

## Unlocking Interstices

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## Unlocking Interstices: Multiple Lenses Enriching the Participatory Design of Urban Leftover Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

Opening leftover spaces for the participation of local initiatives is prevalent in current urban design practice. While these cases reanimate the vacant land for diverse public appropriation, little attention is paid to the inherent qualities of each site. As terrain vague in the urban territory and as ‘intervals’ of urban transformation, leftover spaces can be valued for their indeterminacy that allows co-existence and open interpretation. From this perspective we might question if a design that simply transforms a leftover space according to a single social perspective, is truly responding to the space’s potential. In this article we plea for understanding multiple qualities of leftover spaces in their interstitialness, before the entering of the design. It is from such a mindset that the design could engage the continuity of the place, and initiate a transformation that accommodates, orchestrates and encourages what is embedded in the existing. Specifically, we propose four lenses: the morphological, social, ecological and material lens. The four lenses will be illustrated by a temporary urban vegetable garden PROEFTuin (Delft, NL), implying what might be overlooked in its design transformation. In the end we will discuss how this approach could open up for the participation of leftover spaces: by juxtaposing different lenses, the design invites the potential use while simultaneously triggers the perception and imagination of the place. It is because of this a bond with the place is nurtured and the continuous appropriation of the site could take place.

## INTRODUCTION AND STUDY APPROACH

Funded by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, the German Nature Conservation Agency (Bundesamt für Naturschutz BfN) contracted a research consortium<sup>1</sup> to conduct a study with two objectives; first to design scenarios for the development of renewable energies and, second, to learn more about landscape effects of renewable energy projects. Findings of the project would become part of discussions on future national policy as well as future legislation. This paper reports on findings from the landscape effect study. The majority of renewable energy production is and will continue to be from wind- power. People take note of environmental and landscape effects of wind turbines. Interests includes fauna, such as the conservation of wild birds and bats, and landscape, such as the protection of local character and scenery.

The study of landscape effects takes scenarios as starting points. Scenarios for placing wind turbines include all of Germany. Scenarios consider economic aspects and optimize, among other issues, the best locations for generating energy by wind turbines, according to average wind speed and strength, and the proximity to places of energy demand. Scenario design is based on the national network development plan called *Netzentwicklungsplan* (Bundesnetzagentur 2017).

## TRANSFORMING VACANT SITES ‘TOGETHER’

Involving citizens to co-create public spaces has become a popular phenomenon in contemporary urban design. Particularly in leftover spaces—because of their temporary ‘emptiness’—these participatory projects are likely to take place. The temporary vegetable garden



Figure 1. PROEFTuin, before and after the design transformation. Picture by Rutger Spoelstra.

PROEFTuin in Delft is such an example (Fig.1). The users like the garden; it is a green space that sticks out in the surrounding environment of industrial warehouses and apartment buildings. However, upon entering the garden one can hardly find it is an intriguing place, as it is similar to other urban agricultural gardens: a collection of cluttered planting beds, boxes and agricultural facilities. The functional approach to the design subordinates the spatial qualities, resulting in casually placed different programmatic components. Visitors who enter the garden as ‘outsiders’, may hardly be able to orient themselves or attach to the place, nor would they stay in the garden since it doesn’t cater for other forms of activities. Two years after its opening, the garden was removed for a future housing project. Although the fate of the garden was largely decided by the development authorities, it might also relate to the design: the design merely considers itself a temporarily fill in the short break of the site’s transformation, without any intention to project itself into its long-term trajectory. In other words, there were not much efforts to include the design in the future planning of the site. Looking back at its ‘leftover status’, as a space with a thin layer of grass open to various way of using, the design transformation animates the social practice of the space, but simultaneously closes it into a new

form of fixation of a limited social group (who cultivate here) as well as a limited temporality (in its leftover period).

The case of PROEFTuin is a common example for current participatory design practices such as urban catalyst (Oswalt, Overmeyer and Misselwitz, 2013) and urban acupuncture (Casagrande, 2014). Besides the merit of such designs that tests out the site’s social potential, the story of the PROEFTuin also exposes the conflict between the design’s definition and the openness of leftover spaces. This paradox leads us to reflect whether some design thinking is unaddressed.

