Research Plan

Intersection of Architecture, Nature, and Human

Identifying non-smooth space for human and nature, & cohabitation

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Hayahisa Tomiyasu's photograph series of a pingpong table from his room, 2012-2016

Aim

How does architecture/urban space leave room for human? How does it leave room for nature? How does human & nature both cohabitate within architecture? The research seeks to investigate the intersection of urban architecture, human and nature. By identifying non-smooth spaces that accommodate the desires and identities of both humans and the nature, and spaces of cohabitation, the research positions itself in an architectural and anthropological framework, with comments on the sustainable architecture debate.

The following paragraphs explain the relevance and motivation behind the importance of studying cohabitation, defining what is non-smooth, and at the end how all these concepts come together. These concepts are established through theoretical framework and personal observations. At the end, the research makes links to how it informs design, especially within the studio site la Friche Josaphat, and how it is significant for the topic of sustainable architecture.
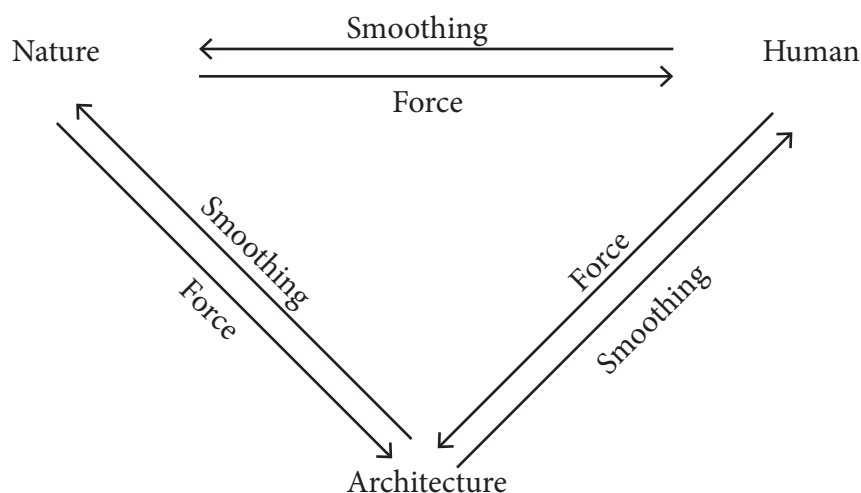
Cohabitation

There has always been a dilemma, ever more apparent within the studio theme. Keeping the weather out, sheltering, climatization of buildings, are met with a longing for the outdoors, for contact with non-human elements. The Friche Josaphat site brings this dilemma to the foreground: the presence of the ecologically flourishing brownfield confronts architects and planners with the opposition of the constructed and nature. Otherwise normally circumvented or neglected issue in an urban setting, the question of how human builds in this world, becomes unavoidable. Usually, the soil is covered with slabs, the rain blocked by the roofs. Nature becomes distant and intangible. La Friche Josaphat, the last green in town, too, is inaccessible and hidden out of sight.

However, the intangible notion of climate and nature in the city is now materialized in la Friche, which now urgently calls for ideas of how human coexists with nature. Habitat, originally a biological and anthropological term, was introduced in the mid-20th century to architecture and planning, inventing an ecological thinking of architecture (Van den Heuvel et al., 2020). This thinking restores architecture as part of the intricately connected whole, but also humans as a part of the larger system, instead of the sole actor. It also established a kind of architecture that is unfinished and a 'habitat waiting to be' (Van den Heuvel et al., 2020). This also means that there is a cohabitation of humans and non-humans, constructed and non-constructed, over time. How do we leave space for them? Most buildings nowadays utilise a generous amount of materials which cause problems for the ecology, and subsequently try to solve them by using machines, installations, and devices. How does one strike the balance between keeping out elements, negating rain, water, animals, & soil, vs. living among them, enduring the frictions? Do all spaces need to be climatized? Do you need a wall? A roof? Or glass? How can architecture reintegrate itself with the non-constructed, utilizing the site so specifically?

Smooth

Looking back on my personal experience growing up in Shanghai, one of its most evident urban characteristics is in the efficient machine-like logistics of human, goods, and services, the visually stimulating shopfronts and entertainment, and 'trendy' shiny objects, under the shadow of a vast virtual world. Walking in Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam, a different but familiar experience washes down on the pedestrian. The lack of seating, the 'perfectly' detailed apartment seemingly empty, and the only few trees sitting in metal containers, engraved on them is the logo of Kop van Zuid. The upkeep of the urban space is the upkeep of the price tag of all the apartments and 'cultural' restaurants. Nothing else should happen here. The only 'diligence' this development pays to the immigration history of this site is by calling the apartment towers by foreign city names.

