



# Reflection Paper

## Being in Chaos

negotiating an urban culture of  
nature

Urban Architecture Graduation Studio

**Last green in town**

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## Introduction

The studio of Urban Architecture, themed 'Last Green in Town' for the current year began for us even before the first day of class. We were asked to answer the following question - 'what is nature to you?' and 'bring a photograph/drawing/collage and an object that resembles the answer to the question'. This simple yet profound question began an adventurous, explorative and highly challenging yet satisfying journey to this graduation thesis project till date.

I have tried to answer this question through the research and design of this graduation project under valuable guidance of my mentors Elsbeth Ronner, Jos Lafeber and Leeke Reinders as well as immense support of my friends from the studio, for which I am deeply grateful.

## Reflection on research and design

The reflection to the question of 'what is nature to you?' immediately took me back to my life in Mumbai, a city that perpetually exists in chaos. Here humans and nature are in a constant state of tussle, trying to overpower each other. People are dragging the urban boundaries into the last remaining fragments of nature in the city while on the other hand nature reacts and blurs these boundaries by flooding the streets or washing homes in landslides. More often than not these end in tragic situations for the common people of the city.

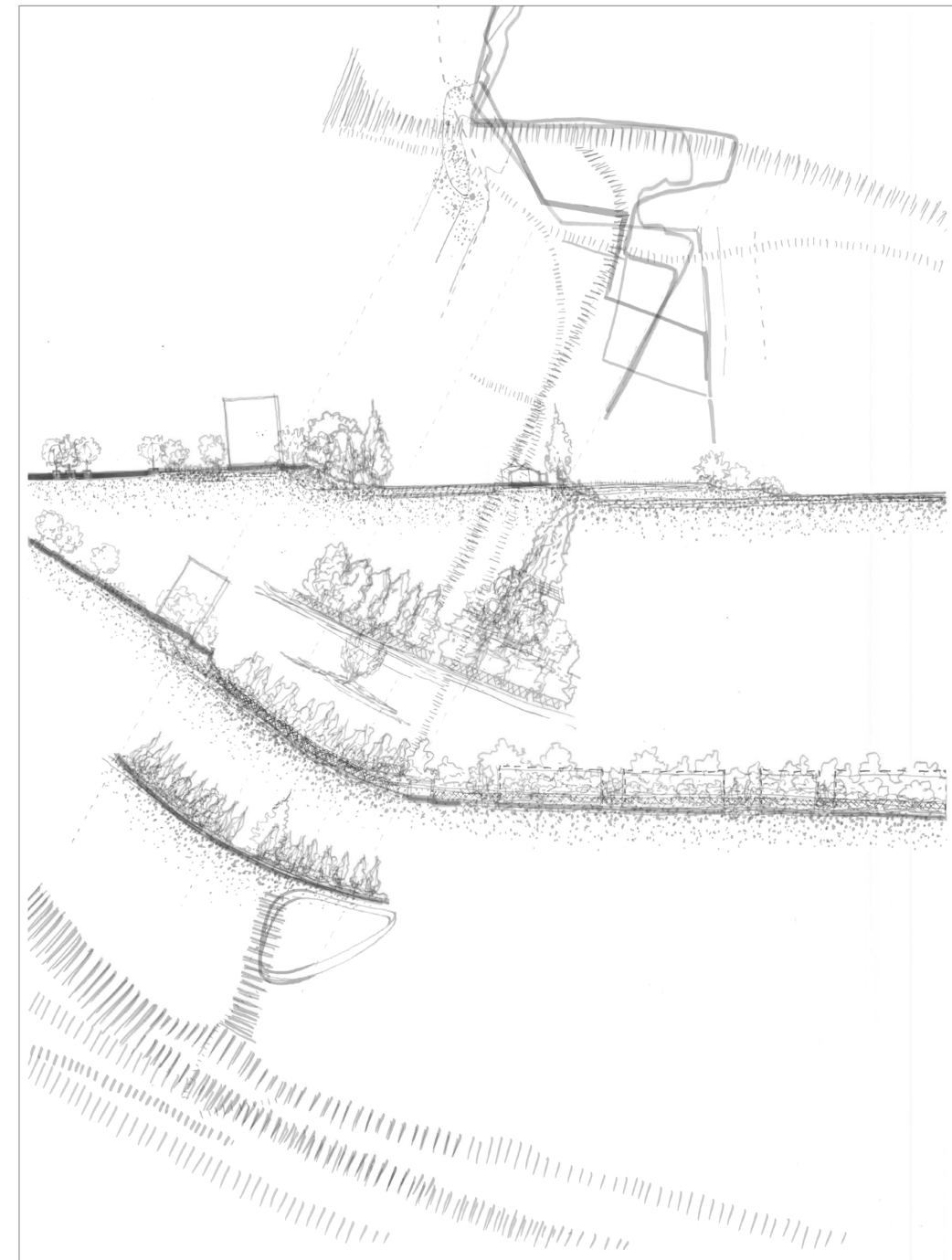
Amidst this disorder, however, there are instances of accidental and intentional synergies that emerge. A nomadic barber shop under a tree, a small shrine under a banyan tree, more often than not right in the centre of the street, a historic fort taken over by wild grass and creepers, natives of the forest (or as we call them adivasis) occupying small pieces of land on the fringes to farm as well as farming adjacent to railway tracks.

