



URBAN KINTSUGI

REFRAMING URBAN VOIDS AS SITES OF POTENTIAL

**Gustav Ratinen
Master's Thesis 2026
Chalmers School of Architecture
Department of Architecture & Civil
Engineering
Examiner: Nils Björling
Supervisor: Joaquim Tarrasó**



CHALMERS
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Urban voids is the term used to describe neglected leftover spaces that emerge through processes of urban transformation. These spaces, ranging from vacant lots to brownfields and underpasses, are often-times framed within planning and development discourses as useless or dysfunctional - “problems” requiring resolution through redevelopment and/or programmatic activation.

Architect and philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales proposed an alternative reading of urban voids, through the concept of *terrain vague*. Viewed through a *terrain vague*-lense, the word “void” signifies not absence, but possibility and freedom. Urban voids are thus interpreted as autonomous territories of indeterminacy - spaces that exist outside the rigidity of conventional urban planning and therefore remain open to informal, spontaneous occupation and appropriation.

This thesis accordingly frames rupture in the urban fabric not as a defect to be resolved but as fertile ground for open ended and alternative forms of urban life, that defy strict programming. It explores how architectural intervention can engage such spaces without neutralizing the ambiguity that makes them meaningful, and proposes a design approach that draws conceptual inspiration from *kintsugi* - the Japanese practice of celebrating, rather than concealing, fractures.

Gamlestaden in eastern Gothenburg, consists of a very fragmented urban landscape, ridden with urban voids. A specific void, inhabiting the space beneath Gamlestadsbron, is examined and analyzed as a representative *terrain vague* and serves as a site for a number of design experimentations.

These experimentations build on reference projects set in urban voids and on design concepts derived from academic literature on the concept of *terrain vague* and its possible integration with architectural design.

Acknowledging the planned demolition of the bridge and the disappearance of the site, these experimentations also reflect on memory and change, and explore the possibility for traces of past fragmentation (in the spirit of *kintsugi*) to be integrated into the future evolution of the area.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation:

One day, while I was out walking in Gamlestaden, I came across a dark and strangely empty space beneath a bridge.

As I stood there, it felt like I had suddenly stepped outside of the city. It felt like I was looking at the buildings of Gamlestads Torg from a vast distance, like through a telescope.

I felt isolation, but something else as well. A sense of freedom, maybe.

As architects, our first instinct may be to “fill” or “fix” such spaces, assigning them a clear function. Yet emptiness may contain an invisible and intangible value that is not immediately apparent from the outside.

As Rem Koolhaas once observed:

“Where there’s nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible.”

I wondered if that was really true, or if architecture maybe could be reconciled with the concept of emptiness, of the “void”.

Background:

Contemporary urban development is increasingly characterized by optimization, densification, and strict forms of spatial programming, often leaving little room for ambiguity or indeterminacy within the urban fabric. Recognizing the overlooked value of these pockets of openness is at the core of this thesis.

Aim:

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how architectural interventions can engage with unused spaces in the urban fabric, by interpreting them as *terrain vague*.

Throughout the thesis, *terrain vague* as a concept is employed in two ways: both as description for a physical place (a piece of “vacant land”) and also as a theory pertaining to the possible socioecological, as well as philosophical, value of the voids of the urban fabric.

Research questions:

> *How can an architectural intervention enable the activation of an urban void while also preserving its openness to future possibilities?*

> *How can a kintsugi design approach be applied to an architectural intervention in an urban void?*

Method:

This thesis explores the relationship between architecture and the concept of *terrain vague*, as well as the potential integration of the two, through a review of existing literature. Insights drawn from this research, together with analyses of the chosen site, later serve as foundation for a number of design experimentations.

Delimitation:

The thesis investigates architectural interventions in a specific urban void with very specific spatial and contextual conditions and opportunities, resulting in site specific design proposals (referred to as “imaginations”).

The underlying design approach, informed by a broader theoretical and conceptual framework, could however be replicated elsewhere.



URBAN VOIDS

The term “urban void” is an inclusive concept that includes the unused, underused or misused spaces of the city - examples of urban voids range from vacant lots, empty buildings to brownfields and underpasses. These spaces may result from conventional planning processes or emerge quietly on their own by accident, through neglect, or simply as cities change over time. Many small urban voids exist because they were never included in the original development plans, or because their abnormal morphology makes them difficult to build on (Hwang and Lee 2019).

Various discourses have employed different, oftentimes interchangeable terms to describe these types of spaces. The term “urban voids” serves as a neutral, overarching concept, while other expressions, such as “lost space” or “wasted space,” carry more negative connotations.

Hwang and Lee (2019), however, state that the word “void” implies absence, vagueness or emptiness, and points to hidden, latent potentials.

One potential they highlight is that these leftover spaces can act as an alternative to traditional public spaces, allowing spontaneous and open activities that can bring together different social groups.

They also argue that leaving urban voids empty or without a fixed use, or using them temporarily for different purposes, can offer relief in growing, increasingly dense cities. There nevertheless exists a widespread tendency to reincorporate urban voids into the productive logic of the city, either through programmatic activation or redevelopment.

TERRAIN VAGUE

Spanish architect and philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales, highlights the “evocative” potential of urban voids and their indeterminate and open character in his seminal essay *Terrain vague* (1995).

The term *terrain vague* is French and essentially translates to English as “vacant land”, but this translation doesn’t really convey the layered meanings of the original term that lend a very positive and philosophical character to this “vacant land”.

By labeling them *terrain vague*, Solà-Morales frames urban voids as spaces of freedom and possibility. This is because they exist outside the overly planned and overly monitored urban order.

Solà-Morales writes (1995, p.120):

“Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply un-inhabited, un-safe, un-productive. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative.”

“Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation” Solà-Morales, 1995, p. 120).

Because of their autonomy from the urban order, these spaces can serve as fertile ground for alternative forms of urban life that don’t rely on strict programming, that instead leave room for imagination for the user.

Voids can accordingly hold cultural and social value, but also ecological value, as they allow for spontaneous use by both people AND nature - sometimes leading to the formation of self-evolving ecosystems, untamed wildscapes in the middle of the city (Sheridan 2012).

Terrain vague has marked a clear shift in how urban voids could be interpreted. Instead of treating voids as problems to be solved, or “holes to be filled”, Solà-Morales emphasizes that their emptiness can have value in itself, representing both possibility and freedom from strict order and form.

So the question is how architects, who most commonly act as *representatives* of a world of order and form, should engage with voids. *Is there even room for architecture?*

Solà-Morales (1995) states that the challenge is to consider how architecture can engage with *terrain vague* without becoming a tool of control or domination. Instead of imposing a new, rigid structure, architects should treat these spaces with a careful and nuanced attitude, working with their existing conditions in a way that preserves their spatial and temporal continuity rather than disrupting it.

This design challenge lies at the core of this thesis.



KINTSUGI

Kintsugi (lit. *golden joinery*) is a Japanese repair philosophy of highlighting imperfections instead of covering them up, associated with the repair of broken ceramics. Similar to a palimpsest, where layers of history are inscribed over one another, *kintsugi* preserves rather than erases past “mistakes”.

Looking at the urban fabric through a *kintsugi* lense, urban voids could be considered the “cracks” where the fabric has broken and come apart.

The metaphor of *kintsugi* offers a way to reconcile the concept of *terrain vague* (which emphasizes the inherent value of voids) **with** architectural design.

Gold, of course, represents value, and the value of the cracks of the urban fabric lies in the potential life - whether human or non-human - that can emerge within them. In this metaphor, architecture supports the emergence of this life and therefore reveals the inherent value of the crack.



IMAGE: CHATGPT

PROCESS



1. *LITERATURE REVIEW*

- extracting design concepts

2. *REFERENCE PROJECTS*

- through lense of design concepts

3. *SITE ANALYSIS*

4. *TESTING SCENARIOS ON SITE*

- experimenting with geometries/concepts
of reference projects

5. *CONCLUSIONS*

The background of the page is white, overlaid with a complex network of thin, irregular yellow lines. These lines form various shapes and paths, some of which are thicker than others, creating a sense of movement and structure. The lines are scattered across the entire page, with a notable concentration in the upper and lower portions, framing the central text.

LITERATURE REFERENCE

The background of the page is composed of several overlapping, hand-drawn yellow lines of varying thicknesses. These lines form a complex, abstract pattern of irregular shapes and paths, creating a sense of movement and structure. The lines are bright yellow and stand out against the plain white background.

REVIEW + PROJECTS

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following two sources attempt to bridge the gap between *terrain vague* (and its utopic idea of the void as a space of freedom) and architectural design. These sources detail design concepts that the architect can make use of when intervening in voids, that are spiritually aligned with So-la-Morales original essay on "vacant land" and also mirror the qualities of these types of spaces.

"Rethinking the In-Between: Designing with a socio-ecological approach to activate the potential of Terrain Vague spaces"

This article from 2025 written by Lorenzo Stefano Iannizzotta and Alexandra Paio addresses the gap between academic literature on the potential of *terrain vague* spaces and emerging projects and practices. They state that these spaces, and the latent potentials they carry, are at risk of being erased due to a functionalist or merely productive approach to design that dismisses them as empty, worthless spaces that need to be fixed. They instead propose a socio-ecological approach to *terrain vague* spaces, and outline the essential characteristics and principles, derived from theoretical literature, on what such an approach would entail. By intersecting these principles with a review of nine case studies demonstrating design actions aligned with the specific characteristics of *terrain vague* spaces, the authors identify five design concepts that point toward a new socio-ecological design approach to these types of spaces. The guiding design strategies are concisely described in the following paragraphs.

Ephemerality and temporality.

Temporality as a concept could be applied and understood in numerous ways. Here the authors mainly focus on ephemeral and temporary interventions that align with the oftentimes transitory and uncertain nature of urban voids.

These small, short-term actions can of course trigger longer-term processes while responding immediately to community needs, offering local communities greater access to shared, self-managed spaces for learning, experimentation, and cultural or productive activities.

Indeterminacy and vacancy.

Rather than producing fixed and finished forms, design should establish open frameworks that remain flexible and adaptable to changing conditions and spontaneous appropriation. By avoiding predetermined uses, vacant spaces can retain functional openness over time, accommodating a wide range of evolving activities. This approach preserves unpredictability, informal occupation, and a degree of non-control.

Diversity.

Diversity encompasses both the richness that might be present in these spaces (biodiversity, communities, uses, etc.) and the balance among ecological, social, and aesthetic values. Different architectural approaches could emphasize this aspect in varied ways: one could opt to prioritize biological diversity, or instead promote openness to multiple and changing functions, while hybrid models combine ecological, social, educational, and cultural functions within a single framework.

Connectors, limits, and margins.

Rather than treating margins and boundaries as residual spaces, design should reframe them as opportunities to activate connections and flows. As intermediate spaces, these margins can mediate between infrastructures and everyday urban life, functioning both as physical connectors and as social interfaces that strengthen local relationships.

Multiscalarity.

These spaces can support local needs, such as access to green or communal spaces, while also serving broader urban functions - for instance, by linking into larger ecological and mobility networks.

***“Disordering Public Space: Urban wild-
scape processes in practice.”***

In this article, Dougal Sheridan identifies *terrain vagues* as “urban wildscapes”, adding to the wide array of terminology employed by scholars and designers to describe these types of environments. He outlines different qualities and processes observed at play in these wildscapes and translates them into design concepts for how architects might intervene in them.

Registration of change.

Urban wildscapes/*terrain vagues* often-times offer an unmediated encounter with physical traces of the past (e.g. structures, industrial artifacts, vegetation). The juxtaposition of layers of past and present occupation aren’t curated or arranged, but are instead simply encountered in their raw state. Existing outside dominant narratives of urban identity, these spaces exist as gaps in the hegemonic order of the city and thus resist processes of identification and incorporation. They become palimpsests, allowing for subjective and personalized interpretations and meaning. Architects should be careful not to force a specific narrative.

Indeterminacy and ambiguity.

This concept relates to preserving the ambiguity of a wildscape. An indeterminate space invites questions rather than offering fixed answers, enabling subjectivity, appropriation, and adaptation.

**Temporal and temporary interventions:
architecture on probation.**

Incremental and temporary strategies enable structures and uses to operate outside the stricter regulatory frameworks of permanent architectural and urban projects, enabling uses and programmes to evolve through experimentation and probation. This design concept may incorporate temporary structures whose uses are reversible or adaptable.

Mobility: roving subjectivities.

A temporal approach may also entail mobility. As conditions shift or opportunities fade, design projects could migrate to other sites, through mobile spatial frameworks that are inherently adaptive - capable of reconfiguring themselves to suit changing environments, and are able to exist outside the rigid regulatory frameworks of fixed architecture and building codes.

Quality of incompleteness.

Temporal and transient approaches frame spaces as unfinished, allowing them to grow and evolve over time. This openness invites ongoing participation and contribution, keeping projects alive and responsive. The focus is not on a finished product, but on an ever evolving process.

Performative properties.

The absence of mediation allows wildscapes' physical attributes and potentials to be understood and activated performatively. These spaces, and their lack of regulations, enable activities that exist outside of mainstream acceptable behaviour, for example graffiti. Architects could work to encourage and enable these types of activities.

Participatory processes.

This strategy concerns the possibility for projects and activities to emerge from the spaces and opportunities of an urban wildscape, shaped by bottom-up processes of negotiation and participation led by local communities.

Architects could collaborate with local communities in either the design or construction phase of a project, or both.

Diversity.

Wildscapes are often appropriated by multiple groups and any intervention should retain the interests, expressions, and activities of diverse users, functioning as spaces of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Summary and comparison.

Comparing the two articles, it's evident that there is a lot of overlap between the design concepts that they propose.

Some concepts are identically phrased and described, such as "temporality" and "indeterminacy".

Some concepts may be articulated in the same terms yet understood in distinct ways. The concept of "diversity" is one such example. Iannizzotto and Paio describe it either as designing for biological variety or as creating a framework capable of accommodating multiple uses. Sheridan's article, however, interprets "diversity" as a way to foster inclusiveness, of making one space cater to a very diverse demographic.

Even within the individual articles, the proposed concepts often overlap with one another, with many of the strategies connecting to the wider themes of temporality (flexible designs that embrace an unpredictable future) and indeterminacy (maintaining an ambiguity of function and purpose).

One might argue that the central philosophy shared by these concepts is to keep the space in question "vague", and not narrow all the possibilities contained in its emptiness into a single, fixed outcome.

REFERENCE PROJECTS

The following projects were all developed in sites that could be described as urban voids. The spatial conditions and the key concepts of the projects vary a great deal, but all of them applied some of the concepts and strategies found in the literature review.

Spacebuster was a temporary architectural installation created by Raumlabor Berlin. The project consisted of a portable device mounted on a small vehicle that inflates a transparent bubble, instantly creating a temporary public room in overlooked urban spaces. The inflatable structure allowed spontaneous gatherings such as discussions, workshops and performances.

HOUSE 2 - Counter City was a temporary public installation underneath an underpass in Zurich created by ALICE and built in under ten days by 200 students, with different elements of the construction being designed by different student groups. The structure explores collaborative design, collective use of public space and negotiation of space.

