ear40

[Re]CLAIMING PLACE

Vernacular Practices and Alternative Architectures

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
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Editorial

Architecture is often understood through the language of permanence, authorship, and formal production. Current narratives tend to privilege traditional forms of practice and established modes of development. Yet beyond these frameworks, architecture continually emerges through acts of adaptation, resistance, negotiation, and care. Spaces are [re]claimed not only through construction, but through memory, occupation, representation, and the day-to-day practices of those who experience and inhabit them.

The 40th issue of Edinburgh Architecture Research [EAR40] explores these conditions through the theme [Re]Claiming Place. The contributions collected here examine how architecture is continually [re]imagined outside conventional systems of production, foregrounding practices that emerge from lived experience, cultural memory, collective action, and political tension, among others. Across diverse contexts, this issue asks what it means to reclaim space in moments of uncertainty and transformation, and how alternative spatial practices challenge inherited assumptions about architecture itself.

The issue opens with a reflection on decolonial spatial practices within the South Asian collection at Kedleston Hall. Through a collaborative research project between students and academics, *Decolonising Research* questions how institutional heritage spaces may be reconsidered through decolonial frameworks and participatory forms of engagement. Questions of authorship, positionality, and collective learning establish an important base for EAR40: reclaiming place also involves reclaiming narratives, voices, and modes of knowledge production.

From institutional heritage, the discussion moves toward wider questions of community and urban memory. James White's article *UNESCO World Heritage: Communities in Time* revisits the inscription of Edinburgh as a World Heritage site to examine how the notion of 'community' has evolved within heritage discourse. Rather than understanding heritage as a motionless condition, the article promotes the living nature of urban environments, considering how institutional frameworks might better engage with the complex social and more-than-human realities embedded within the city.

Questions of memory and resistance continue in *Towards Kaszëbsczi Contiguity* by Charles Drożyński, where a vernacular space becomes a subtle yet powerful form of opposition to ideological homogenisation. Through the story of Mieczysław Różycki and the transformation of a vernacular cottage under a Communist Poland, the paper explores architecture as a close act of reclaiming cultural identity, continuity, and agency against systems of imposed 'uniformity'.

The issue then shifts on material and vernacular transformations in rural northeast Mexico. Ana Gómez de León's *Filtered Modernities* examines how traditional construction practices coexist with industrial materials and contemporary aspirations, producing hybrid conditions that resist simplistic distinctions between 'traditional' and 'modern'. Here, vernacular architecture is not framed as static, but as a transformational process through which communities negotiate environmental, cultural, and social change.

From these rural settlements, the issue moves into conditions of displacement and precarious urban occupation. Hafsa Olcay's *Digital Anchors of Displacement: Reclaiming space on the unsettled grounds of Athens* examines how digital infrastructures operate alongside physical ones in contexts where access to space is unstable. Through practices of solidarity, communication, and visibility, the paper reveals how digital and material spaces become interconnected territories; spaces through which displaced communities assert presence and maintain forms of spatial agency.

Questions of representation and spatial 'translation' continue in *Affective Cartographies: Using Space as a Translation Device in Collaborative Processes*. Challenging the dominance of "perfectly measurable spaces", this article proposes affective mapping as a means of engaging with lived experience, atmosphere, and attachment. Through collaborative methodologies the space is understood not as a neutral scene, but as an active intermediary capable of translating between varied experiences and forms of knowledge.

Finally, the issue concludes with Youfeng Liu's *Designing with Non-Human Things*, which extends the discussion of alternative architectural practices into 'emerging' digital territories. Rather than treating artificial intelligence as a neutral instrument, the paper positions generative AI as an active collaborator, one that reshapes creative work and authorship. In doing so, it raises broader questions regarding influence, interpretation, and the evolving relationship between human and non-human actors within present architectural practice.

The contributions in this issue reveal reclaiming place not as a singular act, but as a continuous process progressing across scales, territories, and mediums. They range from decolonial heritage work and vernacular adaptation to digital solidarities, mappings, and AI-mediated design experience. The issue traces architectures that exist at the edges of formal systems while simultaneously redefining them. These projects remind us that architecture is never solely about buildings or objects, but about it's social, political, cultural, and material relations.

As a collection, EAR40 reflects upon architecture not as a fixed discipline, but as an open field through which space is continually produced and contested [shaped by negotiation, diversity, and lived experience]. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider where architectural knowledge is produced, whose voices should be amplified, and how places might be continually reclaimed through acts of making, remembering, inhabiting, and imagining otherwise.

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Amanpreet Kang, Nanfe Lar, Ghazal Mohammadi,
Zeus Pithawalla and Ana Souto

DECOLONISING RESEARCH:

[Re]claiming Forgotten Narratives of the South Asian Collection at Kedleston Hall

A student-staff collaboration

Introduction

This paper offers a group reflection on a summer student-staff collaboration, which appraised the exhibition of South Asian objects at Kedleston Hall by co-designing a decolonial lens. The topic came to the fore through conversations with different stakeholders, and responds to the need to decolonise universities, museums, and knowledge in general. The following pages record our collaboration, and the different stages of the research process to embrace the decolonising challenge: it started with the engagement with the literature, the co-design of a theoretical framework, the visit to the main case study, which includes our personal reflections on the collection and their forgotten narratives, the co-design of a methodology to explore these issues with participants, and a reflection on our own positionality. Following on the steps of other academics exploring with their students how to decolonize knowledge (Mellor, 2022, 28), our reflection delves on how to reframe dominant hegemonic narratives to include other voices.

Reflecting on our own positionality was an essential aspect of the research due to our own identities, our lived experiences and roles within the project. As Dwyer and Buckle assert:

> "We explicitly and implicitly situate ourselves throughout the research process but, in particular, in data collection and analysis [...]. The personhood of the researchers, including their membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is an ever-present aspect of the investigation." (2022, 86).

Kedleston Hall, a country house in Derbyshire, has over 1,000 objects from across the Asian continent (National Trust 2025). The largest group of objects originate from India, and reflect the period when Curzon was Viceroy (1899-1905) in colonial India. This display reflects British Imperialism in India at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

> "The display of Indian and other Asian objects in the 'Eastern Museum' at Kedleston Hall reflects British Imperialism in India at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The objects were acquired by George Curzon (1859–1925), Viceroy of India from 1899–1905. By all accounts Curzon had a passion for Indian art and artefacts, but in recent years we have recognised that our method of display of objects was culturally insensitive. A new project is under way to work with experts in Asian art and history as well as Asian communities to research, interpret and redisplay the collection as much more than the spoils of Empire." (National Trust, n/d).

The National Trust acknowledges that these collections represent a particular era of British history, dominated by imperialism. But they also highlight the importance of reviewing these displays, recognising changes in history, and our current social and political context. Consequently, the National Trust is in the process to 'examine these links as part of our broader commitment to ensure that they are properly represented, shared and interpreted' (Huxtable et al. 2020).

Artefacts can be seen as more than static embodiments of culture, as a medium through which identity, power, and society are produced and reproduced (Ray 2020). This paper presents a group reflection on our student – staff collaboration, the process of co-designing a decolonising framework, and our own positionality which has developed alongside the research project.

Methods

This paper reflects on the research process, more than on the data collected, which will be published in due course. Consequently, this paper is framed by a qualitative methodology, using group reflection as the main method of enquiry, which is a method used widely in the literature pertaining student-staff collaborations (Marquis 2017; Hughes, Evans, Souto 2023). It is important for the authors to include a biographical note that goes beyond our institutional affiliation, to recognise how our own context influences our connection to the topic and the process of research. We believe that this is an important exercise when working in a partnership, especially exploring the idea of decolonising knowledge due to our different backgrounds and life experiences.

Who are you? Why did you take part in the project?

This is Amanpreet's biographical note:

> I am an architecture student entering the final year of my bachelor's degree. I am drawn to creative disciplines because I believe that art can be a language without words. I always wanted to place creativity within a meaningful, practical context. As a British Indian with immigrant parents, the idea of 'identity' often felt blurred and difficult to face. For a long time, I tried to avoid it. But through stories my grandparents would share - of their childhoods, Sikhism and old folk tales - I began to reconnect. One summer, they sent me a parcel filled with handwritten letters, childhood journals, and storybooks, the pages filled with script I could not yet read. That package sparked something in me: a love for poetic calligraphy, scrapbooking, and most importantly, a motivation to truly learn about

myself. I began learning Gurmukhi and Punjabi so I could understand what they had written to me.

Why did I get involved, Amanpreet?

Learning to heal and find peace feels so rare in this generation. In a world that seems constantly noisy and fast-paced, I want to remind myself to pause, to breathe, and to hold onto moments of happiness - something timeless and universal. For me, one way of doing that has been through learning: visiting new places, diving into personal creative projects, and saying yes to opportunities that align with who I am becoming. One of those opportunities was being able to work on this research project on decolonisation: to explore identity, memory and power - topics I have quietly wrestled with in my own life. Decolonisation, to me, is just that: recovering what was silenced, questioning dominant narratives, and honouring the voices and stories that have been left out. This project gave me space to ask difficult questions, to rethink how stories are told, and to imagine how museums can become more inclusive, honest and healing spaces.

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This is Nanfe's introduction:

I can only describe myself as just me. I am proudly Nigerian, although I know little of my country's rich heritage. I am a woman. I am Christian. I am straight. I am plus-sized. I have black hair and brown eyes, and my skin has a peachy, cantaloupe-y tone. I love reading—truly, anything—and I'm an avid listener of heart-wrenching ballads. I consider myself well-educated and a critical analyser of most aspects of my life. I have just completed my bachelor's degree in architecture. Ultimately, I am simply a mix of many intersecting identities that come together in perfect proportions to form who I am. It is through this specific lens that I view the world and encounter narratives of my own culture and those like mine, feeling their omissions and distortions acutely.

Nanfe, why did you get involved in this project?

I chose to join the research on decolonisation because I've always had a deep, personal interest in the topic—even before I knew what the word meant. I remember being in high school, passionate about history, yet disappointed by the narrow narratives I found in textbooks. As an African, I often saw my continent represented as underdeveloped, lacking, or somehow stuck in the past. At best, Africa was romanticised—exotic, ethnic, and primitive. This narrative never sat right with me. When I came to university in England, my love for history led me to museums, which I had hoped would be spaces of truth and reverence. However, I often left feeling underwhelmed or even insulted about how African heritage was presented. These experiences fuelled a desire to learn more about what decolonisation really means, and how I could contribute to the reclamation of my culture's dignity. I wanted to add my voice to the broader conversation of how we can begin to unravel a legacy of colonialism that still shapes our world today.