## SPACES OF OPENNESS

In order to explore the missing design qualities, it is essential to first understand what are leftover spaces and why they might be valuable for the city. Ignasi de Solà-Morales’ conception of ‘terrain vague’ serves as a portal that guides us to the particular conditions of leftover spaces: as in-between spaces on the urban territory but outside the urban functional system, ‘foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city’ (1995: 119).

Leftover spaces can be abandoned sites, undefined margins or empty plots. They emerge as their original function is lost or when different urban developments leave

them in-between, as spatial and temporal interstices of the city. In their neglect the traces of former urban occupation slowly fade away, which further constitutes an ambiguity that opens up to spontaneous natural processes and human practices. They are spaces for mixed urban (human and non-human) dwellers to coexist, offering room for diverse, informal public or non-public activities (Cupers and Miessen, 2002), enabling ‘forms of inhabitation that disrupt the logic of urban development and provide social and ecological prospects otherwise unavailable in cities’ ( Foster 2014: 125). Likewise, there is an ambiguity in the interpretation of the place, for the established linkage between signifier and signified is blurred by the unfamiliarity of the site. As Tim Edensor pointed out: ‘The sensations and objects that haunt are signs denoting nothing that can be pinned down’ (2005: 836); and Luc Levesque noted: ‘the interstitial condition to the phenomena often undecidable [...] as for the perception of form and the general decoding of the environment’ (2002a: 24). Because of the programmatic and interpretational openness, the future trajectory of the site is unknown. Such a string of present and future indeterminacy, beyond one’s expectation, un-planned and unpredicted, offers valuable alternatives complementing our existing cities controlled by a well-designed functional system.

## DESIGN FROM MULTIPLE LENSES

According to Christophe Girod, the design process starts with four steps: ‘landing, grounding, finding, founding’, exposing the designer to various specificities of the site (2009). If a situated reading of the place is fundamental for landscape design, then leftover spaces should never be read from a single perspective,

since that would erase other qualities nurtured in such interstitial conditions. For example, foregrounding a social group’s requirement while overlooking other potential uses as well as other spatial and material characteristics of the space. In order to allow design to engage with the indeterminacy of leftover spaces, we propose the design reading of leftover spaces from multiple perspectives and especially emphasize those qualities particular in the interstitial conditions. To enhance this multiple reading of interstitial qualities, we explicitly elaborate four lenses, addressing the social appropriation, the spontaneous ecology, the residual form and the unfamiliar materiality of the existing leftover space. These social, ecological, morphological and material angles are embedded, and frequently applied in our field of profession. They provide the initial channels that guide a designer understanding a leftover space, but never validate themselves as the only possible way of reading.

To further illustrate the concept of multiple reading, we will re-examine the PROEFTuin through these four lenses. Thus exposing potentials and design possibilities of leftover spaces, the discussion intends to indicate missing angles in its design and open up the notion of design through multiple perspectives.

## RE-READING PROEFTUIN

### Reading the social appropriation

The social lens is derived from praxeology, which studies human action and conduct, focusing on how people interact with the space – the way they inhabit and use the space, as well as the changes they further deliver framing and re-constructing the space (Riesto, Braae and Avermaete, 2018). Geographically and socially interstitial areas give a sense of hiddenness and freedom, free to be used by any citizen, also those who live in the margin (M. Thrasher, 1927:22). They open to



Figure 2. Current activities taking place inside the garden—the majority is setting under the agricultural theme, leaving little spaces for other practices. Draw by author.

various uses, as alternative spaces for those everyday informalities that are not met in designed public spaces with their specific behaviour codes. This temporal, marginal and informal dimension of space embodies the 'lived space' constructed by everyday practices, resisting the dominant image of the city that is determined by programmatic requirements (Lefebvre 1991:39).

