CRACKS OF THE CITY

Crack as an invitation for informality

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Contents

Overview

PHASE 1-BACKGROUND-Understanding the informal space
  1.1 Where I started
  1.2 Introduction to thesis topic
  1.3 Some early stage of works
  1.4 Thesis statement & abstract

PHASE 1-BACKGROUND-Understanding the informal space
  2.1 Breaking the surface
  2.2 Threshold/Filter/Barrier

PHASE 1-BACKGROUND-Understanding the informal space
  3.1 Mapping downtown providence
  3.2 Site observation & recoding
  3.3 Design proposals
  3.4 Site plan & Analysis
  3.5 Imagination of “secret gardens”

Overall Assessment

Selected Bibliography

Image Citation
Overview

As cities expand and develop, urban planning prioritizes efficiency and ease of management resulting in clean, tidy, and accessible spaces. Streets are wider and flatter, buildings are more uniform, and parks are more open. However, this vision of a “beautiful” city ignores the needs of various informal and non-mainstream populations, erasing space for some people’s expression and survival.

The city becomes less inclusive, losing the charm and flexibility brought by informal activities based on local history and background.

If cities adopt a more loose and porous approach to planning, with potential places for informal activities like gaps that bring oxygen and light, informal economies and those pushed to the margins will have the opportunity to thrive. Designers should not stand completely in the position of formulating rules and order but provide the possibility of spontaneously generated activities. By embracing the unpredictable and uncontrolled nature of informal urban spaces, we can inject new life into areas.

This thesis challenges the existing urban system by introducing several interventions that enhance the cracks, as an invitation for informality. My proposal involves breaking the boundaries of different surfaces, and blurring the usage and function.

Using selective “thresholds” to make some spaces blurry, even less accessible or welcoming, and leaving their usage undefined. It could create a series of “urban secret gardens” that are only open to those willing to enter. The places are selective and hold the potential for more diverse and informal usage.

Figure 1: Digital Art by Rudy Bagozzi
The thesis is structured in three phases.

Phase One of the project is divided into two parts. The first part involves researching cases such as the Highline Park and Essex Market to critically examine how current urban design methods are eradicating the informal aspects of the city. The author utilizes diagrams to gain a deeper understanding of the process of formalization. Additionally, the author introduces the thesis statement and poses questions.

In the second part of Phase One, the author presents early-stage models that aim to elucidate initial concepts and potential “solutions” to the problem at hand. These models serve as an exploration of possibilities, showcasing the author's attempts to address the issues raised in the first part.
In the physical realm, cracks in concrete are typically seen as signs of decay or structural weakness. However, when we shift our perspective to the cracks in the urban fabric, a different narrative emerges. Wild plants sprouting from the cracks, becomes a metaphorical representation of the vitality and resilience inherent in informal urban spaces. These cracks in the city are not just physical gaps; they are spaces filled with life, energy, and opportunity.

Much like the wild plants that find a way to thrive amidst the concrete, informal activities in these spaces flourish, offering a sense of freedom, creativity, and resourcefulness. These informal activities may include street vendors, impromptu gatherings, or spontaneous expressions of art and culture. They bring a unique vibrancy and dynamism to the urban landscape, challenging the prescribed order of formal urban design.

The wildness and vitality found within these cracks in the city disrupt the rigidity of planned environments. They provide a breath of fresh air, both literally and metaphorically, as they offer spaces for people to interact, exchange ideas, and build social connections. Moreover, just as cracks in concrete allow for the penetration of air, water, and sunlight, the cracks in the city enable the flow of diverse perspectives, cultural exchange, and socioeconomic mobility.

In essence, the comparison between cracks in concrete and cracks in the city illuminates the paradoxical beauty that emerges from the interplay of informality and formality. It highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the wildness, vitality, and untapped potential inherent in these urban interstices.
Criticism “renovation” project : case studies

Highline Park, located in New York City, is an iconic example of urban revitalization through the adaptive reuse of an elevated railway track. The park, which opened in 2009, transformed a disused industrial infrastructure into a green oasis, drawing millions of visitors each year. The park features beautifully landscaped gardens, art installations, and stunning views of the city skyline.