—

This is Ghazal's statement:

I am a 26-year-old Iranian architecture student currently pursuing my master's (MArch). I speak Persian as my native language, and English is my second. My cultural roots are central to my identity. I have always felt a strong connection to Persian literature, traditional music, and classical poetry, but I also deeply appreciate Western classical music and global cinema. Growing up in a family that combined engineering logic with artistic sensibility, I found myself constantly navigating between structure and expression. That duality continues to shape how I approach

architecture and life. I consider myself emotionally empathetic, yet highly rational in decision-making. Helping others through design, conversation, or problem-solving gives me a deep sense of purpose.

Why did you join the project, Ghazal?

When I first encountered the term decolonisation during Ana's module, it was entirely new to me. The concept immediately intrigued me although Iran was never formally colonised, I have always felt the lingering effects of cultural and intellectual colonialism. That initial class discussion sparked meaningful conversations not only within the academic setting but also with my family back home, encouraging me to reflect more critically on the structures that continue to shape knowledge and identity. This project introduced me to a field of inquiry I now feel deeply connected to, and it helped me understand decolonisation not as a fixed endpoint, but as an ongoing process of reflection, learning, and inclusion. It has been transformative both academically and personally.

—

This is Zeus' biographical introduction:

I am a part-time lecturer currently pursuing a PhD. Being a Parsi born and brought up in India, as a young adult I felt a sense of being the 'other' in the country I lived in. This piqued my curiosity to understand my cultural roots and those of the many traditions I was surrounded by. I got interested in exploring what heritage is in different contexts, what it means to its associated communities, and how it is understood by young adults. For four years I gained experience in the field of Heritage - being involved in documentation, teaching, and research projects that included building assessments, exhibitions, feasibility reports, publications, and design interventions for heritage sites in India, and UK. I am passionate about how heritage sites can be co-interpretated and communicated to young adults beyond their mere aesthetics and toward their multifaceted values and overall significance. This led me to undertake a PhD in co-designing serious games for cultural heritage sites. This process of co-design, of giving voice to different stakeholders, local

Amanpreet

Nanfe

Ghazal

community members, and end-users in shaping the digital interpretation of the site, is a process of decolonisation.

—

Finally, this is how Ana introduced herself:

> I have been an academic for the last two decades. At the core of my practice is to promote collaborations with students, using extracurricular projects to think together. Originally from Spain, I spent two years in Mexico before moving to the UK. It was in Mexico when I first experienced the idea of decolonising knowledge, even though was not aware of it then. I was teaching 'Universal History' when the lesson about 1492 challenged what I had learnt in Spain (a narrative about the Discovery of America and the benefits of the Colonial period), against the narrative I learnt from my Mexican friends, students and colleagues (an acknowledgement of the brutality of the Conquest and subsequent inequalities that were dominant during and after the Spanish rule). I am still working on decolonising my knowledge and approach to research and teaching: this summer collaboration has been essential as part of this process.

Why did you, Ana and Zeus, co-designed and facilitated this project?

> As many other projects, the idea for this collaboration emerged in a very organic way, when three colleagues from CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India, visited our institution in April 2025. Visiting Kedleston as a group of 'others', offered us an opportunity to reflect on the disparities encountered in the Hall, especially in terms of the curation and exhibition of the objects from the South Asian collection, and the opulence of Western decor in the State floor. Zeus' interest in designing serious games to promote further engagement with younger audiences, also aligned with the need to update current curatorial practices using a decolonising lens.

Figure 01:
This is us, Amanpreet (student), Nanfe (student), Ghazal (student), Zeus (student and co-lead), Ana (academic and co-lead).

Mohammadi, 2025.

Zeus

Ana

Discussion and analysis: The research process

The main output of this summer project was to develop a theoretical framework and test it through a case study of Kedleston Hall, Derby. This will inform future phases of the project, which later will engage stakeholders and end-users to co-design a 'brief' of a serious game. This serious game aims to support the efforts to decolonise exhibitions in UK institutions. The next pages explain how we designed a conceptual framework to decolonise exhibitions, as well as the impact that this had on the development of our own positionalities.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Carrying out a literature review on decolonising knowledge towards developing a conceptual framework for a serious game was both intellectually stimulating and, at times, monotonous. Despite the richness of the topic, I felt a lack of engaging and objective, resources on decolonisation. Many of the sources were politically charged, and the authors biases were often becoming evident. The literature sparked great group discussions which were some of the most fulfilling aspects of the process. We debated, we questioned, and we tried to make sense of the complexity of decolonisation. In many ways, that back-and-forth became the real heart of the work – the reading existing knowledge, reflecting on that knowledge, then forming one's own view to then bring forth for discussion, hearing what the research team thought and then repeating the process. The fluid and often amorphous nature of our writing further complicated the task of synthesising ideas across the team: navigating this complexity required constant dialogue and clarification to ensure that individual interpretations could be integrated into a shared understanding.

The literature review highlighted the authors that resonated with our interest in the topic, which also informed the development of the group's conceptual framework. This can be seen as part of the Literature Review Diagram (figure 2). Decolonisation does 'not seek to rewrite history but rather broaden the boundaries by which it is examined' (Zabunyan 2022, 153). This idea resonated strongly with our project, since decolonising museums is not about erasing the past but presenting it with fuller context. Our interviews revealed that many visitors, even without knowing the term 'decolonisation,' were concerned about representation, accuracy, and transparency. Participants often expressed that they wanted to see multiple cultural perspectives reflected in exhibitions and believed that museums should address their colonial histories honestly without censorship, but with explanation and accountability.

Through this process, we learned that emotional responses to these issues such as discomfort, empathy, and curiosity were shared across diverse backgrounds. This showed us that decolonisation is both institutional and personal: it begins with inclusive dialogue and a willingness to reconsider dominant narratives. As suggested by Zabunyan, embracing a pluriversal approach can help restore visibility to the stories that have long been excluded, allowing museums to evolve into spaces of reflection and shared knowledge.

We often frame colonialism through stolen artifacts, but what is important is the way institutions continue to present knowledge through a colonial or biased framework:

> "Knowledge and culture were as much

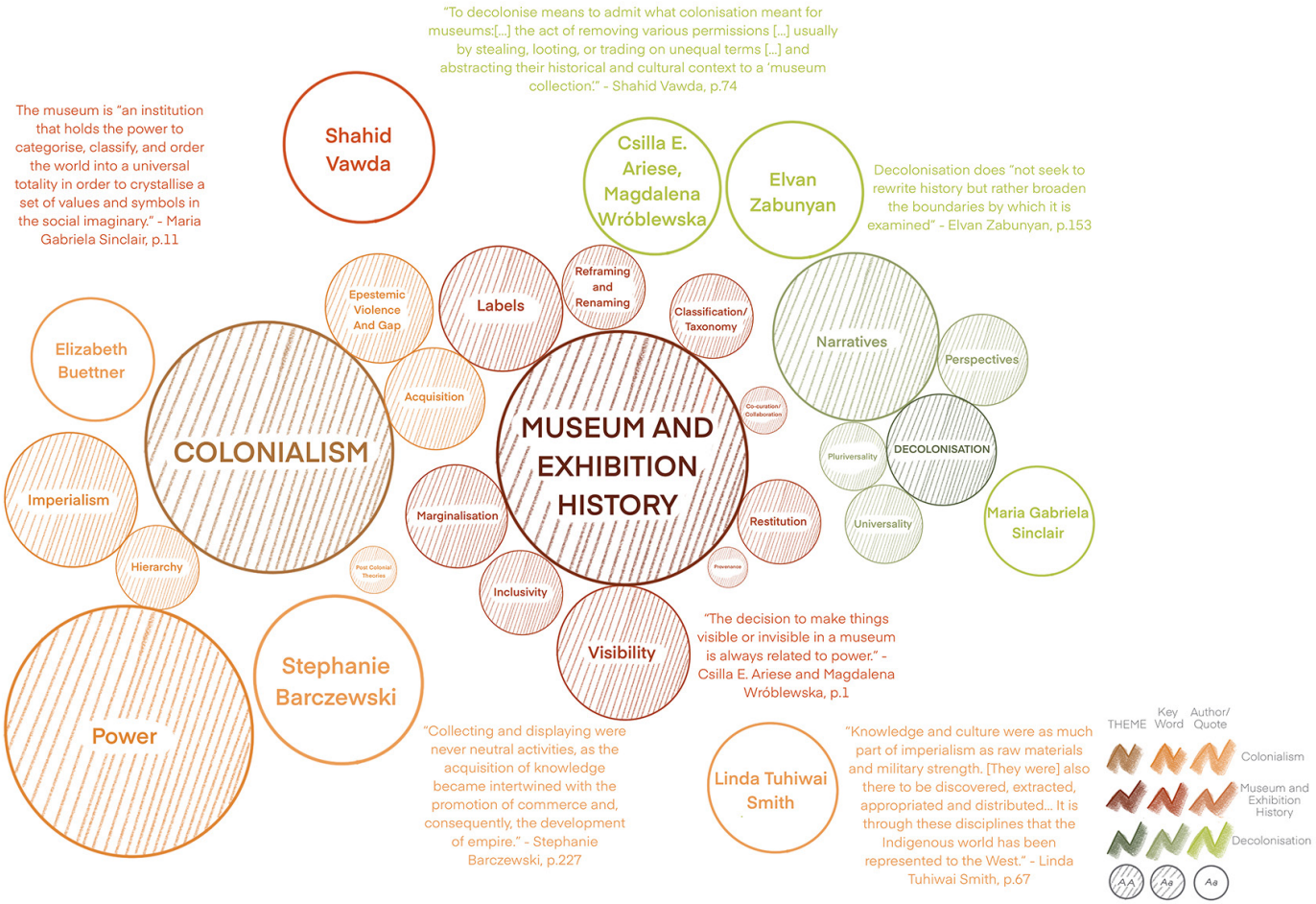
> part of imperialism as raw materials and military strength. [They were] also there to be discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed... It is through these disciplines that the Indigenous world has been represented to the West." (Smith 2021, 67).