The PROEFTuin belongs to the railway project 'Spoorzone Delft', since 2012 waiting for housing construction that is supposed to start in 2019. In 2014, the social initiative group Groenkracht proposed to use the site temporarily as allotment gardens. In order to involve the surrounding stakeholders and residents the design team (architect Rutger Spoelstra and permaculture consultant Taco Blom) organised several meetings to deliver input that was then translated in the plan of the garden (Stichting Groenkracht, 2016). In 2015, the garden was opened to the public. People who made subscriptions of a plot and gardening volunteers can work in the garden while also allowing other visitors. The transformation of PROEFTuin opened the site for users, but then framed it in the form of gardening practices. Related activities such as educational tours, festival gatherings and out-door yoga took place occasionally. Although designed with a participatory process,

it is not equally inclusive for different social groups. For example, a proposal from the Turkish community to add a play area in the garden was not incorporated in the design but resulted in a simple and small playing area outside (Fig.2).

### Reading the spontaneous ecology

A second lens which studies the agency is the ecological lens. Ecology addresses the interrelationship of organisms and their environments. Specifically, it identifies habitat conditions, biotic communities and ecological processes of the site (Riesto, Braae and Avermaete, 2018). Reading leftover spaces through an ecological lens is to discover spontaneous ecologies that evolve without intentional human interference. A further consideration may be given to what network might be completed because of the small spots that substantiate certain potential connections (Müller, 2013). A site might be seen as the habitation for species losing their habitat in the city, but also as a migration passage for wild fauna from the city to surrounding rural area (Foster 2014:127). Maintaining such shelters for wildlife not only means to enhance biodiversity, but their presence reflects mankind's management of urban nature. As argued by Steve Hinchliffe,



Figure 3. Inside the garden there are traces of wildness, but its dynamic still contrasts with the unbounded wildness growing on the adjacent leftover earth pile. Draw by author.

the current ecosystem is manipulated by human-centred relationships, however the presence of non-human forms of life is equally crucial for urban livability: 'urban livability involves civic associations and attachments forged in and through more-than-human relations' (Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006: 137).

In the design of the PROEFTuin, the original thin layer of grass was removed from the site and new soil was added to make the garden. The design was made according to permaculture principles that have a potential to incorporate wild life. The PROEFTuin, in some ways, initiates the growth of a natural ecology but also limits its evolution in the long term. What this ecology could be is illustrated in the leftover space next to the garden (also as a part of the railway project) where the wild vegetation now fully flourishes after two years of spontaneous growing. (Fig.3)

### Reading the residual form

The lens of morphology concerns the form and structure of the site's geography, the cultural landscape and the urban composition (Riesto, Braae and Avermaete, 2018). Reading leftover spaces from this lens is to identify the residual geometrical and spatial characteristics of the site. What are they and where do they come from? The form of

leftover spaces is not self-defined but a consequence of their surroundings, the by-product of the city's transformation. As Stephen Bann writes 'disjointed and freed from the conventional and utilitarian constraints of the compact city but at the same time integral to their spatial and visual structure, derived from its very form (2003: 110). Further it is to ask what is the topographical context of the site? How do geometry and spatial form refer to the site's abandonment? And how does the single leftover space relate to other interstitial spaces, possibly forming an internal logic of openness? Art and architecture avant-garde group Stalker saw in the network of leftover spaces a new mental image of the city, like an 'archipelago' that consists of floating islands with the empty spaces in-between (Francesco, 2003). Besides the meaning of these residual forms, these interstices are also physically the empty containers that open up to all inhabitants of the city, as the alternatives of the regulated spaces where 'the foreign matters tend to collect and cake', to 'reinvent the city by inhabiting it differently' (Lévesque 2002b:29).

