



# Liminal waters

*Places of re/generation of urban tissue*

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## Abstract

The following paper explores the architectural concepts of liminality as a state of transition and 'genius loci' as an essential actor in understanding a place's spatial, atmospheric, and experiential character. It explores the liminal in terms of its presence, effect, and transformational potential on various scales in the city and in the individual. Architecture is seen as a connective tissue between a place's physical and temporal elements. A central focus of the investigation is the use of water within architectural and landscape urban contexts and its importance as a key element of their 'genius loci'. Water can serve as a binding element linking the city's aboveground and underground layers together with its historical and future dimensions. It can also serve as a continuous modifier, an element of renewal and regeneration. By positioning water as a catalyst for spatial, ecological, and spiritual transformation, this essay stresses the importance of environmental awareness. It promotes a design approach embodying a more resilient and symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural environment.

*I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god-sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities-ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.  
(T.S. Elliot, The Dry Salvages, Nb. 3 of Four Quartets)*

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## 1. Introduction

Water has always played a central role in the shaping of life and establishing human settlements. The locations of the first urban civilisations were tightly related to the presence of drinkable water and more specifically, rivers. Cities have long been drawn to the life-sustaining, connective, and strategic advantages that water provides.

The natural water bodies were used not only for supply but as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with the surrounding areas, which resulted in fertility and the flourishing of the regions. With the advance of agriculture and trade, rivers gained even greater importance as trade and transportation corridors. The growing economic significance led to the necessity for protection, which turns the riverine cities into commerce and social centres (Pinto, P., & Kondolf, G., 2015).

Today, climate changes are making water and our relationship with it and the environment more important than ever. Environmental issues are faced globally and one of the many examples for that is Spain. Water scarcity and the degradation of water quality in the country are the results of increasing economic activity pressures over the past 50 years (Schwabe et al., 2013). Prolonged droughts and water scarcity present critical challenges leading to a re-evaluation of water's role within the urban landscape.

Water serves not only as a historical and environmental element but also as a conceptual and experiential catalyst for urban renewal. In this way, the paper connects water with the dual concepts of "liminality" and "genius loci" by examining how they both influence and are influenced by architectural experience. In this context, architecture serves as a framing device that provides shelter and enhances these experiences, initiating a transformative process within the urban environment.

The paper is structured into two main thematic sections. Each one is devoted to a key theoretical concept, namely, "liminality" and "genius loci", including their definitions, perceptual dimensions, and modes of manifestation. Throughout the text, special emphasis is placed on their phenomenological aspects, highlighting how they contribute to the formation of place and identity.

Subsequently, the paper examines how these concepts are related both materially and experientially through the interaction with water. Water is reintroduced not only as a thematic and material element but also as an agent of change by tracing its historical significance through Madrid's Manzanares River and exploring its potential as a guiding force for resilient architectural interventions in response to the current ecological challenges.

## 2. LIMINALITY

### 2.1 Definition of liminality

#### 2.1.1 Urban cracks

##### ***How to define the zones we move through but rarely occupy?***

*“If there is to be a “new urbanism” it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form” (Rem Koolhaas, 1994)*

The city is in constant flux-growing, shifting, and reorganizing in response to changing conditions that set off continuous transformations. In the context of Spain, for example, Madrid has extended beyond its historic center over the centuries. The change in importance of the suburban areas results in a shift in the spatial dynamics between the districts and the core (Wendell Cox, 2018). This poses the necessity for source redistribution and spatial reconfiguration.

A significant consequence of this complex evolution is the emergence of overlooked urban voids-abandoned or underutilized spaces disrupted by shifting spatial flows. These "dead cells" in the urban fabric are often rich in historical and cultural significance and thus possess potential for redevelopment. They represent liminal zones caught in between the past and the future. Because of their transitional nature those spaces could become transformational nodes, catalysing spatial reactivation. This ability makes them key actors in strengthening the connections between the existing urban systems which could foster optimizing the spatial quality, supply chains and sustainable growth.

The underdeveloped spaces could be assigned in different categories such as urban voids, glitches, coincidences based on their formation, position, spatial actors present etc. (Appendix A). Many of these spaces emerge without initial planning, they are a byproduct of the interactions of the existing urban flows. When it comes to experience, they are often marked by silence and emptiness. They evoke feelings of unease or alienation (Huskinson, 2016).

*Their unsettling nature makes them into prompts of movement rather than stillness. Those emotional responses are often related to acts of change, transition, or threshold passage.*

## 2.1.2 Temporary waves - thresholds

### ***What is a threshold?***

### ***How is it experienced?***

Addressing intermediate zones, spatial pockets, and undefined areas of transition within the urban fabric implies exploring the notion of the "threshold". As a construct that involves both spatial and symbolic elements, the threshold serves as a critical lens through which liminality can be examined.

Threshold systems can be understood as the spine of architectural spatial organization—a connective infrastructure that both defines and dissolves boundaries between spaces. As articulated in architectural theory, "a space that is delimited by thresholds and space-defining elements can be termed a threshold space" (Till Boettger, 2014). These zones function as bridges, continuities, interruptions, and anticipatory moments.

The emotional perception of the spatial "in-between-ness" is tightly connected to movement, navigation, sequence, and order. According to Wolfgang Meisenheimer, thresholds serve as "tools for architectural choreography" (Till Boettger, 2014), staging the transitions of arrival, mediation, and departure.

Continuing on the metaphysical nature of thresholds, the spatial sequences they form are often nonlinear but overlap, intertwine, fuse, pierce through each other, suggesting a complex multilayered system. A good illustrative representation of this could be seen in Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas" (Fig.1), where the interplay of light, gaze, and mirrored reflection collapses distinctions between viewer and subject, real and represented.



Fig 1. Las Meninas, Diego Velázquez (2025, Britannica.com.)

Strating with the captivating gazes of the painted figures which fall onto the viewer they create a sense of incorporation into the situational frame, familiarity.

Using the light, the artist distinguishes between objects and figures at the front and the back. The two main frames of action are presented also through the figures set up. At the front, most of the figures seem still and affected by the viewers presence and the other one with the figure in the back. The bridge between isolation and collectiveness, stillness and dynamism spatially divides the canvas and creates depth. In the darker backside, a glimpse of light through the door suggests an existing sequential space that is yet invisible to the viewer, marking the infinite character of the composition.