Western imperialism used disciplines like ethnography and archival practices to claim ownership over Indigenous knowledge and culture, presenting them as 'discoveries' and placing them within Western systems of value. This reveals how knowledge production/storage in institutions like museums was not neutral but deeply entangled with colonial domination. This is very visible in collections like the Eastern Museum of Kedleston Hall, where objects acquired under colonial rule remain labelled with imperial taxonomies, their original meanings erased by the very systems that claimed to 'preserve' them. To this day, immigrants to Western nations may also search for fragmented parts of their identities within institutions such as museums. The task ahead would then be to transform museums from sites of extraction into spaces of co-creation, where marginalized communities reclaim authority over how their knowledge is stored, displayed, and valued.

One key point that emerged during the literature review was the understanding that 'collecting and displaying were never neutral activities, as the acquisition of knowledge became intertwined with the promotion of commerce and, consequently, the development of empire' (Barczewski 2014, 277). This observation was significant to our

Figure 02:
Literature Review Diagram.

Lar, 2025.



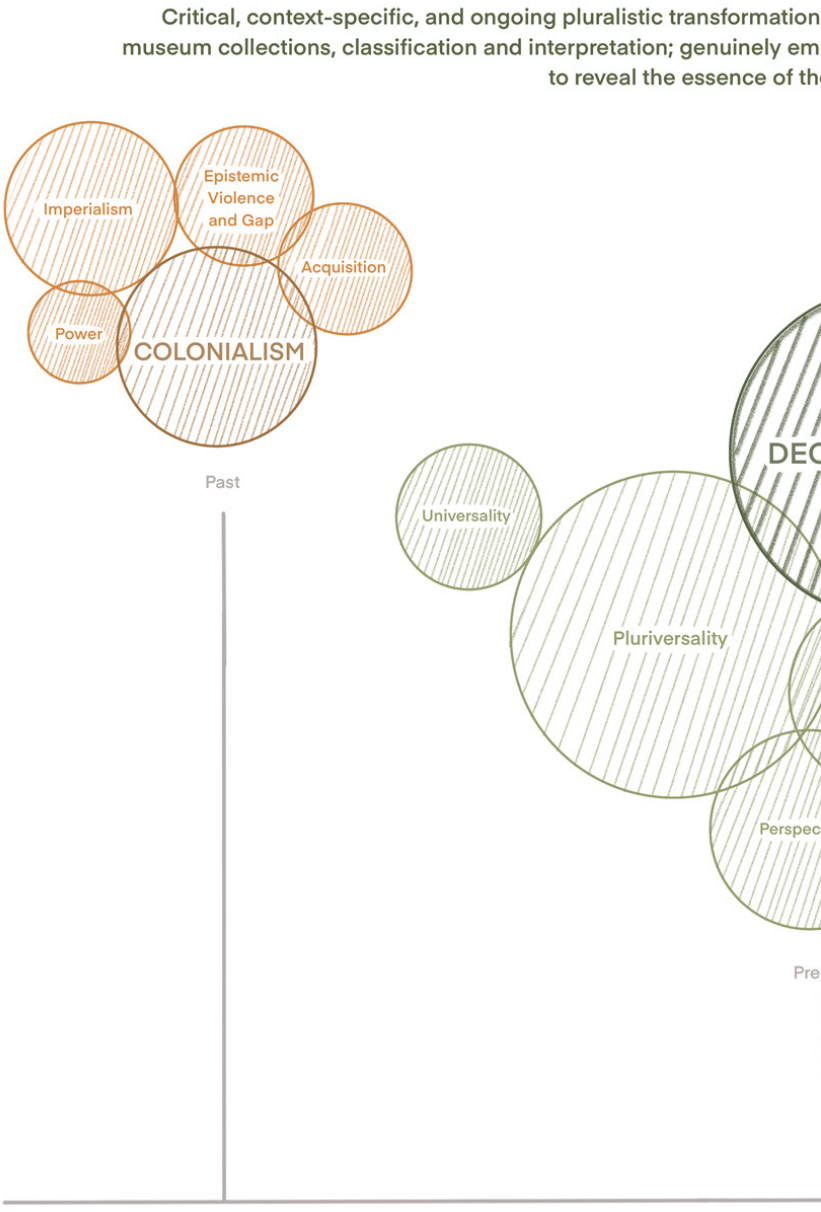
research, as it underscored the fact that the origins of many museum practices are rooted in systems of power and hierarchy. If these practices remain unchanged, the objects within these institutions continue to reflect colonial frameworks rather than neutral historical narratives. More critically, this insight highlighted the necessity of adopting a nuanced perspective—one that seeks to understand complex histories in their entirety rather than selectively interpreting them to support a preconceived stance. Just as the historical presentation of artefacts often served to legitimise empire, the way knowledge is framed today can also reinforce ideologies. The goal, therefore, should not be to promote a singular 'correct' narrative, but to foster a more holistic and inclusive account—one that resists simplification and reflects the plurality of experiences and perspectives involved.

This links to one of the quotes that we have used as a driver of the project:

> "In architecture particularly, the dominant voice has historically been a singular, exclusive voice, whose reach and power ignores huge swathes of humanity — financially, creatively, conceptually — as though we have been listening and speaking in one tongue only. The 'story' of architecture is therefore incomplete. Not wrong, but incomplete." (Lokko 2022).

As educators in the School of Architecture we tend to omit the 'other' as part of the history of architecture, as precedents for design projects. We are clearly missing out, and we must change the culture at the university to embrace those hidden by the colonial narrative.

The transition from the literature review to the development of a decolonisation framework was one of the most fulfilling parts of the process. Identifying key concepts emerging from the literature and reflecting on how they applied to our own practice allowed us to co-create a framework that was both critical and grounded. It felt as though we were drawing together multiple strands of inquiry into a coherent expression of our collective understanding. This statement summarises the theoretical foundations and the values that guided



our approach: Critical, context-specific, and ongoing pluralistic transformation is what will fundamentally challenge the colonial foundations of museum collections, classification and interpretation; genuinely empowering diverse voices and dismantling enduring power structures to reveal the essence of the multiple realities present.

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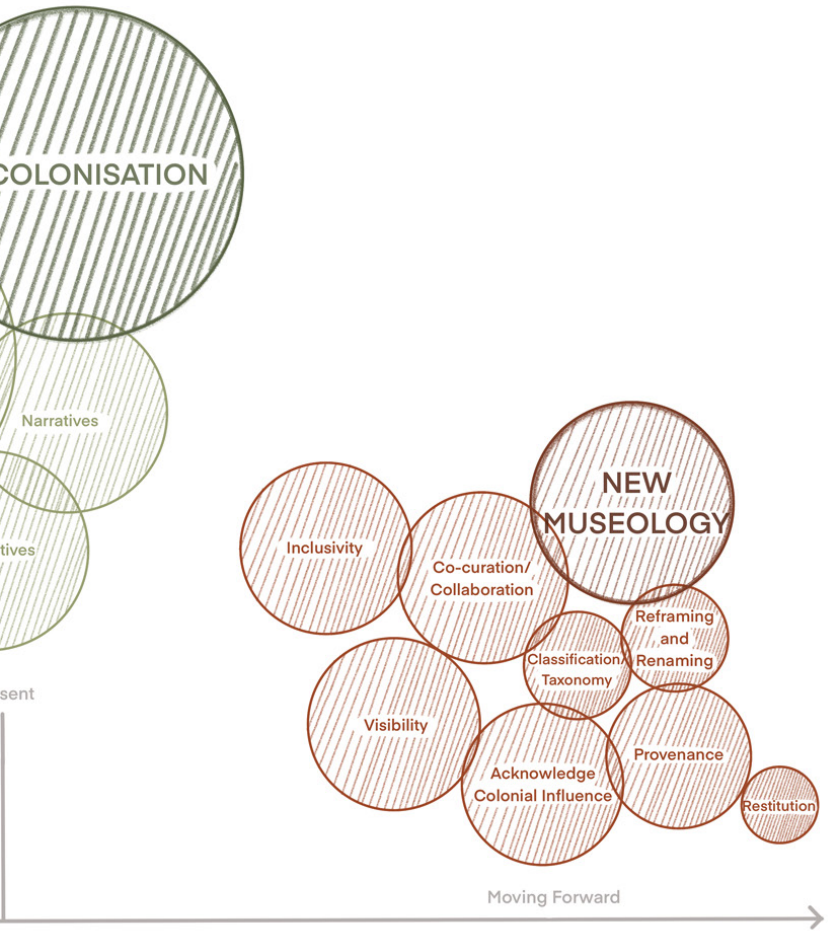


Research Methodology

After gathering weeks of research, our next challenge was transforming that knowledge into meaningful interview questions. We organised our thoughts and quotes into three categories, connected to the stakeholders we wanted to participate: end users, community members and cultural heritage experts. Our initial pool included around 60 questions, but through several rounds of editing and discussion, we refined them down to 18. To stay within our 40-minute target for each session, we conducted mock interviews and developed a smooth routine to keep things professional, consistent, and on schedule. This stage of the project taught us that designing questions is not just about curiosity—it is about clarity, sensitivity, and responsibility.

This process of data gathering highlighted how much room there still is for public education and awareness in this area. The interviews were not only a tool for data collection, but a form of mutual learning. As we listened to diverse opinions and engaged in conversation, we gained a more balanced view of the topic. Despite the diversity of backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences, we also encountered shared values and emotional responses that transcended nationality or race. These moments reminded us of our shared humanity: how feelings of displacement, care, discomfort, or hope are not bound to one culture but are universal. This understanding added depth to our project and reinforced the importance of listening across differences.

Figure 03:
Decolonising Framework.

Lar, 2025.

Visit to Kedleston Hall

Our visit to Kedleston Hall was emotionally charged and critically revealing—particularly in relation to its Eastern Museum and colonial artefacts. Entering the dim, cramped basement gallery—a space starkly neglected compared to the sunlit, contemplative grandeur of the State Rooms—felt profoundly disrespectful. The artefacts, many originating from colonised regions, were presented under poor lighting, with vague or inaccurate labels, and an overall sense of disregard. Persian objects, familiar to one of us through personal cultural heritage, were misattributed to other cultures—fundamental errors that seriously undermine any curatorial authority. The imbalance is striking: the main house celebrates British heritage with care and reverence, while the colonial collection is exhibited in a dark, small space.