One word that describes this condition is smoothening, which is discussed extensively by Boer (2023). This is not a singular phenomenon, but a global trend. He describes the smooth city as a city that is curated in an efficient fashion which eliminates all unpredictability, homogenizes, and excludes anyone who does not fit into the norm (usually dictated by capital and politics). It reduces diversity, complexity, and freedom, in favour of economic gains. It is made of pleasing objects that accelerate information transfer and capital, without the layered complexity. The history is usually smoothened or flattened into one generic image. The smooth city negates the inevitability of unhappiness by smoothening out any problems or injustice, instead of confronting them.

"both pleasant and ugly", "veiling and unveiling", "the oscillation of presence and absence" -- Byung-Chul Han on beauty in *Smooth City*, 2023.

Non-smooth

As architects and planners, it is unproductive to fixate on the overarching political and economic context that contributes to the smooth urban conditions, but rather, the way one should build in order to counter the adverse forces. Several authors prior to this publication have discussed, although not using the same terms, a similar topic, and what the positive counterpart can look like to the smooth city. The opposite of smooth can be defined from different perspectives.

Richard Sennet (2018) believes cities ought to be more than physical shells, but the relations they create with one another. He advocates for the idea of an "open city," which is characterized by diversity, inclusivity, and flexibility. The ethical modesty of designers argues that any arbitrary innovation is potentially a mismatch and, to some degree, disrupts how things currently work (Sennet, 2018). Sennet advocates for experience-led forms in architecture and encourages open-endedness and the idea of evolving. This gives power back to the urbanites and gives space to power, identity and possibilities. William H. Whyte (1980) studied social life in small urban spaces. The New York food truck is one example of a bottom-up initiative organically finding a commercial gap in the city and providing affordable service to people in public space. The movable chair and the 'splashable water' illustrate the social significance of having control or impact over the physical environment. The non-smoothness is reflected here in the act of exerting change on the space and the self-regulating force behind humans and social life.

Non-smooth (continued)

Another way to describe the non-smooth city is the Ludic City. Quentin Stevens (2007) based his argument for the importance of play in urban spaces on a thorough literature review of urban spaces. Besides being a place for production, exchange, work, and logic, urban spaces should be about diversity, character, possibility, and experience, or the ludic city, as he calls it (ludic meaning showing spontaneous and undirected playfulness). He studied the paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds and props in urban spaces and how they enable playful and spontaneous behaviours. Glenn Lyppens (2022) studies the successfulness and robustness of collective living space over time in urban enclosures. The main findings include the way configurations, typologies, and other dimensions influence the sense of privacy and ownership, where appropriation and collectivisation flourish.

The 'roughest' example of all, the sub-human living conditions in the demolished, infamous Kowloon Walled City, an organically grown settlement out of the reach of laws, reported to have created fond memories and nostalgia for the ex-residents. How can that be? Informal studies suggest the close-knit community and collectiveness played a part. Furthermore, the intricate convoluted corridors and networks as a result of the organic structure, create multiplicity and unique mental maps for each resident, thus allowing them to project identity on their everyday physical environment.

What is then the role of architecture in facilitating open-endednes? What are the spatial or architectural elements that induce appropriation and change? Is there a balance between an over-determined identity, and the overly flexible neutral space, or in other words, between designing and letting go? How is a sense of ownership created without necessarily declaring exclusivity?

"The city must be a place of waste, for one wastes space and time; everything mustn't be foreseen and functional … the most beautiful cities were those where festivals were not planned in advance, but there was a space where they could unfold." (Lefebvre 1987)

Why cohabitation and non-smoothness are related

The negation of friction and unpredictability of a smooth city is reminiscent of the elimination of the friction between the constructed and nature. If the unpredictability and complexity of urban environments can be smoothened, then the friction created by nature can also be smoothened out. If we look again at the example of the tree planters in Kop van Zuid, you could argue that it embodies both the spirit of the smooth city and smooth nature: total manipulation of space, no humans nor nature completely belong. However, rather than calling this nature smooth, I would like to make the point of a smooth architectural position towards nature. In the same way that cities are organized like large machines pumping flows of humans, buildings are made to be large devices that cut out any connection with the outside when a sensor tells them to. This position of smoothening nature expresses the same position of what public space and buildings do towards humans. The funny thing is, that humans are both the reinforcer and the recipient of these forces, smoothening nature and smoothened by the urban environment they create for themselves.

