

# Landscapes of Care

## Weaving nature and culture through environmental care practices

Reflection by Sába Schramkó

Valparaiso, a city reaching to the mountains, embracing the ocean, seemed like a faraway land from the studio at TU Delft. Bridging this distance, the theory of the commons formed an initial framework within which the city's exploration could begin. Therefore, the first encounter with the city happened through a reading of the commons (Bollier, 2014). It began as a search into how common resources, that stand between public and private ownership, could hold a key in challenging state and market-led developments which in turn, often result in the privatization of the city. At the same time, Valparaiso's unique topography came to the fore at the very beginning of the research and it became clear that it is a city where a sense of place is inevitably intertwined with the undulations of the landscape.

From these two notions, the landscape as element that situates within the city and the commoning of resources as acts able to protect those resources and unite fragmented and often suppressed layers of society, an interest in the cross section of these ideas has emerged. An in-depth analysis of the environmental resources of Valparaiso revealed a state of environmental abandonment that challenges the way the city relates to its resources of water and the surrounding forests. Following these preliminary investigations, the fieldtrip to Valparaiso was an enriching experience that highlighted social perspectives. At the peripheries of the city, where free-flowing streams are not yet channelled underground, unique socio-spatial practices flourish that are more related to rural forms of life than urban lifestyles (Araya, 2009). These practices that include gardening, animal husbandry and carpentry are all forms of life where nature forms an integral part of the everyday (Vásquez, 2012).

In this way, the initial research and the personal experience came together at the edge of Valparaiso where the city meets the landscape, where nature meets the inhabitants. This peripheral zone of the city poses several challenges. The pressure of urban expansion, the neglect of water and forest resources, the flammable construction materials are all contributing to ravaging urban fires that affect these peripheral areas the most. Moreover, the poorest inhabitants are regarded as illegal occupants of their lands and suffer from a lack of public spaces and depleting resources. These issues all share the challenge of finding a sustainable coexistence with nature. In this regard, Singh's paper on "The affective labour of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects" provided a key starting point in finding solutions to these complex issues. Further readings into theories on the Anthropocene and the idea of decolonizing nature transformed the approach from a human based perspective to search for solutions from the perspectives of nature and humans alike (Seres, 1995; Weber, 2015). Processes

of reading and researching directly led back to the design proposal and the development of the design brought up new questions and theories to investigate. In this way, research and design began to mutually influence one another.

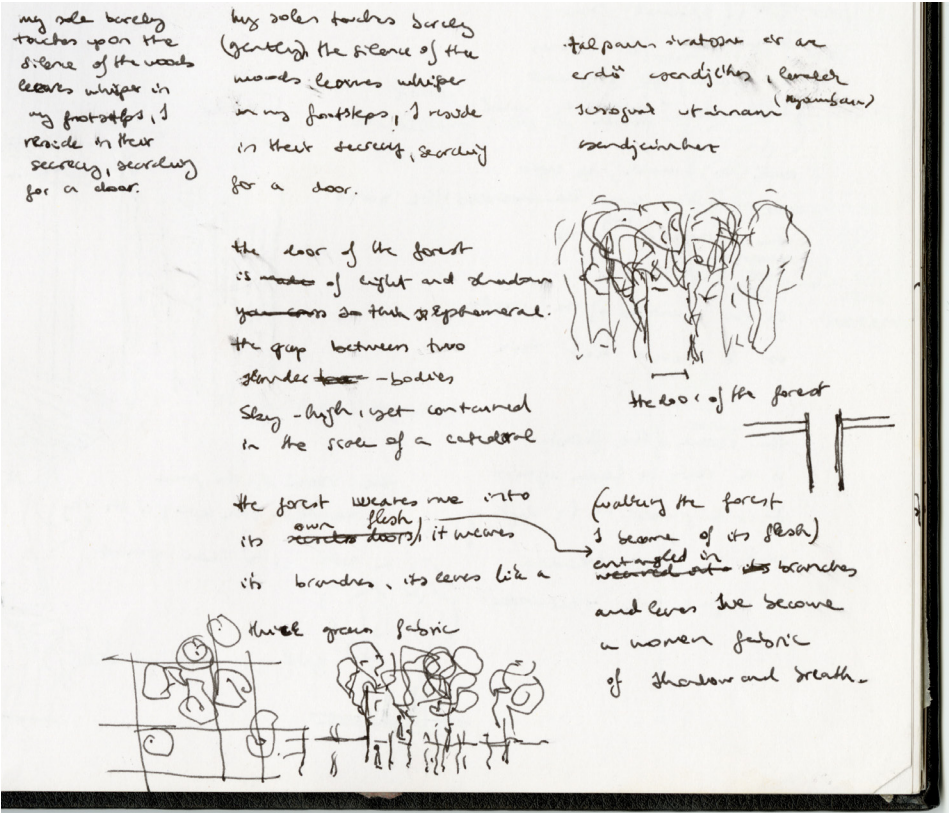
The notion of affective labour (Singh, 2013) was instrumental in repositioning the socio-spatial practices of growing plants and raising animals at the rural edges of Valparaiso. Once these seemingly simple customs are looked upon as forms of affective labour their reciprocal relationship comes to the fore. They become forms of care (Ingold, 2011) where nature and humans are equal beneficiaries of the relationship. These environmental care practices do not only transform the individual's perception of nature but are able to transcend collective subjectivities (Singh, 2013). Thus, it is the aim of this graduation project to build upon these existing rural practices and enlarge their scope from being individual endeavours of the private garden plot to be collective care practices of the common land. The project envisions the transformation of a valley to an edible forest where the neighbourhood takes care of the forest and they receive the gifts of nature in return. By positioning the project in the gift paradigm (Singh, 2015), the proposal aims to preserve the already present affinity of peri-urban communities to protect their natural environment and to educate the citizens how to manage conservation in a mutually beneficial way for both nature and humans. The project conceptualises that by building upon existing environmental practices and treating them as acts of affective labour the city's view on marginalised communities shifts from regarding them as land-takers to appreciating them as care givers.