This experience underscored how colonial legacies persist through subtle marginalisation—via careless display, selective storytelling, and the erasure or distortion of non-Western histories. We were left questioning how museums shape public understanding through omission and misrepresentation. The absence of curatorial intentionality was glaring; even a modest acknowledgment of this marginalisation could have shifted the gallery's message from one of neglect to one of critical reflection.

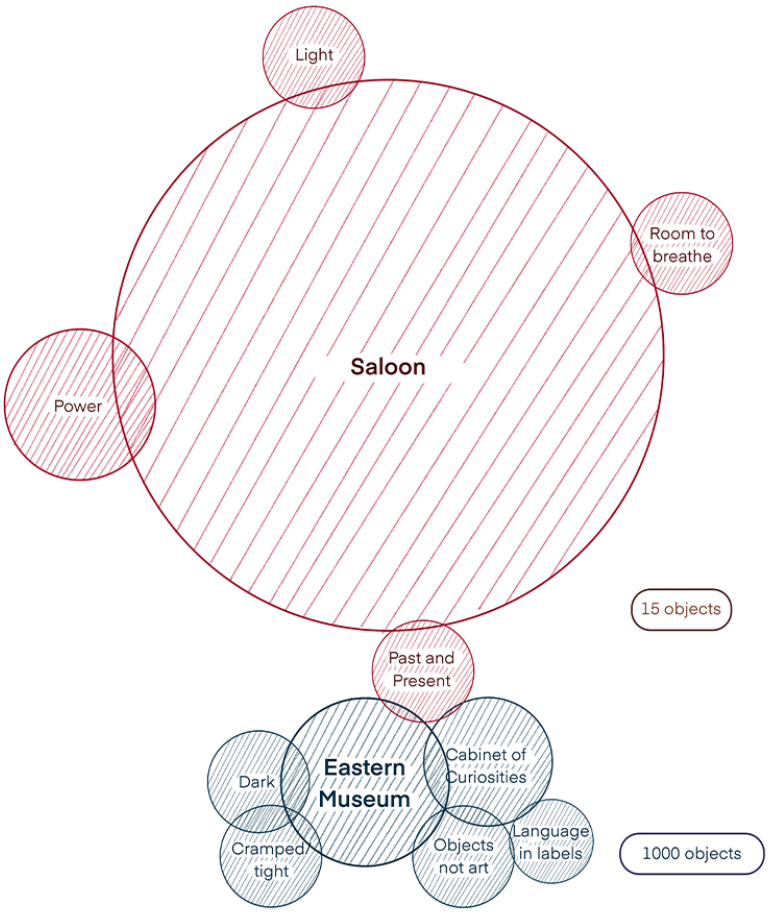
By contrast, visits to the Derby Museum and the Museum of Making offered a powerful counterpoint. Both institutions demonstrated thoughtful and respectful curation: artefacts were given space, context, and dignity. These visits reinforced a vital lesson—regardless of provenance, all artefacts deserve a baseline of care through accurate labelling, appropriate lighting, and preservation. This not only honours the objects and their originating cultures but also respects the public's capacity to engage with complex histories.

At a recent visit to Kedleston Hall in November 2025, we were encouraged to see the Hall covered in Diwali decorations, celebrating the 'Festival of Light', the most celebrated festival in India and is celebrated by Hindus, Jains and Sikhs' (National Trust, 2025). This is the third time that Kedleston Hall has embraced Diwali, creating an extraordinary precedent for other National Trust properties to recognise the pluriversality of their collections. Moreover, Kedleston Hall is now promoting a dialogue with visitors regarding the Eastern Museum. Some of these comments have now been displayed, including comments such as: 'What a glorification of colonial power this was... please, be more critical', or 'Feelings are mixed: I like to see these things but feel a slight sadness as to how it came to be here'. These comments aligned with the feelings expressed above by the research team. However, other comments displayed in this conversation express different views: 'I didn't find anything unsettling about the museum. Matter of fact I'm grateful that Lord Curzon kept these artifacts for so long and maintained them so well for us to see'. We hope that adding this conversation alongside the South Asian collection may spark further reflection around decolonising Kedleston Hall.

Museums must recognise their power—not only as institutions of knowledge, but as agents capable of empowering visitors and fostering critical awareness. History must be presented fully and transparently, not selectively, and not hidden. Only then can these spaces move beyond preservation to become sites of reckoning and reflection.

Figure 04:
Thousands Below, Fifteen Above – Visualising Display Disparity.

Mohammadi and Lar, 2025.


Light
Room to breathe
Saloon
Power
15 objects
Past and Present
Eastern Museum
Dark
Cabinet of Curiosities
Cramped tight
Objects not art
Language in labels
1000 objects

Findings and conclusions

How this project has shaped our positionalities

As part of the project, we invited Melanie Wellsley, leading the Decolonising efforts at our university, to run a workshop on positionality mapping. This led to an in-depth reflection, whereby we acknowledged who we are, and how we became those individuals. The main themes that emerged highlighted the liberating experience to engage with a deep reflection on identity and values, an open and liberating dialogue with others, using text and drawing as equal ways of communication.

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As Amanpreet reflects:

> I was able to reflect more deeply on what truly shapes my identity. I've often found it difficult to speak about this topic, but having the chance to explore it visually unlocked many childhood memories. It felt almost liberating to finally see how different elements—like race, language, and class—come together to form the bigger picture of who I am. Sharing this space with others and seeing how they mapped their own identities was equally uplifting and gave the experience a strong sense of connection and solidarity.

—

For Nanfe, this was one of the more meaningful exercises within the project.

> While I've always thought deeply about who I am and had many conversations about identity and values, I had never visually mapped it out. Seeing the intersectionality of my identity on paper was powerful. It helped me better understand how the different parts of who I am—my nationality, gender, faith, race, and intellect—shape the lens through which I see and move through the world. It was both grounding and enlightening, and it sparked thoughtful dialogue with others.

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For Ghazal it was a pivotal moment:

> Visualising my identity through drawings, symbols, and diagrams was entirely new to me. I'm used to reflecting through writing, but this visual challenge allowed me to understand how interconnected my personal, emotional, and cultural layers truly are. Seeing how other participants mapped their identities also gave me insight into their perspectives often in ways that words cannot express.

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Zeus realised that:

> My citizenship, generation, and qualifications impact my input towards this research project. Being Indian, Parsi, and having spoken English as my first language my whole life strongly influences my position on India's colonisation by the British. Being a millennial and having interacted with many young adults of my generation and gen. Z, I am a strong advocate for digital tools and interactive engagement at heritage sites. Being an architect who specialised in conservation and has a hobby of table-top and video games, I am curious about the potential of gamifying historical narratives in a sensitive and authentic manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this journey into decolonising knowledge has been far from straightforward. It has been frustrating, enlightening, emotional, and thought-provoking.

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Nanfe highlights how much she has learnt:

> I have learned a lot—about the subject, about others, and most importantly, about myself. The project not only deepened my academic understanding but also reinforced my desire to contribute to a more honest, inclusive, and critically engaged narrative of history and heritage. It was wonderful working with people across such diverse backgrounds because it enriched the discussions and provided perspectives that I had not previously considered.

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Similarly, Ghazal reflects on how the research journey has changed:

> The way I think not just about decolonisation, but about myself. I've grown more confident, especially in situations like interviews that once caused anxiety. I've learned to be more patient with complexity and more aware of the ethical weight of my words and actions. Most of all, I've come to see research as a creative, emotional, and deeply human process one that continues long after the official project ends.

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Amanpreet recognised how the research process:

> Helped me grow in confidence—not just in contributing ideas, but in trusting that my voice mattered. Speaking up in group discussions felt more natural as I began to understand the value of my perspective. At the same time, I became increasingly aware of the ethical responsibility that comes with research, especially on sensitive topics like decolonisation. I realised how important it is to be intentional with the words I use and to approach every part of the process with care and respect. This balance between confidence and humility became one of the most meaningful lessons I took away from the project.

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For Zeus, as a co-lead of the project:

> It was a wonderful experience to collaborate with students and staff on this project. In my opinion, the best way to work together is to bring researched points of interest to the table for discussion, be open to whoever makes the best argument, and let the research process unravel dynamically in the direction agreed upon collectively by the team.

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Finally, Ana reflects on this project in comparison with others delivered in the past:

> For me this has been one of the most meaningful student-staff collaboration projects I have been involved with. Even the recruitment process was a great experience, exploring issues of decoloniality, teaching and learning, with like-minded students. Moreover, I believe there is a significant legacy from this project, which will underpin future cohorts of students in Architecture.

Recommendations

Guided by the insights gained through this project, Kedleston Hall (and many other collections!) stands at a pivotal moment to reframe its' legacy. We welcome a more inclusive and critically engaged narrative, which Kedleston Hall has already iniated. Without appropriate contextualisation, this site becomes a missed opportunity for critical reflection on a tumultuous and violent past. Furthermore, all artefacts—regardless of their geographic or cultural origin—deserve a baseline of

curatorial respect for their artistic and historical value. Currently, the disparity in spatial treatment between the grand state rooms and the Eastern Museum is striking. We recommend enhancing the lighting and layout of the Eastern galleries, affording each object space and dignity. Additionally, labels should reflect multiple perspectives, including voices from descendant communities, to foster inclusive and critical reflection.

At the core of these recommendations is the amplification of voice and autonomy. Kedleston Hall must actively seek partnerships—with academic institutions, local communities, and representatives from the cultures where these artefacts originate. Such collaborations can foster a critical, context-specific, and ongoing pluralistic transformation—one that challenges colonial legacies in collecting and interpretation. Through this, Kedleston Hall can genuinely empower diverse voices, dismantle enduring hierarchies of power, and foreground the multiplicity of narratives that these objects hold.

Finally, we believe that engaging with younger generations will support the efforts to decolonise exhibitions and knowledge in general. Raising awareness of the colonial past and its influence in our current context are essential to promote a more just present and future. Hopefully, the co-design of a serious (educational) game to promote younger audiences to further engage with Heritage and make more sense of our present by exploring the past.

