



Being in Chaos

negotiating an urban culture of
nature

Research Plan

by

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Urban Architecture

Last green in town

Introduction

The term 'Urban Nature' brings to memory a chaotic collage of humans and nature in a state of constant tussle from my home in the city of Mumbai. A perpetual war, where people are steadily dragging the urban boundaries into the last remaining fragments of nature in the cities and nature reacts by washing these boundaries, time and again, sometimes by flooding the city, some other times by burying homes under catastrophic landslides. Apart from these tragic encounters, one can also see subtle symbiotic engagements on every street and corner. A nomadic barber shop under a mango tree, a small shrine under a banyan tree, a historic fort taken over by wild grass and creepers, water trickling down the slopes and into the canal from between closely packed slum dwellings, birds building nests in the service shafts of tall highrises and huge bee hives hanging from balconies and so on.

Such socio-ecological interactions can be seen almost everywhere to varying extents and in diverse forms. The field trip and research in the past few weeks in Brussels, more specifically of the Garden City of Terdelt, displayed human-nature interactions of distinct features. Nature spilt on the street boundaries in the form of regulated front gardens, allowing passersby to interact with them, but from a distance. The green islandlike back gardens behind the row of houses brought you into a different realm, a montage of private intimate expression of every household, each different from the other. The people living

in social housing apartments shared this nature in the form of a common central garden, each using it differently, more often with a reduced sense of intimacy (ownership). Further the research also observed communal gardens, where groups of people go beyond the boundaries of their own private gardens and engage with a different shared landscape, manicured yet wild.

The observations from the research suggested varying degrees of human-nature interactions, often with shifting scales of aesthetic sensibilities. The human endeavor of domesticating nature results in a gradation of wildness in urban nature. It is very evidently seen on the fringes of the friche where private and communal cultivated garden spaces share boundary with the wild and uncultivated friche. This dynamic boundary, displaying the duality of engagement and detachment with nature, is an outcome of various socio-political-cultural and environmental discourses. As Matthew Gandy writes in his article 'Entropy by Design', "... nature itself, whether encountered directly or in abstracted form, is a cultural product or synthesis so that the epithet 'wild' - especially in an urban context - is laden with pre-existing connotation."¹

The interest of this research lies at this intersection of evolving 'urban culture of nature' that produces diverse physical spaces of human-nature synergies (or dyssynergies?).

1. Gandy, M. (2013). Entropy by design: gilles clément, parc henri matisse and the limits to avant-garde urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(1), 259–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01164.x>



Figure 1: Mumbai City and Nature, image taken from a flight.
Authors own photograph

problem? statement?



Figure 2: Navigating La Friche
Authors own photograph

The Friche and its neighbourhood have evolved as a juxtaposition of layers of urban negotiations.

..... The Industrial Revolution leads to the expansion and overcrowding of the main city, which in turn results in the encroachment of urban areas into the city fringes. The urban negotiations eventuate the annexation of the Linthout forest towards the north of Brussels city centre, leaving the Parc Josaphat as the residual urban green. This abrupt demolition of city fringes and disconnection from the rural life creates discomfort amongst urban populations. The urge to reengage with nature while at the same time cater to the increasing inflow of urban migrants results in the ideation of the garden cities, an experiment in experiencing the urban life in apparent rural aesthetics. The city is built over a cemetery. The existing marshalling yard provides the experimental city with its first residents. From high-ranking officials to yard labourers, this city negotiates to fit all. These negotiations germinate man-nature relationships in diverse forms. The closing of the marshalling yard leaves a void in space, but in gradual time, life evolves in this void, giving it a new meaning. The city grows around this newly evolving void, indifferent to the life happening inside. Now the city has occupied everything around this 'urban green void' but it still aims to grow and so it turns its attention towards this 'void?'. Some fancy a new posh urbanity, some merely seek asylum while some others hope for a future for the next generations on a livable planet.....

What negotiations transpire now? Who negotiates for what? How does one negotiate?

Research Aims & Questions



Figure 3: An outcome of active and dynamic assemblages?
Authors own photograph

The research aims to explore the patterns of human-nature interactions that produce site-specific cultural practices across the fringes of Friche Josaphat. The 'cultural practices' involve the private, communal, social, political, and ecological relationships between humans and nature that characterise the area.

Taking the research of 'Living with Nature' carried out in the Garden City group for P1 as inspiration, the research aims to study different spatial forms of human-nature intersections further to help formulate a nuanced and layered understanding of this relationship which in turn provides clues to intervene with the site. The attempt is to bring together the disparate discourses of landscape urbanism, urban ecology, environmental and social politics and ecological sciences in and around the friche to develop a multidisciplinary catalogue for intervening with urban green landscapes.