Even with the feeling of being there, not everything is visible for the observer. For example, the canvas the artist is painting on remains hidden. It is a frame, however, that the spectator could mentally construct since he is a central character in it. A double invisibility and manifestation of the painting is just the first step of spatial multilayering. One of the seemingly hung portraits on the wall in the room is a mirror reflecting the observer, drawing yet another layered dimension through spatial reflection (Foucault, 1966).

The analysis of the painting rules out few main oppositions used to construct the spatial narrative:

*familiarity ↔ unfamiliarity*

*visible ↔ invisible (light)*

*absorption ↔ reflection*



*Fig 1.1 Las Meninas, Exploration of the elements of light, invisibility and reflection present in the depicted atmospheres (Elaborated by the author)*

By exploring the border between those opposites Velázquez creates a multilayered dimension perceptually spreading outside of the canvas (Fig.1.1). As Foucault notes, the mirror in the painting does not simply reflect. It cuts across representational space, allowing visibility to that which exists outside of perception (Foucault, 1966). In this sense, the threshold becomes a metaphor for perception itself, an optical and conceptual hinge between realities.

All in all, it could be said that thresholds can define limits, separate but also connect, reflecting their functional duality. Yet the threshold is not a border. It is not finite or fixed but rather dynamic and fluid. It is a zone and a tool for constructing spatial and experiential sequences that overlap, clash, and influence each other. The characteristic duality shows the threshold's duality and ambiguous, liminal nature. This fluidity situates the threshold not just in tectonics, but in ritual, ceremony, and meaning-making.

### 2.1.3 Liminality and transition

***What is the difference between threshold and liminality?***

***How is liminality experienced?***

The notion of transition lies at the core of both threshold spaces and the broader concept of liminality, extending beyond the architectural into the psychological and phenomenological realms. Rooted in the Latin term "limin", meaning "threshold" (Dictionary.com, 2019), which therefore means that liminality also denotes an in-betweenness, a suspension between "before" and "after".

The term unfolds in both space and time. However, while a threshold refers to a state, condition, or something more momentary, liminality's significance lies in the process of change and movement. Vital becomes the experience of transformation itself. It could be said then that liminality is less of a spatial construct and more of a subjective experience.

Emotionally and psychologically, the liminal state is characterized by ambiguity, disorientation, and uncertainty, often accompanied by heightened sensitivity and awareness. It generates what can be described as a liminal atmosphere—a perceptible mood or aura evoked by the instability of transition.

The anthropological roots of the concept were established by Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century. He refers to a liminal process in the so called "rite of passage", a ceremonial transition from one social group to another. According to him the change happens in a structured sequence of three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. He identifies the "preliminal rites", separating the person from his way of living up to that moment, "liminal rites" where the individual is detached and ready to change and attach to new social and cultural attributes and lastly, "post liminal rites" which mark the established transformation (van Gennep, 1960). The liminal phase is the central moment of transformation, accompanied by the feeling of stillness and suspension, uncertainty. These moments we could identify through sacred rituals or a ceremony such as birth, wedding, funeral. As Victor Turner stresses, the liminal changes related to "gestation, parturition" and "undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner, Victor W., 1967). This leads to the idea that the presence of liminality in our lives could be detected through the processes of becoming, of going from one state to another, of change and renewal. These processes are usually marked by religious ceremonies referring to social status change, or they are related to fluctuations in our daily behavior and expressed in our daily routine.

This theoretical work offers an additional lens for reinterpreting spatial structures and experiential sequences and how they could evoke liminal situations in architecture and spatial studies. Transitional spaces would then be places for not only physical but also physiological transformation. They would shape our perception, alter tempo, and trigger our imagination. By doing so, they construct journeys in two realms simultaneously- the existing one and the one of possibilities

## 2.2 PERCEPTION of liminality

### 2.2.1 Art of the liminal

#### ***How is a liminal atmosphere defined?***

In experiential design, a space's atmospheric qualities are essential. Therefore, we could talk about transitional spaces with liminal atmospheres. To understand how a liminal atmosphere is physically constructed, we need to examine how it could be simulated or visually represented. The concept of liminality is thus explored through the lens of visual art. The previously discussed "Las Meninas" is a good first example to represent the liminal effect of a visually constructed space and its analysis would serve as a base to investigate the art of Ferdinanda Florence (Fig. 2.1,2.2,2.3) and Edward Hopper (Fig. 3.1,3.2,3.3). Both of the artists capture moments suspended in time suggesting liminal presence.



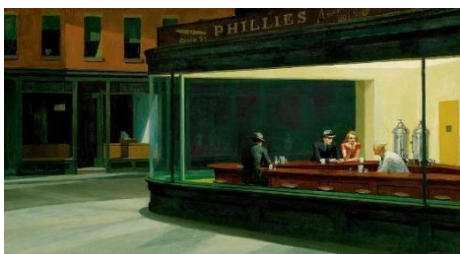
*Fig 2.1 Portable, small no. 7, 2020, Ferdinanda Florence (Portable, Small No. 7, 2025)*



*Fig 2.2 Brittons no. 7, 2017, Ferdinanda Florence (Brittons No. 7, 2017)*



*Fig 2.3 Close to Home, Small no. 3, 2024, Ferdinanda Florence (Close to Home, Small No. 3, 2024)*



*Fig 3.1 Nighthawks, 1942, Edward Hopper (Hopper, 2019)*



*Fig 3.2 Automat, 1927, Edward Hopper, (Edward Hopper (1882-1967), Automat, 1927, Copyright 2016)*



*Fig 3.3 Gas, 1940, Edward Hopper (Hopper, 2019)*

A closer observation and comparison of the paintings it could be noticed construct based on tensions, similar to the one in Velázquez work as traced in Fig. 3.3.1.:

*familiarity ↔ unfamiliarity*  
*visible ↔ invisible (light)*  
*absorption ↔ reflection*

