgian fries and cheese are mixed with the Turkish doner kebab creating the so-called kapsalon. In mythology fusion can be seen in entities fused together creating hybrids. These so-called liminal beings are for example the centaur (half man half bull), harpies (half man

Transition type:	Formula:	Graphic representation:
Hard	$A = B$	
Smooth	$A = B$	
Split	$A = B_1 + B_2$	
Coexistence	$A + B = AB$	
Fusing	$A + B = C$	
Ephemeral	$A = B = A$	
Liminal	$A = AB = B$ $A = C = B$	

Table 1: This graph shows the different transitional types with their simplified formula and graphic representation to show similarities between the different transition types.

half bird) and sphynx (half man half lion). That the word liminal is used here is because of the derivation of *līmen*, or, threshold, because the liminal beings are on a threshold of two different entities.

The ephemeral transition is a transition that only lasts a certain amount of time before it goes back to its former state. Especially events like festivals and concerts, but also movies or reading a book might give an ephemeral feeling. You become detached from the 'normal' state and feel if you are in a different state. Most of the time you can choose for this to happen and in this case the ephemeral transition is called a liminoid experience (Huang, 2018).

1.2 Liminal transitions

The liminal transition is harder to physically define while it is mostly described as an event or experience by an individual or a group (then called 'communitas'). The most known examples of liminality are when someone enters a cult or becomes a member by a rite. The letting go of the past state but not being in the next state creates a new in-between state where neither state is fully present. While this is somewhat like a fusion, the liminality does not form from two already present states or elements, but rather between the two states (image 2). To give an example, fusing would be a man and a horse together becoming a centaur and liminality would be a man transforming into a horse but being a centaur in the middle of the transformation.

The liminal transition therefore contains a special element that, besides from the liminoid experience, creates a 'temporary' moment of something new. Besides the thermocline as mentioned in the preface, brackish water at river mounds is another example of a liminal condition. Being a mix of sweet and salt water, it evoked some specific ecosystems around this place, with their own characteristics to thrive.

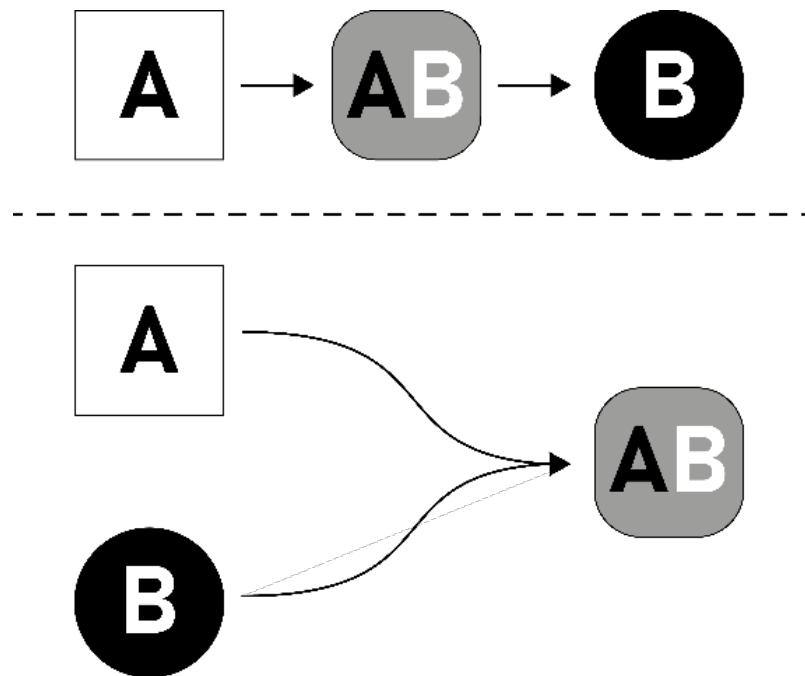


Image 2: This image shows the difference between the two notions of hybrids. The top being the liminal transition where the hybrid is halfway through the transition and down the fusing transition where the hybrid is the result of the transition.
Own work (2020)

PART 2 (Limen):

LIMINAL SPACE & NON-PLACE AS LIMINAL PLACE

From the previous chapter we know that the liminal transition is characterized by the new and distinct state it causes. However, how this can be 'mastered' in a way that you can have certain elements that put a liminal transition in motion is not easily done. Therefore a good definition of how liminality can be implemented within architecture might help with this.