It intends to document intentional and accidental co-existences between humans and nature in order to produce an extensive archive of spatial appropriation by humans as well as non-humans. Through this, the research seeks to test the limits of the proposition that the existing urban culture of nature is a composition of dynamic, relational, and emergent assemblages or networks of humans, non-human entities, and technologies.

*What are the existing forms of associations between humans and nature?
How have these associations developed through time in and around the Friche?
How can the historical evolution of the 'urban culture of nature' help in developing intimate strategies for sensitive urban engagements?
What formal programs can help catalyse and promote the co-existence of human-non-human entities?*

Above are a few of the many questions this research intends to gradually seek answers to.

Reflection on Methodology

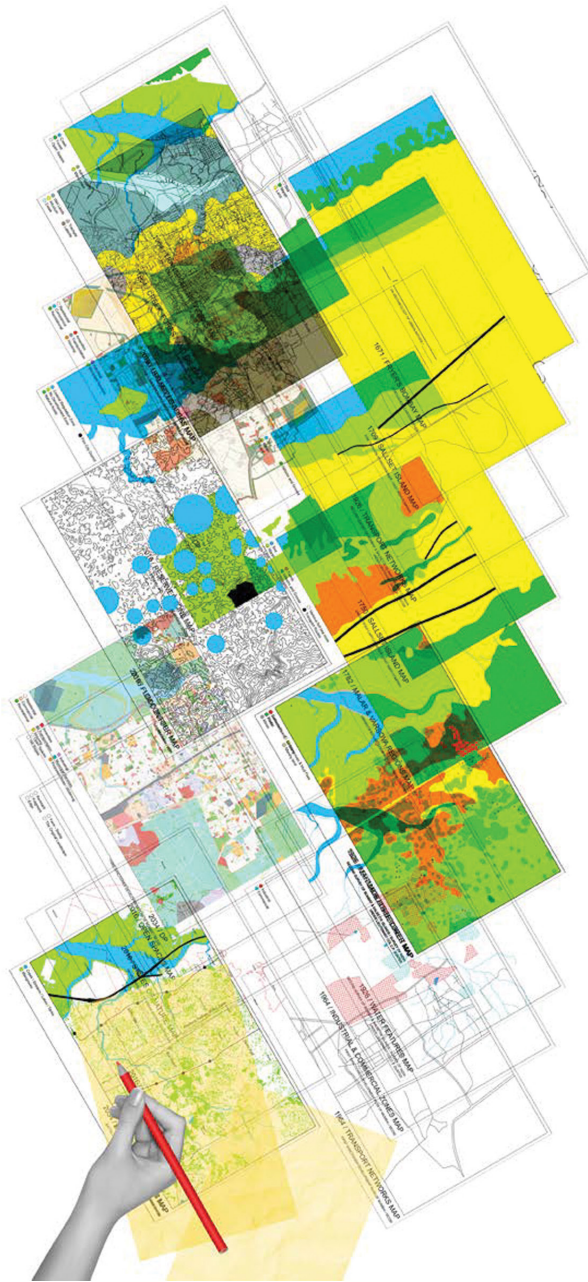


Figure 4: Methodology of analysis, representation and inference extraction. source_LandXArchitecture, Mihir Desai, Design Dissertation, KRVA

To search for answers to the questions posed before, the research carries out systematic operations to intimately unearth hidden layers of informations from site, just like an archaeologist who excavates through layers of history. The steps mentioned below are organized actions undertaken to uncover the 'being' in the 'chaos' that constitute the 'urban culture of green' in and around Friche Josaphat.

a. Study of the historical development of the urban cultures around the friche and its evolving relationship with nature. A space-time analysis of the production of edges along the friche as observed today using historical datasets like maps, images, literatures etc. The focus is to understand the development of urban and nature as distinct entities that perpetually interact to produce relational capacity, an 'urban culture of nature'. The study would aim to break from the conventional approach of analysing this evolution as a linear progression (one event led to another and hence the outcome today). Instead, it aims to validate the chaos and diversity in production of a space and intends to develop creative perspectives to observe this 'wild' evolution. (Fig 4 is an example where the author classifies the ecology that makes land significant and traces the site historically through these classifications. Their study validates the making and remaking of land as a outcome of changing perspectives of urban culture and intends to introduce a new ecologically sensitive lens to observe this fragment of nature