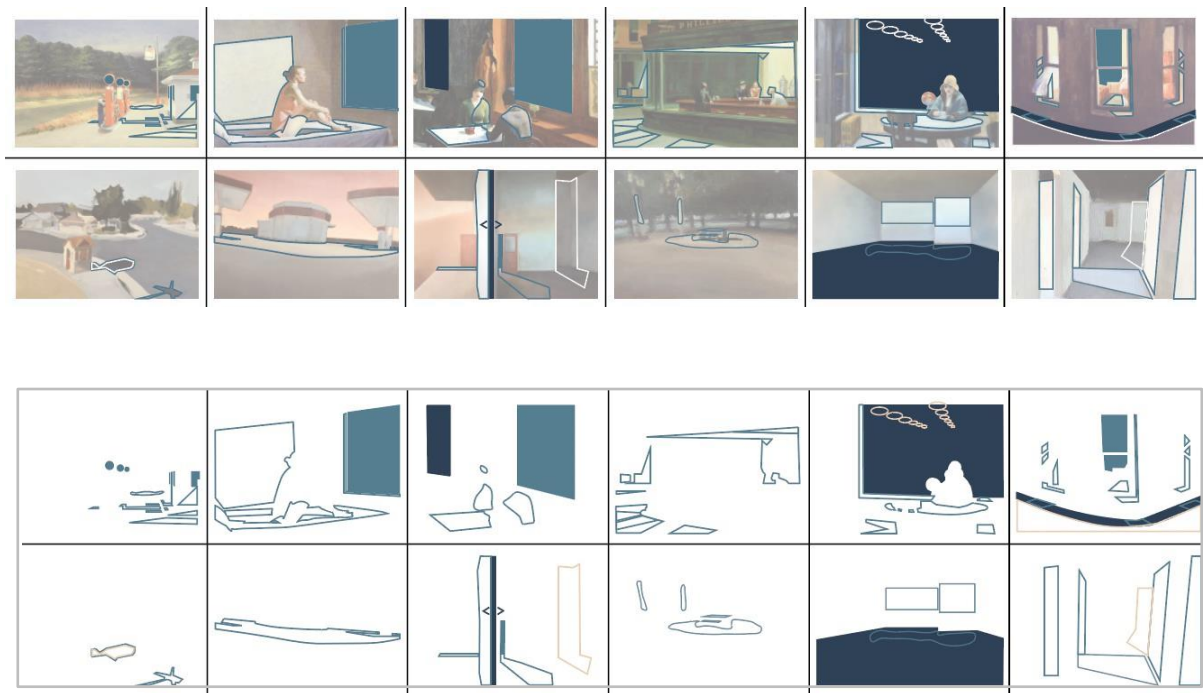


Fig 3.3.1 Exploration of the elements of light, invisibility and reflection present in the depicted Atmospheres (Elaborated by the author)

- Casted light area
- Use of light
- Reflection/mirroring
- Invisibility

The balance between opposite conditions highlights the duality in the liminal spaces. Despite their shared thematic focus, the artists differ in their depiction of spatial experience. Hopper often portrays more intimate, personal spaces that are inhabited yet emotionally distant. On the other hand, Florence mainly emphasizes on public and semi-public industrial and commercial spaces where humans are not depicted, yet their presence is still felt. These are spaces that, while not belonging to anyone in particular, evoke a strange sense of **familiarity**. This intensifies the atmosphere of solitude and estrangement. F. Florence herself notes:

*"Almost all of my subjects are industrial or commercial areas, rather than private residences. They are 'home' to no one, but I am drawn to them and find something strangely familiar in them. The lines between inside and outside are sometimes blurred. The architecture itself is difficult to place, both in time and spatially. These sites may suggest the nation's unresolved social and economic issues; they also represent for me a psychological space, a place for personal reconnaissance." - F. Florence (Liminal Spaces in Art, 2023)*

Following on the opposition of **loneliness** and **liveliness**, many of the paintings depict a people-less place, where the observer is the only one present in the space, highlighting the idea of separation and alienation. This is also underlined in the paintings with present only one or two characters. Some of them are placed in a what the viewer would expect a busy setting such as a cafeteria or a restaurant. Nevertheless, through the making of the painting, a spatial border is drawn, and they are isolated from the rest of the world, the crowd remains **invisible**.

Sometimes, exaggerated perspective makes the elements hard to place spatially. This causes a false **dynamism** in a still setting which causes disorientation or sparks curiosity for the **unpredictable**, feelings typical for the liminal.

Light plays an important role in constructing the atmosphere in the artworks. It is often used to focus on objects or characters, highlight a certain place, or reflect another. It is a powerful tool used to create spatial hierarchy but also create the illusion of invisible continuation in the visualised space, putting the observer in a state of anticipation.

The artistic interpretation of the liminal leads to the idea that a liminal atmosphere is to be perceived not only through the spatial conditions of a space but as a part of a constructed emotional landscape, which influences perception. Therefore, in architectural settings, the physiological manifestation of the liminal arises in places where boundaries are blurred. These are places built on opposites where the expected sequence set by memory or existing cultural narratives is interrupted, provoking a moment for reflection.

### 2.2.2 Aesthetics of Fear

Liminality is not only associated with feelings of calmness or relaxation, but it often evokes sensations of suspense, uncertainty, and sometimes fear. This psychological complexity becomes even more pronounced in visual and experiential representations, especially where depiction intersects with simulation, as seen in video games. Contemporary examples are the "Backrooms" video games, such as *Sublimity* or *Seclusion*, which illustrate how liminal spaces can create psychological tension by tapping into the unsettling qualities of ambiguity and the unknown.

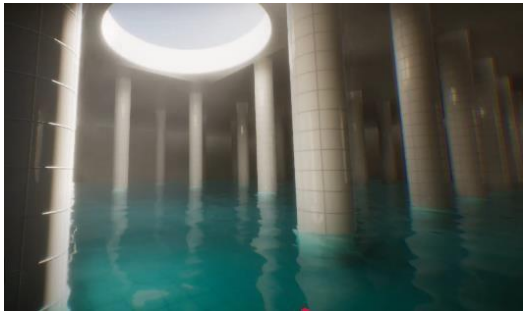


Fig 4.1 Capture of the game "Sublimity"  
(Sublimity (2024), 2024)



Fig 4.2 Capture of the game "Sublimity"  
(Sublimity (2024), 2024)



Fig 5.1 Capture of the game "Seclusion"  
(Reddit - the Heart of the Internet, 2024)



Fig 5.1 Capture of the game "Seclusion"  
(Reddit - the Heart of the Internet, 2024)

In order to evoke different emotional responses, similarly to the discussed paintings, the visualizations are constructed based on mainly the same opposites as mentioned in the previous section that can also be seen in Fig. 5.1.1.