2.1 Liminality & Liminal space

Liminality is defined as "The transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc." (Dictionary.com, 2021). This definition shows it is not directly well-suited for architecture because the original 'founders' of liminality, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner are talking on the cultural rites (Gennep et al., 1961)(Turner, 1964). The only direct link that can be made to architecture is that there are buildings made for these rites like temples or freemason lodges. However, these buildings are not guiding in the experience of liminality but rather the other way around. By looking at the characteristics of liminality, it might give some hints to what really makes this experience so enriching.

This brings me to the liminal space, mostly used in religious theomatics because it leans still to the experience of rites. Richard Rohr, author and Franciscan friar, noted it as follows:

"Where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible... This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy." (Rohr, 1999, p. 155-156)

This notation of the Liminal space is notably influenced by Turner, because the phrase betwixt and between is the title of his book about liminality. It is nonetheless the right way to describe the atmospheric quality, while you are in an in-between phase where you find an ambiguous notion of reality, or betwixt (image 3). But again, also the liminal space fails to note some physical elements or relics that defines the space in itself, keeping it a rather personal psychological experience.

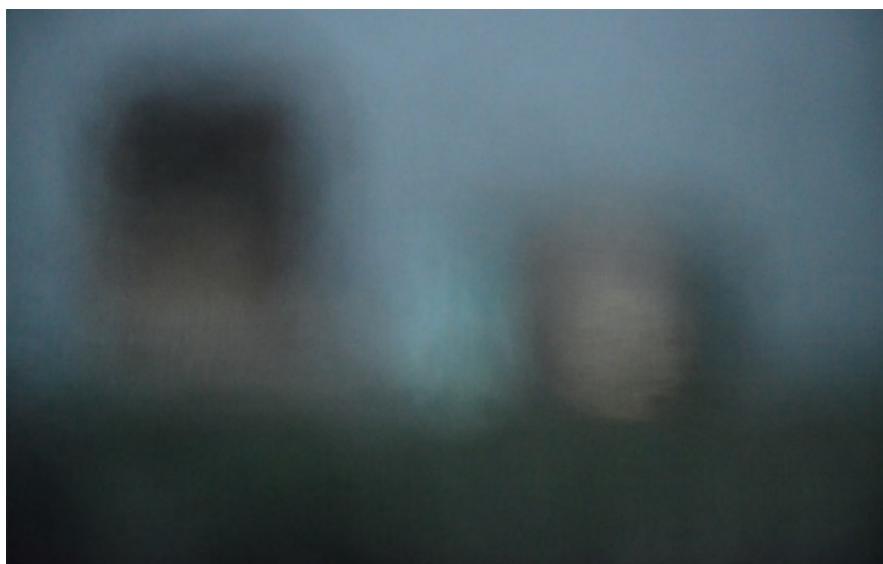


Image 3: Liminal Space, Jurek Wajdowicz (2013)

2.2 Non-place

From another point of view we can look into the non-place that was proposed by Marc Augé in 1995. The non-place is a place also on the threshold between starting point and destination, or rather, the place without personal affiliation to it. Examples of these non-places are hotels, gas stations, airports or other public transport places. As Marc Augé states it:

"A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver" (Augé, 1995, p. 103).

This is almost the same as Turner described how a person that goes through a rite feels during the liminal period, not in control and feeling more as a passenger being guided through the phase of transition. But there is some subjectivity to the non-place as well. For example, the people, like hotel-employees, that go to a non-place every day, will not experience it as an anonymous place anymore and it is therefore again not particularly bound to the place itself but more to the reception of its user.