Woodvale HUB by LiD Architecture was developed through discussions between local communities and authorities about the future of Woodvale Park, in Belfast. It aims to support the park's long-term regeneration and respond to the needs of local users. It utilized a "plug-in" design concept, meaning that different programs can temporarily "plug-in" to its core structure.

Illuminate Paris! by 1week1project is a speculative project proposing a modular public space beneath a railway in Paris. The main purpose being to reclaim this unused space and support refugees who lack housing, the lightweight modules are multifunctional and could also be adapted in numerous ways.

The **High Line** is an urban park in New York City built on a disused elevated freight railway, that had been taken over by nature. As an architectural and landscape project, it repurposes existing industrial infrastructure into a linear public space, combining walking paths, planting, and seating while preserving elements of the original rail structure.

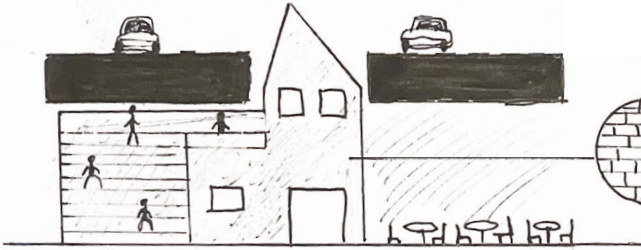
Folly for a Flyover was a temporary architectural pavilion beneath the A12 flyover in London designed by Assemble. Over nine weeks, it hosted open-air cinema screenings, theatre performances, workshops, talks, and community events. The structure itself was constructed by volunteers from the local community using reclaimed and donated materials.

ONDI in Tokyo is a small, intentionally undeveloped urban plot that is rentable for temporary public use, such as markets, gatherings, or performances. The project explores absence, informality, and temporary occupation as active urban strategies, positioning the vacant lot as a flexible social space rather than a failure of development.

Dublin Parlour by LiD Architecture is a conceptual project for a flexible civic space. The design uses modular shipping containers that can be stacked or rearranged depending on the program.

Parc Henri Matisse, designed by Gilles Clément, is an urban park that at its center contains a raised, inaccessible mound, planted with dense vegetation. Visitors cannot enter it. The idea is to create a self-evolving ecosystem, an urban wilderness that develops without human intervention.

FOLLY FOR A FLYOVER

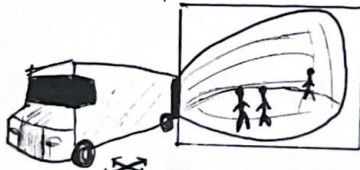


the pavillion fills out the shape of the void underneath the motorway

designed as giant construction kit,
constructed by volunteers from
the local community
- bricks (made of wood and clay)

SPACEBUSTER

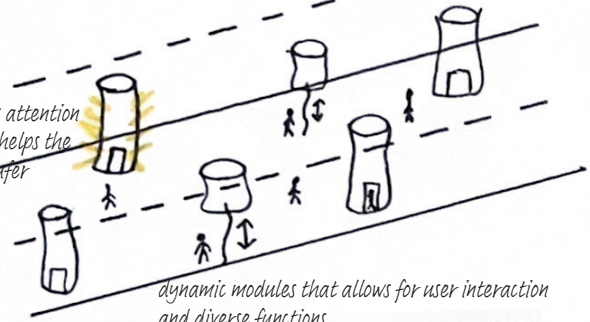
inflatable lightweight structure
"frames" the urban void



mobility - cyclical process

ILLUMINATE PARIS!

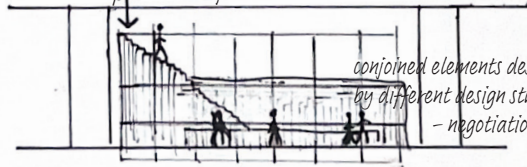
light draws attention
to void and helps the
space feel safer



dynamic modules that allows for user interaction
and diverse functions

HOUSE 2 - COUNTER CITY

close relationship with the infrastructure



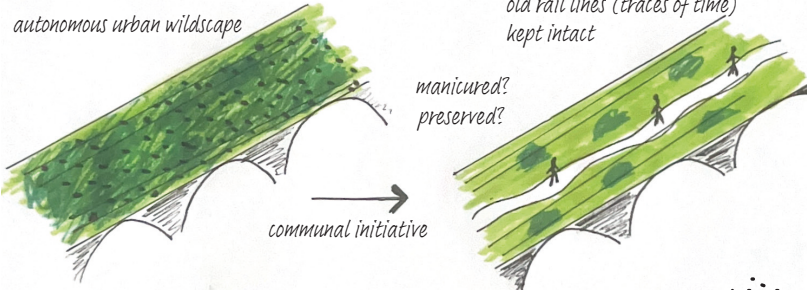
conjoined elements designed
by different design studios
- negotiation of space

recyclable timber - cyclical process

HIGH LINE

autonomous urban wildscape

old rail lines (traces of time)
kept intact



manicured?
preserved?

communal initiative

PARC HENRI MATISSE

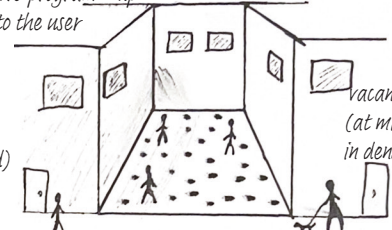
"third landscape"
elevated from the rest
of the park and
inaccessible to people



= autonomy
(unprogrammed)

ONDI

NO program - up
to the user

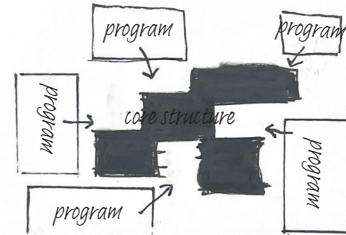


vacant rental space
(at minimum rates)
in dense urban fabric

simple and
flexible rules

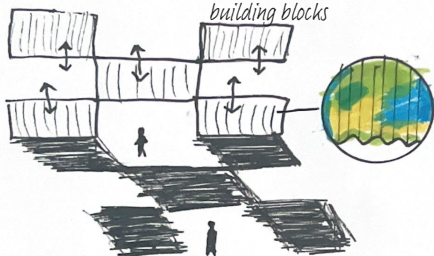
WOODVALE HUB

different programs can connect
to the core structure



DUBLIN PARLOUR

reconfigurable and adaptable
building blocks



encouraging appropriation
through materiality of
containers (graffiti etc.)

shadowplay inviting integration of varied art forms

○ design concepts proposed by one of the sources
 (Rethinking the In-Between: Designing with a socio-ecological approach to activate the potential of Terrain Vague spaces.)

◇ design concepts proposed by the other source

multiscalarity



connecting



ephemeral



indeterminacy































diversity



	<u>PROJECT IN URBAN VOID</u>	<u>YEAR/DURATION</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>SCALE</u>
<i>same spatial conditions as chosen site</i>	FOLLY FOR A FLYOVER/ ASSEMBLE STUDIOS	2011 (9 WEEKS)	LONDON	SMALL
	ILLUMINATE PARIS!/ 1WEEK1PROJECT	2018 (NEVER BUILT)	PARIS	SMALL
	SPACEBUSTER/ RAUMLABOR BERLIN	2009 (10 DAYS)	NEW YORK	SMALL
	HOUSE 2 - COUNTER CITY/ ALICE	2017 (2 WEEKS)	ZÜRICH	SMALL
<i>examples taken from literature</i>	THE HIGH LINE	2009-	NEW YORK	MEDIUM
	ONDI	2010-	TOKYO	SMALL
	PARC HENRI MATISSE/ GILLES CLEMENT	2001-	LILLE	MEDIUM
	DUBLIN PARLOUR/ LiD Architecture	2009 (NEVER BUILT)	DUBLIN	BIG
	WOODVALE HUB/ LiD Architecture	2009 (NEVER BUILT)	BELFAST	SMALL

proposed by both sources design concepts proposed by one of the sources
 (Disordering Public Space: Urban wildscape processes in practice.)

registration of change mobility participation performative properties incompleteness

KEY CONCEPT	MAIN DESIGN CONCEPTS				
PARTICIPATION					
MULTIFUNCTIONAL MODULES					
CITIZEN LABORATORY					
NEGOTIATING SPACE					
REGENERATION					
FLEXIBILITY					
"THIRD LANDSCAPE" <i>term coined by Clement, meaning areas that are neither pure nature nor man-made</i>					
ADAPTABLE CIVIC SPACE					
PLUG-IN DESIGN					

intermediate spaces, mediating between infrastructure and local urban scale

temporary construction

participatory construction process

supports multiple functions

mobile, cyclical system

hosts discussions and workshops aiming to involve the local community in urban planning

providing local function (green space) but also urban functions (e.g. walkways)

biological diversity

community-led initiative

not erasing the history of the city (keeping old rails visible)

letting spontaneous processes unfold (human) - UNPROGRAMMED

letting spontaneous processes unfold (non-human)

encouraging performative art forms

allowing gradual and adaptable development

REFLECTIONS

As previously described, the reference projects are all quite different in regards to key concepts, geometries, design concepts, etc. They also have a lot in common.

What many of the reference projects share is that their interventions in the respective voids don't seek to impose a permanent solution or resolve a single, defined problem. Instead, the aim of many of these projects is to prompt a rethinking of these spaces, to challenge assumptions about their supposed "uselessness", to demonstrate how such spaces can respond to the constantly changing needs of users.

The projects did not approach the pre-existing voids as "tabula rasa" - blank slates to be overwritten and filled. Instead they acknowledged inherent values of each site and took care to preserve them.

One specific project is particularly interesting to highlight, in relation to the potential clash between "architecture" and "void": the **High Line**.

The public park, as it is known today, was a project launched by nonprofit organization "Friends of the High Line", aimed to preserve this piece of disused railway infrastructure in Manhattan that was threatened by demolition.

Before this redevelopment/renovation, the abandoned railway was, in every sense of the word, an urban void, an urban wildscape, a *terrain vague*, dominated by free growing, spontaneous vegetation. It served as a place for both out-of-place plants, allowing the trespass of biodiversity through the fissures of the concrete, and out-of-place bodies, enabling the trespass of people and behaviours situated in the the fringes of society (Millington, 2015).

Today's public park still carries traces of the past, for example the old rails, and its landscape design retains many of the species originally found on the abandoned rail bed.

Critics, however, argue that the High Line has become a highly manicured park in which the former 'chaos' of the wildscape has been carefully ordered by designers, with its "transgressive" socio-ecological potentials effectively removed. The park has also served a role in the ensuing gentrification in the surrounding neighborhoods. (Barron, 2013).

According to Millington (2015, pp. 2329) "reading the High Line through the lens of *terrain vague* demands that the site's renovation be seen as an act of wholesale dislocation of the specific materialities of its pre-renovation landscape."

The designers, however, claim that the redesign still evokes a spirit of transgression, that it retains the relevant qualities of the original wildscape (Millington, 2015).

It is of course not easy to answer who is right and who is wrong, and perhaps it's the discussion itself, and the design dilemma at the core of it, that is of the greater interest.

Ultimately, it depends on the intentions of the designer. However, if the designer is working from the concept of *terrain vague* it's clear that they should exercise caution to avoid over-designing and permanently altering the site's character.

The background of the page is a complex, abstract pattern of yellow lines of varying thicknesses. These lines form a network of irregular shapes and paths, resembling a stylized map or a technical drawing. The lines are primarily yellow, with some areas where they overlap or cross, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is a dynamic and somewhat chaotic visual field.

ANALYZING THE SITE

THE SITE

The chosen site is an urban void situated within an underpass underneath Gamlestadsbron, a long bridge stretching across Sävveån, serving motor traffic.

The structure of the bridge extends above a dispersed network of other similar voids, fragmented by vehicular (cars, trams) and pedestrian infrastructure.

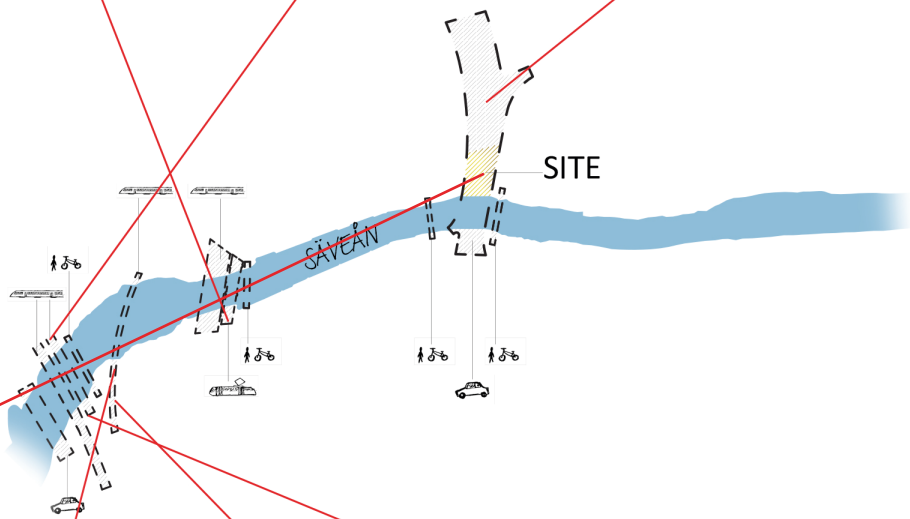
There are a lot of similar sites dotted around Gamlestaden. It's a highly fragmented part of Gothenburg, with large industrial sites and road and rail infrastructure dividing it.

Many voids exist in this intersection between road and rail infrastructure and Sävveån.

Other sites nearby, however, show signs of use and appropriation - be it by nature or graffiti taggers.

There are no such traces on the chosen site. Its potentials remain very much untapped, and the site is truly a "void".