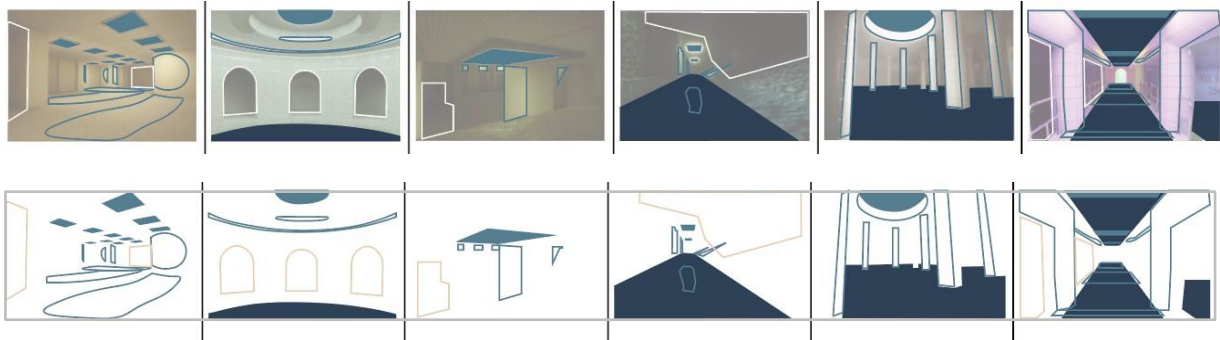


Fig 5.1.1 Exploration of the elements of light, invisibility and reflection present in the depicted Atmospheres (Elaborated by the author)

- Casted light area
- Use of light
- Reflection/mirroring
- Invisibility

It is noticeable that here as well light plays an important role in navigating the order of perceptual frames. It highlights certain elements but also navigates through the environment. It is also used to reorganise perceptual hierarchies by shifting the focus on typically overlooked background elements and thus change the visual engagement with the viewer. Furthermore, most of the illustrated spaces are either secluded or too vast with no clear way out, which highlights the idea of isolation from the rest of the world and evokes the feeling of **loneliness**. Even if the light can be used to set a direction of movement, not having a visual connection with the outside or the end of the spatial journey denies the spectator a narrative clarity. Moreover, the spaces with predominant darkness make the environment **invisible**, bring **unpredictability**, and provoke a more profound sense of anxiety.

Putting the human in a setting where the outcomes of his actions cannot be anticipated and what could happen next cannot be rationalised, triggers an emotional response of terror, panic or even physiological disorientation. The sense of disorientation is intensified also by the repetition of identical elements or spaces constructing an ambiguous spatial continuum. This again creates a false **familiarity** with the sense of unease for of the uncanny.

Mirroring is used again to create sense of infinity. This time, however, **water** is the main reflective element present. It becomes a tool for representing the hidden and unknown, almost like the glass reflections in Hopper paintings or the invisible canvas of the artist in *Las Meninas*.

The analysis of the liminal either through paintings or digital media allowed for a closer look at the duality of those spatial conditions and how they could affect the personal experience and emotions. The complexity of the provoked emotions stems from their duality. For example, in one setting, unpredictability could trigger curiosity and excitement, in another, it could trigger terror and anxiety. A place deprived of human presence could feel both lonely and peaceful, contradictory, isolation could also be achieved in a crowded space.

The distinctive presence of water in the digitally constructed atmosphere opens a discussion of how water is related to liminality. It is perceived as liminal not only because of the reflective nature but because of its effect on our bodies and its cultural meaning. Our perception of water is primarily navigated through our bodily experience (floating, submerging, loss of breath, noise reduction, blurred vision) but also its symbolic meaning (sacrality, purification, mythology).

Further investigation into the role of water and our interaction with it on various occasions would help us depict a clearer picture on its role in our life and the significance of its liminal nature.

## 2.3 MANIFESTATION of the liminal

### 2.3.1 Liminal elements

To translate the liminal atmosphere from the visual and imaginative to the physical realm, we would go back to Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage. Diving into the liminal manifestation in our lives would help materialize the concept.

Various life-cycle or daily rituals could be determined. There are less frequent ceremonial events such as weddings, funerals, and births, while others are among our daily habits, such as bathing, drinking, sleeping, etc. They either mark or include actions that lead to certain emotional or physical changes. The event is just as important as the environment during these liminal rituals. The liminal is tightly connected to the experience of the change, which is influenced by the surrounding environment and the spatial construct.

The tables below analyse different rituals (Fig 6.1, 6.2). They are categorised based on their frequency of occurrence. Life-altering events are examined, symbolising metamorphic phases that reshape the course of life. On the other hand, daily practices are seen as sacred since their repetitive nature makes them key influencers of a person's way of thinking and living. To relate those rituals to physical spatial thresholds, each one is analysed in terms of present architectural elements in the environment, atmospheric description, and evoked feeling.