Image 4: non-places, Sarah Peters Photography (2018)

2.3 Liminal place

If we combine the terms of liminal space and non-place, we get a place that is in a transitional phase where it has passed the point of no return and has segregated from its previous state but is not yet aggregated to the next state. This place does still have elements from its former status and begins to show signs of its future status, but in its place becomes something particular with its own characteristics. What is most important is that all these terms, liminality, liminal space and non-place find their core in the in-between moment where the previous state and future state could be seen as normal.

To find the liminal place in a physical manner, you almost need to be able to look into the future because it demands you to know what the next phase will be. In the built environment this is not easy to find. However, if you would be able to control the experience of the transition and/or see examples where liminality has happened which could happen again, there might be some valuable elements that can be used to (re-)create liminal places.

2.4 Roden Crater, James Turrell

One example that plays with the idea to create new insights by experiencing the building is James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (image 5a). This large-scale art project in the Painted Desert region of Northern Arizona situated within a volcanic cinder cone (image 5b) goes about the experience of the perception and contemplation of light, time and landscape. Whilst it is not completed yet, one part of it already portrays the vision of Turrell.



Image 5a: Aerial view of Roden Crater. (2015) Patowary

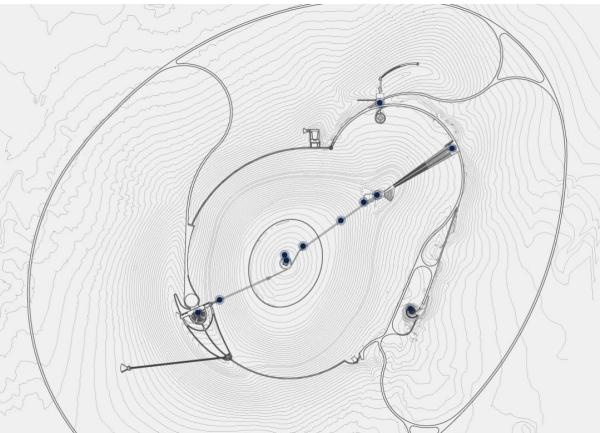


Image 5b: Map of Roden Crater. (N.D) Rodencrater.com

This part follows, starting from outside of the crater to the crater's eye a straight path called the alpha (east) route (image 7). Two special experiences are found here. One being the sun and moon stone, a black square stone with white marble in the middle showing the different eclipses like the native American Fajada Butte in New Mexico (Corner & McLean, 1996, pp. 165–167). The other being the tunnel where you see a circle in the distance (image 6a), a white light that becomes brighter the closer you get to it (image 6b). But suddenly you realize that the circle you have been looking at actually is an eclipse on a steep angle (image 6c).