From an environmental point of view, the project recognises the abandonment of water resources as principal cause of the urban fires and decreasing biodiversity (Magrini & Varela, 2016; Puentes, Alvarez Aranguiz, & Araya, 2014). The implementation of infiltration interventions, such as trenches, swales and ponds, aims to retain water for a longer period in the higher hills of Valparaiso instead of letting them flow into the ocean too rapidly. The transformation of the pyrogenic plantation forest to a more humid native sclerophyll forest regenerates the area to its natural state and also provides a natural fire barrier. Planting a highly biodiverse forest based on permaculture principles does not only benefit humans with its bearings either. Permaculture forests and silvopastures also regenerate the soil at a faster rate and on the long term are able to shift the entire ecosphere of the area to more humid states (Gotsch, 2015; Jacke & Toensmeier, 2005).

The conceptual notion of deconstructing the nature-culture opposition urged a spatial solution of deconstructing boundaries between exterior and interior, between landscape and building. Furthermore, mediating between nature and culture posed the challenge of scale. The challenge was to address the vastness of the natural landscape and the lived experience of touching a leaf, simultaneously. The method of poetic writing allowed to bridge these seeming oppositions. Writing as a tool for architecture was already explored in the theory thesis and was therefore

conceptually familiar but an unknown territory for designerly use. Even though the writing of short stories was already employed in the first phases of the graduation project to explore how landscape affects the sense of place, back then it acted more as a tool for analysis and less so as a method of designing. It was only in the rhythm of poetry, in the field of spatial metaphors where dichotomies of nature and culture, of landscape and building began to merge.

“the forest weaves me  
 into its own flesh  
 entangled in branches and leaves  
 we become a woven fabric  
 of shadow and breath”