Rituals of life (passage)	Architecture (threshold spaces)	Objects architectural elements	Atmosphere	Feeling	Liminal element
Wedding	church, court	altar, table	sacral, authoritative, monumental	love, joy, stress, anticipation	
Birth	hospital, home	bed, birth pool	sacral, protection	love, happiness, fear, safety, relief	
Funeral	cemetery, crematorium, home	casket, altar, soil, headstone, table	heavy, isolated, connection, sacred	love, grief, loneliness, helplessness, togetherness, peace, anxiousness	
Baptism	church	sacred pool	sacral, festive	hopefulness, belonging, love	
Coming of age	home, bathroom	bath, mirror	isolated, festive	fear, relief, curiosity	

Fig. 6.1 . Tables analysing the spatial and emotional atmospheres in different life-changing rituals  
(Elaborated by the author)

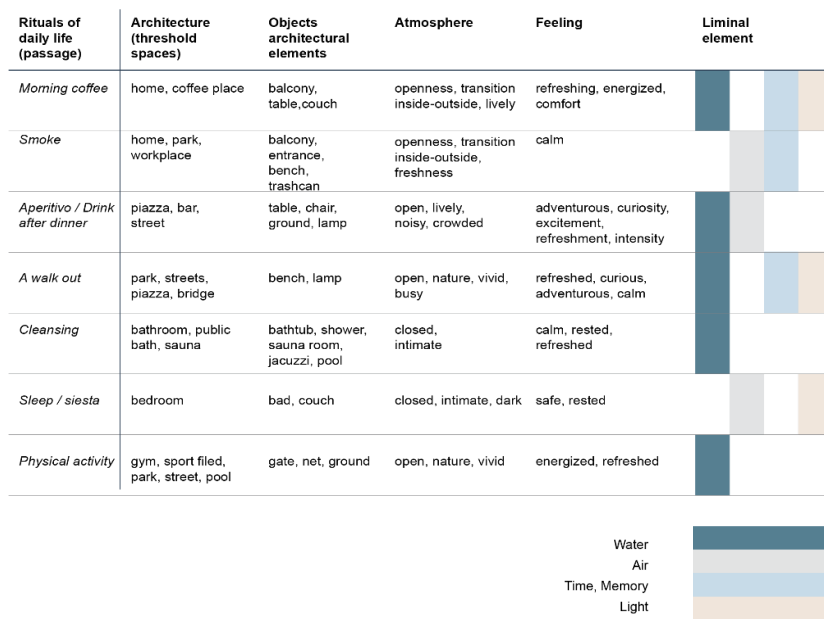


Fig. 6.2 . Tables analysing the spatial and emotional atmospheres in different daily rituals (Elaborated by the author)

Outlining the relationship between event, space, and emotion during the rituals helps identify a few liminal elements whose presence has a direct impact on the experience and execution of the rituals: water, air, time, and light. Water seems to be the most interwoven element which displays its importance in a person's life during the liminal rituals, moments of transformation. That could be better examined through its cultural meaning and physical interaction with the human body.

### 2.3.2 Divine flow

#### **Which are the different meanings water carries throughout the cultures?**

Across various spiritual traditions, water holds profound symbolic and sacred significance. It is considered inherently sacred, purifying and healing or embodying the qualities of protection and alignment with nature. It is revered as a vital and sacred force that sustains all life (Kunnazarova Sholpanay Makhsetbaevna, 2024).

A shared perspective views water as a connection among mind, body, soul, and nature, which is applied in many religions' rituals. For example, in Christianity, baptism with water symbolizes spiritual purification and initiation into the faith. In Hinduism, immersion in the river Ganges stems from spiritual purification. Similarly, in Islam, ablution is performed before prayer, cleansing the body and mind, symbolising purity.

In their essence many of the rituals involve a contact of the human body with water. Starting from the daily activities that people do that involve water and continuing with the religious-related rituals, it is interesting to explore this physical interaction of the human with the water.

In the displayed matrix, rituals involving water are listed in a gradient manner, starting with mundane and frequent rituals and finishing with religious ones. In the first table, the body parts in contact with the water during the ritual are marked. A second related table showcases their frequency throughout the year, marked with an estimated amount of water used.

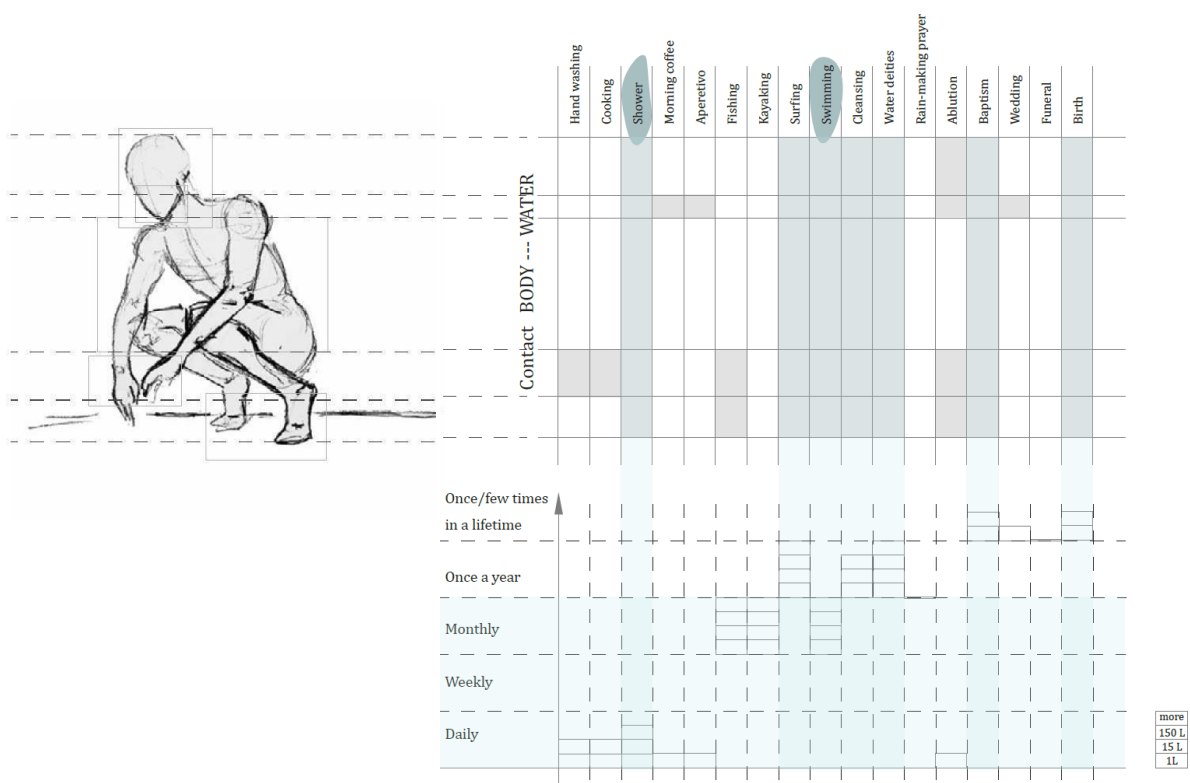


Fig. 7. Matrix exploring the relationship between water and the human body during rituals as well as the amount of water used (Elaborated by the author)

Most often, full body immersion in water occurs both on a daily and on a religious level. This is the state in which the element has a big impact on the body. It changes the environment around it, bringing it in a state of floating suspension, neither falling, nor standing. The body enters a threshold state of mind marked by calmness and relaxation (Hruby, H., 2024).