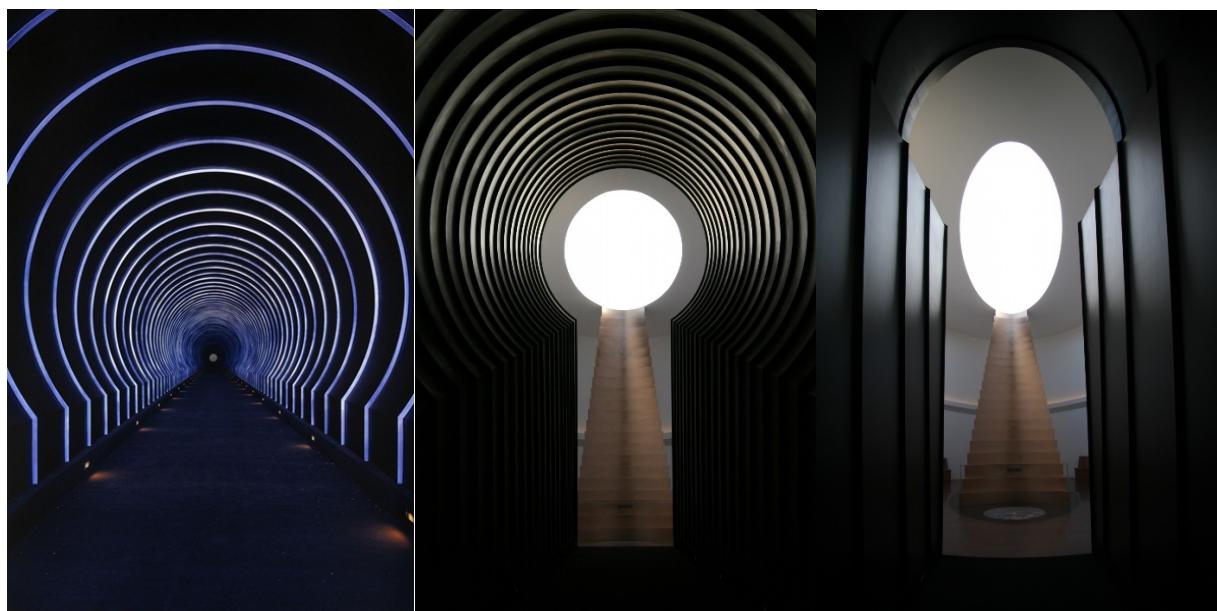


Image 6a,b,c: Alpha east tunnel. (Holzherr, n.d.-6a) (Krupp, n.d.-6b,c)

Here is where the liminal experience takes place. On this point you are separated from the knowledge you looked to a circle, but slowly gets aggregated to the new reality, that it has become an eclipse (image 8). From there you continue to the crater's eye where the famous skybox from Turrell is shown.