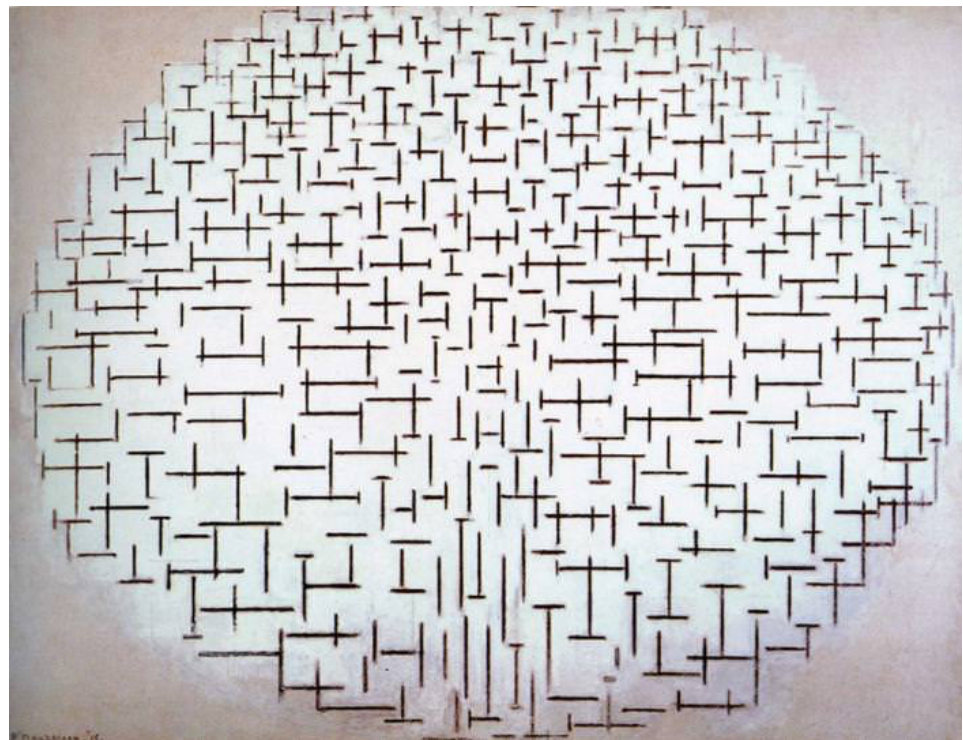
The woven fabric of the poem, the sketch and the spatial metaphor of the web

## Pier and ocean

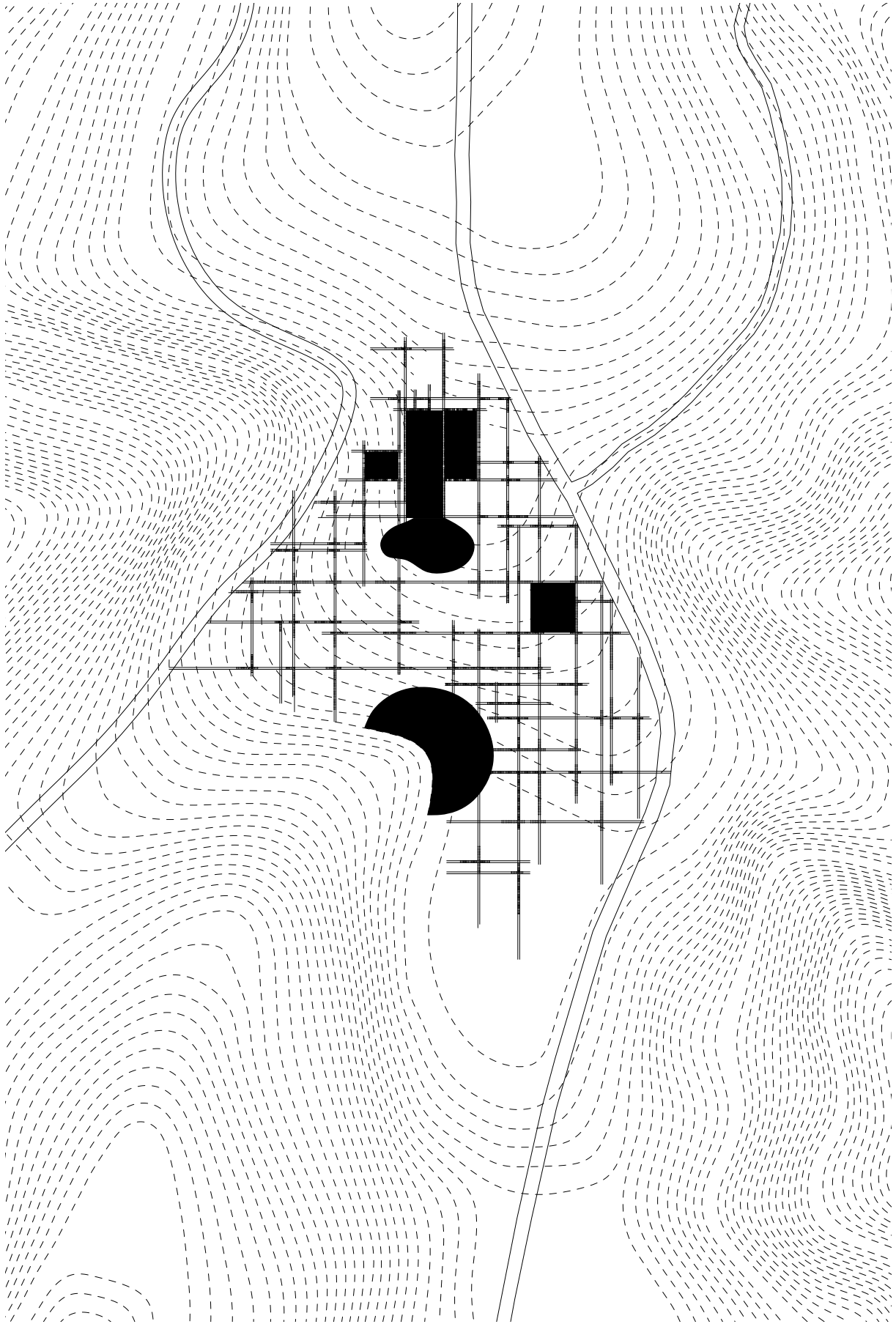
the waves break on the surface  
the pier pierces the water  
the water remains whole  
fluidity is unbreakable