Conclusively, liminality relates to uncertainty, instability, motion, and transformation, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. By identifying thresholds as a tool for their spatial construct, liminality outlines the process of permutation, the period of metamorphosis, and their experience. The notion of the ritual is used to bridge the gap between the material and immaterial manifestation of liminality. Additionally, experience, emotion, and physical elements are brought together, and water emerges as a primary liminal element. Its liminal nature lies within its physical transformation, emotional and spiritual metamorphic power, and strong atmospheric presence.

Up until now the focus is on the perception of the liminal and using it to describe a place, a state, an experience. However, it could be said that the liminal marks the presence of something even more complex – a place's "genius loci".

### 3. GENIUS LOCI

#### 3.1 Definition of Genius loci

*'Nullus locus sine genio est' 'There is no place without a genius (spirit)'*

*- Maurus Servius Honoratus*

To critically engage with the concept of genius loci, or the "spirit of place," one must first clarify the term "place," which could be explored through the lens of phenomenology. It is an environment where something "takes place", where something is being or is happening. As suggested by C. Norberg – Schulz the structure of a place could be described by using two categories – "space" and "character". Where space relates to the spatial organization and spatial elements that construct the boundaries of the place, the character relates to its **atmosphere**, and both influence human perception (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The character of the place is tightly connected to the **action** and therefore it could be said that different programs require different atmospheric conditions. It is important to note that the character of a place is not permanent, it changes through time, it is influenced even by the change in the amount of light present (day and night) (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

The atmosphere is reflected not only by what is there but how it is formed. The **process of making** and the reasoning behind it set the character of the resulting product. Similarly, Semper investigates the notion of creation and transformation through the **craft**, use of material, and its formation. The idea of the *Stoffwechsel* is represented through "the science of the changeable and the changing" (Forty, 2000). It links the structural form to its metabolic processes.

The term '*Genius loci*' comes from a Roman concept that refers to a "guardian" or "spirit" that gives life to beings, people, and places (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). It is vital that the presence of this spirit is acknowledged, and its essence preserved during a place's future development. Thoughtful architectural practices can play a vital role in facilitating this accommodation and transformation. Thus, architecture should be in a: "good relationship" with the place both "in a physical as well as psychic sense" (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

The concept of genius loci comprises both the actors and the events resulting from their interaction, happening in a specific space. It also reflects every small change in the relations between those actors, which makes it a complex layered system, an interplay of physical conditions and meaning constructing the place's character.



In a closer comparison between the images, we could see that many seemingly small or hidden objects or features, such as golf balls, swings, building pieces, and items left on benches, suggest an activity or event happening in addition to the primary assigned function. They become more dominant in human perception because they enrich the atmosphere and help build a more thorough image of the place's genius loci. Invisible factors such as traffic noise or cyclists passing by are also important. Every detail, from the crack on the concrete tile, through the nesting ducks in the river, to the people eating on a bench, portrays the existence of a different ecosystem simultaneously existing and shaping the place's character.

### **3.3 MANIFESTATION of Genius loci**

#### **3.3.1 Water veins of Madrid**

Just like the river is used as a guiding tool to discover the genius loci of spaces around it, further investigation into the water systems and their significance for the city will help us explore the historical and cultural layers of their meaning.

#### **3.3.2 Surface meanders**

A significant part of Madrid's water infrastructure was the establishment of the Canal de Isabel II in the 19th century, which played a primary role in sustaining the city's metabolism and allowing its future growth. The new supply system was navigating water from catchment areas up north to the city's center, utilizing the gravitational forces. A complex net of reservoirs, dams, channels, and pipes shaped the city's urban pattern. As Madrid grew, so did the demand for water supply, leading to the need for expansion of the capacity of the waterworks. Necessary improvement of the distribution systems throughout the years is marked by a series of alterations of the water channels, reservoirs, and also additional structures such as water towers (Rubio-Gavilán et al., 2016).

Some of the currently existing water structures such as historical aqueducts, water towers, canal, but also parts of the Canal de Isabel II water systems together with the natural water sources in the city are overlaid on the map below (Fig.9). The image becomes a layered representation, a palimpsest showcasing the city's development. The remnant, no longer water elements serve as monuments honouring its past, while the new structures symbolise the advancement and prosperity of today's Madrid.