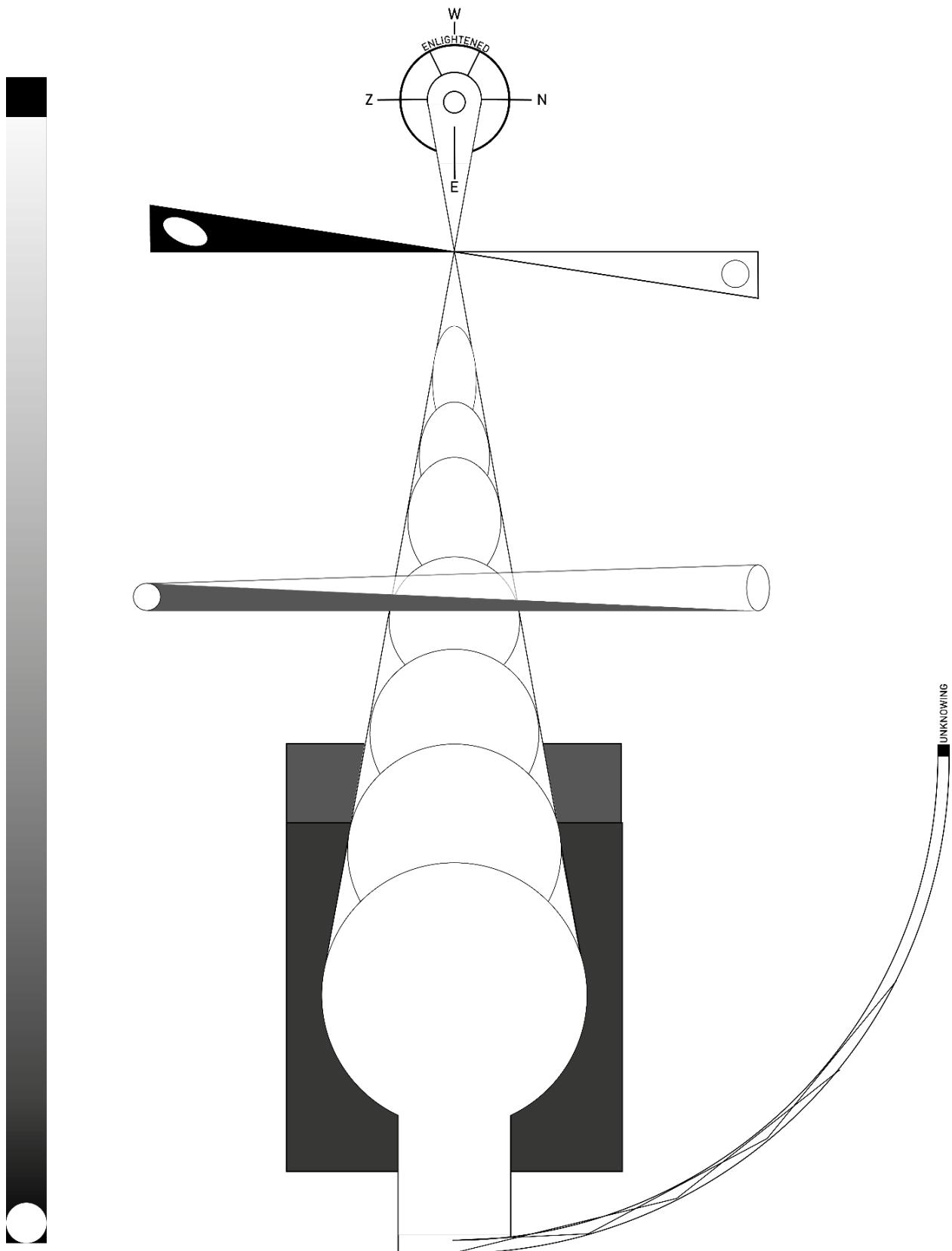


Image 7: mapping of the Roden Crater from the curved tunnel to the alpha route that guides you from the sun/moon room to the center of the crater crossing the eclipse. Own work.

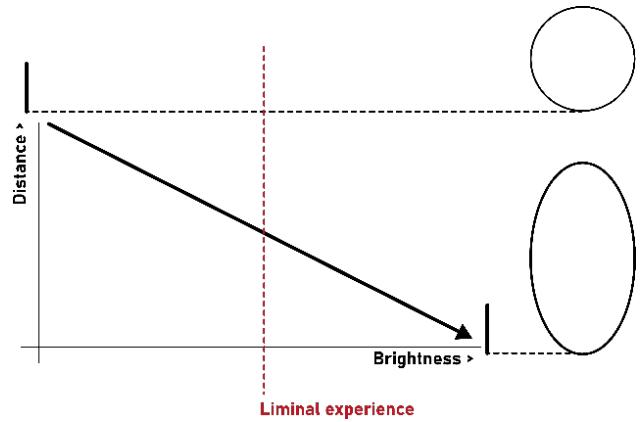


Image 8: Diagram of the liminal experience at Roden Crater.
Own work.

2.5 Staraya Linza, Russia

A second example of a liminal place is Staraya Linza, situated twenty five kilometers from the center of Yekaterinburg, Russia. Staraya Linza is a former talc mine that became deserted. This created a rip in the landscapes of tens to a hundred meters deep that became neglected over time. Because of groundwater levels mostly being higher than the depth of a mine, a pumping installation is used to pump away the water that flows into the mine through aquifers. When this pumping stopped the lake slowly filled up, to its current lake status. Nowadays it is a place where recreation can take place like swimming, supping and scuba diving (image 9).