Such socio-ecological instances can be observed everywhere in different forms and nature. We were able to observe some such instances during our first visit to the city of Brussels and more specifically in and around the site of Friche Josaphat. The experience of walking from the fast paced, densely packed city center through residential areas populated by migrant communities into the well regulated and manicured public parc of Josaphat and finally culminating into the Friche, quietly hidden behind the borders of tall trees and locked gates, was exhilarating. It was the first instance where we were introduced to the various different instances, small and big, obvious and hidden, intentional and accidental in which humans engaged with different forms of urban nature. Entering the friche felt like entering a completely different universe with its intimate shelter spaces, beehives, vegetable garden, water ponds, birds on trees and insects in bushes, filling the silence of the vast landscape of friche with their sounds. The friche was not just physical detached by natural and man



made boundaries from the neighbouring urban areas but was also absent from the general knowledge of the people living in its vicinity. This became more evident after the study of garden city of Terdelt with my group for the research in P1. In the research we studied the evolution of the garden city as a urban design concept and delved deeper into understanding the spatial experiences of people living in these neighbourhoods through documentations and personal interviews with the residents. It was very evident that the people living in these residences had become fairly attached to the front and back gardens that they owned. The maintenance of these privately owned green spaces differed from person to person but the common sentiment they shared was an intimate connection to these island like enclosures. And in spite of living in such close vicinity to the wild landscapes of the Friche only a handful of them were even aware of its existence and fewer showed any concern for its future. A similar lack of concern could be seen in the urban master plan proposed to develop on the friche by the authorities. A general lack of knowledge about the nature culture that has been evolving within the Friche would be one of the primary causes to this insensitivity towards it. Attempts at making the people aware about the lush biodiversity that makes the friche its home has been made by activists and environmentalists through online channels and limited nature walks but there seems to be some hesitation to open the friche up to the people completely. Probably fearing the disturbance of this wildlife by the increasing human interference.

The project thus aims to negotiate between these sensitivities in coexistence between humans and nonhumans and attempts to create a space that educates the people about the nature that emerges in cities. The program of the research center brings together researchers, scholars, academicians, activists, environmentalists and other professionals involved in carefully producing knowledge about the biodiversity within the friche and other such pockets of urban nature. While the community center blurs the boundaries between the urban and the friche and brings people closer to the center of knowledge production, educating them while at the same time providing them opportunities to interact with the emerging landscapes of the friche. The project takes the phrase 'People protect what they understand' very seriously and attempts to make learning as the anchor on which a symbiotic coexistence of nature and humans becomes possible. To design for this symbiosis the project carefully looks at the past and present cultures of urban nature that have evolved on the site. It looks at the traces of nature that were manmade but have evolved to its own logics and rhythms. It looks at the social and cultural interventions on site, some of which restrict the flow of socio-ecological interaction while others provide possible opportunities to evolve into moments of symbiosis. It looks at the material cultures existing on the site and negotiates on formulating a material language that shelters both humans and nonhumans. Thus the process of design constantly zooms in and out of the research to develop a sensitive approach towards the production of space, space which promotes a new way of evolving in symbiosis.



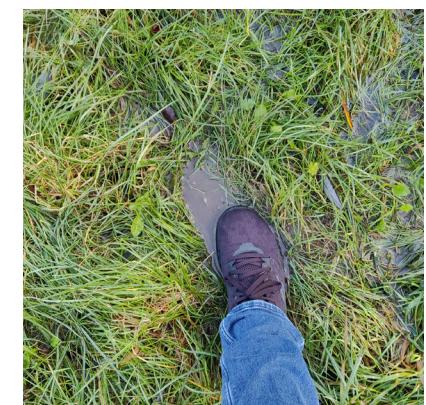


## Reflection on Methodology

The method promoted in the studio environment, one that this project evolves around is one of being careful. Caring for the existing, caring for the has been and caring for the future to unfold is the approach that both research and design attempt to work with. For me the method evolved as a flow of evolving processes that corresponded with the aims of the studio through different phases. Starting with understanding the development of culture of urban nature through the intimate engagements with the site of the Garden city during P1, it developed into sensitively understanding the evolution of the various elements of the site itself. The 'as found' research focused on these sensitive observations that make the site specific cultures of human-nature interactions. The individual research then expands on these collective studies by looking at this process of evolution of cultures through time and looking the space-time manifestations of spcio-ecological interactions. This extensive study helped formulate a very sensitive approach of design that zooms into these varied scales of socio-ecological interactions and aims to provide mediators through architecture and design. Mediators that catalyse the symbiotic existence of humans and nonhumans on site and promote a culture of mutual growth between different species. In summation, the method becomes the design project itself as it explores ways of sensitive design approaches that can be either replicated or be evolved on other such contested sites.

## Reflection on the 'Me' in the project

I firmly believe that as architects and designers the decisions we make in any project is a reflection of your own personalities and sensibilities. From the start I looked at this topic with curiosity, concern and heaps of doubt about my role as a designer. The chaos that this topic created within me has also reflected into the way I tried to deal with an array of subjects within this project. However this chaos has slowly but steadily led to some sense of logic, rhythm and peace that accept the natural order of things and allow an untethered growth. The project is me trying to make sense of the world, by looking at how humans shape their surrounding, what perceptions do they create in this process and how have they evolved in tandem with the non human life all around? It is an attempt to situate myself in this disordered evolution and find little comforts in the process by proposing a mutually evolving environment.







thank you!