Existence in Liminality

From Liminal Politics to Intimate Spaces

an investigation of undocumented immigrants in Amsterdam

001 **Introduction, problem statement**

Liminal Space [Image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.vertigopolitico. com/politica/ciudada-nos/carceles-del-df-vi-vir-del-dolor-ajeno.

The world is witnessing the displacement of people on an unprecedented scale. 79.5 million people around the world decided to leave their homes for reasons of conflict and persecution in early 2020 (UNHRC, 2020). Displacement is a mass phenomenon in contemporary history; the existence of a growing population of displaced persons may be the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.

When we take a closer look at the situation of undocumented immigrants in Amsterdam, it becomes clear how the gestures of openness and integration of European countries of refuge can in fact barely compensate for the inhumane traces left by bureaucratic policy on roughly 64% of rejected asylum seekers. Immigration detention, fortified borders, police brutality, as well as other social, cultural and legal forms of exclusion, deprivation and dehumanization create a collection of liminal spaces which control and oppress human lives (Agamben, 1998; 2008). Aiming to critically reflect such exclusionary practices as a crisis of the political apparatus of the EU, national and regional governments, this work investigates the mutual relationship of the rightless displaced person and a form of 'settlement' - the 'settling' in the world that man shares with his fellow man. In order to do so, this work critically searches for the qualities of a form of protection and intimate space that provides the rightless displaced person with a place in a 'common' world, by offering a dignified existence for as long as their 'threshold' condition continues.

This thesis focuses on a deeper understanding of thinking about the built environment as a form of facilitation, a form of protection, as opposed to more hegemonic views of architecture as a result of numbers, program, market forces and oppressive politics. This 'empathetic' approach, as this thesis proposes, is nurtured by shedding light on aspects of the human experience of the built environment, as opposed to a top-down approach which consults statistics in order to placelessly embody a generalizing policy. That is to say, an often bureaucratic construct withdrawn from the city, isolated; a heavily walled a-contextual expression (van de Loo et al, 2014). Where such formal approaches manifest themselves in the design and construction of extra-urban detention centers, asylum seekers' centers and temporary shelters for tens of thousands of displaced persons - in an attempt to give the increasing immigration crisis one face, to counter it with formal structures - an empathetic approach rather translates human patterns into tangible and accessible forms of shelter and protection; a plurality which embraces diversity and heterogeneity. As a certain form of empathetic approach in architectural practice, this concept can be of great value in contributing to social issues alike, which are often marginalized in architectural practice.

002 Research question

Schneider, G. (1984) *Life Action: Begraben* [Image]. Retrieved from www. gregor-schneider.de/ places/1986mgladbach/ pages/1984_begraben_ liedberg_11.htm

Contributing to counter the turmoil of an ever-changing environment - the sense of survival that haunts every day, the restlessness of a liminal existence - requires more than thinking of "shelter." It demands a notion of continuity, protection and tranquility: "shelter" which protects man not only from the storms of heaven, but also from the storms of life, the violence of the world. A place where memory unwinds, where fears can hide and thoughts can integrate. In the life of rightless displaced people the question for these integrating qualities is the question for a place to work on their future and, with that, a place which renders them visible to the world; a position in a "common" world. It is the question for a dialectic approach of space, where the sheltered human being can give perceptible limits to his shelter. In other words, being human requires some form of 'settlement': the possibility to settle in a place where all these qualities can take shape. *How does the rightless displaced person build a relationship with some form of "settlement" in this volatile yet long-lasting liminal world?* Central in this work is the exploration of these integrative qualities, in an attempt to provide rightless displaced persons with anchors in their liminal existence.

003 Reflection on methodology

This question enforces upon itself the convergence of the material and the immaterial, as it reflects on the juxtaposition of the inner world of man with a dominant, political context. Therefore, the work approaches this question in a transdisciplinary way, reflecting on the 'shadow world' of a rightless population in an attempt to breach invisibility and start a conversation with architectural practice. The work acts as a moderator between political theory, interviews, philosophy, newspaper articles, poetry, art and architecture, in order to dialectically approach the area between specificity and abstraction, between tangibility and emotion, between the outer world and the inner world of man, between politics and poetry. The work consists of two written essays, two visual essays, a case study and a series of discursive maps.

