The research for the design project started after studying the context of the city Brussels. During our studio group work it became apparent that Brussels is a highly fragmented city on different levels. Morphologically there are structures within the city that differ greatly in size and scale, a process that has been aptly named ‘Brusselisation’. Many areas of the city were also planned with radical clashing utopian ideas in mind. There is the European Union quarter on walking distance from the historical pentagon shaped center as well as the high rise Manhattan project in the north of the city.

But the fragmentation of the city also becomes visible when one starts identifying the different social and demographic layers of the city. People with different religious views, income and family size are scattered in strict zones around the city. Rather than seeing the fragmentation of the city as a problem that needed a radical response within the design, the attitude became one of acceptance. Further in the design process I recognized that the clashing of these different fragments even provide spatial qualities to the city that give Brussels a unique identity that continues to surprise upon every visit.

The main research then took a direction to search for techniques and tools that I could use in order to design in such a fragmented context. I became fascinated with the movie montage, since it is a technique that deals with strong cuts within different scenes, but it also aims to keep the whole understandable to the viewer. Especially the ‘intellectual montage’ as described by Sergei Eisenstein at the beginning of the 20th century became a leading theme in the research. In this theory, the strong cuts within a movie sequence become qualities when the different fragments are interpreted in relationship by the viewer.

The question then was how this technique could be used to provide spatial qualities in the design process. After a search of different examples that were already present during extensive walks within the city, I found some situations and spatial manifestations that could be interpreted as an example of the intellectual movie montage. For example; a group of refugees started to use the Gare du Nord main hall as a dwelling, where they claimed domestic territories within the station. This resulted in an experience of the refugees that started to directly clash with the ones from the travelers. The claimed areas, filled with blankets, bags and other possessions were used as bedrooms and living rooms. Refugees were relaxing here and playing with their kids, while a few meters away travelers were busy rushing from point A to point B in order to be on time on their destination. I started to map the use of the station by the refugees and the travelers and wanted to understand if the clash of these fragmented parts could be considered an example of the intellectual montage as it is present in movies. I learned that the experience of time can differ greatly between different people within a similar spatial context.

In the search for a design location I fortunately came across another great example of a place where time could be experienced on different levels depending on the position in space. As we walked underneath the south crossing of the Brussels ring road over the Senne, there was an ambiguous feeling of conflict in speed. As cars drove with a 100 kilometers an hour on top of the road, the area underneath felt like a shelter that provided ideal conditions for resting and exploring. At the same time the noise on the tarmac above from the cars gave the shelter a strange identity where one was always reminded of it's conflicted nature. By drawing the highway and looking to what extent it's presence could be felt in the larger context, I started to construct a time map of different time fragments within the zone, that eventually lead to a design that responded in a spatial way on these time fragments.
Diagram showing the different speed fragments around the Senne Ring road crossing in Brussels. The red line became the route from which the design was generated.

It is within this part of the research that the approach of the border conditions studio becomes apparent. I think one of the goals of the studio is to make different forces and mechanics in a city visible that are otherwise taken for granted by most architects. However, by accurate research and the ‘mapping’ of these forces, we can discover how these things work and how we could use them to our advantage within a design. In that sense the eventual design is a direct outcome of the mapping of my topic and it is in line with the design logic of the studio.

I hope that the specific research I have done about the experience of time in relation to its spatial manifestation can be useful as an element to be considered in the design process of other architects. Often we use time related words as ‘slow’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘fast’ to spaces without really knowing what the exact spatial cause is of these sensations. I aim to show in my design process that these words are not just poetic classifications to describe a space, but that they can accurately be researched and identified. When the results of such research is considered seriously in the design process it can lead to a design that makes these qualities more easily transferred to the public.