The renovation of the Highline Park has received widespread acclaim for its innovative design and its ability to activate a neglected urban space. It has become a symbol of urban regeneration, attracting investment, tourism, and positive media attention. The park’s success lies in its ability to reimagine an obsolete structure and repurpose it as a vibrant public space.

However, the transformation of the Highline Park has also sparked debates and differing opinions. Some critics argue that the park’s renovation has led to the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhoods. As property values have soared, long-time residents have been displaced, and local businesses catering to lower-income communities have struggled to survive. The once gritty, industrial character of the area has been replaced by upscale development, potentially erasing the historical and cultural fabric of the neighborhood.

In recent years, the Essex Market underwent a renovation that aimed to modernize the facilities and attract a broader customer base. The revitalization project involved relocating the market to a new, purpose-built location with upgraded amenities and expanded vendor spaces. The renovated market now boasts a sleek and contemporary design, providing a more curated and upscale shopping experience.

The renovation of Essex Market has been lauded for its efforts to enhance the market’s appeal and create a more inviting environment for visitors. The new space offers a wide variety of food options, specialty shops, and communal seating areas. It has become a destination for food lovers and tourists seeking an elevated market experience.

However, this transformation has not been without its critics. Some argue that the renovation has stripped away the market’s unique character and erased its authentic, grassroots charm. The market’s history and the sense of community built over generations have been overshadowed by a more commercial and sanitized atmosphere. Concerns have been raised about the displacement of longtime vendors who may not fit into the new vision of the market, as well as the impact on affordability and accessibility for local residents.

In both the Highline Park and Essex Market cases, the renovations have undeniably brought aesthetic improvements and increased popularity. However, the trade-off has been the potential loss of the wild, untamed aspects and the tangible traces of history that once defined these places. The debates surrounding these case studies highlight the ongoing tension between revitalization and the preservation of the unique character and social fabric of urban spaces.
The formal city is always seen as rational and well-behaved. By ignoring and neglecting informal spaces and activities, and adopting similar top-down planning approaches, cities are losing authenticity and specificity.

I always miss the old messy pedestrian street and various roadside vendors. I always want to see what is happening behind the abandoned wall. I want to see the truth of the city beyond the “perfect green way”. The informal places are like cracks offering glimpses of what lies hidden within and behind.

**Thesis question:**

Do we have to fill the cracks with rules? Is there any other possible reaction towards an informal city? I wonder how designers can start to participate in the formalization process without keeping informality away. Can we let the cracks grow bigger thus creating a more flexible, diverse and engaging city?
The process of a place becoming formalized often follows a series of stages. Initially, cracks in the existing urban fabric begin to appear, creating spaces or opportunities for informal activities. These may manifest as abandoned lots, vacant buildings, or neglected areas that are temporarily occupied by people and activities seeking space but lacking formal alternatives.

Over time, these niches become more established as individuals and communities recognize their potential and utilize them for various purposes. Informal markets, street art, and other forms of cultural expression often flourish in these spaces, driven by the need for self-organization and the desire to fulfill specific needs within the community.

As these informal activities and spaces gain prominence and popularity, government authorities often take notice and seek to integrate them into the formal urban fabric. This integration may involve design interventions, infrastructure improvements, or regulatory measures aimed at “improving” the area according to established planning principles. While these interventions may have positive intentions, they can also result in the displacement or suppression of the original informal activities that gave the place its character and vibrancy.

As the formalization process progresses, the informality that once defined the place may gradually fade away, replaced by standardized structures, controlled activities, and regulated spaces. This transformation can result in the loss of the spontaneity, creativity, and sense of ownership that characterized the original informal spaces.

It is important to recognize the value of informality and the contributions it makes to urban life. Informal spaces and activities often serve as important social and economic incubators, fostering community cohesion, diversity, and resilience. Balancing the need for formal structures and regulations with the recognition and preservation of informal dynamics is essential for creating sustainable and inclusive urban environments.

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In some cases, formalization occurs primarily due to the perceived economic or political benefits of planned development. Government bodies and private entities may prioritize profit-making ventures or prioritize aesthetic ideals over the existing informal practices, leading to the disappearance of informality from the area.