The geometry of the PROEFTuin has been decided by an industrial 19<sup>th</sup>-century tramline. The enclosure by the tramline and the main road determined the irregular form of the site. The design only partly follows this

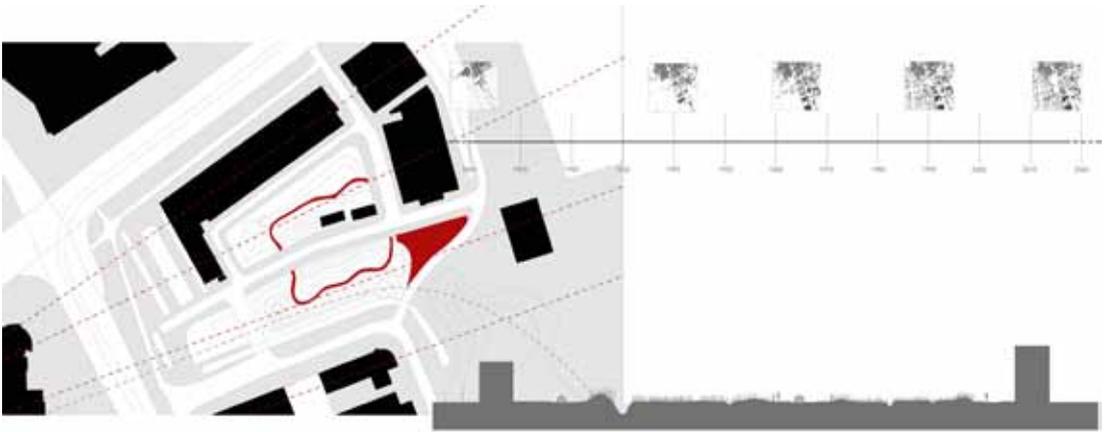


Figure 4. The layout of the garden follows the standard of agricultural production while the logic of the surrounding urban composition is rather unaddressed. Draw by author.



Figure 5. The dense vegetation inside the garden recalls a sensation of being in a secrete oasis. However the perception of the place is later limited to an ordinary vegetable garden, recognizing little uniqueness of the site. Draw by author.

compositional framework of the site. The agricultural plots are located in the centre, surrounded by affiliated functions and leaving the margins unkempt and gradually occupied by wilderness. The design intended to make a circular route to connect the two parts of the garden that are divided by the urban road running in-between. However, only part of the route follows the compositional logic of the surrounding buildings, where the other is shifted from the axis offered by the buildings. Loose wood poles connected by a thin string of wires roughly define the boundary of the garden to the road in-between, while other boundaries are made by earth piles, hardly related to each other or elaborating the relationship between inside and outside. (Fig.4)

### Reading the unfamiliar materiality

The material lens interprets the characters and meanings of the material world. It relates to the study of perceptual experience in its purely subjective aspect, and the signs and symbols, revealing the interpretations triggered by specific objects (Riesto, Braae and Avermaete, 2018). Looking into leftover spaces, the material lens focuses on the physical world that is characterised by their unfamiliarity. Being outside the urban system, no longer belonging to the organization of the city and maintained by their functionality, the material world of leftover spaces presents an unkempt, wild, and ruined image. The things in leftover spaces are detached from their familiar context, creating confusion in



Figure 6. Dalston Curve Garden, London. After the design transformation, the previous linear interstitial space opens to wider social groups and practices. Picture by Chelsea Jade.

the established epistemology and thus forcing the visitors to encounter the site with the perceptions from their body. As Edensor pointed out: ‘the things are always enmeshed within specific cultural contexts and embody particular histories’. Leftover spaces are where people can unlearn the conventional meanings of things, releasing new interpretations beyond their assigned cultural and historical background (2005: 99).

The materiality of the PROEFTuin is dominated by the green of crops and wild vegetation. Some pieces of garden furniture could also be found in the site, such as a working table, compost and nursery boxes. The green space is detached from its surrounding, however, one can hardly experience it because of its image similar to any other guerrilla garden, non-specific to the location of the site. Entering the site from the surrounding industry, office buildings, housing and railway construction site hardly offers an experience that expresses the specificity of garden in this urban context. (Fig.5)

## A CASE PLAYING WITH MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

As we start to imagine the missing perspectives in the PROEFTuin, another community garden—Dalston Curve Garden—could enrich our design thinking because it reads and designs with the leftover site through more than one lens. In 2009 this linear interstitial space was opened to the public by the research-experiment project ‘making space for Dalston’ (Muf Architecture and J&L Gibbons, 2013). The design process involved multiple stakeholders and communities and residents in its process, which ‘never stop with satisfying a single social group’. The garden, designed by J&L Gibbons, was built with elements of an open pavilion, planting boxes, and native species trees and shrubs (Fig.6).