Ethics: this project received favourable opinion from the Art, Architecture, Design and Humanities Ethics Committee, Nottingham Trent University (June 2025).

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Figures

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James D. G. White

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE:
Communities in Time

"**Do not seek the traces of the ancients, seek what they sought**"
Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)
'On Parting from Kyoriku' ('Kyoriku ribetsu no kotoba')
(Ueda 1999, 289)

The People's Story Museum

Edinburgh's 'The People's Story Museum', which "tells the story of the lives and work of the ordinary people of Edinburgh from the late 18th century to the present day" (Clark 1991), suddenly closed its doors for several months in the summer of 2024. Stories were told of staff shortages and financial issues, which would push the closure to April 2025. Following local uproar, the Museum was reopened by the city council in early-December 2024.

During the uproar, former councillor and MP George Kerevan, who was part of the city's Labour administration that established The People's Story Museum in 1989, suggested that closing the museum risked losing Edinburgh's "identity". Kerevan went on to argue that the closure was a deliberate attempt at "expunging the history of Edinburgh" (Turvill 2024).

As museum co-founder and pioneering Scottish oral historian Helen Clark explained, The People's Story Museum was to be about "those ordinary people who made the city tick, who worked to make it what it is, but who do not appear on the pages of the history books and remain hidden from view" (Clark 1991, 37). In others words, working-class people whose "story" was previously invisible to the lens of history, rejoining sociologist David McCrone's question in 'Who runs Edinburgh?', about "who gets airbrushed out of the city's history: women, the working class, and in-migrants" (2022, 22).

The People's Story Museum sits within the boundary of the Edinburgh UNESCO World Heritage (WH) site[01]. It predates Edinburgh's 1995 WH inscription. And it has been continuously housed in the Canongate Tolbooth, a building recognised by ICOMOS[02] as one of the most historically significant in the Old Town (WHC03 1995,[03]). Is social history not a key part of Edinburgh's core heritage identity? Is it not part of the WH site's "Outstanding Universal Value"[04], a selective mechanism shaping what is visible, valued and protected within WH boundaries? Is the story of certain groups of people - as mentioned in the museum's name - undeserving of WH recognition, and therefore of international heritage protection?

At the heart of these questions lie a number of complex issues, of which we will here begin by examining two: 'heritage value' and 'community'.

On heritage value

Heritage "values"[05] are defined in broad terms by historic preservation scholars Erica Avrami and Randall Mason (2019, 30) as "the different qualities, characteristics, meanings, perceptions, or associations ascribed to the things we wish to conserve" (2019, 11)[06].

More specifically, Avrami and Mason categorise "values-based heritage conservation" approaches into two "complementary perspectives" that are both "at play in most heritage places, most of the time": the "heritage-intrinsic" or "essential", on the one hand; and the "societal-instrumental", on the other (Avrami and Mason 2019, 30). The former perspective focuses on the material properties of heritage, to be protected and transmitted to future generations, foregrounding materialist heritage expertise. The latter is "reflected in more participatory conservation practices that engage more diverse stakeholders", allowing "multiple publics" to apply a broader range of societal values to heritage assets (Avrami and Mason 2019, 22). Such participatory processes, it is argued, have the potential "to address the varying degrees of agency and power among decision makers" (Avrami et al 2019, 6).

The WH 'system'[07] - in its global dealings - has long walked a tightrope between different perspectives on heritage values, depending on geographical, cultural and typological particularities. On an operational level, the specific WH concept of "Outstanding Universal Value" (or OUV) has been the source of debate since its earliest days regarding its meaning, application, and relationship to heritage value.[08]

As influential former UNESCO WH Centre Director[09] Francesco Bandarin explains, in some instances "the material substance is very important, but it is considered as the support of the values to be preserved. It is not the value itself, it is the support of the values" (Koolhaas et al 2014). For his part, ICOMOS President[10] Gustavo Araoz defines heritage values as "a vaguely shared set of intangible concepts that simply emerge from and exist in the ether of the communal public consciousness" (2011, 58). Araoz further argues that in conservation practice, "heritage professionals have never really protected or preserved values; the task has always been protecting and preserving the material vessels where values have been determined to reside" (2011, 59).

Bearing the above in mind, the concept of OUV - beyond its complex relationship to heritage values on a case-by-case basis - offers insights into the WH approach to heritage value management. To begin to understand this approach, it is worth taking a step back in time to the founding theoretical principles of the WH system itself, to better appreciate the axiological[11] issues at hand.

On Outstanding Universal Value

At its adoption by the UNESCO General Conference in 1972, the WH Convention[12] envisioned "an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value" (UNESCO 1972, 1). As the WH Operational Guidelines[13] (OGs) would in turn clarify, prospective cultural WH sites would be evaluated through the lens of at least one of six criteria[14], in relation to which the OUV of the property would be defined.

In practice, each WH site's definition of OUV stands to have a significant material impact on the property's subsequent heritage "protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future

generations" (Article 4, UNESCO 1972, 3). As WH experts Bernard Feilden and Jukka Jokilehto explain in their seminal 'Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites' (1998): once a WH site has been inscribed, it is expected that its OUV "will be maintained on a permanent basis" (Feilden and Jokilehto 1998, 9). Through its - both retrospective and prospective - temporal and axiological weight, OUV emerges as a potent future-making device.

Just as importantly, as legal scholar Abdulqawi Yusuf (2023, 49) explains, "it is the select subset of immovable 'cultural heritage' possessing outstanding universal value, as described in the criteria elaborated for this purpose by the Committee, that ultimately qualifies as 'cultural heritage' under the 1972 Convention". This select subset, and no other. In other words, the OUV establishes the remit of WH institutional influence - through the very definition of the term "cultural heritage" - within the boundary of the WH site.

In turn, the property's 'Statement of OUV' (SOUV) becomes "the basis for the future protection and management of the property" (WHC 2024, 49). The SOUV enshrines the key heritage qualities and attributes making up the WH site's OUV, and it outlines the property's strategies to manage and protect that OUV, further operationalising Feilden and Jokilehto's 'permanent basis'.

It is worth noting at this point that the 1972 WH Convention mindfully highlights (Article 12) that the fact that a property has not been included on the WH list "shall in no way be construed to mean that it does not have an outstanding universal value for purposes other than those resulting from inclusion in these lists" (UNESCO 1972, 7). However, the Convention refrains from suggesting that - within the boundaries of inscribed WH sites - values other than those identified through the OUV might be equally worthy of "identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations", for purposes equal to or other than those of the WH Convention.

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[01] The 'Edinburgh WH site' mentioned in this article consistently refers to 'The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' WH site, and never to 'The Forth Bridge', sometimes referred to as Edinburgh's second WH site.

[02] Cultural heritage advisory body to UNESCO.

[03] UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

[04] The term 'Outstanding Universal Value' has been capitalized in the OGs since 2011. In this article, it is used in its capitalized form for consistency with current OGs.

[05] In their work, the same authors emphasize that heritage values "as qualities departs from another common usage of the word in English: values as ethics, philosophies, or normative codes of behavior" (2019, 30).

[06] For other influential work on 'heritage values' carried out under the aegis of the Getty Conservation Institute see also De la Torre et al (2000, 2002, 2005).

[07] As it is referred to in the 1972 WH Convention (UNESCO 1972, 1).

[08] For further insights into the relationship between OUV and heriage value, see Jokilehto 2008.

[09] Bandarin was WH Centre Director 2000-2010, then UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture 2010-2018.

[10] Araoz was a three-term ICOMOS President from 2008-2017.

[11] Axiology : "the theory of value" (OED 2026).

[12] Official name: 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage'.

[13] Official name: 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention'.

[14] Summarised respectively by Jokilehto et al (2008, 5) as 'Masterpiece', 'Values/ Influence', 'Testimony', 'Typology', 'Land-Use' and 'Associations'.

In the process, as anthropologist Lynn Meskell (2016, 93) argues, "heritage properties are wrested from their sociohistorical contexts and mobilized as transactional devices in the World Heritage arena that both mask and enable a multifarious network of political and economic values". This complex dynamic prompts fundamental questions about the evolving purpose of the 1972 WH Convention, and the potential 'values' at stake, some of which this article serves to unpack.

In specific relation to the Edinburgh WH site, the UK State Party and the City of Edinburgh Council have respectively described its OUV as "what makes the city special" (UK Gov 2013, 4) and "the collection of things which make the area special" (Edinburgh Council 2025). This may once again be true, but arguably only insofar as the WH system's particular cultural foci, priorities and purposes can be seen to legitimately prescribe - and by extension proscribe - what is "special" - and what is not - within the boundaries of the WH site. The word "special" stems from the Latin specere, to look (OED 2026), denoting what is visible.

On a similar visual register, the UK State Party has justified the absence of a buffer zone around the Edinburgh WH site, through the presence of "a Key Views policy that serves to protect and enhance views into, out of and across the property" (UK Gov 2024, 45).

The above arguably rejoins what architectural historian Françoise Choay calls "the hegemony of the eye" (2001, 177). In this view, heritage becomes a "great mirror" in which society contemplates its own image, and "dynamically assumed cultural identity" is replaced by "passive contemplation and the cult of a generic identity" (2001, 165). To break out of this condition, Choay calls for a traversal of the mirror through "an intimate connection between two bodies, the human body and the patrimonial corpus" (2001, 177 - original emphasis).

In the case of Edinburgh, a particular human group - to return to Clark's words - might not appear on the pages of the history books and remain hidden from view as a result of specific 'key views', both literal and metaphorical.

Within this context, the concept and definition of OUV emerges as a key factor in the value perceptions, and ensuing protections, promoted by the WH system within the boundary of the Edinburgh WH site. And it is a very same concern about visibility and invisibility which - at its core - the creation of The People's Story Museum sought to address.

On community

When it first opened, The People's Story Museum showcased a "specially commissioned" twenty-minute film, which "concentrates on the experience of four individuals: Annie Scott, a domestic servant; Betty Hepburn, a co-operative worker; Hugh D'Arcy, a bricklayer; and Jimmy Crighton, a printer and one-time member of the Communist party." (PSM 1989; Clark 1991, 37). The four protagonists - and their respective stories - serve as a microcosm of the "real people" the museum sets out to empower (Clark 1991, 38).