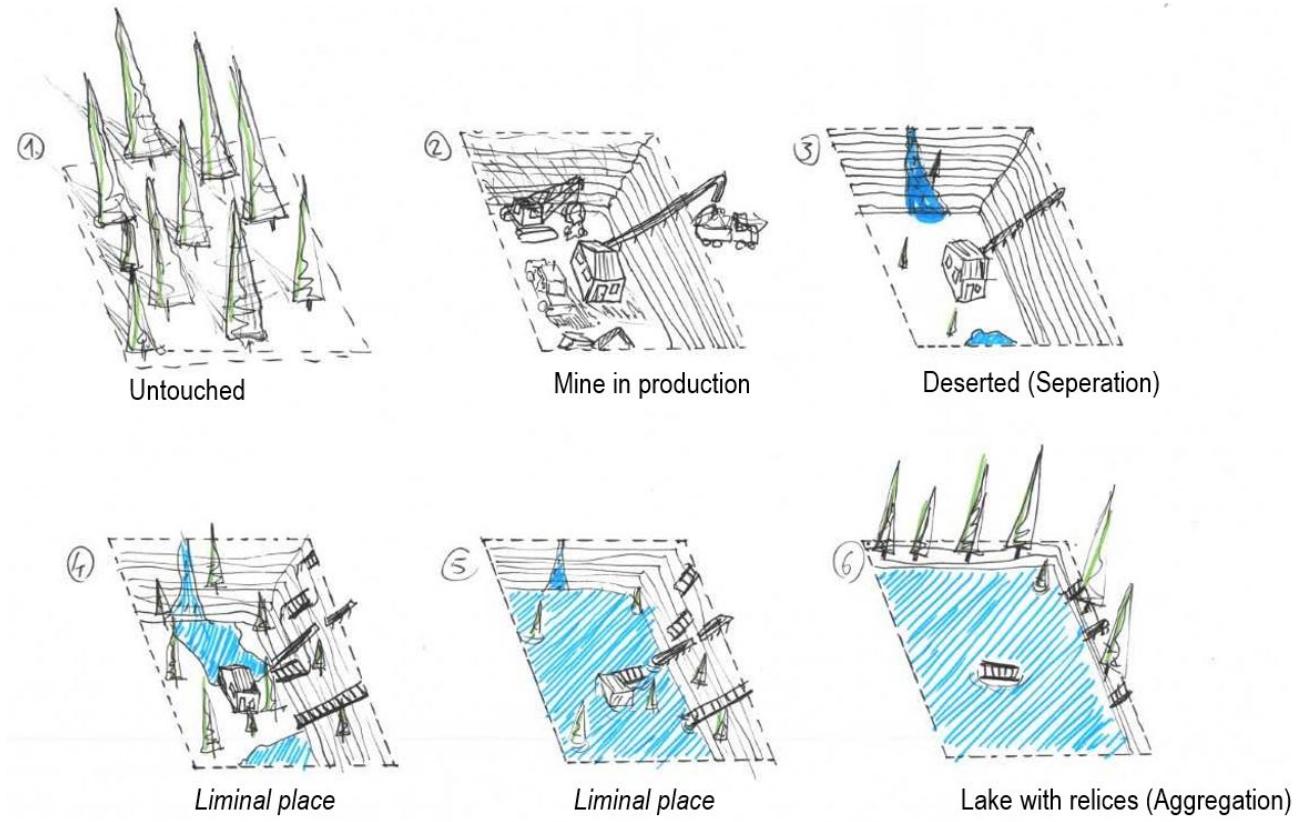


Image 9: Different phases Staraya Linza went through. Own work.

What is most interesting is that in the phase between mining and being a lake, Staraya Linza was used as well. In its derelict and transgressive state people found the place for recreational purposes as well. Putting camp fires and using the pumping house as shelter gave it a new destination which eventually would end up disappearing under the water surface. This fate is an interesting fact that a place in transition can have a phase where the future is already set, but gives place for new activities, or, a qualitative liminal place in a transitioning space. The tools that offered this liminality are for example the pumping house as mentioned before, but also the stairs leading down, becoming a pier when the water rose and the roof of the shed becoming a platform to dive from. These rather trivial and anonymous elements trace back to the elements that can be seen in non-places and with that, it physicalizes the liminal space as well.

PART 3 (aggregation): LIMINAL PLACES IN YEKATERINBURG

The Staraya Linza mine from the previous chapter is as said near to Yekaterinburg. Yekaterinburg itself is a city in transition from being a fully industrial city into a service city. This is causing a co-existence of heavy industry still in function, office blocks being built and free-time (recreation) slowly being built into the culture happening all at the same time.

A rather special phenomenon visible in the city is that the skyscraper offices that are being built, are all built in a cylindrical shape, which could be argued are a reminiscent of the factory pipes once (and still visible) ruling the skyline of Yekaterinburg. The architecture itself is a *fusing* hybrid transition while the general square office building and the industry pipe already exist. For the bigger urban scale these buildings contribute to a more *liminal* hybrid transition, while the city contains buildings now that are accustomed to the 'previous' industrial state to the 'next' economic city, making Yekaterinburg a liminal place itself (image 10).



Image 10: The hybrid in-between design of a skyscraper in Yekaterinburg fusing the appearance of the industrial past with the function of an office building.