Conceptual diagram: The process of a place being formalized

“Cracks” | Gathering & accumulating | Vendors; markets; graffiti; weeds; wild oasis | Reconstruct & design

1.2 INTRODUCTION TO THESIS TOPIC
1.3 SOME EARLY STAGE OF THE WORKS

Keywords & digrams: Tordium cononsist facchui deperum

Spontaneous; Self-organized

Surging; Active

Disordered; Chaotic

Concept models

“What's underneath” Like a weed breaking through the ground. Sometimes we can’t see it but we know things are there, just under the ground.

“Trace” Everyone is leaving traces of their activities and the city is shaped by everyone.

“Struggle” When a city is failing to meet the needs of society, it becomes the fence for the people there.

“Mix Push” Marginalized groups are victims of urban development. They are being pushed away and forced to the physical edge.
When it broke, the invisible wires showed up and when I held it like this, the wire started to bond all that debris together. It makes me think about being soft and strong. A loose and soft city can be more resilient and powerful.

Made with different density of plaster and mixing with sponges. Placed the wire inside the model. Crack it after it dry
Melting wax like teardrops are connecting different layers together. The charred cotton forms a unique reinforced texture at the edge of the hole.

Through his artistic practice, Matta Clark explored themes such as the perception of space, the relationship between the inside and outside of buildings, and the idea of urban decay and renewal. He sought to create new experiences for viewers by transforming ordinary structures into immersive and thought-provoking environments.

The breaking or alteration of a building was not seen as a destructive act, but rather as a catalyst for new possibilities and renewed life. By breaking the established boundaries or norms of a structure, he believed that it revealed its true essence and potential. The breaking process allows for a deeper understanding of the structure, exposing its hidden layers, histories, and narratives.

when it’s breaking, it’s alive.
The movement of individuals and the level of activity can change in response to the availability of flexible facilities, fostering diverse utilization methods and types of spaces. The presence of flexible facilities encourages a dynamic and adaptable urban landscape. It allows for the optimization of available resources and spaces, accommodating different functions and activities throughout the day and across seasons. Moreover, the ability to reconfigure spaces and adapt to changing needs enhances the city’s resilience and capacity to respond to unforeseen circumstances or emergencies.

Can we build a system filled with flexibility and uncertainty?

1.3 SOME EARLY STAGE OF THE WORKS

Models: initial thoughts on design methods

Form and space: Typologies of “forming the cracks” spatially
1.3 SOME EARLY STAGE OF THE WORKS

Collage: city’s rhythm 01

Collage: city’s rhythm 02
In recent years, the Essex Market underwent a renovation that aimed to modernize the facilities and attract a broader customer base. The revitalization project involved relocating the market to a new, purpose-built location with upgraded amenities and expanded vendor spaces. The renovated market now boasts a sleek and contemporary design, providing a more curated and upscale shopping experience.

**Thesis Statement & Abstract**

**Thesis Statement**

My proposal advocates for cities to adopt a more flexible and permeable approach, where informal activities can thrive in the form of open spaces, gaps, and unregulated areas that invite the growth of vegetation and spontaneous activities. Rather than solely focusing on establishing strict rules and order, designers should embrace the potential for organic and unplanned activities to emerge. By creating environments that accommodate and encourage such spontaneous actions, we can infuse new vitality into urban areas.

Allowing for the unpredictable and uncontrolled nature of informal urban spaces brings about numerous benefits. These spaces become opportunities for social interaction, cultural expression, and community engagement. They offer room for creativity and experimentation, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among residents.

Embracing the concept of loose and porous urban spaces also has environmental advantages. Open gaps and green areas contribute to improved air circulation, providing oxygen and natural light. The growth of indigenous vegetation, including weeds, can enhance biodiversity and support ecological balance within the urban fabric.

Designers play a crucial role in shaping urban environments that facilitate the coexistence of planned structures and informal spaces. By incorporating elements that allow for adaptability and the organic evolution of these spaces, designers can foster an inclusive and dynamic urban landscape.