Annie Scott, the domestic servant, served as fifth housemaid to a prominent Scottish aristocratic couple connected to the British Royal Family[15]. The use of words in her testimony is telling in respect of several issues addressed in this article[16]. First, when Scott explains that the aristocrats "didn't pay any attention to what you did, or didn't do", she highlights the very invisibility addressed by The People's Story Museum's mission.

Secondly, when Scott says that "actually, the people were nicer to us than the upper staff" (PSM 1989, 04:07), the "people" she is referring to are the aristocrats, as opposed to the staff - exemplifying the complexity of the word 'people', even within The People's Story Museum's own materials. Finally, when Scott says that a ten shilling tip "was nothing to them [the aristocrats], but it was a fortune to us" (PSM 1989, 04:34), she highlights both the extreme financial imbalance and the group-mindedness, the "us", that reinforces such a class system.

Annie Scott's compelling testimony, and the last quote in particular, illustrates McCrone's point that "a key function of creating and maintaining communities is the telling of stories" (2022, 131). The singular "Story" in the name The People's Story Museum further reinforces the notion of a single group narrative.

In another noteworthy passage, Scott explains that "you had to make your own polish for the floors, beeswax and turpentine"[17], and describes working on her knees to brush off and repolish the floors at Carberry Tower (PSM 1989, 03:45). Such backbreaking physical work - under class-based and financial duress - highlights the historically embodied and often forced relationship between the working class and the physical fabric of buildings, lending brutal realism to the abstract poetry of the "practical and concrete traversal of the patrimonial mirror" advocated by Choay (2001, 177).

Through such testimonies, the People's Story Museum brought substantive contributions to what influential critical heritage studies scholar Laurajane Smith (2006, 5) describes as the ethnographically-informed growth - since the 1990s - of "multidisciplinary interest in the way diverse communities forge, maintain and negotiate their identities". Such processes allow "the diversity of community experience and identity claims" to challenge "consensual heritage narratives about the nation and national identity" and what Smith terms "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (2006, 5-6).

In light of the narrative power of such community representation, what role might the WH system play in the influential "framework of external rules" (McCrone 2022, 275) impacting Edinburgh's governance? To begin to address this question, this study will now examine how 'Communities' have been defined in the WH context, as well as the role the concept of community holds at the heart of post-1995 WH theory.

"**Life of the community**" [1972 Convention]

The 1972 WH Convention mentions the concept of local "community" - as distinct from "international community" - only once: Article 5 indicates that each State Party should "give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community", to "ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the protection, conservation and presentation" of WH properties (WHC 1972, 3).

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[15] Lord and Lady Elphinstone at Carberry Tower. Lady Elphinstone was the elder sister of Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother.

[16] Though Carberry Tower sits in the countryside outwith Edinburgh's municipal boundaries, Scott's testimony arguably serves as a legitimate representation of working class experience in and around the city at the time.

[17] A natural, but potentially toxic, solvent distilled from tree resin.

"**Within the same culture**"
[1994 Nara Document & 2005 OGs]

The 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity is widely credited for an "expanded treatment of authenticity" in the WH system (Silverman 2015, 73). Since 2005, the WH OGs have copied verbatim the Nara Document in stating that "judgments about value attributed to cultural heritage [...] may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture." (WHC 2005, 21 - my emphasis)

In this context, communities traditionally outwith institutional influence might finally lay claims to heritage rights within the WH system, as the spirit of Nara saw that "ultimately global cultural governance should respect the fundamental cultural values of communities" (Silverman 2015, 73). As cultural anthropologist Claudia Liuzza would point out however, complexities over agency and legitimacy would arise in practice in the distinction between "stakeholders" and "rights holders" in relation to WH sites (Liuzza 2021, 276). At the heart of such issues lies the definition of recognized "communities" within the WH system, on a site-by-site basis.

Defining "**Communities**"
[2007 Strategic objectives]

In 2007, 'Communities' (plural) was added as the "fifth C" in the Strategic Objectives of the WH Convention (Christchurch, WHC 2007), five years on from the Budapest Declaration's 'Credibility', 'Conservation', 'Capacity-building' and 'Communication' (WHC 2002, 1).

The fifth Strategic Objective was integrated into the OGs the following year, to "enhance the role of **Communities** in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention" (WHC 2008, 7 - original emphasis). How broadly one considers the remit and agency of said "Communities" in respect of "implementation" is arguably open to interpretation.

In the 2007 Christchurch Declaration, States Parties[18] to the WH Convention pledged "that they shall, as appropriate, seek the active involvement of communities at all stages" of the WH process (WHC 2007, 7).

But how does the Christchurch Declaration define the word "communities"? As "inter alia, community groups, tribes, nongovernmental organizations, private enterprise and/or local authorities" (WHC 2007, 2 - original emphases). This broad remit betrays a multilateral concern for universal applicability to all nations, cultures and potential stakeholders, effecting a dilution from an already broad "indigenous, traditional and/or local Peoples" to "all forms of non-State actors" (WHC 2007, 2). The mitigating term "as appropriate" further reinforces the contingent nature of a process regulated by established governance systems.

The Christchurch definition also points out that "typically, these communities share a close proximity with the sites in question". The word "typically" suggests that said 'Communities' might in some cases not actually be geographically colocated with their respective WH sites, this time challenging the relevance of the word 'local'.

During the 2024 The People's Story Museum uproar, award-winning Edinburgh-born author of 'Trainspotting' Irvine Welsh took to social media to recall the circumstances surrounding the museum's original opening in 1989:

> "I worked for Edinburgh Council when this museum opened. The feeling amongst councillors from working class areas of the city was that we represented monarchs, aristocrats and the warlords of slavery and imperialism enough in our civic culture, it might be an idea to represent local people too." (Welsh 2024)

In light of the broad 2007 Christchurch definition of 'Communities', Irvine Welsh's "monarchs", "aristocrats" and "warlords of slavery and imperialism" would arguably deserve the same "local people" and "community" labels as the working class people of Edinburgh, as long as the former did not act alone.

Semantics aside however, Welsh's point is one about solidarity, multiperspectivity[19] and diversity, internal to the mechanisms of Edinburgh's heritage-value ecosystem. This idea rejoins what political scientist Margaret Kohn (2004, 151) calls "public spiritedness", a concept we will return to later.

But why on earth should "local people" be important to Edinburgh's history?

On Edinburgh

This section will cast an eye on Edinburgh's Old Town through the lens of the nomination, evaluation and inscription of the Edinburgh WH site. Reference will be made to several archival documents, each representing a step in the sequential process which led from the 1994 submission of 'The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' nomination dossier to UNESCO, to the site's WH inscription one year later. Each document informs the next, in the following chronological order:

- the October 1994 UK State Party nomination dossier for Edinburgh, produced by Historic Scotland (hereafter '1994 UK State Party nomination dossier'); which informed

- the March 1995 ICOMOS evaluation report by Herb Stovel, following his visit to Edinburgh on 27 Feb to 2 March 1995 (hereafter '1995 Stovel ICOMOS evaluation'); which in turn informed

- the September 1995 ICOMOS advisory body evaluation final report, for the attention of the WH Committee (hereafter '1995 ICOMOS final report').

At the end of this process, the WH Committee inscribed 'The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' WH site on 9 December 1995 on the basis of criterion ii ('Values/influences', Jokilehto et al 2008, 5) and criterion iv ('Typology', Jokilehto et al 2008, 5), in line with the advice of the 1995 ICOMOS final report.

In Edinburgh's official WH inscription, while the criterion ii justification focuses solely on the New Town[20], Edinburgh's Old Town explicitly features in relation to criterion iv:

> "The Old and New Towns together form a dramatic reflection of significant changes in European urban planning, from the inward looking, defensive walled medieval city of royal palaces, abbeys and organically developed burgage plots in the Old Town, through the expansive formal Enlightenment planning of the 18th and 19th centuries in the New Town, to the 19th century rediscovery and revival of the Old Town with its adaptation of a distinctive Baronial style of architecture in an urban setting."

At this point, it is worth taking a moment to interpret the abovementioned "19th century rediscovery and revival of the Old Town", as there were in fact - at least - two simultaneous "revivals" at play in Edinburgh's Old Town at that time. The first was a revival of medievalist architectural style, variously identified

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[18] In the WH system as in other UN contexts, the double plural 'States Parties' is used instead of 'State Parties'.

[19] Education scholar Ann Low-Beer (1997) describes 'multipersectivity' as stemming from "the need to assess historical events from different perspectives", while highlighting its limits within historical education (1989).

[20] Criterion ii focuses on the New Town's "major influence on the development of urban architecture and town planning throughout Europe, in the 18th and 19th centuries".

as "Old Scots", "Scots revival" or "Baronial" (Historic Scotland 1994, 5). The second revival, closer to its post-classical Latin etymological root revivere "to live again", alludes to the Late-Victorian social consciousness and civic initiatives that labored to rekindle the ties of "sympathy and fellowship between different classes", exemplified by such groups as the Edinburgh Social Union, co-founded by Patrick Geddes, Jane Whyte and others in 1885 (Darling 2020, 15).

This question is answered in Edinburgh's 1995 Stovel ICOMOS evaluation, where he argues in favor of the relevance of criterion i ('Masterpiece', Jokilehto et al 2008, 5) in addition to criteria ii, iv and vi ('Associations', Jokilehto et al 2008, 5), finding OUV in the fact that:

> "the Old Town, its ten and eleven-storey medieval "lands" providing the densest urban configuration in Europe and bringing aristocrats, merchants and the urban poor together under a single roof, is a strong and unusual response to the physical, political and economic circumstances prevailing in the Middle Ages" (Stovel 1995, 2).

Although Stovel's advocacy for criterion i - and for criterion vi - did not find its way into the September 1995 ICOMOS final report to the WH Committee, his insight opens the door to a deeper understanding of the fundamental heritage value of the Old Town's social history.[21]

Stovel's "Urban poor"

The Oxford English Dictionary draws the etymology of the word "poor" from the classical Latin pauper, meaning "unproductive" (OED 2026). By including the "urban poor" as a productive component in his 1995 future-making assessment of Edinburgh's potential WH OUV, Stovel leads the way into alternative narratives of architectural production, revealing different ways of sharing and shaping space.