But if you scale down again to the process of the building, the transformation again finds itself in a liminal state, where the factory transforms into an office building. In this, and any other urban renewals, there is a phase where the past context is left but there is no sign of the renewal yet. In this phase (image 11), normally high fences are the trace of this moment, blocking the pedestrians from hazard, but in another way also make the people adapt to the new situation that is temporarily created. People have to go around or through a new route that will disorientate them, also making this a liminal place.

Interesting in these examples is the variety of elements contributing to the liminal place. These elements are characteristic for having a liminal character. These are normally trivial but become to special use in the liminal place as mentioned in the previous chapter.

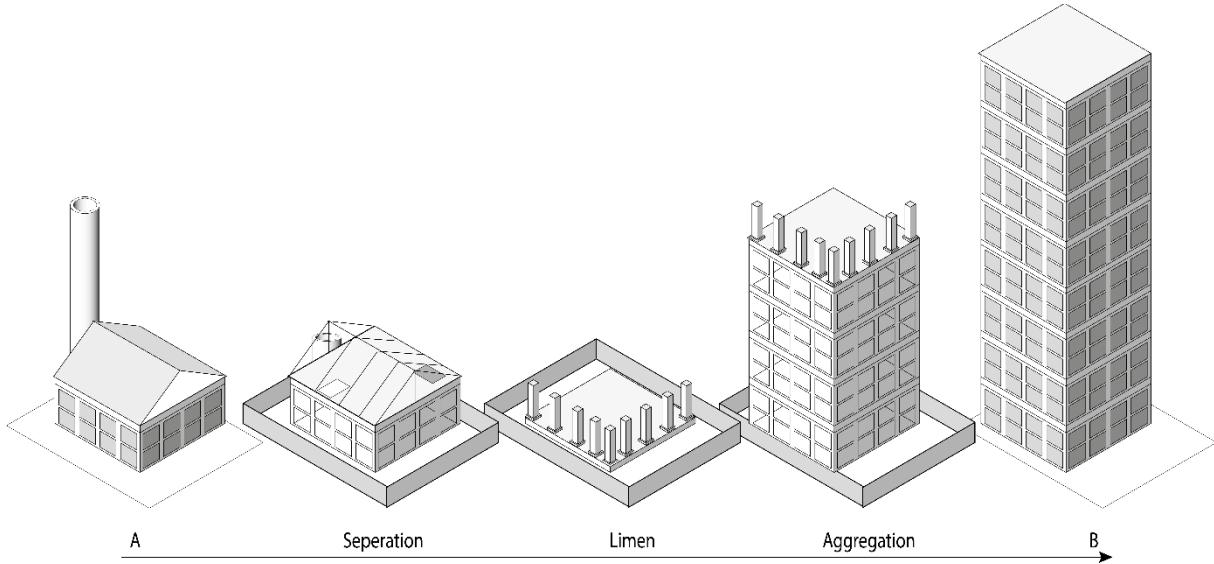


Image 11: The transformation of a factory into a high rise office with the construction site as the liminal phase. Own work.

CLOSING

If we look back to the preface of this essay, it started with the scuba diving experience where I found myself in a place where I could not really place what I felt but where I knew that I was in a phase between two other states. This evoked the question if this liminal experience could be used in architecture to form a qualitative new phase in a transitioning space.

It is hard to really find clear examples of places in the built environment that gives the same experience as the thermocline, in one way because it is many times a rather subjective experience, but on the other hand it is always a temporary event as well. A liminal place is therefore always guided by the notion of the experience and time (you could even say temporality). There are indeed examples of places that deliver this feeling of liminality and have specific qualities to them. In architecture important parts to look at are therefore places where transformation will take place, but instead of it being a rather one-time psychological experience like at the non-place, the place should be able to re-activate this liminal experience every time you visit it again.

Therefore, the next time when my father and I will go scuba diving, I will ask him to follow me, slowly descending to ten meters and just hang there, in the middle of our journey, the surface above, the reef below, to contemplate on the change we feel when we experience the qualities of the liminal place called the thermocline.

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