In conclusion, my proposal advocates for cities to embrace a more flexible and porous approach, where informal activities can thrive and contribute to the vibrancy and sustainability of urban areas. By providing the possibility for spontaneous and unregulated activities, designers can unlock the potential for new experiences and interactions.
Phase two of the project can be divided into two parts, each focusing on a specific aspect of understanding the process of urban transformation. The first part involves comprehending how the city starts to break, while the second part aims to categorize the typology of urban thresholds.

In part 1, the focus is on studying the various scales and cultural backgrounds of different places to explore how urban breaks occur. The analysis encompass a range of scales, from large-scale infrastructure down to the intricate details of alleys and smaller urban elements.

In the second part, the focus shifts to categorizing the typology of urban thresholds. This involves identifying and classifying different types of transitions or boundaries within the urban environment. These thresholds can include physical, social, or perceptual shifts that occur within the city.
The first step in understanding informal spaces is recognizing how they emerge through the breaking of the surface in various scales and urban contexts. This breaking of the surface refers to the disruption or transformation of the established urban fabric, creating cracks or openings where change can occur.

These cracks can manifest at different scales, from macro-level disruptions like major infrastructure projects or urban redevelopment initiatives, to micro-level transformations within specific neighborhoods or even within individual buildings. The nature of these cracks varies based on the specific urban content and context in which they appear.

The cracks that form through the breaking of the surface become the places where new possibilities and chances for change emerge. They serve as entry points for informal activities, spontaneous interventions, and alternative uses of space. These informal spaces often challenge the established norms and regulations, allowing for experimentation, creativity, and the expression of diverse community needs and aspirations.

By embracing the breaking of the surface and acknowledging the value of these cracks, the city can transition into a more porous state. A porous city fosters connectivity, permeability, and openness, both physically and metaphorically. It encourages the flow of people, ideas, and activities across different spaces, blurring the boundaries between formal and informal, public and private, and allowing for a greater exchange and interaction among individuals and communities.

The notion of breaking the surface and embracing porosity in the city signifies a shift towards a more dynamic, inclusive, and adaptable urban environment. It acknowledges the importance of informal spaces in shaping the urban landscape and invites designers, planners, and communities to embrace the potential of these cracks as catalysts for positive change and transformation.
2.1 BREAKING THE SURFACE

The process of urban cracks often initiates with the presence of railways or other transportation infrastructure. These abandoned infrastructures, positioned close to the city but often away from the immediate sight and attention of urban dwellers, gradually transform into pioneer spaces. These spaces attract individuals or groups seeking alternative uses and opportunities. They may be artists, activists, or community members looking for affordable places to express themselves, experiment, or create.

One of the early signs of activity within these urban cracks is the emergence of graffiti. These neglected structures provide a canvas for artistic expression, and graffiti artists utilize them to showcase their skills and convey messages. The vibrant colors and intricate designs of graffiti often bring life and vibrancy to these otherwise overlooked spaces.

As time progresses, the cracks become more than just artistic canvases. They start serving practical purposes as well. Some individuals, such as the homeless or marginalized populations, may seek refuge within these neglected spaces, utilizing them as temporary shelters or places of respite.

Additionally, the absence of regular maintenance and intervention in these areas allows nature to reclaim its space. Wild plants and vegetation gradually find a habitat within the cracks, creating pockets of biodiversity amidst the urban environment. These organic elements bring a touch of greenery and natural beauty to these neglected spaces.

Cracking start from railway

figurer9: A view looking north along the High Line from around 19th St.
Photo by unknown photographer

figurer10: The freedom tunnel in New York
Catherina Gioino

figurer11: Secret garden, irrigated with a hose from a nearby apartment
Charles Star

2005
2.1 BREAKING THE SURFACE

Cracking in the alleys
Cracking in the street, particularly within the context of Shenzhen Urban Villages, presents unique opportunities for informal vendors. These cracks refer to the neglected or overlooked spaces, such as old alleys, that emerge within the urban fabric.

figure 12: Aerial map of Shenzhen urban village 2018
2.1 BREAKING THE SURFACE

“Small cracks” - Activities break the surface

38
2.1 BREAKING THE SURFACE

“Small cracks” - Blurring the usage

Blurring the open and close

New york chinatown
photos by author
2.2 THRESHOLD/FILTER/BARRIER

Set the threshold

The second step of my thesis after breaking the surface is set the threshold. By strategically designing selective “thresholds” within these “extra” spaces, we can slow down the process of formalization that occurs when spaces become too open. Instead, these spaces will be chosen by certain groups of people and hold the potential for more diverse and informal usage.