As this article will later address, such socially-minded heritage narratives would - over the following decades - come to dominate the discourse of the WH system in relation to sustainability.

But first, this study will follow the productive thread of Stovel's social argument in the context of Edinburgh's WH OUV, to examine the extraordinary nature of social interaction and urban dynamics within Edinburgh's pre-New Town Old Town.

In his "classic"[22] 1966 work, The Making of Classical Edinburgh, A. J. Youngson highlights that though Edinburgh's 1760s Old Town saw "great differences of wealth and clear distinctions of rank", there was very little "physical separation of social groups" (Youngson 1966, 236). The economic historian points out that, following the construction of the New Town, "charity took the place of neighbourliness and true sympathy", arguing that "unity of social feeling was one of the most valuable heritages of old Edinburgh, and its disappearance was widely and properly lamented" (Youngson 1966, 256)[23].

This particular concern about the impact of market-related transactional relationships (charity) over "true sympathy" (neighbourliness), brings to mind political philosopher Michael Sandel's extensive work on "things that money should not buy" (Sandel 1998, 95). Furthermore, this growing transactional dynamic - in the case of Edinburgh - recalls Meskell's earlier point about WH sites as "transactional devices", drawing parallels between heritage and neighbourliness as key intangible cultural artefacts vulnerable to commodification.

At this point, it is worth noting that describing the pre-New Town Old Town as a perfect unadulterated classless utopia would be naive, and one should not understate the range of parameters

which might have played a part in Edinburgh's extraordinary social history. As historian R. A. Houston suggests, such parameters might include "the complex motivations of individuals and groups" and the "mutual dependence between master and man, merchant and artisan, landowner and labourer, patron and client" which might have "created a community of interest which blurred distinctions of birth, wealth, and lifestyle" (Houston 1994, 19, 385).

Nonetheless, prior scholarship consistently points to the extraordinary nature of Edinburgh's pre-1760 Old Town social and urban dynamics as a "Hotbed of Genius" (Simpson 2004, 61). For his part, Edinburgh conservation architect and vice-president of ICOMOS-UK James Simpson argues that "the density of Edinburgh, and the consequent creative social mix, made it the natural centre for what became known as the Scottish Enlightenment in the later eighteenth century" (Simpson 2004, 61).

This argument is further supported by historian Murray Pittock (2019), who writes that "Edinburgh's close vertical environment of stacked living complemented its horizontal one of urban propinquity to create [...] 'a city bustling with creative energy ... an incubation of the kind of ideas that could revolutionize urban life'" (Pittock 2019, 46). In his efforts to outline "a mechanics of the Enlightenment", Pittock draws similarities between Edinburgh and other "Enlightenment cities" sharing features of social and urban dynamics, including "extensive time spent in public places or outdoors, intensifying the velocity of the circulation of ideas" and "an associational life which to an extent transcended social divisions" (Pittock 2019, 23-24).

Pointing to Jane Jacobs' pioneering work on cities, Pittock argues that "the material conditions for the development of the Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh were similar to the conditions deemed necessary today for the growth and development of innovative ideas in cities" (Pittock 2019, 17).

Such present-day considerations resonate with political scientist Margaret Kohn's concept of the "carnival of the commons"[24], a "heterogeneous polity" in which "public spiritedness embraces those who are different" (Kohn 2004, 151). Pointing to the three qualities of 'public spiritedness' as "sharing, solidarity, and diversity", Kohn argues that the legitimate "desire for community [...] must be supplemented by public spiritedness" at the risk of falling into the trap of "amoral familialism", where the 'community' "group is conceived in an excessively narrow fashion" (Kohn 2004, 151). Along similar lines, the privatization of public space - Kohn warns - "narrows our sensibility by diminishing the opportunities to encounter difference" (Kohn 2004, 156).

What is arguably at stake in neoliberal capitalist economies - as sociologist Jon Dean and political economist Benjamin Kunkel put it - is "the metabolism between humanity and nature, the very relationship and interconnectedness between people and their social lives" (Dean 2015, 143 - *original emphasis*).

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[21] Though Stovel's typological description here refers to particularities of the historic Burgh of Edinburgh, the term 'Old Town' in broader social analysis can encompass the Canongate and adjoining Old Town areas.

[22] Pittock 2019, 22.

[23] Though this article focuses on examining this "unity of social feeling", discussion on reasons for its loss can be found in the work of Youngson (1966) and historian R. A. Houston (1994, 233).

[24] Which Kohn opposes to the "tragedy of the commons".

On purpose

This article has thus far provided cross-sectional architectural, social and axiological insights into heritage drawn from the Old Town's social history. In the challenge they pose to such common Edinburgh heritage narrative binaries as city/slum, élite/ordinary and rich/poor, such insights might yield more nuanced - and ultimately more productive - cross-pollinations, opening up micro-economies of spatial, temporal and social value.

In more general terms, such narratives point to architectural historian Joseph Rykwert's concept of the "feel and the fabric" of cities as "a tangible representation of that intangible thing, the society that lives in it - and of its aspirations" (Rykwert 2000, 6). Such considerations might in turn call for a reassessment of the aspirations, goals and purposes of our heritage systems, as of our cities.

Regarding purpose, the words of systems thinker Donnella Meadows spring to mind:

> "a system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose. [...] A change in purpose changes a system profoundly, even if every element and interconnection remains the same."
> (Meadows 2008, 11, 17 - *original emphases*)

Even if one considers the elements and interconnections of Edinburgh's WH inscription to be fixed, within the textual confines of the stated OUV, questions might be asked about the social and environmental purpose of the WH system itself, as it applies to Edinburgh's inscription.

As it proceeds into an uncertain future, the WH system might further explore the central roles of social history and productive community heritage in addressing the social component of polycrisis. Drawing upon sociologist Richard Sennett's reflections on the presence of history in neoliberal late capitalist society, "but no shared narrative of difficulty, and no shared fate" (Sennett 1998, 147), such efforts would serve to reemphasize the central role of communities traditionally outwith institutional influence within processes of ecological resilience, adaptation and - most importantly - transformation.

Sustainable development

Twenty years on from Edinburgh's WH inscription, the UNESCO WH Centre set out three "overarching principles" for sustainable action, in its 'Policy for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective Into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention' (WHC 2015, 2): "human rights", "equality" and "sustainability, through a long-term perspective".

In relation to the principle of "equality", 'The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' WH site emerges as a privileged space within which to use the lens of heritage to examine concerns related to "structural causes" of inequality, "including discrimination and exclusion" (WHC 2015, 2). As the above historical analysis demonstrates, exclusionary dynamics were not predetermined by the Old Town's urban fabric, quite the contrary.

Furthermore, as political scientists Patrizia Nanz and Klaus Dingwerth explain in their entry on 'Participation' in The Oxford Handbook of International Organizations, "enhancing the opportunities for participation is of little help unless complementary measures exist to enhance the participatory capacities of groups that are otherwise at risk of being excluded from the political process."
(2016, 1145 - *original emphases*)

Through its continuing mission, presence and development, The People's Story Museum arguably contributes such an enhanced participatory capacity, its location within an emblematic historic building directly linked to Edinburgh's rich social history (former jailhouse, council chamber etc) further enhancing its narrative and substantive power.

Conclusion

Recalling "unity of social feeling" as "one of the most valuable heritages of old Edinburgh" (Youngson 1966, 256), the WH 'Typology' of criterion iv (WHC 2024) clearly extends beyond the closes and wynds of Edinburgh's Old Town, to include the shared social narratives and dynamics which arguably spawned the Scottish Enlightenment.

The 2007 Christchurch Declaration saw States Parties to the WH Convention pledging "that they shall, as appropriate, seek the active involvement of communities at all stages" of the WH process (WHC 2007, 7). Such a pledge asks questions about the role of communities in heritage stewardship over time, and calls for a renewed understanding of the history of community and "unity of social feeling" across time and across urban WH sites, as inspiration for present and future generations.

As cautioned by Bandarin, Jyoti Hosagrahar[25] and Frances Sailer Albernaz, efforts in service of sustainable development should "give in neither to the single-minded certainty that they hold the property rights to universal truth, nor to the relativism that would allow them to condone practices that are contrary to human rights." (Bandarin et al 2011, 22)

Navigating the complex terrain between claims to "universal truth" and extreme relativism has been the challenge of the WH system since its earliest days. Time will tell whether the recent introduction of an explicit sustainable development perspective at the core of the global WH system serves to strengthen local efforts to integrate social history perspectives within urban WH narratives. In any case, it is eminently clear that the global WH system's current dynamics offer a critical opportunity to redefine the nature, meaning and purpose of heritage at a local level, to support the international community's efforts to tackle an increasingly urgent existential polycrisis, not least from a social perspective.

In relation to the 'Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' WH site's own future-making heritage practices, might an argument be made towards explicitly bringing "aristocrats, merchants and the urban poor" - interpreted in the broadest human and more-than-human senses possible - together under a single roof of heritage value recognition, as a strong and necessary response to the physical, political and economic causes and impacts of that very same polycrisis?

The time may have come for a revival of the people's story.

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[25] UNESCO WH Centre Deputy Director, since 2018.

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Charles Drożyński

TOWARDS KASZËBSCZI CONTIGUITY

Towards an Introduction

In 1925, *The Trial* - one of Franz Kafka's (arguably) most influential texts was published. It became an object of interest and subject to multiple interpretations, allowing it to become a story encapsulating a multiplicity of meanings across time. The publication was sadly not adorned by the author's presence, as he died a year prior. Perhaps due to Kafka's absence, the text could meander between plateaus of meaning in the turbulent socio-political history of 20th-century Europe, becoming a new story every time it was read, and with every new encounter it engaged. At times, it *became* a description of the operational mechanisms in Central European Communism, while at others it took on the features assumed as representing a much more intimate experience of long-term illness – similar to Kafka's. What it never was, however, is compliant with the ways in which a major piece of literature was expected to function and rather acted as a minor work.