SCALE 1:3000

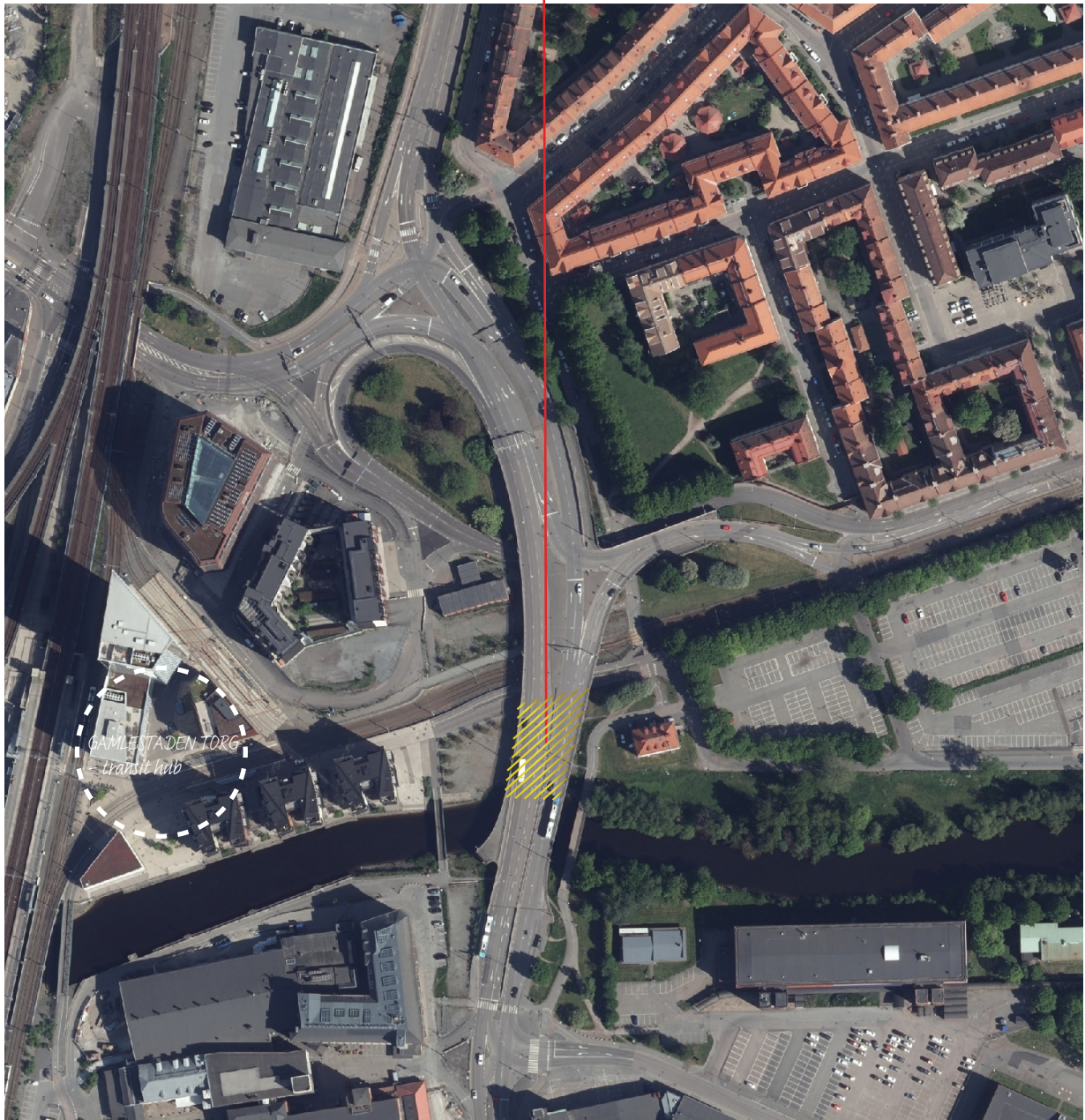


The site sits in an interstitial place in the urban fabric and is crossed by informal pedestrian flows, mainly towards or from the nearby transit hub at Gamlestads Torg.

People occasionally pause or linger briefly beneath the bridge, but these moments of occupation are short-lived.

For analyzing the site, it is **necessary** to linger. Linger in a liminal space, that appears intended only to pass through, is a strange feeling. Not only do you gain a new perspective on the space itself, but also on the city that surrounds it.

SITE



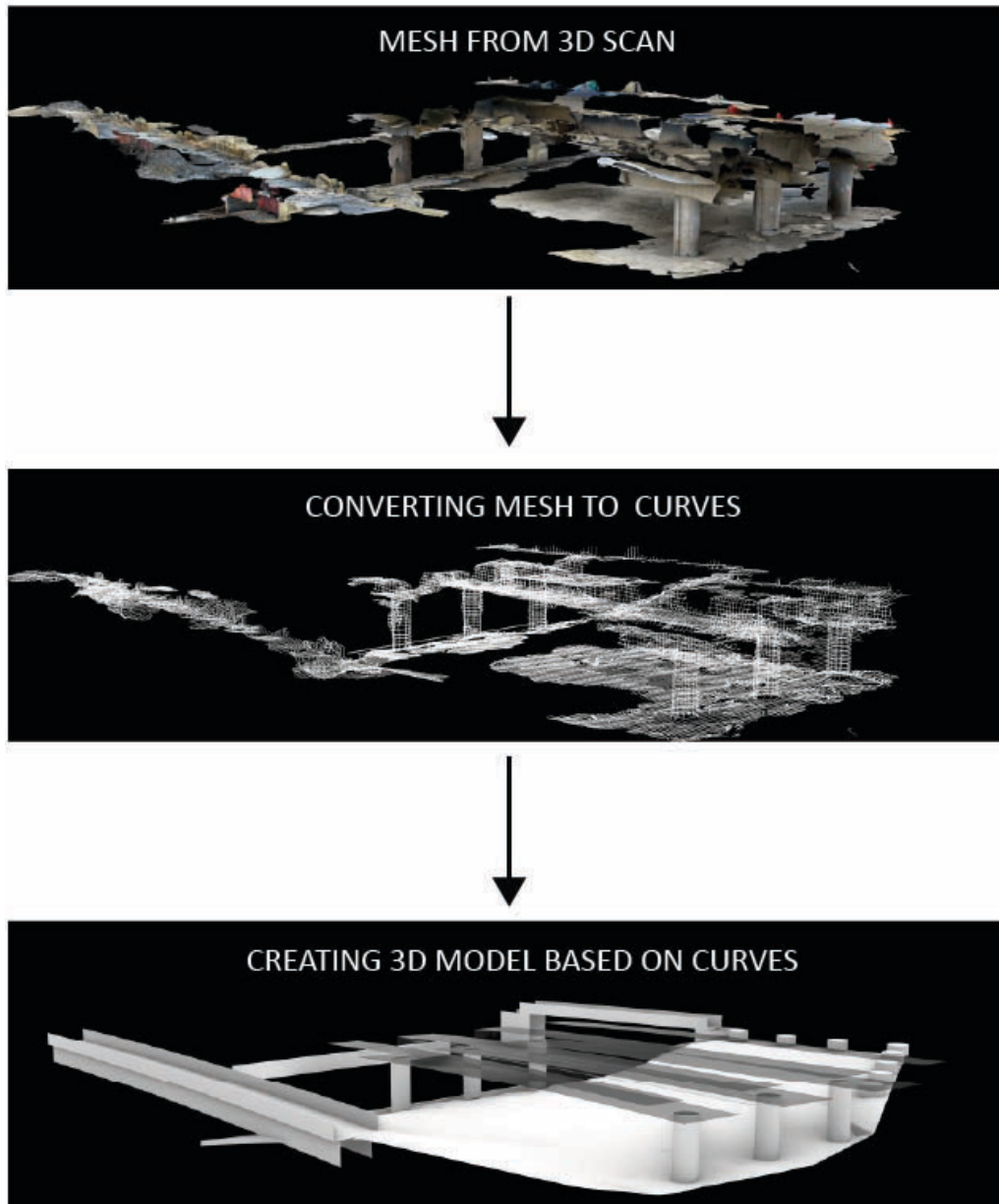
MAP: LANTMATERIET.SE

SCALE 1:2500

SCAN

Scanning the underpass (the structure of the bridge above, the terrain, as well as parts of the immediate surroundings like the two adjacent pedestrian bridges) was an essential step in the site analysis. The scans, made using the phone application Polycam, enabled the extraction of precise geometric data representing the terrain and the bridge structure.

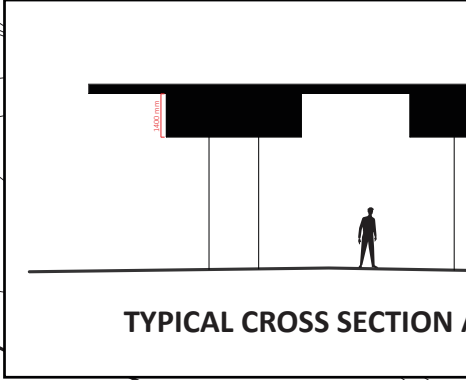
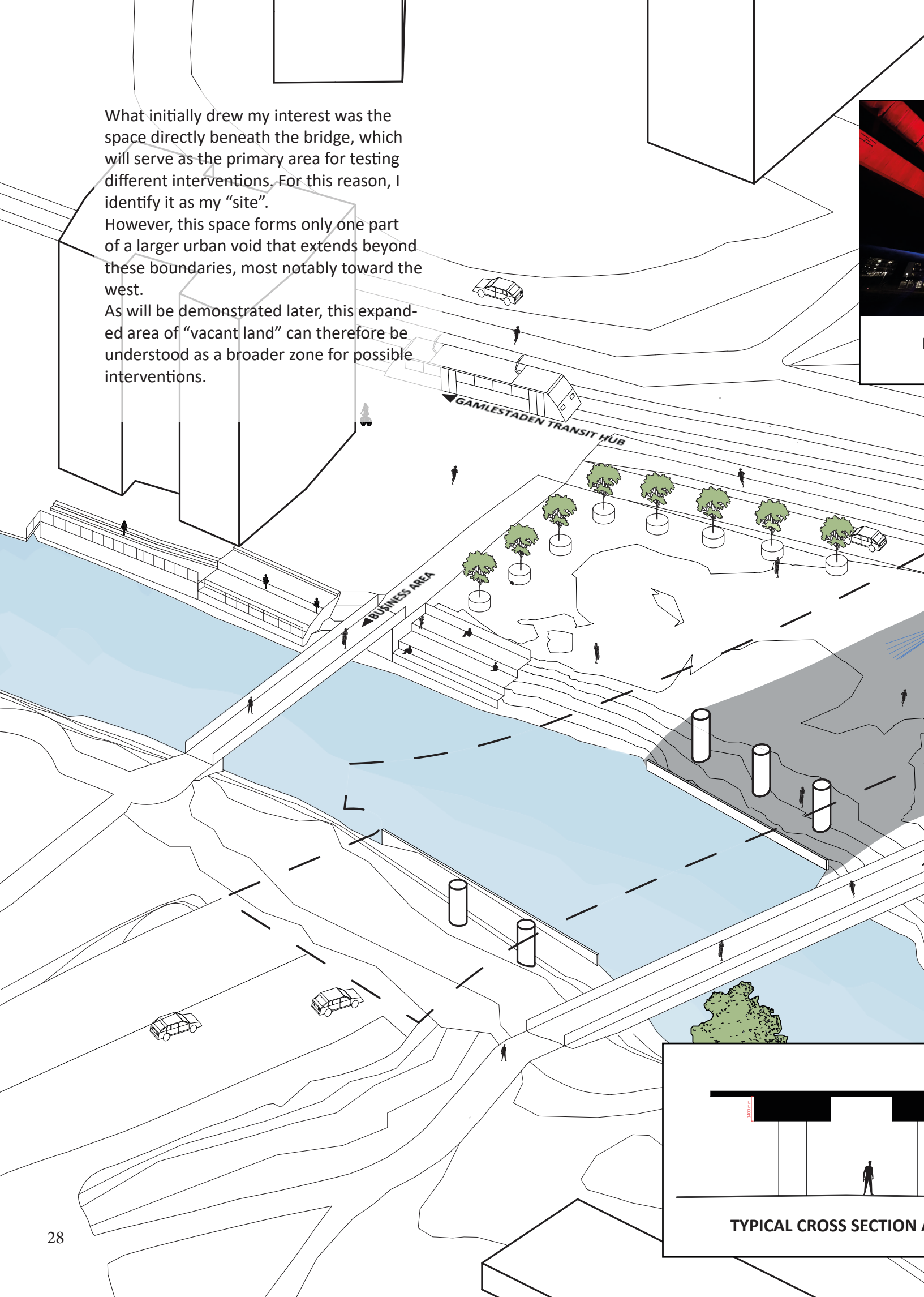
In short, the geometry of the void itself was extracted and developed into a digital 3D-model. Constructing this model lead to accurate drawings and, of course, a greater understanding of the spatial opportunities of the site.



What initially drew my interest was the space directly beneath the bridge, which will serve as the primary area for testing different interventions. For this reason, I identify it as my "site".

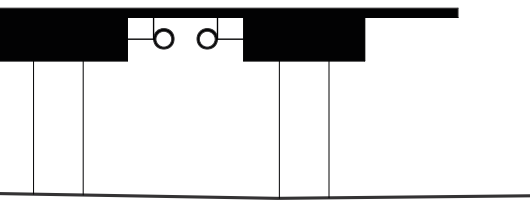
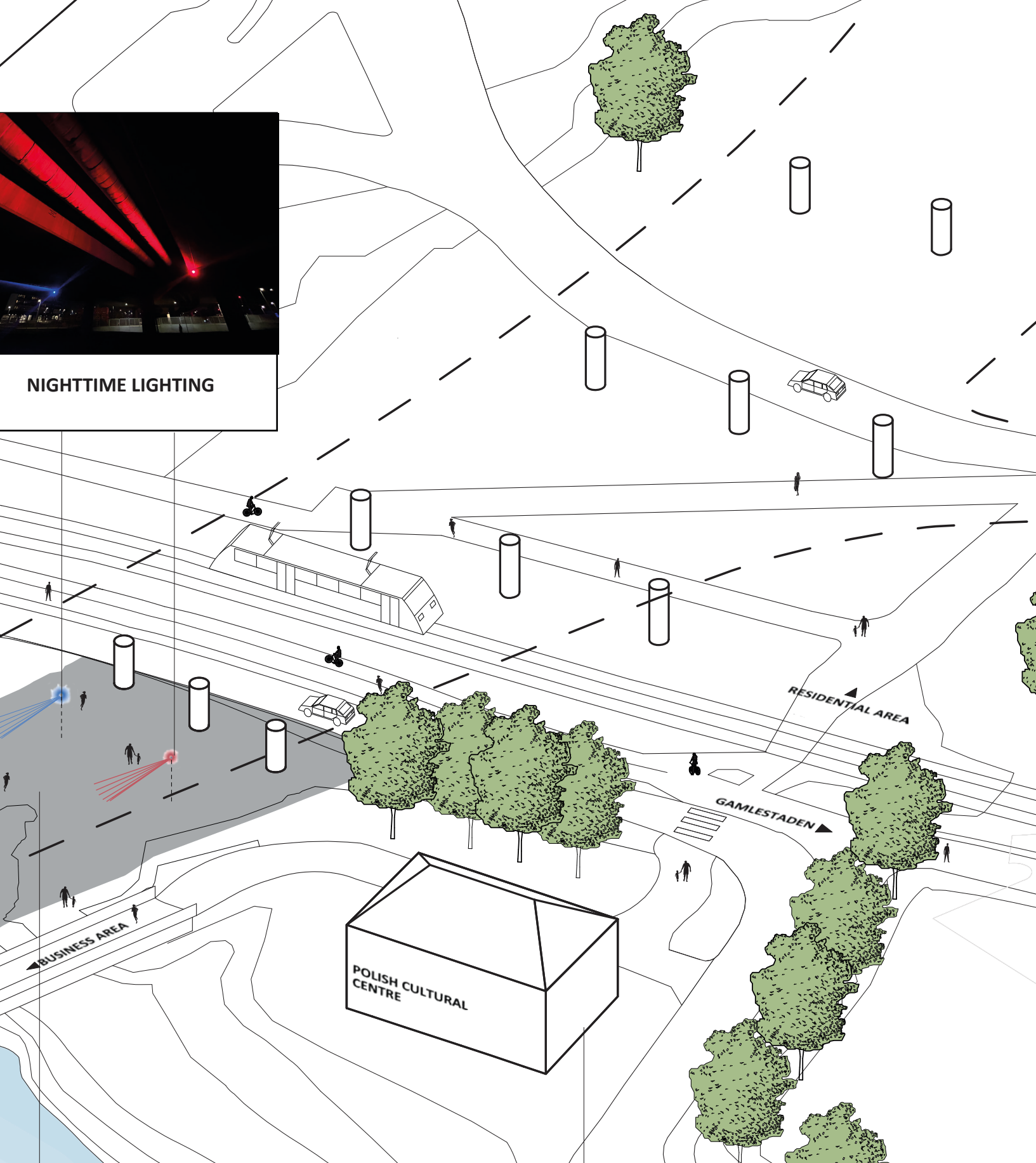
However, this space forms only one part of a larger urban void that extends beyond these boundaries, most notably toward the west.