Urban threshold typology

1: Threshold can be understood as a surface or edge that represents a quick transition from one state to another. This type of threshold is characterized by its transient nature, as it occurs rapidly and represents a moment of change. There are three main types of thresholds that are related to different relationships with the ground or context.

2: Threshold can be seen as a volume. Thresholds are not limited to instantaneous moments but encompass a longer process of transition. They are characterized by a certain amount of space rather than just a surface or edge. Examples of such thresholds can be found within buildings or in the spaces between buildings.

3: Thresholds can also be understood as perceptual spaces that involve intangible elements like smells, temperatures, or other sensory stimuli. Unlike physical surfaces or volumes, these perceptual thresholds evoke a more subtle and subjective experience. They can create shifts in our perception and trigger emotional responses, signaling transitions or changes in our environment.
2.2 THRESHOLD/FILTER/BARRIER

Threshold as a surface/edge

A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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A  B

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2.2 THRESHOLD/FILTER/BARRIER

Threshold as a volume

Threshold as a perceptual space
In this phase, the author tries to figure out what can the designer do to intervene and trying to test them in the site in downtown Providence.

By examining photos and Nolli maps, the author gains a comprehensive understanding of the physical and spatial characteristics of Downtown Providence. This analysis helps identify key elements, patterns, and challenges within the area. It provides a foundation for the development of design proposals that aim to intervene in a minimal yet effective manner.

Based on this analysis, the author presents three design proposals that serve as potential interventions. These proposals are conceived as minimal interventions, aiming to make a meaningful impact while respecting the existing context.
3.1 MAPPING DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

Walking in Downtown Providence

I always think about the "short cut" that create by buildings in the city. RISD students can navigate through RISD buildings using their ID cards, effectively transforming these buildings into a public road specifically for RISD students. This idea highlights the notion that different buildings within a city can represent varying degrees of public space, ranging from entirely private to completely public.

By considering the city as a unified and interconnected space, the concept of porosity emerges. Rather than perceiving buildings as isolated entities, the idea of porosity views them as elements within a larger urban fabric. This perspective recognizes that buildings can contribute to the permeability and interconnectedness of the city.
3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

How this alley looks like
3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

Different surfaces
3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

Surveillance

Surveillance, within the context of built form, refers to the ability of the physical environment to offer opportunities for observation and monitoring by residents and others using the building. This can be achieved through strategic design choices, such as the configuration and placement of windows and entrances. However, it is important to recognize that blindspots, areas with limited visibility, also play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of certain spaces, particularly in relation to the formation of crack spaces.

Blindspots refer to areas within the built environment that are not easily observable or are outside the typical line of sight. These areas often result from design elements or physical barriers that obstruct views or limit visibility. In the context you mentioned, homeless people may find shelter or rest in these blindspots, as they provide a level of privacy and protection from surveillance.

Blindspots can contribute to the formation of crack spaces, which are informal or underutilized areas that exist within the urban fabric. These spaces often emerge due to neglect, lack of surveillance, or limited accessibility. The presence of blindspots allows for activities or uses that might not conform to conventional norms or regulations.

While surveillance is often seen as a means to promote safety and security, blindspots and crack spaces offer opportunities for individuals or groups who may not have access to more conventional spaces. These spaces can serve as a refuge, meeting place, or alternative use for marginalized communities or activities.

3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

Lacking maintenance
3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

Cracks & wild plants
3.2 SITE OBSERVATION & RECORDING

“niches” & structures
3.3 DESIGN PROPOSALS
Design concept

In my design approaches, I strive to achieve transformative effects using minimal interventions, focusing on creating thresholds that effectively restrict vehicular access and reclaim ample space for people and activities. One of my key objectives is to cultivate an atmosphere within the space reminiscent of a post-industrial secret garden, an environment that is not openly accessible to everyone but rather exudes a sense of exclusivity and intrigue.