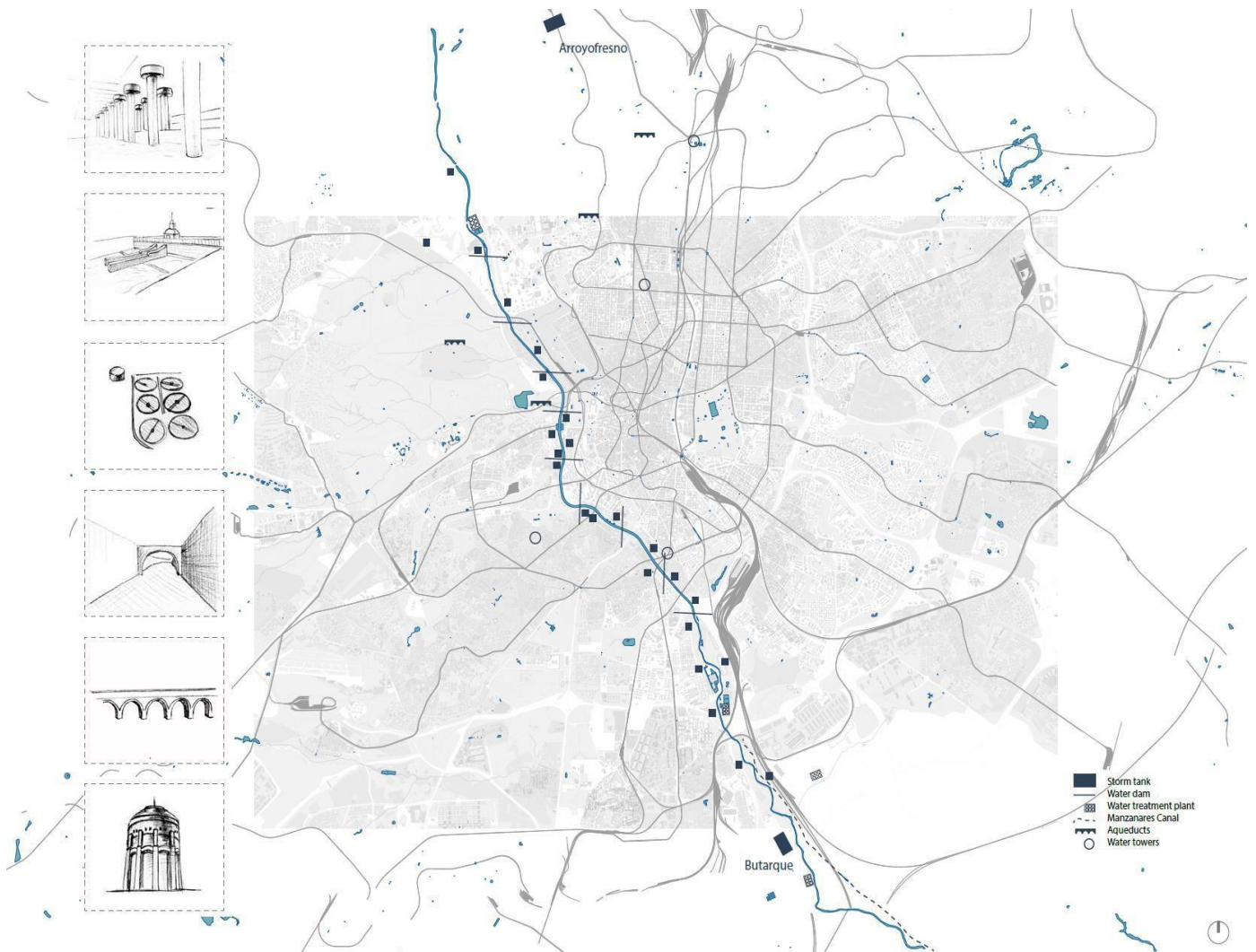


Fig.9. Water structures of Madrid (Elaborated by the author)

By looking closely at the existing water structures of Madrid city, exploring the present environment in which they are situated it is visible that the river of Manzanares has a central place as a part of a bigger vital water system sustaining the city.

### 3.3.3 Memory deposits

#### ***How did people interact with the water of Manzanares river?***

Although it is situated along the river, the city has maintained a historically ambivalent relationship with it, marked by both dependence and neglect.

Even though Manzanares may not be one of the major European rivers, its role in Madrid's urban development is crucial and should not be underestimated. As a water source, it played a key role in the city's Muslim establishment as a fortress to protect the river corridor. It has become a part of the city's water network supply chain connecting the center and the suburbs.

The importance of the river also lies in its social value. It facilitated various activities throughout the centuries, from laundering, fishing and gardening to more leisure activities such as swimming or rowing. These activities helped construct the river's identity as a place for living and working. This is well represented by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya, who portrayed the act of washing clothes, dancing, or simply having a picnic by the river in his paintings (Fig. 10.1, 10.2, 10.3).



Fig 10.1 The Washerwomen, Francisco Goya (Goya, 2019)



Fig 10.2 Dance on the banks of the Manzanares, Francisco Goya (MeisterDrucke, 2025)



Fig 10.3 Picnic on the bank of the Manzanares, 1791-1792, Goya (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 2008)

Despite its cultural significance, the Manzanares has often been ridiculed. Writers of the Spanish Golden Age famously mocked the river for its meagre flow and lack of navigability. In his "Poemas al manzanares" Francisco de Quevedo referred to it as a "river apprentice" (Serrano, 2001). Tirso de Molina also expressed his viewpoint in his "Oda al río Manzanares": "Like Alcalá and Salamanca, you have, and you are not a school; summer vacations, and classes only in winter" (Serrano, 2001). Furthermore, Todo Grogona also mentions Manznares river in his poem "Duélete de esa puente, Manzanares": " look what people say out there that you are not a river for half a bridge" (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2013).

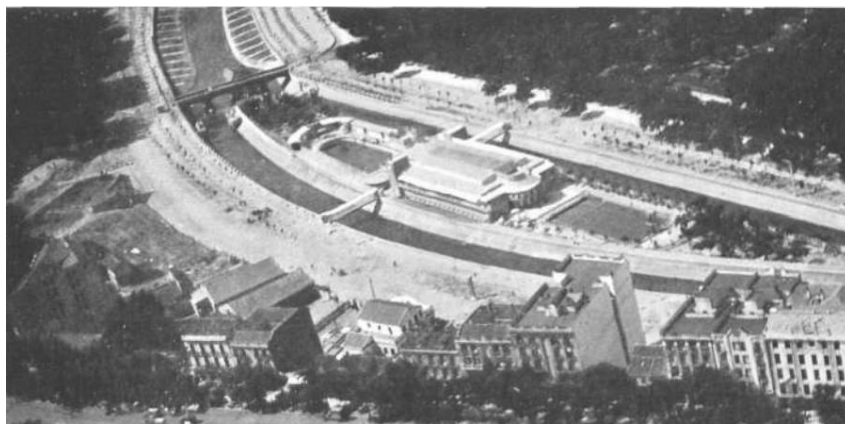
The duality of people's relationship with the river is intriguing. They use it, consume it, and interact with it through organised activities, sports, and events, yet the river's importance is not

fully recognised. Often, the perception of the river is focused on its physical features, overlooking its role as a vessel of memory, cultural heritage, and potential transformation.