As will be demonstrated later, this expanded area of "vacant land" can therefore be understood as a broader zone for possible interventions.





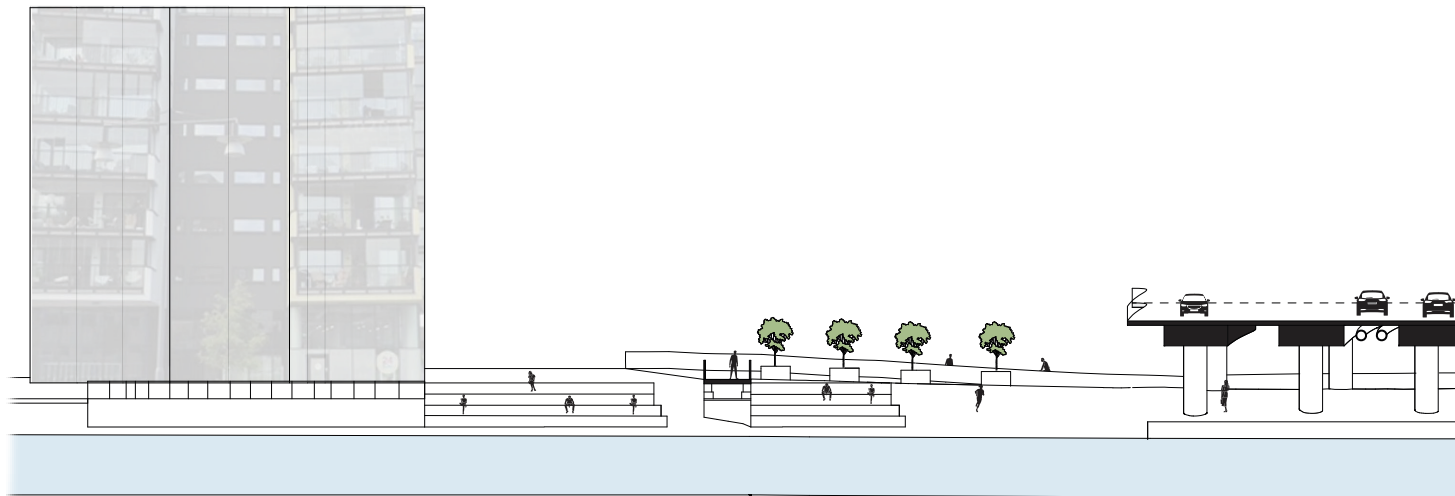
NIGHTTIME LIGHTING



CROSS SECTION ACROSS SITE, SCALE 1:250



POLISH CULTURAL CENTRE

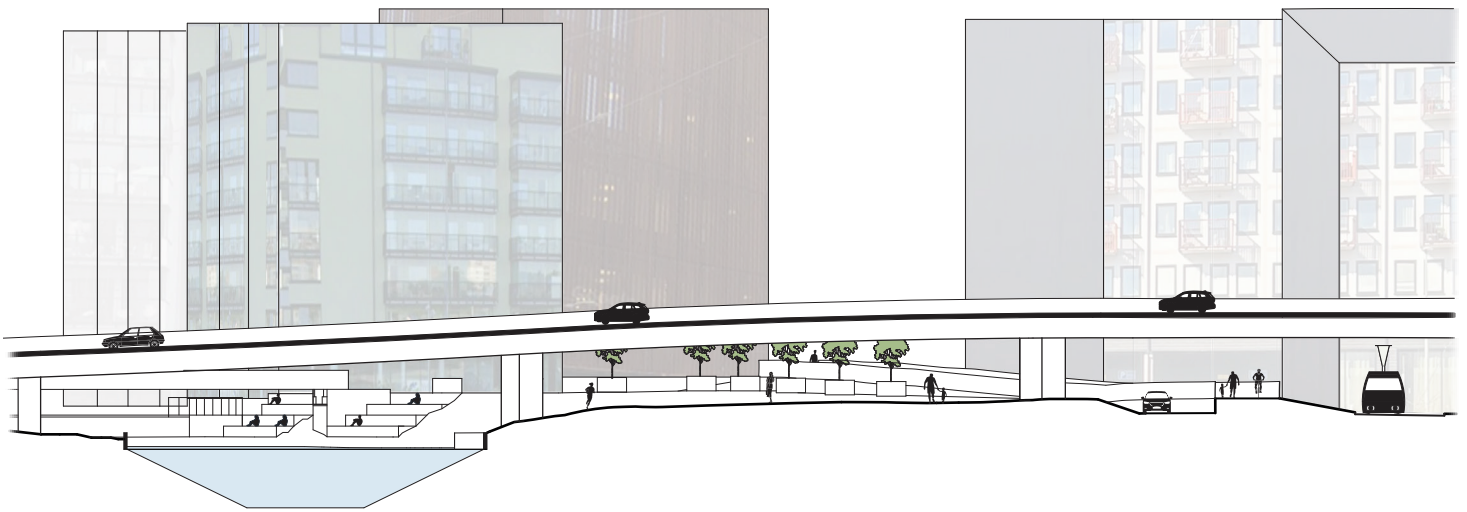
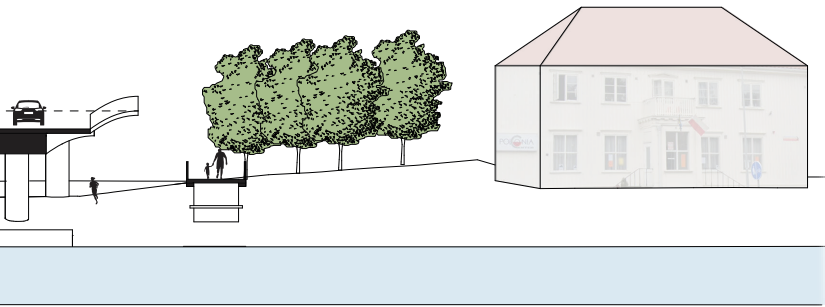


SECTION THROUGH THE RIVER, SCALE 1:500

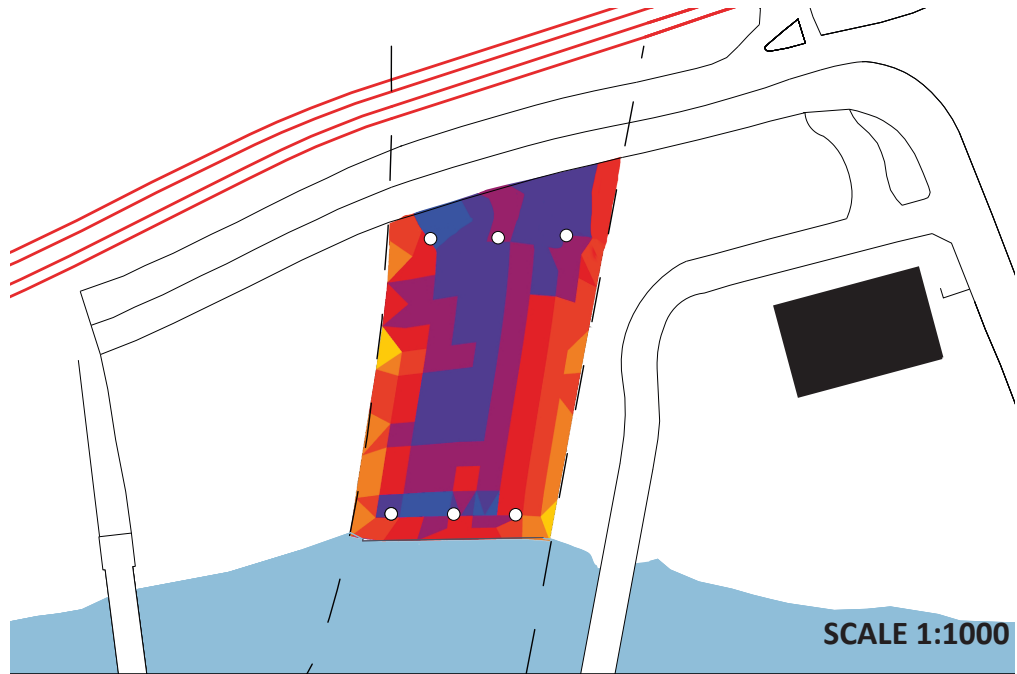
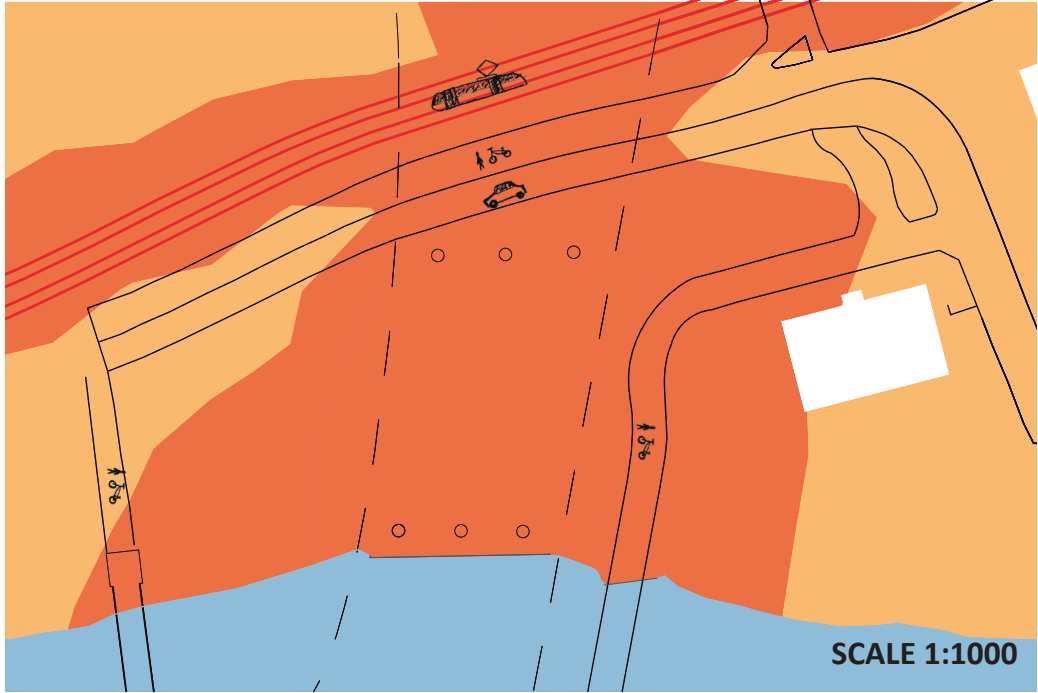
The sections highlight the liminality of the site. In its interstitial position, it exists **inbetween** the built, **inbetween** the planned.

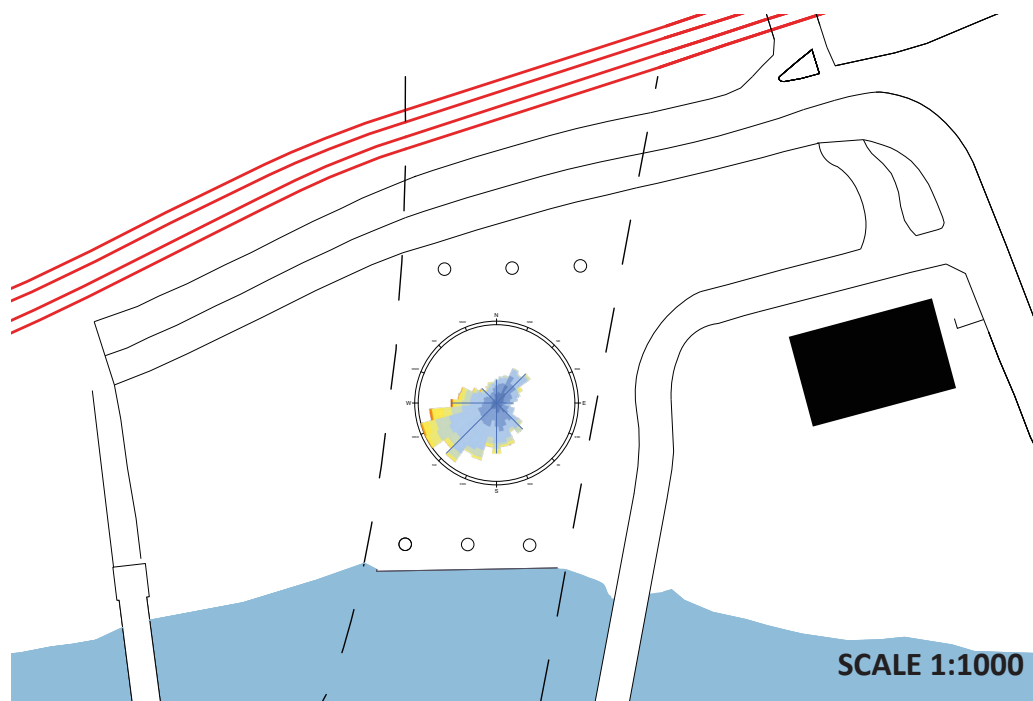
Standing there, it feels like you're on the **outside** looking in.

Feelings of isolation, freedom, autonomy intertwine - forming a singular, powerful impression of the place.



SCALE 1:500





wind directions and speeds

Noise:

The site is quite noisy. The noise, however, doesn't stem from the cars passing by overhead, whose engines are dampened by the concrete of the bridge - the noise instead mainly emanates from the trams passing by every so often, moving to and fro Gamlestads Torg.

Daylight:

Due to its spatial condition as an underpass, the site is shady. For only brief periods each day, sunlight penetrates the underpass's shadowy interior, while the edges are more consistently touched by light.

Wind:

The map presents a wind rose representative of Gothenburg as a whole, and for example shows southwest being the dominant wind direction.

Some site-specific observations can also be made: winds from the south are obstructed by the bridge abutment, while those from the southeast are significantly diminished by surrounding terrain, as well as the nearby pedestrian bridge and riverside vegetation.

PHOTOGRAPHS

“The photographic images of terrain vague are territorial indications of strangeness itself, and the aesthetic and ethical problems that they pose embrace the problematics of contemporary social life. What is to be done with these enormous voids, with their imprecise limits and vague definition?”

(Solà-Morales, 1995, p.121)













“Filmmakers, sculptors of instantaneous performances, and photographers seek refuge in the margins of the city precisely when the city offers them an abusive identity, a crushing homogeneity, a freedom under control. The enthusiasm for these vacant spaces—expectant, imprecise, fluctuating—transposed to the urban key, reflects our strangeness in front of the world, in front of our city, before ourselves”

(Solà-Morales, 1995, p.121)

REFLECTIONS

The conditions of the site vary in nature. They are of course both physical (spatial boundaries, environmental conditions), but also metaphysical.