As architects and planners, it is unproductive to fixate on the overarching political and economic context that contributes to the smooth urban conditions, but rather, the way one should build in order to counter the adverse forces. That can be enabling spontaneity, empowering, creating a sense of ownership and identity, etc, as discussed in the last section. It is also not fruitful to romanticize chaos, total freedom, or the ferocity of nature when thinking about what architects' role is under such contexts, but look for design choices, and subtleties that reinstall relations with nature. Can humans' position towards nature be changed through architecture, thus allowing nature its identity, agency, spontaneity, etc.?

Intersection of architecture, nature, and human and what it means for sustainable architecture

Traditional Japanese houses, regardless built in a cold climate, are not insulated and double-glazed all-round as opposed to Western principles of sustainable buildings, despite having lower energy consumption (Knowles, 2023). Many characterizes completely open spaces towards the outside. Besides timber offering a reasonable amount of insulation, they are only partially heated. The heated dining table being the only warm place in the house, residents would live more collectively during cold months. The flexible layout of this architecture shrinks and expands the living space with the natural patterns. This position towards nature and fluctuating lifestyle, in this case, is expressed with a adaptive architecture. And on warm days, the openness again welcomes nature inside, and residents live less compactly in the house. Similar to a fireplace being the warm spot in the living room, or a bonfire, the warm space creates fond images for Western cultures alike. The non-smooth stance towards nature's friction, which confronts unpredictability and changes over time, seems to be productive in this example.

This architectural position towards nature, however, could one argue that it signals a form of control of architecture on human? Is the architecture then, per definition, diminishing human will?

Methodology: theoretical montage, dialectical

Walter Benjamin's (1999) The Arcades Project proposed a unique methodology of research, that is usually characterized as a theoretical montage. In this graduation research, examples from different fields including architecture, history, movies, art can aid to answer the question of human's position towards nature. Benjamin's unique use of quotes from all types of sources evokes dialogue. The montage of these quotes stimulates associations and encourages readers to make new connections.

[Arcades, *Magasins de Nouveautés,* Sales Clerks]

The magic columns of these palaces
Show to the amateur on all sides,
In the objects their porticos display,
That industry is the rival of the arts.

—"Chanson nouvelle," cited in *Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris, ou Observations sur les moeurs et usages des Parisiens au commencement du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1828), vol. 1, p. 27

For sale the bodies, the voices, the tremendous unquestionable wealth, what will never be sold.

—Rimbaud[1]

Figure 1: a snippet of The Arcades Project by Walter Benjamin of how he typically begins a chapter, using a montage of quotes.

Methodology: flâneur, photography

muurtje stapel staan   stretching

Figure 2: Paulien Oltheten's photography collection

The concept of the flâneur, the urban explorer and detached observer of city life, plays a significant role in Benjamin's methodology. He adopted the perspective of the flâneur to engage with the city and its arcades, using it as a method of understanding the urban experience. Combining this with documentary photography will be a medium to further study the topic in a manner more grounded in reality. The preliminary findings from the literature study will inform the photography, of where to go to, and where to point one's lens at. For example, the earlier mentioned paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds and props can be identified in urban space, and observed. Photographs of how humans' spatial practice, and the role of nature can subsequently be analysed. Paulien Oltheten's photographs, besides being witty and humorous, also tell a story of human form, the dimensions of space around, and the relations between them. These 'coincidences' could be telling for the sake of this research, finding meeting points of architecture, human, and nature in a candid and real way.

Reflection

The research plan attempts at including numerous topics, driven by personal interest and curiosity. It is necessary to consider at the next step if these topics are in fact relevant to one another or are some topics outliers from the rest. Is the topic of smooth and non-smooth potentially insoluble with the question of architecture cohabiting with nature. Is cohabiting and not cohabiting a result of a smooth and non-smooth architectural position?

The research seeks to investigate the intersection of urban architecture, human and nature by identifying non-smooth spaces and examples that accommodate the desires and identities of both humans and the nature, and spaces of cohabitation. The urgency and relevance of such topic is to challenge the prevailing trend of smoothening of urban environment and the smooth position towards nature, that prioritize efficiency, homogenizes and eliminates unpredictability and identities. The results of this research can potentially inform design decisions in terms of how designers can leave space for such possibilities. In the site la Friche Josaphat, the research can inform design in how to cohabitate with the nature in the site. It would also be relevant in the sustainable architecture debate, in which the prevailing thought is still rather 'smooth'. By shifting human & architecture's position towards nature to a more non-smooth, cohabitating, and synergetic one, one finds new answers to how humans can live in this world for the long run.

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