Honkasalo, F. (2018) *Grey Cobalt* [Image]. Retrieved from americansuburbx. com/2019/04/feli- cia-honkasalo-ob- jects-and-ontologies. html

The two theoretical reflections, which tangentially built upon, and relate to one another, each set off from a different perspective of liminality in relation to being human in this world. The first essay, 'The Right to Humanity', links Hannah Arendt's political theory (1958; 1962) with the thinking of Giorgio Agamben (1998; 2008) and Michel Foucault (1975; 1986). In this way, this essay interweaves politics, discipline, power and human right in an attempt to come to an understanding of the raison d'être and manifestations of exclusionary practices, and offering insights to counter them spatially. The second essay, 'Our Own Corner in the World', builds on the work of Martin Heidegger (1971) and Gaston Bachelard (1994) to come to an understanding of forms of protection and continuity within the existence of rightless, displaced people. This essay interweaves philosophy, architectural theory and poetry in order to speculate about spatialities providing architectural practice in designing for a rightless population of traumatized individuals.

The two visual essays are an endeavor to understand the transdisciplinary entanglements of the central concepts of 'liminal space' and 'interstitial space' in order to both frame them within this work, as well as situate them in their inseparable context.

In order to reflect reality in a meaningful way, the case study examines an activist collective of rejected, undeportable displaced persons who, regardless of their illegitimate existence, actively position themselves in the public debate. Over the past eight years they have enforced their position in society by squatting vacant buildings, while often living in appalling circumstances. The existence and survival of this group are explained on the basis of interviews and newspaper articles.

Finally, the documentation of some of the former shelters of the 'We Are Here' collective, as well as a series of comparative maps, provides insight into the spatial translation of the speculations raised so far about life, intimacies, exclusions and limitations of the 'threshold world.' At various scales, a discursive representation emerges of hiding places, movements, relationships and traces of life under the radar in the capital: a representation of segmentation and exclusion, liminal space and privileged space and, finally, normative and non-normative space to construe interstitial spaces as scars of the contemporary city and as gaps of everyday life.
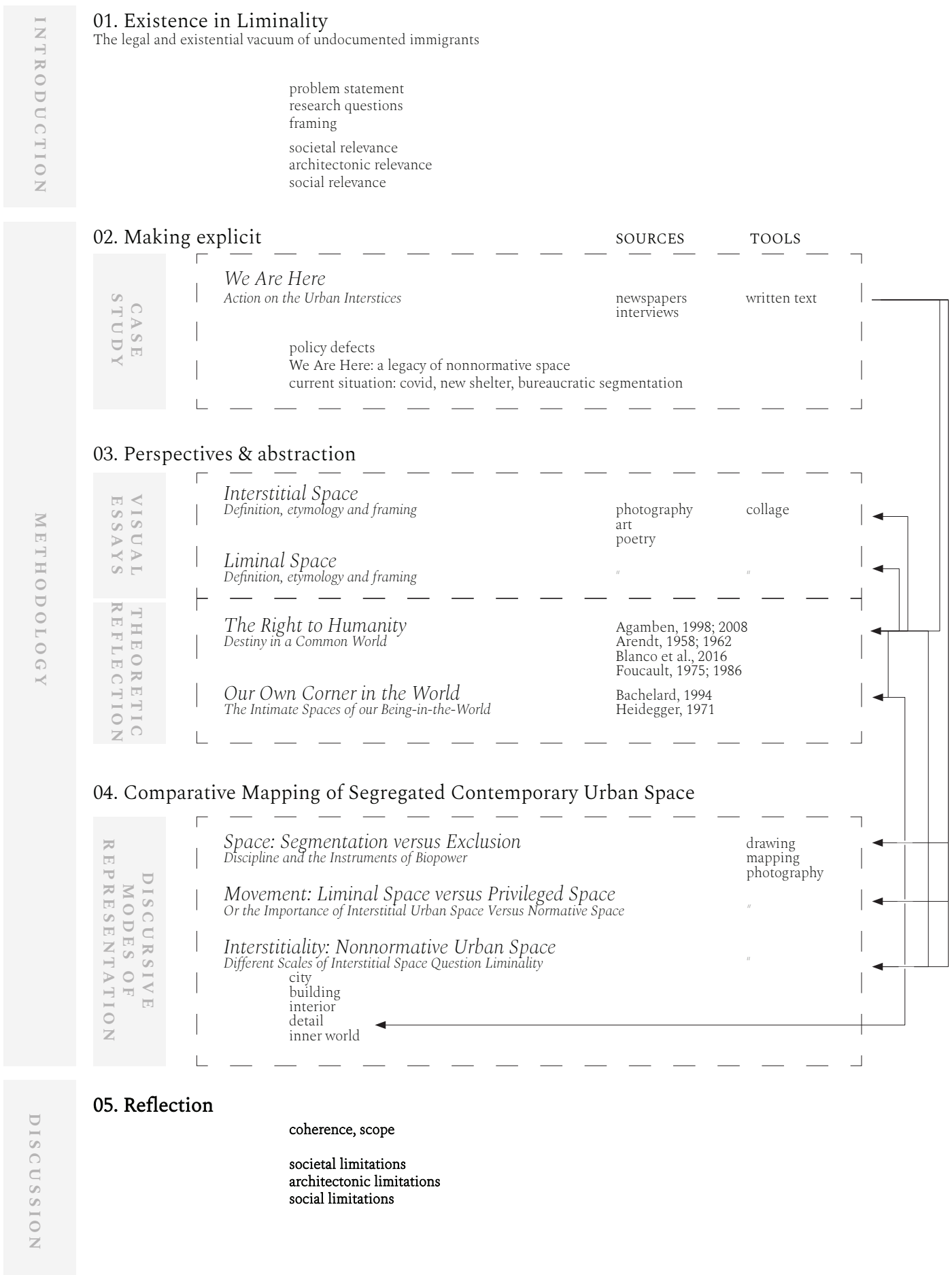
004 **Reflection on relevance**