As shown by the concept of *terrain vague*, the liminal spaces, the interstices, the voids, the margins of the city hold a tremendous amount of potential and value *because* of their emptiness and their relative autonomy from the city.

Solà-Morales writes this in his essay (1995, p.119):

“The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city’s *terrains vagues*.”

You can really feel this potential, this expectancy, when standing on the site, almost like a tension in the air that raises the question: what **could** this place be?

As previously stated, the site, in its interstitial condition, supports informal pedestrian flows. It is currently a place for passing through, and not lingering. It remains largely unused by both people and nature.

This observation invites the following questions: how could I, employing architectural design, make people linger instead of only passing through? How could I attract people (and nature) to the site, **without** fundamentally altering it, and instead depart from its pre-existing conditions? How can I add to the site without taking away from its existing character?

The following design experiments on the site will attempt to answer these questions. They depart from both the literature review and the reference projects, taking into account the previously described design concepts. These concepts aim to align architecture with the concept of *terrain vague*, prioritizing the preservation of the site’s ambiguity. In this context, designating my site as *terrain vague* means that adding fixed programming, for instance, is not an option.

Viewing the site as *terrain vague* also calls for a specific design position: rather than treating it as a problem to be solved, and seeking *definitive* resolution, the focus shifts toward the inherent potential and latent of the site - framing it as a testing ground in which these possibilities can be explored and tested.

Each experiment aims to bring life to the site - to activate it through the application of the design concepts drawn from literature and reference projects.

Returning to the metaphor of *kintsugi*: if the gold, or value, of these spaces lies in the potential life they may contain, then the role of architectural intervention is to create the conditions through which that life can emerge.

So: what sort of architecture could reveal the value of the void?

The background of the page is a complex, abstract pattern of yellow lines of varying thicknesses. Some lines are thin and delicate, while others are thick and bold. The lines intersect and overlap, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is reminiscent of a hand-drawn sketch or a digital line-art style.

DESIGN EXPERIMENTS

SITE POTENTIAL:

this **could** be a nice graffiti spot. **If only** there was some way of reaching the underside of the bridge...



TAGGER

canvas

this **could** be a nice place to escape the heat and the city bustle. **If only** the sound of the passing trams and cars could be dampened...



OLD MAN

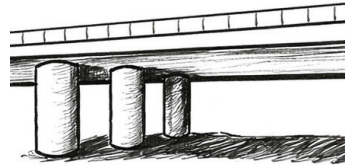
oasis

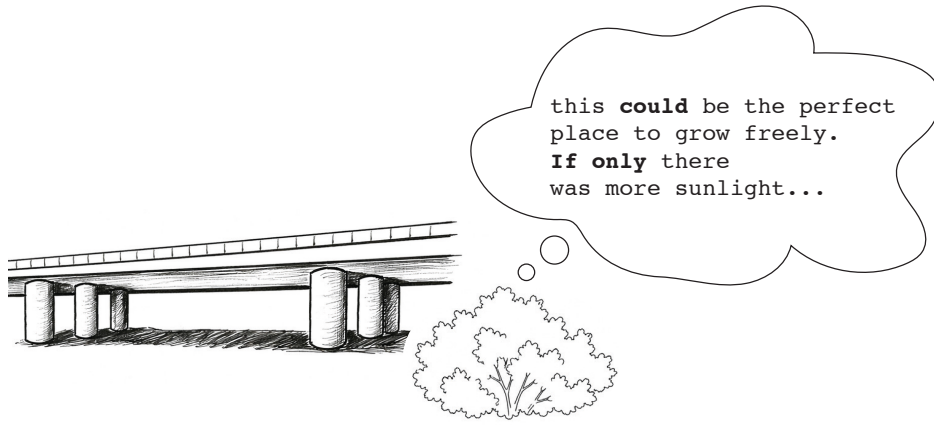
this **could** be a nice place to wait out the rain. **If only** there was somewhere to sit...



MAN IN RAIN

roof

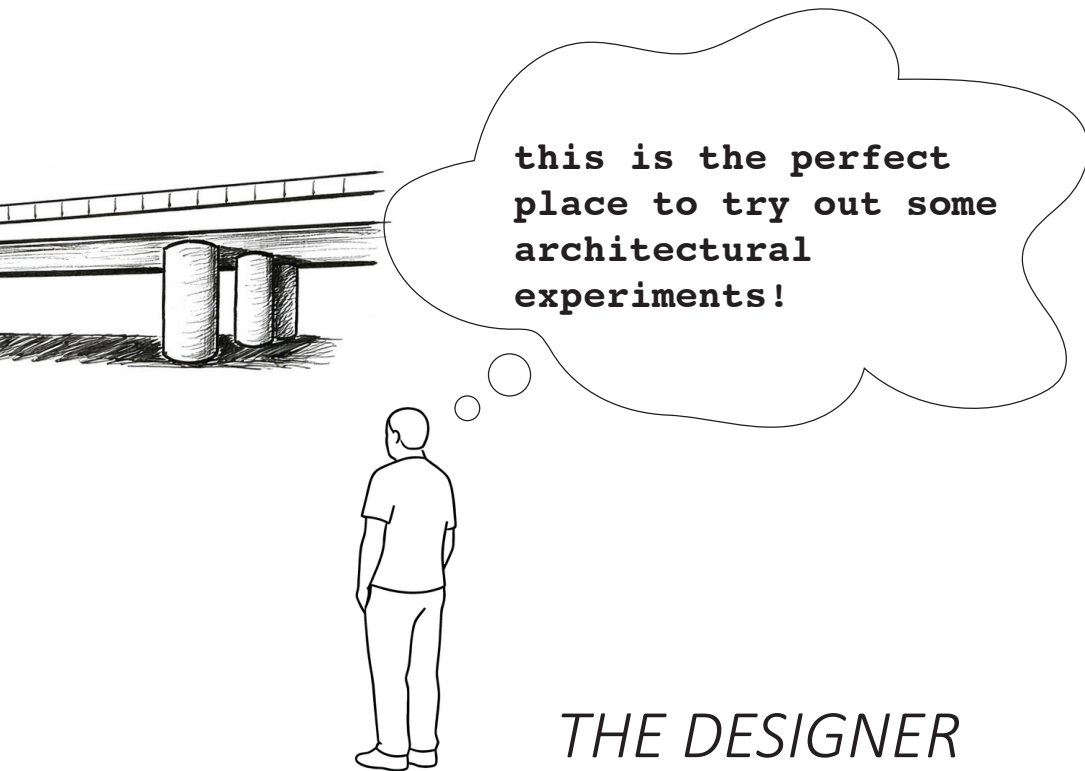




this **could** be the perfect place to grow freely. **If only** there was more sunlight...

SHRUB

autonomy



this is the perfect place to try out some architectural experiments!

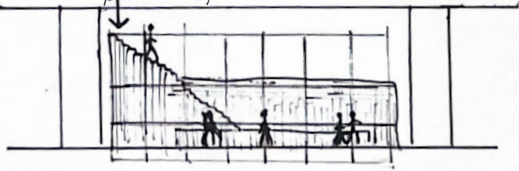
THE DESIGNER

laboratory

IMAGINATION 1

HOUSE 2 - COUNTER CITY

close relationship with the infrastructure



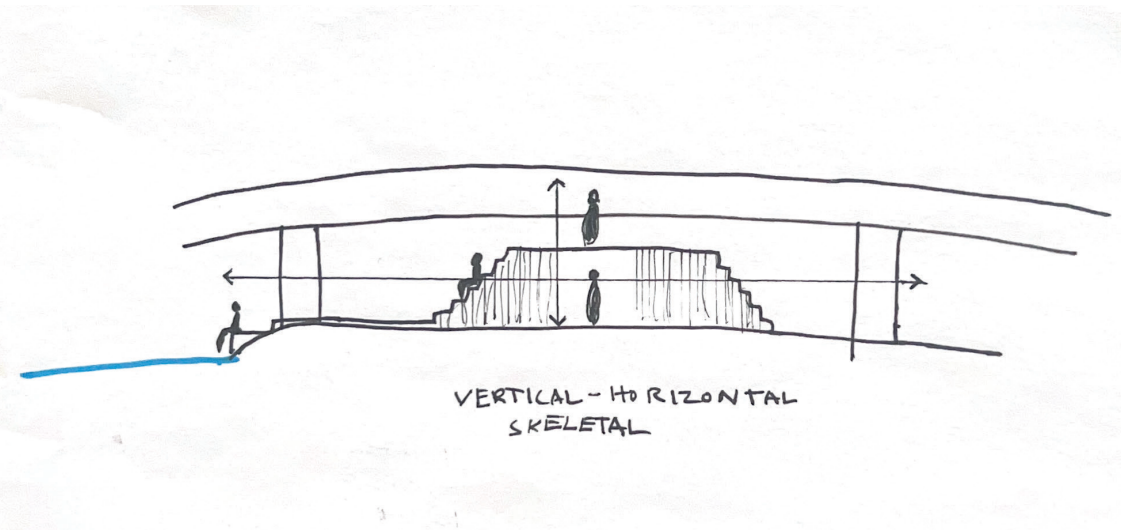
MAIN ELEMENTS:
skeletal, thin, porous geometry

multiple levels (bridge
within touching distance)



connecting

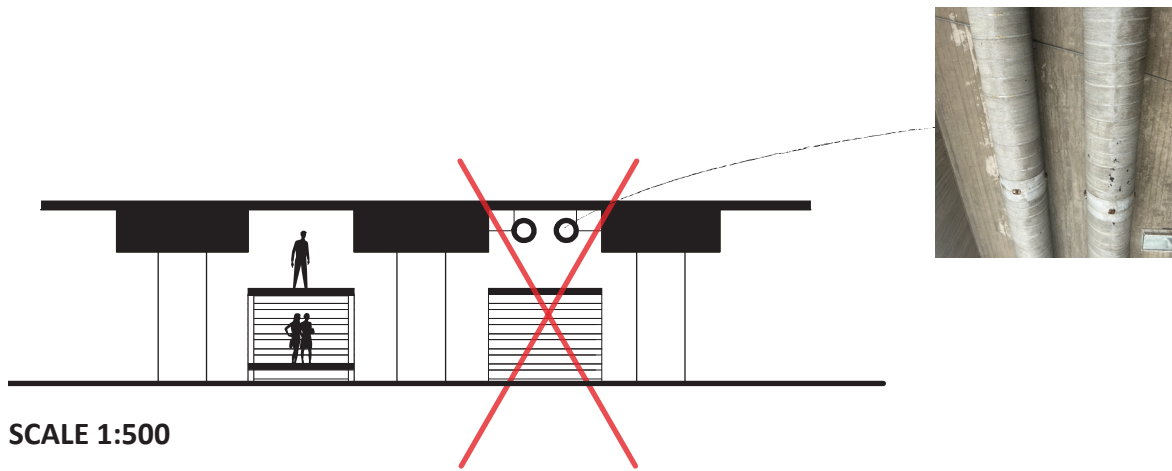
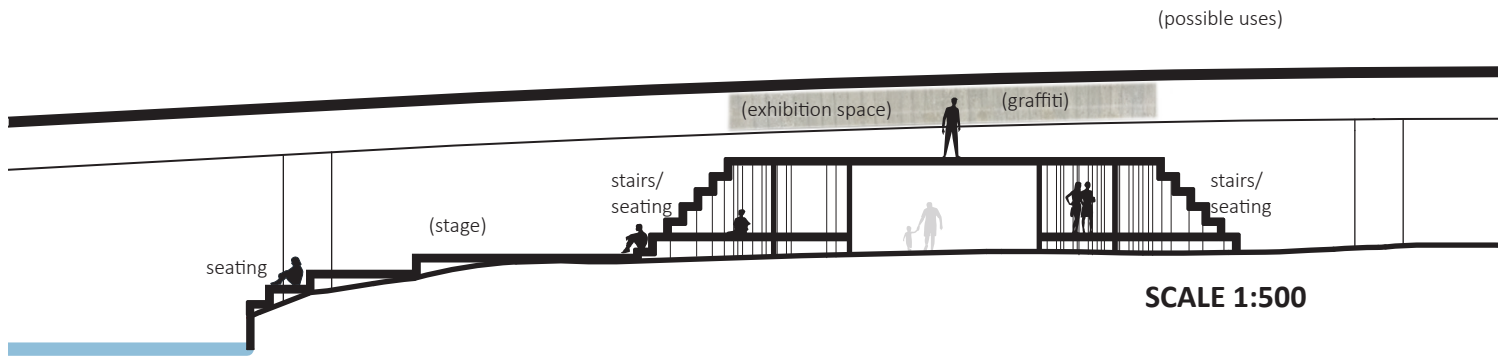
TESTING CONCEPT(S)
ON SITE



VERTICAL - HORIZONTAL
SKELETAL



IMAGINATION 1



DESCRIPTION / EVALUTATION

In this imagination, the geometry of the skeletal ribbon from House 2 - Counter City is tested on the site.

With its porous spatial framework, this structure enables several key qualities.

Firstly, it minimizes disruption to existing desire paths.

Looking at the reference projects that were situated in similar spatial contexts, they all aimed to use these interstices to activate flows and connections.

My site, however, already functions as a connector by supporting informal pedestrian flows, and because this structure only slightly interferes with these flows, the site largely retains its **connecting** quality.

Due to the structure being multilevelled it also creates opportunities for taggers to graffiti the underside of the bridge - previously inaccessible due to its height.

Other proposed functions enabled by the structure (stage, exhibiton space) are similarly **performative** in nature.

The structure also acts as a sort of cohesive element - spatially “stitching together” the site, both horizontally and vertically, while maintaining a high degree of visual permeability due to its lightweight physical presence.

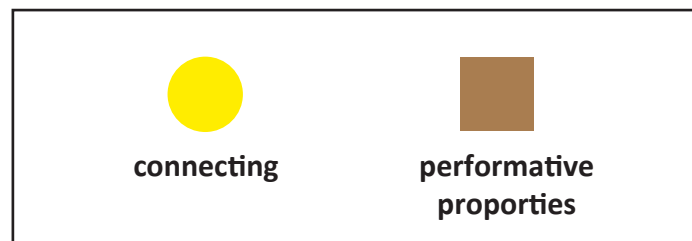
Its thin and open nature however lacks the capacity to significantly expand the range of possible uses on the site.

In this iteration, the structure follows one of the grooves on the underside of the bridge. A parallel groove was also tested, but proved unworkable due to the presence of utility pipes, that not only restricted the available height but also introduced a risk of vandalism if left within reach.

This sort of learning illustrates one of the benefits of treating the site as a testing ground for different imaginations: it allows you to keep learning more about the site, including what is and isn't possible.

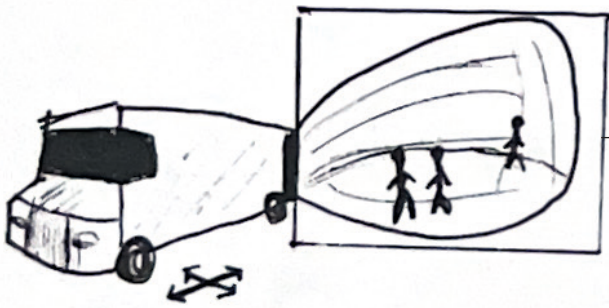
This imagination explores one possible way life could be brought to the site through the application of the design concepts. Other imaginations will test different concepts.