### 3.3.4 Dissolved structures

#### ***Which are the memories of the people in relation to the river?***

Recognizing its layered history invites a re-evaluation of its value not that much as a prominent urban infrastructural element but as having a central role in understanding the relationship between Madrid citizens and nature, as a spark for social cohesion and recreation. Some of the examples for that are several "ghost" landmarks which were once tightly connected to the image of the city –"La Piscina della Isla" and the "Madrid Beach".



*Fig.11 Picture of the "La Piscina della Isla" (Salcedo, 2016)*

The project "La Piscina de La Isla," (Fig.11) built in 1931, was located along the Manzanares river close to the city center. It involved the creation of an artificial island in the riverbed, featuring a uniquely boat-shaped building designed by Madrid architect Luis Gutiérrez Soto (Fernández Prieto, Juan Valentín, 2024). The project consisted of three swimming pools and was an engineering masterpiece. The water for the pools was taken directly from the river and then passed through an integrated filtration system (Salcedo, 2016). The building was a bridge inviting people not across but in the river, strengthening the relationship between the water element and the urban social life.



*Fig.12 Picture of the "La Playa de Madrid" (Jesus S. Jaen, (2021, February 2)*

On the other hand, Madrid Beach (Fig.12) was located up North on the Manzanares stream. It was a sport complex built in 1932. The design made by architect Manuel Muñoz Monasterio

included several pools connected to a small reservoir on the river. The complex provided also facilities for sport tournaments and leisure activities such as picnic areas, gardens (Jesus S. Jaen, 2021, February 2). As the first artificial beach in Spain, it emerged during a time when

Madrid was enamored with its river, aligning with a movement that promoted personal physical development through sports and a connection with nature.

Both of the cherished projects are closely connected to the act of bathing and immersing oneself in water, fostering a stronger relationship between people and this natural element. The interaction of Madrileños with the water takes on a ritualistic quality, transforming their engagement with the city's aquatic environment. These cultural and social interactions provide insight into how the river has functioned as more than a utilitarian watercourse, instead serving as a meaningful social and symbolic landscape.

The overlap of different physical, atmospheric, spatial, social, and cultural dimensions related to the riverscape of Madrid constructs its multi-layered portrait. The composition enhances our understanding of the river's identity and contributes to the construction of the *genius loci*

experienced along the riverbanks. Putting water as a central carrier of the city's spirit and an evidence for its historical and cultural development reminds that the river should be explored not only as a physical entity but also as an atmospheric and experiential space shaped by its surrounding elements.

## 4. Conclusion

Placing the concepts of "liminality" and "genius loci" reveals an interesting juxtaposition. At the heart of liminality is transformation, a phase between two states where the tension between opposites could be explored: the familiar and the unfamiliar, intimacy and distance, solitude and vitality, etc. Those oppositions create liminal conditions allowing for moments of uncertainty that invite reflection and the potential for transformation. Because of its ever-changing nature and metamorphic power, water is posed as a liminal element that influences a place's spatial and spiritual experience, as well as a detrimental part of its 'genius loci'.

The 'spirit of a place' is closely tied to the interactions among diverse actors who influence it over time. The processes of making further intensify its historical, cultural, and ecological significance. In this context, the presence of water, specifically in the form of a river, plays a central role in shaping the meaning of a place.

A key commonality between the two concepts is also their tight relation to the created atmospheric conditions and how they are perceived. Furthermore, in both cases, water becomes a primary actor that embodies change. People's close interaction with it underlines its role in shaping their experience, either by using the water and immersing in it during rituals or engaging with the city's water structures, such as bathing in the river.

Despite their intersecting points, however, the interest lies in the distinction between the concepts. This provokes a discussion on how liminality and a place's 'genius loci' influence each other.

Some may say that liminality of a place sits within the essence of its character, atmosphere, therefore, as a part of its state of being it determines its 'spirit'. However, the 'genius loci' is tightly connected to a place's environmental, historical, cultural, social significance together with its past, present and future formation processes. These elements are detrimental for the present atmospheric qualities of a space and liminality may or may not be felt through them. Not every place's 'genius loci' is characterized as liminal but whenever the nature of a place is liminal it is an inevitable part of its 'genius loci'.

Since liminality is a big part of the emotional landscape and state of being we experience the space's 'genius loci' through it. Liminality then could be seen as a form of manifestation of a place's 'genius loci'.

Water can physically embody the intersection of both concepts, serving as a central element in exploring their relationship. Tapping into the liminal nature of the element through a spatial intervention is pivotal to the place's improvement. This is where architecture can become a key element in transforming a place and strengthening its connection between its physical, spatial, and temporal elements. By regulating atmosphere and space, while considering the location's physiological needs, architecture fosters the site's evolution and resilience.

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## Appendix A - Vocabulary urban cracks

**URBAN SPACE AND ANTIOSPACE-** If space could be defined as differentiated, formed, discontinuous, charged with presence. It is identifiable, capable of plastic form and it has tangible characteristics (scale, shape, size, proportion). It is the form of the in-between. Anti-space is the opposite. It is infinite, continuous, formless, singular. It appears empty (Peterson & Littenberg, 2020).

**URBAN COINCIDENCES-** The spaces as a result of unplanned spatial alignment or social connections we could call coincidences. They are designed not by the design of what is around them.

**ABANDONED STRUCTURES-** These structures are the by-product of production and transportation mechanisms.

The liminality of abandoned structures is expressed in their state of stagnation. They are no longer what they were but also have not become what they will be.

**IN/-BETWEEN** - Between two destinations, between "here" and "there", between two states. "Where between is liminal, in-between is arterial; where between is intermediate, in-between is midstream" (Ingold, 2015).

**URBAN GLITCHES** - The urban glitches are the spaces that are not performing well in the context they exist. They mark inefficiency in the planning of the urban grid. These are the point of potential optimization of the urban network.

**URBAN VOIDS** - The points of 'perforation' into the urban fabric result in residual empty spaces with no purpose or function (Giovanni, 2018).

**ABANDONED SPACES** - Places with lost programs, they are very often marked by vandalism or absence of human activity and deterioration