To ensure practicality and ease of implementation, I emphasize straightforward and uncomplicated construction methods. With this in mind, I have honed in on three fundamental approaches that enable the creation of functional spaces: breaking the ground, setting up steel bar roadblocks, and constructing walls. These strategies function akin to symbolic “stop signs” for vehicles, effectively deterring their presence, while simultaneously generating spaces brimming with untapped potential.

By breaking the ground, I disrupt the conventional flow of vehicular traffic, signaling a clear demarcation between the pedestrian realm and the restricted areas. This physical alteration serves as a visual and tangible reminder of the transition from public thoroughfares to more controlled and curated spaces. The deliberate placement of steel bar roadblocks acts as both a deterrent and a visual barrier, subtly guiding vehicles away from designated areas and opening up the space for pedestrians to freely engage in various activities.

Another approach I employ is the construction of walls, strategically positioned to create boundaries and enclosure. These walls not only establish physical separation between the public and private realms but also contribute to the ambiance of exclusivity and secrecy that characterizes the post-industrial secret garden concept. They offer glimpses of what lies beyond, tantalizing visitors and enticing them to explore further while maintaining a sense of mystery and allure.
3.3 DESIGN PROPOSALS

Intervene 1

[Images of different design proposals]
3.3 DESIGN PROPOSALS

Intervene 1
3.3 DESIGN PROPOSALS

Intervene 3
3.4 SITE PLAN & ANALYSIS

The detailed plan encompasses a narrow alleyway that is currently filled with trash and underutilized. It serves as a testing ground, where all the aforementioned design approaches can be combined to observe their harmonious interaction. Notably, the alleyway receives limited sunshine, primarily concentrated at its northern end.

To leverage the available sunlight and maximize the space’s potential, the strategy of “breaking the ground” can be implemented at the northern end. By halting vehicular access in this area, the space is transformed into an inviting environment for wild plants to flourish. These plants serve a dual purpose: they act as a natural barrier, deterring individuals from entering, yet also beckoning those with a sense of curiosity and boldness to explore further.

Moving along the alleyway, the integration of walls and steel bars in the middle section shapes the space and offers diverse possibilities for different individuals. Children can embrace the walls as a playground, utilizing them for play and creative expression. At the same time, the homeless population can find temporary shelter within these structures, turning them into spaces of refuge. The design intentionally leaves room for the unpredictability of user interactions, allowing the users themselves to contribute to the ultimate purpose and character of the space, making it a collaborative effort between the users and the designer.

By relinquishing some control over the final outcome, the alleyway becomes a canvas where the users can shape and define its purpose, transforming it into a vibrant and dynamic environment that reflects their needs and desires. This participatory approach promotes a sense of inclusivity, enabling the space to evolve organically over time.
3.5 IMAGINATION OF “SECRET GARDENS”

Scenario 1

Scenario 2
This thesis has paved the way for my continued growth. Although integrating all the elements in an urban context posed difficulties, it has provided valuable lessons and a sense of optimism for the future. It has shaped my identity as a designer and an individual, allowing me to explore new possibilities and embrace the complexities of the design field.

The inspiration for my thesis topic came from my love for adventure. I believe that if everything is perfectly planned and predictable, the world becomes boring. It’s like walking in the mountains, where there’s always something new to discover—a bird, a beautiful rock—that adds excitement and keeps things interesting. As a child growing up in the city, the most thrilling thing I could do was hop on a bus and get off wherever I wanted. Exploring the city on foot always fascinated me because I never knew what I would come across, like playing a treasure hunt game.

During the thesis journey, the idea of “derive” always attracted me. While I didn’t use this method extensively in my thesis, there’s a similarity in embracing uncertainty and being open to unexpected experiences.

This thesis has been a way for me to develop my personal interests. It covers various aspects related to design, such as safety, management, ownership, and time routines. It has helped me understand the kind of landscapes I want to create and the elements I can manipulate to achieve my goals.

In the latter part of my thesis, I struggled with combining and organizing everything in a logical way within an urban context. Despite this challenge, I consider it a great starting point for exploring and understanding what I like and what I can do as both a designer and a person.
Bibliography & Image citation
Selected Bibliography