RELEVANT CONCEPTS:



IMAGINATION 2

SPACEBUSTER



MAIN ELEMENTS:

inflatable space

mobile

translucent



ephemeral

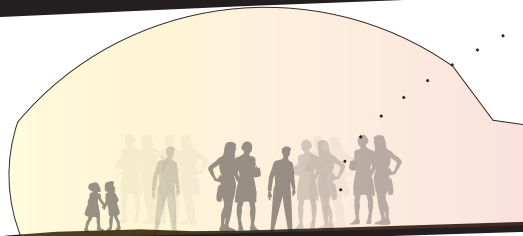


mobility



participation

TESTING CONCEPT(S)
ON SITE



DESCRIPTION / EVALUATION

Raumlabor's Spacebuster stands out as one of the most adaptable and easily reproducible concepts among the reference projects.

The protective shell of the bubble makes it especially suitable for colder conditions, while maintaining a lightweight and mobile structure. This mobility makes it suited to a fragmented urban landscape like Gamlestad, where it could be **moved** between underused spaces and **temporarily** occupy them.

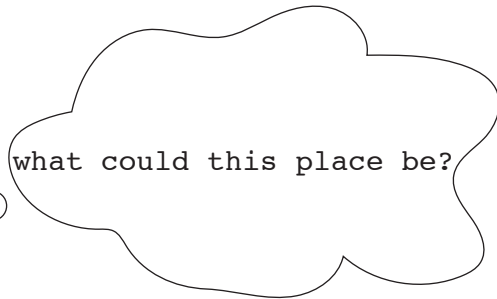
Wherever it appears, the project naturally draws attention to the site it occupies, aligning with the *kintsugi* inspired strategy of highlighting the cracks of the urban fabric. Paraphrasing Raumlabor themselves:

"Space busting is about uncompressing the void, sprouting between the cracks, squeezing the vacuum, enveloping the moment."

In its original form, the prototype hosted activities such as idea workshops, where local development was discussed - for instance, how these types of neglected and residual spaces might be transformed into valuable community assets. These workshops aimed to spark imagination and foster local engagement.

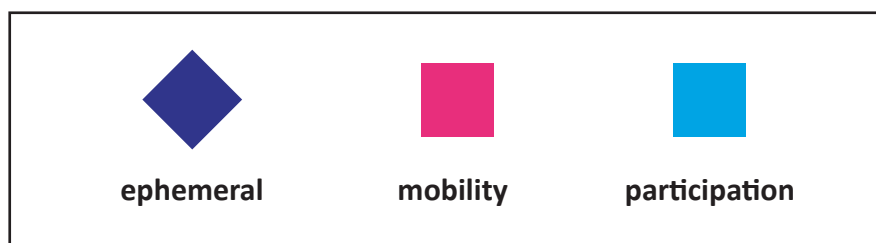
A similar installation beneath Gamlestadsbron could provide a platform for comparable conversations and **community-driven** exploration.

In this sense, the project could almost function as a physical thought bubble asking the question:



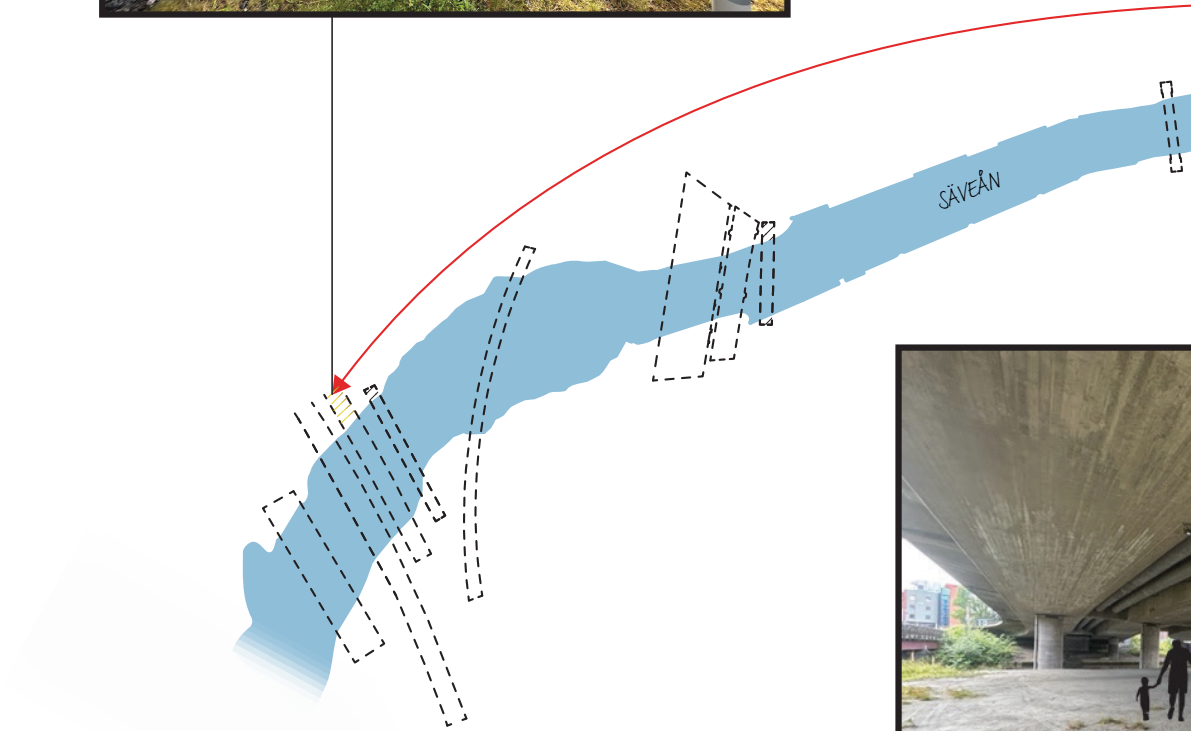
what could this place be?

RELEVANT CONCEPTS:

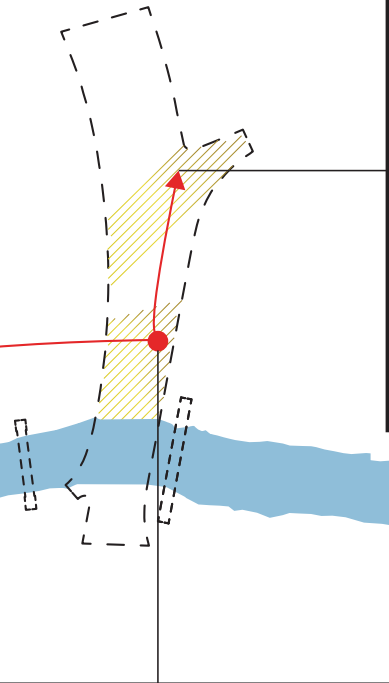


IMAGINATION 2

MOVING BETWEEN, AND ACTIVATING



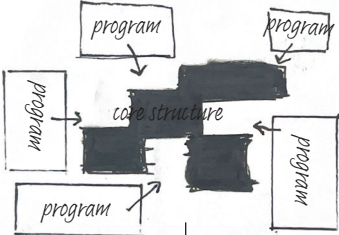
...TING, THE VOIDS OF GAMLESTADEN



IMAGINATION 3

WOODVALE HUB

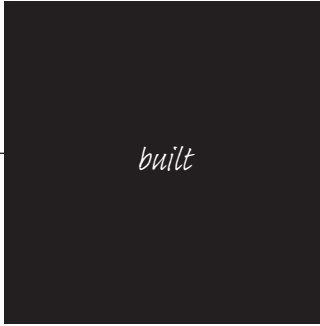
different programs can connect to the core structure



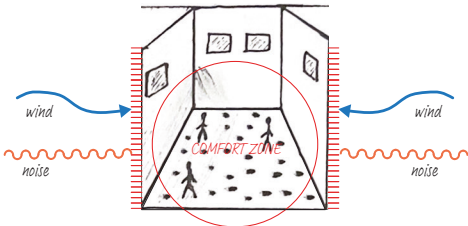
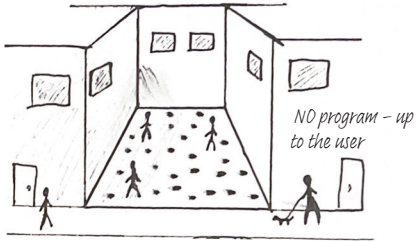
MAIN ELEMENTS:
 permanent core structure
 around which a multitude of activities/ temporary programs can form

incompleteness

 = *autonomy (unprogrammed)*



ONDI



fertile ground for activities/future interventions

FOLLY FOR A FLYOVER



MAIN ELEMENTS:
pavillion

TESTING CONCEPT(S)
ON SITE

MAIN ELEMENTS:

completely unprogrammed, empty
space

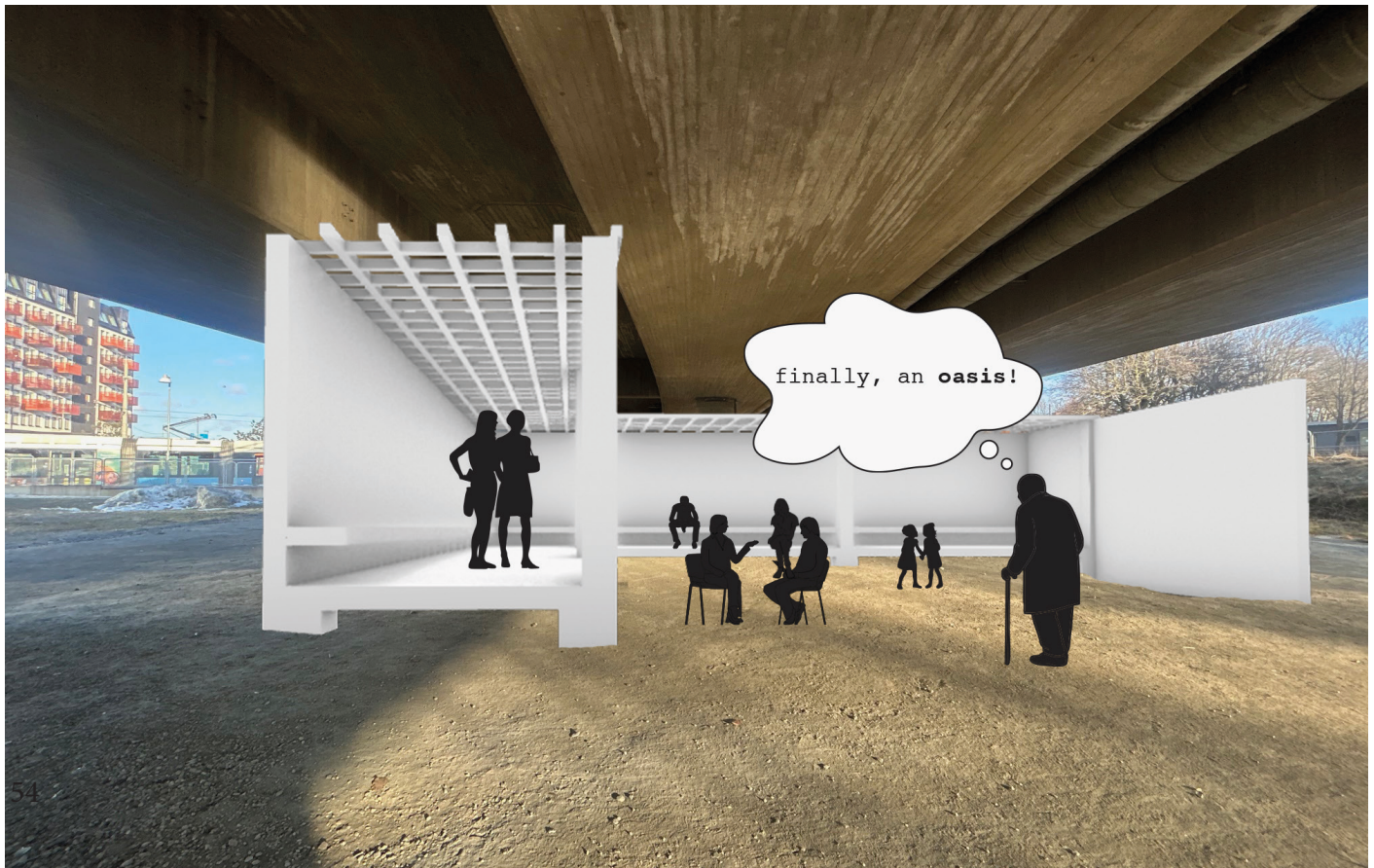
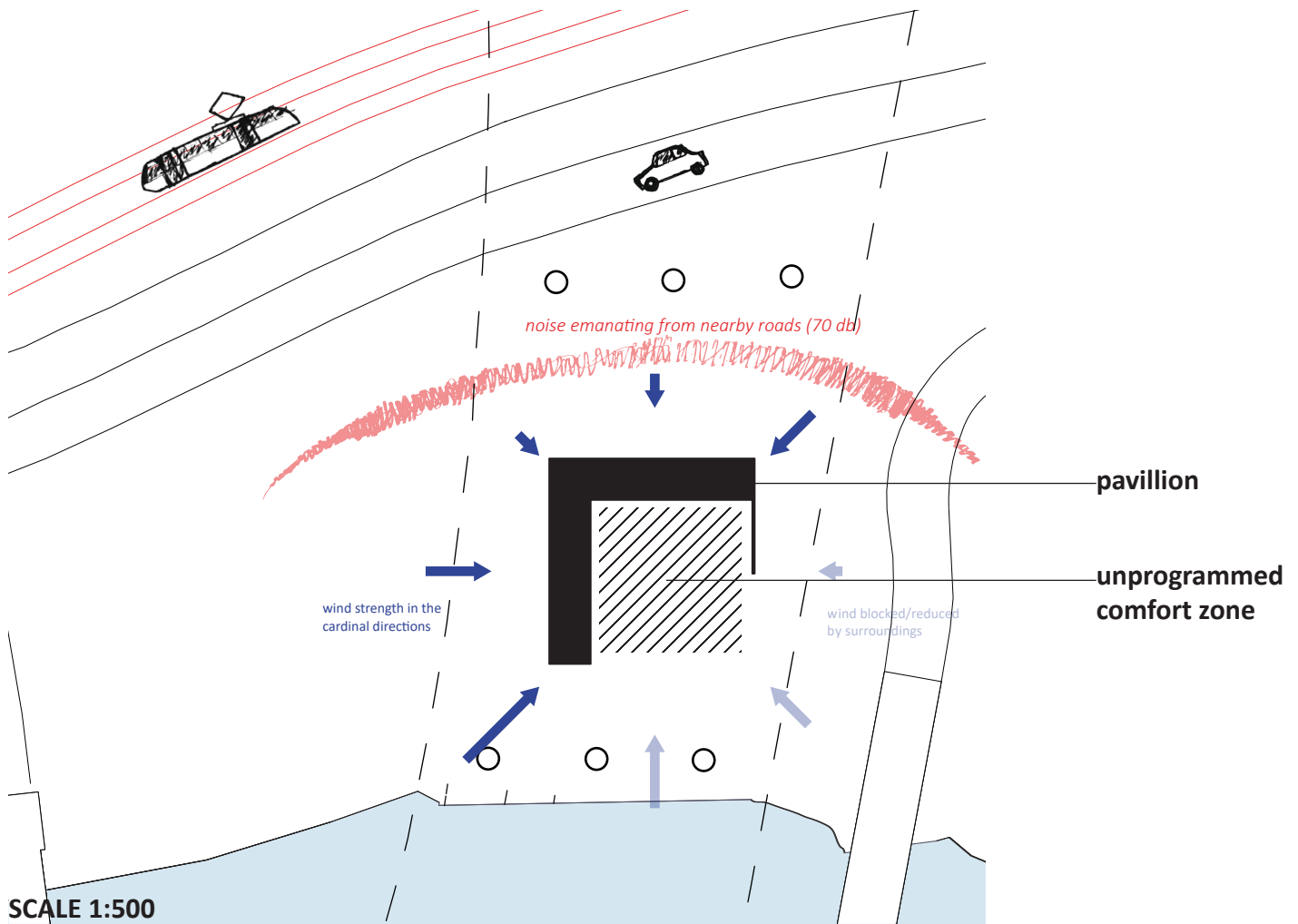
hosting temporary programs decided by
the user

comfort zone thanks to surrounding
built fabric



indeterminacy

IMAGINATION 3



DESCRIPTION / EVALUATION

This imagination is an exploration about the relationship between the built and the non-built. How could the built reinforce the qualities of the non-built, of the *void*?