the lines pulsate, expand-contract  
it is a tension of two  
it is a dance between the web and the forest  
the forest is unpierceable

as the waves swept the pier  
the foliage spread the web  
the rhythm of nature and built  
merged into a single landscape



Composition No. 10 Pier and ocean by Piet Mondrian



The web weaving the layers of the project together



The metaphor of weaving as a spatial method for deconstructing boundaries emerged through the spatial/formal language of poetry and sketching. The poetic line or phrase in this method can be seen as an initiator of a spatial image or metaphor which is then spatialised further through the act of sketching. While sketching the poem continues to unfold, it leads to new metaphors. Thus, the poem is not a finalised construct which is then translated to spatial form but rather poetry and sketching reciprocally form one another. The idea of weaving the branches of the trees led to the design concept of establishing a modular, structural web in the forest which acts as an enabling apparatus (Pope & Vittori, 2015) for consequent development and as a bridging element between the different layers of the project. The water reservoirs, the forest, the topography of landscape and the emerging buildings are all layers interconnected by the structure of the web. Fragments of the web operate in the realm of the trace. They may develop into an enclosed interior but may also remain partially or fully open. The web and the forest permeate one another and thus the web is simultaneously acting on the scale of the landscape by becoming integral part of it and the scale of the building by the possibility of forming it. Thus, the intervention and the forest are growing together in an organic manner.

Beyond establishing the web in the forest, the project focuses on those elements that enable the subsequent growth of the rest of the structure. These interventions include adobe, carpentry and pottery workshops that allow the materialization of future infills in the web. A seed library forms a protected space for preserving and possibly fostering biodiversity through seed exchange. A more traditional library houses all books on the difficult art of raising a permaculture forest. Finally, a series of water reservoirs collect and purify water. These interventions aim to address the interdependence of landscape and built form in a formal, spatial and programmatic manner. Just as the concept of the web stemmed from spatial metaphors, the detailed design of the buildings was born through a series of poems. The emerging spatial metaphors allowed to bridge between the different layers of the proposal; the landscape, the forest, the water, the web and the spatial experience of the buildings. By bridging these layers, the poems opened up a design process where vastly different scales such as programmatic relationships, shifts in material textures and even details of furniture are designed simultaneously.