Compared with the PROEFTuin, Dalston Curve Garden invites a broader range of visitors: the garden is a communal garden but open to everyone. In 2012, due to the end of funding, a café was opened by the garden committee. The small catering



Figure 7. The changes took place in the garden until 2018, after three years of use. Draw by author.

programme further attracted more local people to visit the site, doubling the number of its visitors. It is now regarded as a gathering place and a green oasis hidden in the bustling Dalston district.

Linear elements encourage people to move through the place, echoing the linear shape of the site. The trees provide a 'roof', but won't hinder its transparency. Here the agriculture activities do not serve as a goal of practices, but provide occasion for interaction and working collectively. To the end of the site, the design creates an opening as a mini theatre or for playing, filtering the lively social atmosphere in the previous areas and emphasizing a hidden and tranquil character. The central image of the garden is made by green vegetation, similar to the PROEFTuin, but elaborates on its arrangement, offering the experience of lushness and refreshment. Different signs, such as 'keep cities wild', and different domestic materials are placed in the garden, adding it an extra layer of local culture and everyday.

### ARTICULATING THE SITE, NURTURING OPENNESS

For both gardens, the design focus was on social practices while certain spaces are intentionally left or created for wild flora and fauna. However, the

composition of Dalston Curve Garden adds more expression to the multiple context of the site, transforming the previously neglected plot into a place open to local people and to be experienced and interpreted by its visitors. Its formal articulation—emphasising the linearity of the space, adding a new enclosure and creating a spatial sequence that gives expression to the historical rail line—encourages the visitors to imagine the uniqueness of this place and the narratives that reside here. The design opens up for interpretations of the site where the individual can formulate their own understanding of the place, which makes it easier to feel connected with it. This is not different for the prescribed users of the garden, and those who are 'outsiders', casually visiting the site. In line with this we might imagine the articulation of spatial, formal design as a tool that permeates the 'enclosure' of the design, opening the space for wider public, and as a trigger and a frame for unexpected future transformations, meanings and uses.

Further tracing the process of PROEFTuin after the projection of design, we might find some interesting emergences. The everyday use of the vegetable garden gradually loosened the design scheme, some objects were brought to the site by individual users, and the inadequate growing needs let many area to be re-occupied by wild plants (Fig.7).



Figure 8. Jardins du Tiers-Paysage (gardens of the third landscape), Saint-Nazaire. The design keeps the site's indeterminacy through magnifying nature process. Picture by Shuki.

Although the richness of this wild nature might be appreciated, it can hardly be related to the story of the garden (as a public agricultural site) or in other words, seeing them as meaningful part of the place. The initial formal design is too weak to frame what might happen and how they relate to the site. From this perspective, Jardins du Tiers-Paysage (gardens of the third landscape) in Saint-Nazaire's submarine base of Saint-Nazaire (Gilles Clément, 2009) provides a comparison (Fig. 8). The design intentionally keeps spaces for a spontaneous evolution of local ecology, but the form of the space is elaborated according to the character of the submarine base. The emerged landscape tells the story of the site; a link between visitors and the site is enhanced by this newly growing wildness.

## TOWARDS AN OPEN-ENDED TRANSFORMATION

Multiple lenses provide an initial framework for designers to read the site, exposing the specific qualities of a leftover space. The essential value of such a reading frame is not about which lens is brought into play, but diverging the attention of design to emphasise different perspectives, from where the indeterminacy of leftover spaces can be understood and nurtured. The quality of leftover spaces is not only about what is there now, but what its possible becoming.

However, reading through multiple lenses only serves as a first step to engage with the indeterminacy of leftover spaces. With understanding multiple site-specific qualities, and identifying the future potential, specific design transformations that enable the appropriation of human as well

as non-human agencies are still required, to make the site-specific qualities explicit while at the same time responding to and enhancing the indeterminacy of leftover spaces.

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