Noise, primarily from passing trams, is one of the site's main challenges. While the sound of vehicles moving overhead is largely dampened by the bridge's concrete, Gamlestadens Torg's role as a transit hub means that trams pass frequently, creating an obstacle that limits potential uses of the space.

In this imagination, a pavillion structure encloses a mini-void, that's sheltered from both noise and wind, forming an unprogrammed comfort zone with the potential to become fertile ground for future activity. In this way, the built aims to increase the potential of the non-built, the non-realized, by creating conditions that make it more inviting to inhabit.

Or, framing this imagination through the lense of the relevant concepts: the pavillion consciously leaves its form **incomplete**, thus leaving room for an **indeterminate** emptiness that lacks a fixed function, but is loaded with potential.

The site, with its "free roof", can already be understood as a kind of comfort zone, offering shelter in a rainy city like Gothenburg. Addressing additional comfort-related issues, can therefore be seen as amplifying a pre-existing quality of the site.

Introducing a relatively solid construction somewhat disrupts existing pedestrian flows, reducing the permeability of the space. Its enclosing geometry also raises concerns about safety. Underpasses are often perceived as unsafe environments, and obstructed sightlines caused by a denser structure like this could further reinforce this negative perception.

RELEVANT CONCEPTS:



IMAGINATION 4

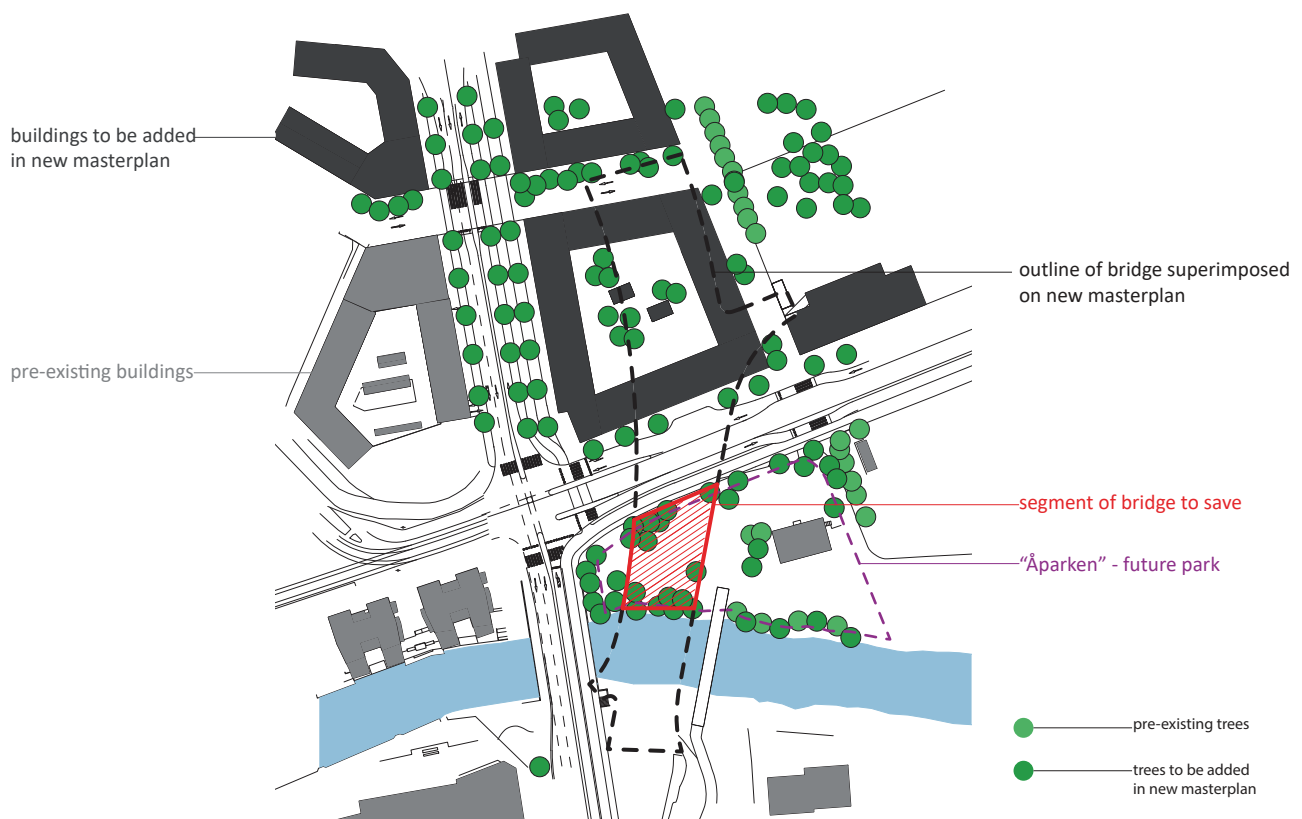
This part of Gamlestaden is facing a lot of redevelopment in the coming years. The existing Gamlestadsbron is planned for demolition before 2035, making way for mixed-use blocks and a new, smaller and lower, bridge across S ave an. This will mean that the present day urban voids underneath Gamlestadsbron (including the thesis site) will disappear.

This imagination proposes a different future - a future where the past is kept alive and woven into the cityscape of tomorrow. Drawing from the themes investigated in the thesis, this imagination invites reflection through a series of questions:

Should we really aim for a future with NO urban voids, when voids demonstrably hold value?

Should we conceal the memory of what was once broken and fragmented?

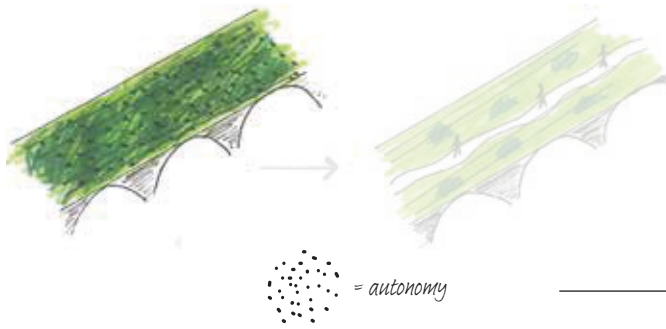
Instead: what if the city were understood as a kind of palimpsest, where different layers of time are allowed to coexist, and even symbiotically influence one another, contributing to a more dynamic and vibrant urban environment?



SCALE 1:3000

HIGH LINE (BEFORE REDEVELOPMENT)

autonomous urban wildscape



PARC HENRI MATISSE

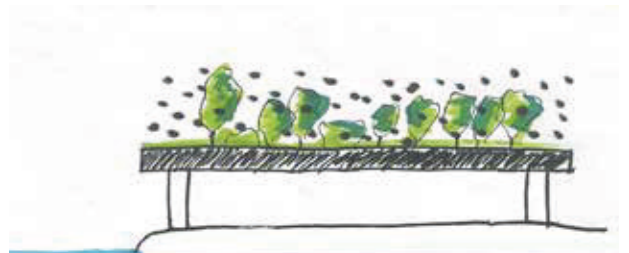
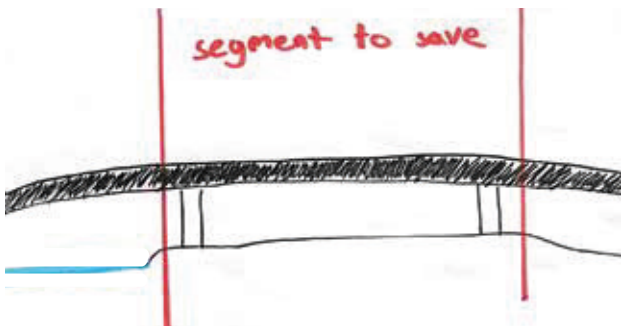
"third landscape"
elevated from the rest
of the park and
inaccessible to people



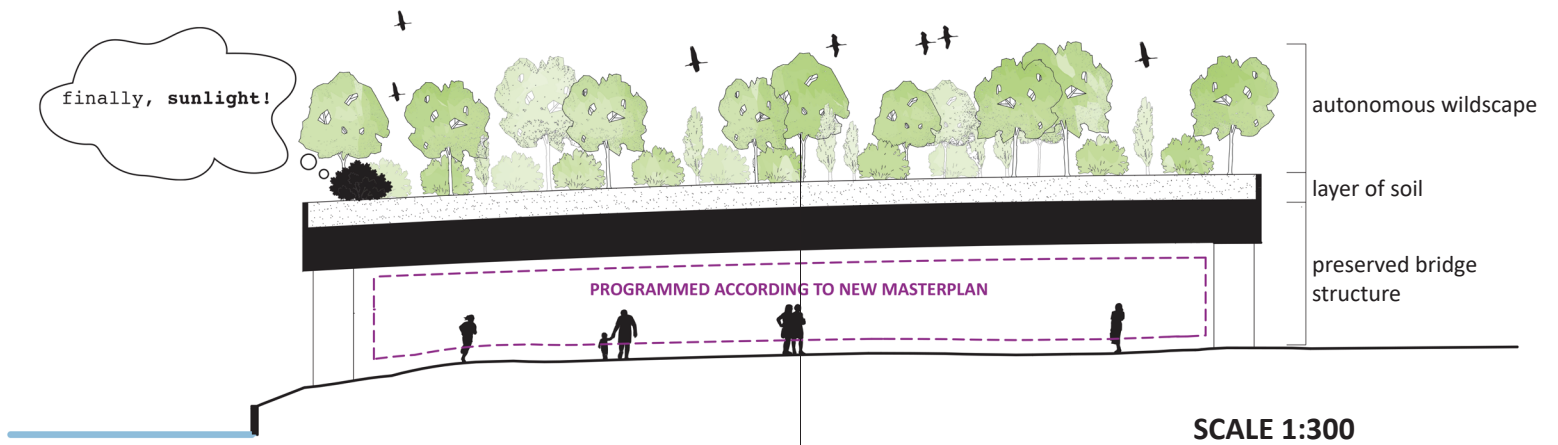
MAIN ELEMENTS:
autonomous nature
"third landscape"



TESTING CONCEPT(S)
ON SITE



IMAGINATION 4



DESCRIPTION / EVALUATION

This imagination preserves a fragment of the bridge, whose shape and location roughly aligns with the thesis site. Such an intervention would relocate the “urban void” from underneath the bridge to its upper surface.

With some additional, smallscaled interventions, such as adding a layer of soil, this new void could give rise to an urban wildscape, à la Parc Henri Matisse or the High Line. A space taken over by nature, allowing a self-evolving ecosystem, free from human interference, to form over time.

The wildscape has the potential to function both as a local oasis for wildlife (birds, bees and other species) and as part of a larger ecological network linking surrounding green spaces across the area, therefore operating on multiple **scales** simultaneously.

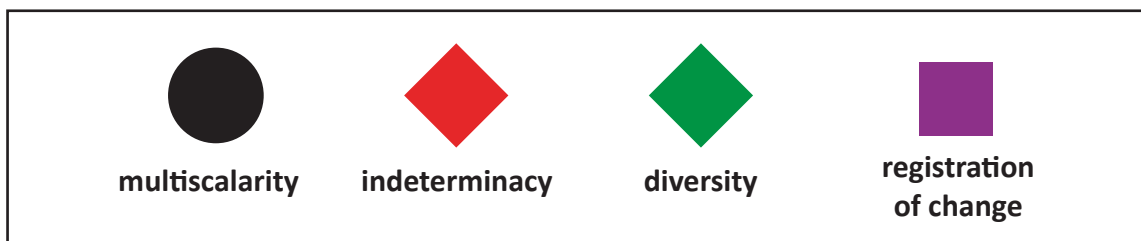
Keeping this fragment of the bridge will certainly shade the future park (“Åparken”) beneath it, and negatively impact its planned programming and vegetation. Nevertheless, the resulting wildscape may prove to be more than an adequate substitute, allowing nature to thrive on its own terms, and potentially supporting a highly **diverse** ecosystem.

This imagination embraces **indeterminacy**, allowing vegetation and wildlife to shape the space organically over time.