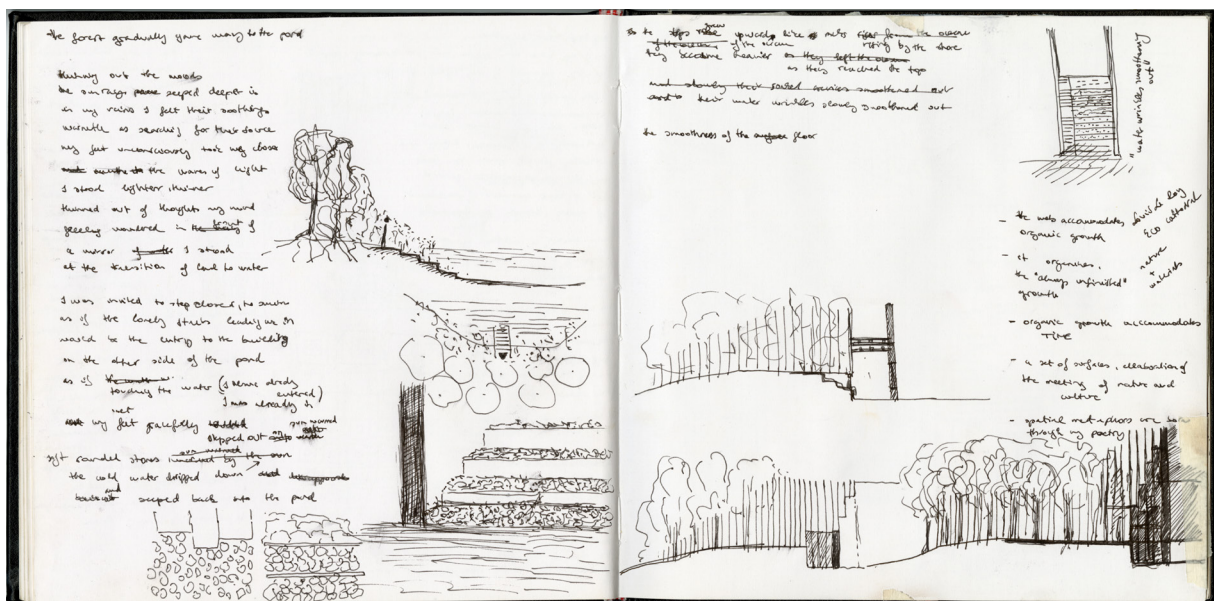
“thinning out the woods  
 the sun rays seeped deeper  
 in my veins I felt soothing  
 warmth as searching for their source  
 my feet unconsciously took me closer  
 in the waves of light  
 I stood lighter, thinner  
 thinned out of thoughts my mind  
 freely wondered in front of  
 a mirror I stood  
 at the transition of land to water

I was invited to step closer, to swim  
 as if the lonely stairs leading me in  
 would be the entry to the building  
 on the other side of the pond  
 as if touching the water  
 I was already in  
 my wet feet gracefully stepped  
 out on sun warmed  
 soft rounded stones  
 the cold water dripped down  
 and seeped back into the pond

the steps grew upwards like rocks  
 rising by the shore of the ocean  
 as I reached the top  
 their water wrinkles smoothed out  
 in a cave like tunnel, surrounded by stones  
 for a moment I paused and turned around  
 unable to decide if I was inside  
 or was it only transit  
 a gate to the forest behind

towards the woods  
 the walls thinned out  
 and the heading was replaced  
 by the canopy of the trees  
 on the wall the opposite side  
 the slender rhythm wrapped around  
 it continued inside  
 the deep green hues of the woods  
 transformed to warm colours of sunrise  
 I felt protected and energized

red and orange tones, like flames  
 danced as in an ancient cave  
 they brought back dim memories  
 of togetherness, of being safe.  
 a deep, dark cove on my left  
 drew me towards its buried secrets  
 and I left the light for the dark”



It appears that poems are able to answer to the singularities of the landscape (Ventura, 2012). Through poetry and sketching the landscape reads not as a still image but as a constantly shifting construct of forms, colours, textures and movements. Poetry paints the world as alive. Upon writing a poem it is often the case that past experiences merge with projected images and it is this rich amalgamation of memory and imagination that creates spatial metaphors open to new associations. It was a great challenge to try and inhabit a forest and through that inhabit a building. For a large part of the graduation process I was hesitant to design through writing because I was afraid that my writing would lack architecture and that perhaps the writing itself would lack beauty. I imagined that in writing the space should appear as fully designed and that the text would read immediately as a work of art. I felt disappointed when I could not continue a poem and instead I began sketching again. Then there came a moment when I felt I was not able to progress further with my project, so I tried writing again but this time I allowed myself to just write and sketch without focusing too early on the final result of either.

Through this graduation project I found a method that enables me to inhabit spaces that are yet to exist and to recall my memories from the distance. Poems allowed me to walk the hills of Valparaiso again and again. Most importantly, in poetry I have found my way to design spaces and discovered that this is the way I am fully invested in the design process. This project has also allowed me to rediscover something I seem to have forgotten while all my education was focused on designing buildings. Through “Landscapes of Care” my love for nature and architecture came together. Only a few weeks ago did I remember what I wrote in my Bachelor motivational letter.

“When I look at the sky in a forest and the rays of the sun break through the canopy I think of the pillars of gothic cathedrals touching the sky”.



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