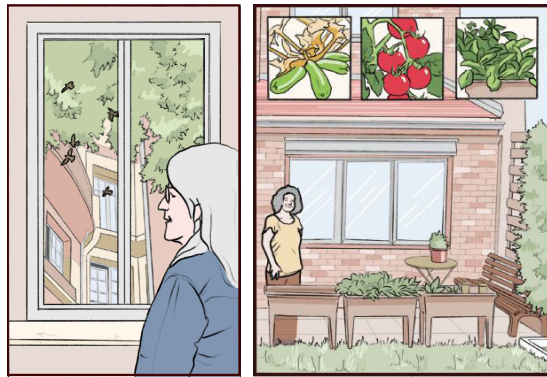


Figure 5: Living in Nature
Garden City group, Last green in town exhibition

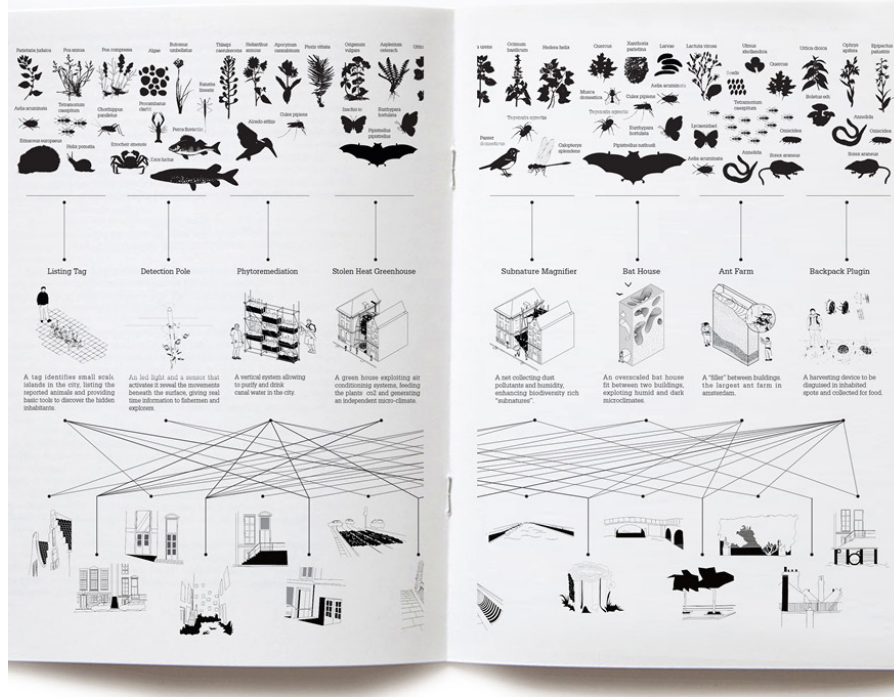


Figure 6: The Wild City

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b. Document human-nature interaction patterns on-site(around) and understand them as a corollary of specific historical urban cultural developments.(probably by overlaying study a.and b.and deriving conclusions)
The aim of this study is to map intimate human-non human relationships through drawings and photographs. As a part of the Garden City group for P1 we began with such observational drawings and represented them in forms of story board.(Fig 5) This research would take this method of mapping as a starting point and try to evolve new methods of observing human-non human relationships on site. (Fig 6. This project is an exploration of the possibilities of an unmaintained world where botany, design and architecture meet outside the technical frame of sustainability and the comfortable setting of the bucolic. The documentation of the wild in the urban becomes a crucial takeaway.

PLAN B JOSAPHAT MANIFESTO



c. Studying the different visions for the friche and the neighbourhood. Understanding the future urban intentions of different actors(stakeholders). *Urban cultures are heavily determined by the aesthetic sensibilities of different stakeholders in that particular moment in time, and vice versa. After understanding the flow of space time in history of the human-non human entities, it becomes crucial to understand the current imaginations of the various stakeholders involved in the systemic reorganization of the Friche and its neighbourhoods. these stakeholders include the government, housing corporations, corporate businesses, non-government organizations, environmental organizations, commons and finally the individuals.*

The final step is using the above actions to develop programmatic inserts (conclusions from the research will suggest the scale of these inserts) that catalyse the germination of ecologically enriched public realms to explore urban environmental discourses. The aim is to extract strategies which help synthesis a newer, fresher and an intimate approach of observing and engaging with urban green environments.

Figure 7: Visions for La Friche
sources: Sauvons la friche Josaphat; perspective.brussels



Figure 8 : How to negotiate with Chaos?
Collage by Author



Figure 9 : What is 'Being' in 'Chaos'?
Authors own photograph

List of Figures

Figure 1: Mumbai City and Nature, image taken from a flight.
Authors own photograph

Figure 2: Navigating La Friche
Authors own photograph

Figure 3: An outcome of active and dynamic assemblages?
Authors own photograph

Figure 4: Methodology of analysis, representation and inference extraction. source_
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