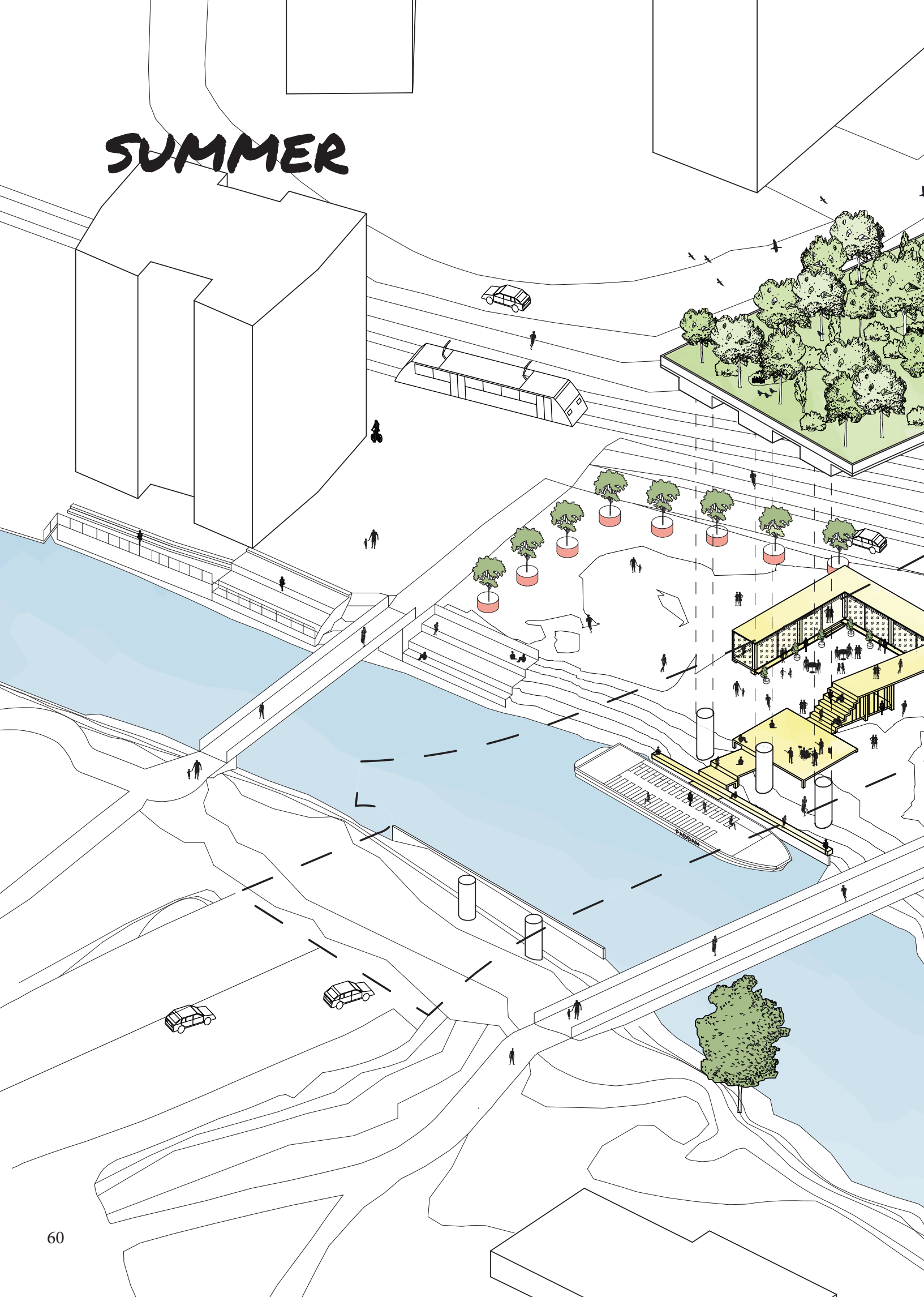
Nature, autonomous from human control, growing and thriving on top of this urban artefact, this physical remnant of the past. A system that reconciles the concepts of memory and **change**.

Ultimately, this imagination in some way demonstrates the main theme of this entire thesis: that the condition of fragmentation can bring value to the inhabitants of the city - be it people or nature.

RELEVANT CONCEPTS:



SUMMER





IMAGINATION 1

IMAGINATION 3

IMAGINATION 4

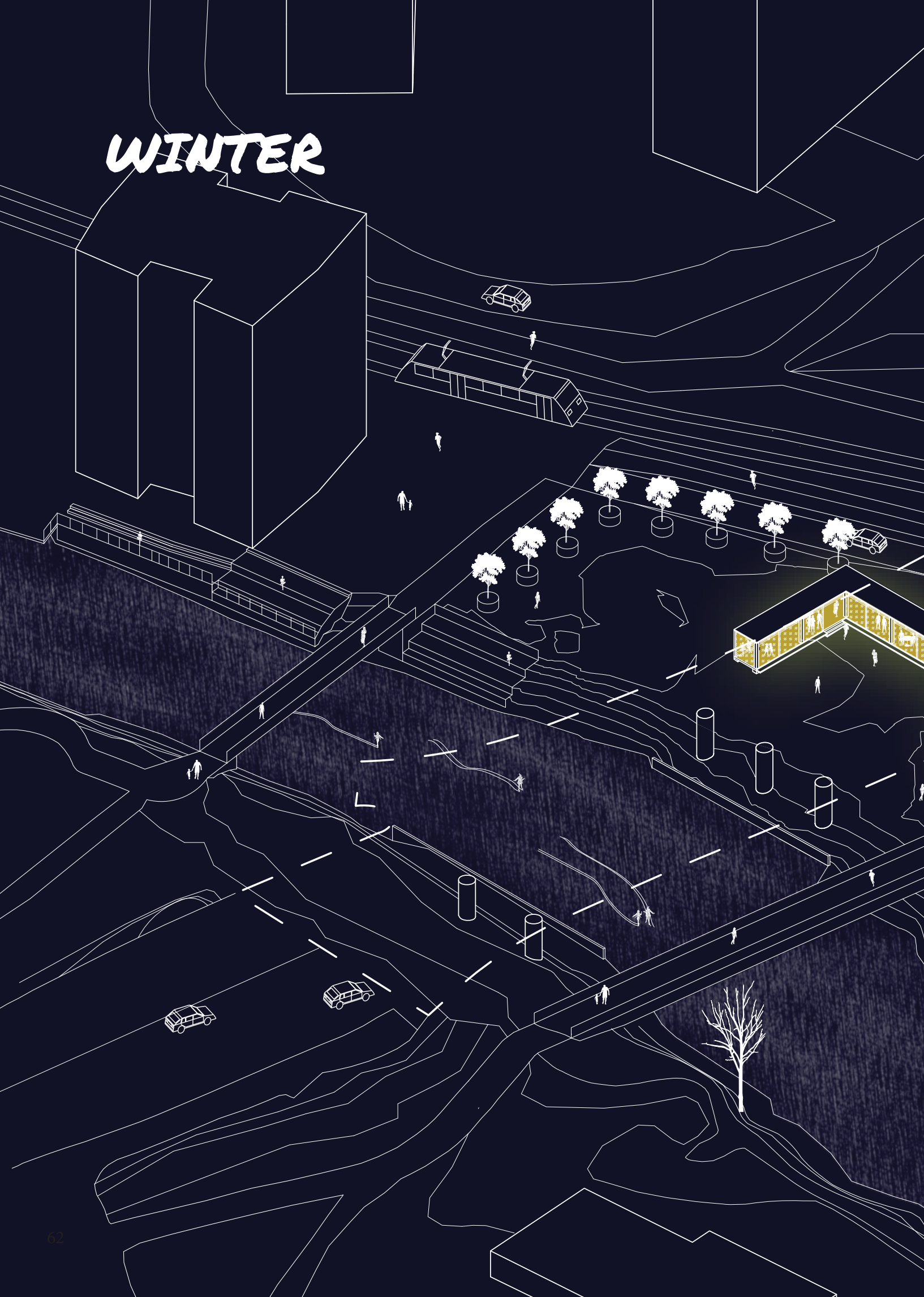
It is possible to imagine the different imaginations co-existing simultaneously. As previously discussed, this could be facilitated by expanding the intervention area beyond the immediate boundaries of the underpass and making use of the entirety of the urban void.

With minor adjustments, such as the addition of a roof and glass partitions forming a protective interior shell, Imagination 3 could be positioned anywhere the intervention area, creating year-round zones of comfort: inside - winter, outside - summer.

Imagination 2, with its protective shell, is best suited to colder conditions, while Imagination 1 is more appropriate for the warmer months of the year. Imagination 4, meanwhile, will naturally thrive and bring vitality to the site during the summer months.

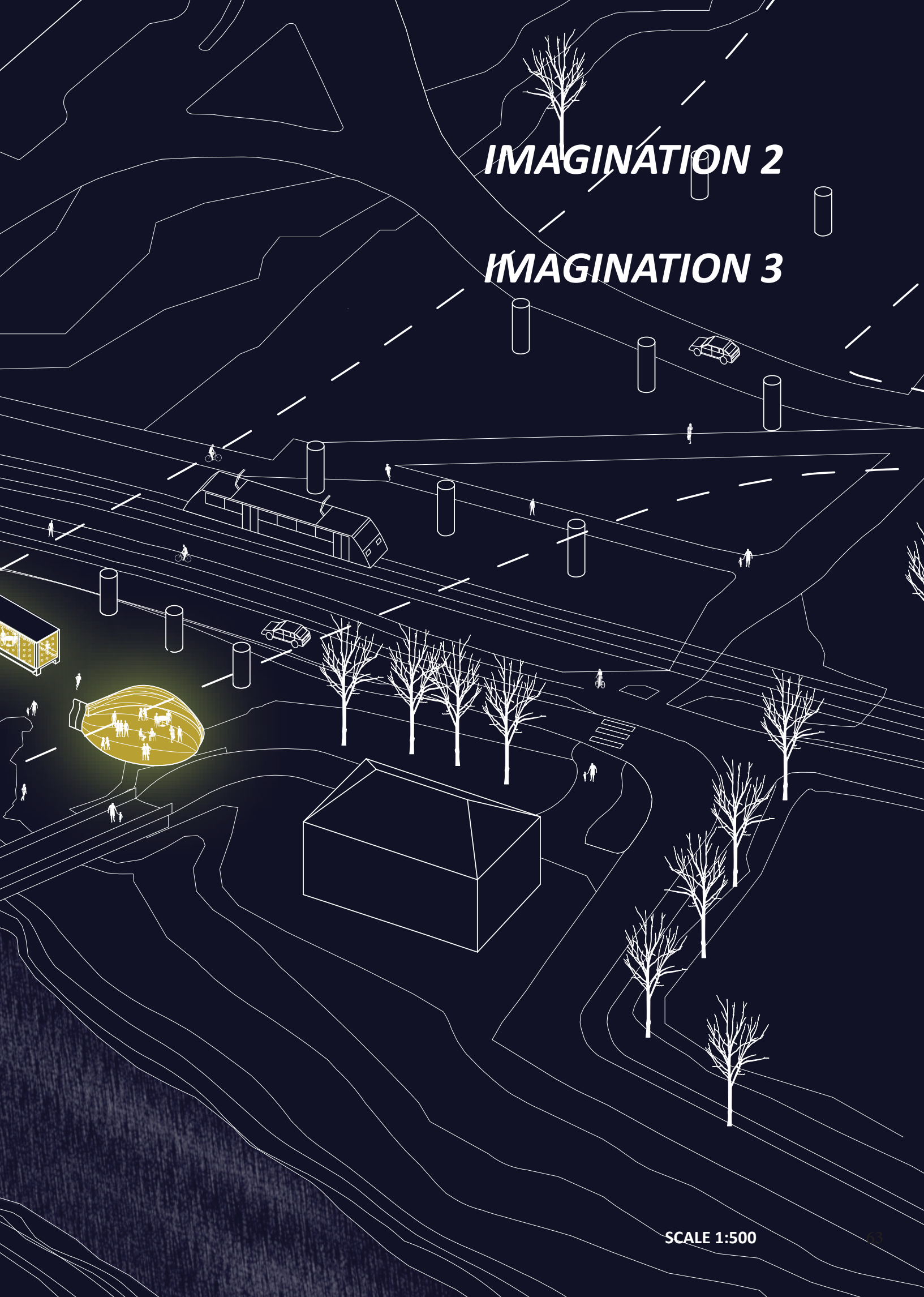
To summarize, the following drawings, representing summer and winter conditions, speculate on the forms of life and activity that these different imaginations could bring to the site across changing seasons.

WINTER



IMAGINATION 2

IMAGINATION 3



SCALE 1:500

CONCLUSIONS / REFLECTIONS

~~WHAT COULD FILL THE VOID?~~

WHAT COULD REVEAL THE VALUE OF THE VOID?

Had I not experienced that epiphany when walking past the underpass in Gamlesta-den, my first instinct today, when faced with an empty, seemingly dysfunctional space, might have been to ask that first question (*what could fill the void?*).

But obviously, after all I've learned since then that question no longer makes any sense.

What does make sense, is acknowledging the potential value of the "empty", and realizing that just because a place doesn't have a clear function doesn't mean it's dysfunctional or useless.

This also means that designers should be more respectful towards the cracks, the voids, the unbuilt - challenging conventional methods when operating in these spaces.

This new question that I asked myself when I starting sketching my imaginations (*what could reveal the value of the void?*) is more in line with Sola-Morale's concept of *terrain vague*, of vacant land that quietly enriches the life of the city.

In this thesis I imagined some possible answers to this question, but I leave it up to other designers to come up with other possible answers in the future.

WHY "IMAGINATIONS"?

The original plan was treating this thesis like any other course, with the final outcome being a very polished and pretty project, grounded in precise drawings. A

project solving the site's inherent dilemma. The further I came in the research process, however, the more I felt like the finality of a "project" clashed against this new understanding of voids I had obtained. Even the word "project" itself felt out of place.

It felt wrong stepping onto the site from a world of hierarchies and order, and pinning down this space that maybe should remain fluid and ambiguous in definition.

I therefore became more and more hesitant to do a conventional project.

In the end, it instead made more sense to treat the site like a testing ground for different ideas, or "imagination".

Producing several imaginations instead of a singular "project" also emphasizes the myriad possibilities presented by an empty space.

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

As a theory, *terrain vague* has the potential to paralyze the architect and trap them in inaction. Working from this perspective not only makes one question the role of the architect, but whether any intervention should take place at all. This was something I occasionally felt myself during the process. It is, of course, a valid and compelling question.

However, pondering that question was not the aim of this thesis. The thesis is instead grounded in research questions that begin from the assumption that architects *can* operate within these types of spaces. And to explore *how* architects might do so, I examined design concepts found in literature and reference projects, bridging architectural design and *terrain vague*, and later allowed these concepts to guide my own design experiments, which had the

very concrete goal of exploring how I could bring life to the site.

I also created a number of dreamer personas - including myself among them - to reveal different potentials within the site. Responding to their needs through the various imaginations became another way of demonstrating how I could bring (or reveal) value to the site.

Altogether, this working process provided a rewarding framework for investigation my research questions: how a site currently devoid of life and activity might be activated through an architectural intervention.

Departing from the learnings from my design experiments, I also propose an additional design concept to expand the approaches already presented in this thesis for how architects can engage with a *terrain vague*.



visual permeability

Imagination 3 explored the idea of creating a more enclosed space with the intention of establishing an unprogrammed zone of comfort. This approach, however, resulted in the partial obstruction of sightlines across the open site, which could make the space feel less inviting and potentially discourage its use.

While concealed and less monitored spaces may attract certain users, they are more likely to exclude a broader public, which conflicts with the ambition of activating the site and bringing life to it. This is particularly important given the existing negative associations often attached to underpasses in relation to safety and surveillance.

Visual permeability simultaneously supports the impression of a lighter architectural touch on the site. Several reference projects already employ this approach, most notably House 2, with its skeletal structure, and Spacebuster, through its transparent inflatable enclosure. Such a design approach also aligns with the intention of maintaining and guiding clear movement flows across the site.

In the end, all of the presented design principles engage with the cracks in the urban fabric with a sense of respect, acknowledging their unique value and qualities. In this way, they can all be seen as forms of urban kintsugi.

Much like a broken vase repaired with gold, the city becomes richer, stronger, and more beautiful when its fractures are embraced.



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AI-Appendix:

Artificial intelligence was used only for the production of a single visual image included in this thesis. The image was generated using ChatGPT. The prompt was “generate a realistic image of a Kintsugi vase”.

STUDENT BACKGROUND

**CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
2020-2026**

Bachelor in Architecture (2020-2023)

**Master Programme in Architecture: Archi-
tecture and Urban Design**

Studios:

Prototypes and Assemblages

Urban Prototypes

**ÉCOLE NATIONALE SUPÉRIEURE d'ARCHI-
TECTURE de PARIS-IA VILLETTE
2023-2024**

Exchange semester