In the political atmosphere of this debate, what noble form of provision imposes itself between law and life? When the verdict calls to expel this shadow population from a position in society and must leave the country - a statement which implies that these people in fact no longer exist in the eyes of the national government - then what is the task of the architect regarding the inhumane living conditions of these displaced people? Some will argue that without political control, without a client, an architectural "intervention" which focuses entirely on this shadow population is not possible and, therefore, the agency of the architect within the presented problem is non-existent. The architect will have to conform to the established program and - would the architect consider to interfere in the humanization of the legal vacuum - contribute to, say, a "more humane" design of a detention center. Others may turn to the role of the architect as an actor in shaping policy itself, with specialist knowledge of the influence of the environment on people; a plea that reduces the role of architectural practice in the presented debate to an advisor. In addition, this will most probably still direct the built environment towards a cold, unwelcome expression which tries to discourage the 'illegal' population In both cases, the hope for possible contributions of the architect in humanizing this legal vacuum is largely absent and the agency seems to be mostly on the side of politics.

However, according to Hannah Arendt (1958), "making" precedes political life. She argues that "the common world of things is a precondition for a meaningful political domain" (Arendt, 1958). The 'world' in her work refers to the way man makes the earth habitable, materializes it, an activity closely linking 'making' and 'political action.'

This view provides a horizon for architectural practices, namely, the responsibility to interfere with the civil society that precedes the production of this "common world". Based on the conviction that architecture is more than building according to market moves and restrictive policy, this thesis argues that architecture functions as a mirror of society which always reflects, moves along and thrusts forward at the same time. More than building: the awareness of its influence on a common world positions architectural practice in society as a critical instrument. In line with this conviction, the design succeeding this research attempts to enforce itself between law and life; a design for a non-normative space which approaches the legal vacuum of rightless displaced people in a constructive way.

005 **Diagram of research structure**

01. Existence in Liminality
The legal and existential vacuum of undocumented immigrants

problem statement
research questions
framing

societal relevance
architectonic relevance
social relevance

02. Making explicit
SOURCES   TOOLS

We Are Here
Action on the Urban Interstices

newspapers   written text
interviews

policy defects
We Are Here: a legacy of nonnormative space
current situation: covid, new shelter, bureaucratic segmentation

03. Perspectives & abstraction

Interstitial Space
Definition, etymology and framing

photography   collage
art
poetry

Liminal Space
Definition, etymology and framing

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The Right to Humanity
Destiny in a Common World

Agamben, 1998; 2008
Arendt, 1958; 1962
Blanco et al., 2016
Foucault, 1975; 1986

Our Own Corner in the World
The Intimate Spaces of our Being-in-the-World

Bachelard, 1994
Heidegger, 1971

04. Comparative Mapping of Segregated Contemporary Urban Space

Space: Segmentation versus Exclusion
Discipline and the Instruments of Biopower

drawing
mapping
photography

Movement: Liminal Space versus Privileged Space
Or the Importance of Interstitial Urban Space Versus Normative Space

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Interstitiality: Nonnormative Urban Space
Different Scales of Interstitial Space Question Liminality
city
building
interior
detail
inner world

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05. Reflection

coherence, scope

societal limitations
architectonic limitations
social limitations

006 **References**

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