This paper aims to explore what can be characterised as this minor type of *becoming* through the analysis of the renovation of an old, vernacular Kaszëbsczi cottage as an act of [re]claiming of space in Poland and as a way to evade the watchful eye and design sensibilities of the local authorities and Communist government officials in the 1970s. In this, the work on restoring this vernacular piece will be treated in a sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari treated Kafka's literature - as minoritarian and will be taken as 'perpetually unachieved' and conceptually contiguous from the point of view of the major regime of thought (2016, p. 35). This is to say that much like their description of space in *The Trial*, the architectural development of the cottage became a creative redevelopment of the relation of a field of knowledge about architecture between the postulates of Modernism, and how vernacular architecture was perceived at the time.

In placing this definition on the cottage, it allows us to understand the interconnectivity of the design decisions that were taken and what they offer in telling the story of the recent Polish past. In this, the aesthetic of the cottage and other minoritarian elements of the Polish landscape from the point of view of the overriding architectural clichés helped redefine the interior under the three conditions that Deleuze and Guattari set out in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.

While it would be an overstatement to assume all urban and architectural proposals in Communist Poland followed the same directive or indeed that the directive was a simple and single-tracked command, the cottage is one example that shows spatial characteristics dissenting from the oppression of the economy and policing in the country. To convene this narrative, this paper is divided into three sections: the first engages with my understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's take on Kafka's literature; the second describes the dominant axiomatic regimes of thought in Polish Communism, and how it was translated into a compliant architectural form; and the third discusses a renovation of a cottage in the Kaszëbsczi region of North Poland.

Towards a Becoming

Once a strong regime of thought is portrayed as the most common-sensical way of engaging with the world, it is easy to start seeing and scrutinising matters at hand through its lens. However, trusting too much in the continuous line of logic that it proposes can lead to intellectual rigidity and accepting ideas that are too abstract or utopian. While it may function in principle or as a description of an ambition, it often propagates the same consistent but limited ways of considering the world or any object at hand. This often breeds repetition and inhibits different perspectives. Such a regime may set out a system of reasoning that is coherent, but when confronted with other ways of interacting with the world, can appear incomplete or fractious, setting out a conceptual contiguity. This is especially true for any new or minor elements that come to contradict or do not fit in with this regime. These elements are sometimes seen as trivialities or mistakes; perhaps representative of ideas that might be too complex for the dogma to grasp and accept.

One can understand Deleuze and Giattari's analysis of Kafka, where they discuss his 'minor literature' as one where they try to visualise this contiguity. In their narrative, they describe the atmosphere in his novel, *The Trial* (2015), in which a vital element of a legal trial is processed always in the next room or a contiguous space, suggesting the impossibility of considering the surrealist situation of the novel in real life. Deleuze and Guattari write that the protagonist of *the Trial* 'will realize that even if the law remains unrecognisable, this is not because it is hidden by its transcendence, [...] it is always in the office next door, or behind the door, on to infinity [...]' (Deleuze and Guattari 2016 p. 45). The protagonist of *the Trial* is never in the same room as the event that he is trying to become part of, signifying a process that is approaching the destination but is in a state of perpetual unachievement. This stipulates a feature of conceptual formations - the lack of their completeness or deep locality of their intellectual positioning (Deleuze and Guattari 2016). The clash of two such positions, composed of different assumptions that do not coincide, results in a recognition that the other is unattainable even if both yearn for one another. Cristóbal Durán Rojas suggests that this is the foundation of the Deleuzo-Guattarian metaphysics

that, while describing the production of the real and having real impacts, epistemic positions are incapable of offering intellectual closure as they are by nature only selective in how they are structured (2024). In this lies the complexity of relations in the real world – being much richer than the reasoned or axiomatic regimes of thought. While these try to grasp reality, they are always incomplete, merely approaching it but never reaching its full complexity. In this sense, true minor works that do not claim adherence to an ideology can meander between them and can be seen as more real and immanent, albeit erratic and somewhat fractioned. This is how *the Trial* could have multiple meanings.

As such, this *becoming* of a minor work, as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari enables us to consider what is outside of the established fields of knowledge, what is new, creative, unusual about understanding adjacencies of intellectual positioning – all in a contiguity of sorts, a 'space' that can be accessed but not via a continuity of the situation/knowledge networks one is presently in. Accepting this demands suspending all the conventional ways of considering the object of interest; ways that follow a strict regime of thought and engage with what is imminently potential, as it has no necessary inevitability in what it might conceptually *become*.

Stipulating this, Deleuze and Guattari suggest key features that are associated with minor literature. They assert that writing such as Kafka's holds a collective value, is written in a rearticulation of common language, and is often politicised (2016, p. 17). One can understand this to suggest that contiguity will hold aesthetic qualities that signify the frictions in reasoning with the dominant reasoning pathways. Writing of the architectural equivalent of such minor literature, Jill Stoner suggests that they necessarily emerge in the context of major axiomatic regimes of thought that dominate knowledge networks (2012). The becoming of the minor in this respect would be characterised by an intense sense of imminent encounters during production and a potential for a rearticulation of the core assumptions associated with major works.

Towards Major Architectural Works in Polish Communism

Major axioms are likely emergent when deep ties with a solution to a problem have to be accepted to create even the feeblest illusion of a viable way forward. This was the case with Polish Communism after the Second World War, where the totalitarian leaders of the state proposed a series of seemingly functionally operative directives that were to bring about and rebuild the entire nation. Their consequences led to the emergence of design sensibilities repetitive across the nation.

In 1953, Nikita Khrushchev took control over the Soviet Union (Kemp Welch 2008). He subsequently renounced Stalin's leadership style in 1956 (Shukman 1998). Pre-empting his renouncement and at the 'All Union Conference of Builders, Architects and Workers of the Building Industry' (1954), Khrushchev stated that architectural design must place greater emphasis on using concrete and prefabricated construction in search of efficiency in solving the housing shortage (Forty 2012). In this, the design circles were to explicitly turn away from Socialist-Realism to look towards Socialist-Modernism as a more common-sensical way forward. Socialist-Modernism recognised the weakened economy under a plethora of embargoes as well as shortcomings of the state

leadership and was to incentivise speed of construction by enabling a lot more unskilled workers to contribute to the industry. This was associated with a change in thinking about architecture to a turn to the Modernist Athens Charter (1933) (in Jurewicz (ed.) 2012). This is to say that public space was to be sunny, and open with a large amount of vegetation, and most commonly a public facility at the core of every assemblage of concrete tower-blocks. In this way, architects who were supported by the state were to continue the axiom of social condensers that was proposed in Russian Constructivism and developed in Socialist-Realism. In a certain sense, it was a (misplaced) trust that architecture, if put together skilfully, had the agency to produce (condense) cohesive communities (Murawski 2017). These assumptions percolated through the social and professional structure of the Polish architectural discipline and became aspirational (Jurewicz (ed.) 2012). Designing was, in an obvious way, idiosyncratic to each design team and not all architectural developments in Poland took the form of tower-blocks. Saying this, in the push to rebuild a nation there was a palpably intense demand and immediacy to build quickly and to comply with the Marxist ethos of sharing resources to build a stronger society – a demand that Socialist Modernist architectural language seemed to have satisfied. The tall Modernist concrete tower-blocks were often unashamedly unresponsive to the immediate landscape, drawing from abstract ideologies more than their context. Victor Buchli asserts that this attitude extended into the private dwellings inside these blocks, where the scarcity of means forced an intensely repetitive set of design choices limiting freedom in interior architectural design (2002).

In addition to this, and as a primarily urban philosophy, Communism targeted and developed all spaces where gregariousness and sharing could be enacted in a unified and comprehensive way, and one that is acceptable to the state. To make sure that these goals are achieved, the government planted agents into the Polish communities. Secret agents whose operations were sanctioned by the government were to coordinate and encourage communities they were brought into without checks and balances on their work (Tyrmand, 2013, p. 28). The presence of these operatives had the opposite effect, and the possibility of meeting one and being reported for benign activities spread mistrust amongst the Polish nation. What is more, amidst the sameness of tower-blocks, it was increasingly easy to determine the layout of a flat below or above one's dwelling. In this, accidental eavesdropping and even intentional surveillance was eased. When describing the atmosphere in Poland in 1958, Michel Foucault writes:

> "In the silences and everyday gestures of a Pole who knew he was being watched, who waited to be out in the street before telling you something, because he knew quite well that there were microphones everywhere in a foreigner's apartment. In the way voices were lowered when you were at a restaurant, in the way letters were burnt, [...] I went through a kind of physical experience of power, of the relations between the body and power." (2004)

Much like in Kafka's Trial, the description of the space of these operatives followed principles that disallowed scrutiny of the work. This lack of transparency is often associated with an over-codified structure of authority that is too rigid and abstract. One could understand this situation in a way that the deployment of the ideology created agents that, in a sense, can be characterised as contiguous, clashing with the seemingly linear and abstract assumptions of Communism with the real world.

I suspect that while aware of this, Polish architects were not designing buildings for invigilation, and I prefer to trust that their mind's eye was focused on what they saw as more pragmatic functions of sheltering large masses of people and offering a viable dwelling at speed. This functionality of architectural and urban designs was obviously of primary concern for the authorities, as it was for most Modernist architects, and especially under Khrushchev's ambitions of efficiency. However, to assume that the tie of Communist politics to architecture was only pragmatic and not aesthetic would be to dismantle the enacted agency in the subjectivity of the architect. There had to have been a scrutinising mechanism that took aesthetics as a signifier of appropriate design decisions; this is to say that there must have been an ethico-aesthetics that distinguished good architecture, perhaps a way of stipulating what is functional or least wasteful. We can see this clearly in the appearance of many examples of buildings that followed the Athens Charter, argued by the functionality or ease of construction, but also represented by carefully drawn perspectives and elevations. In this way, one may argue that architects of concrete tower-blocks were also working within a contiguity of sorts – a space to design with, at best, an aspiration to reflect the Communist ideology. As a result, the Polish urban landscape became inhabited with large concrete residential tower-blocks signifying the prevailing axiomatic regime; differing perhaps in small detail but still manifesting a major work that aspires to a Socialist-Realist aesthetic. Some took extreme proportions, like the tower-block in Gdańsk called Falowiec, which sprawled for a kilometre across the city (see fig. 1).

Figure 01:
A photograph of Falowiec [1 km] long tower-block in Gdańsk/Poland.

Drożyński, 2025.

One need not try too hard to find in this design traces of the cultural hegemony that the Polish Communist Government aspired to, and while unusually distinct in the country, it was openly supported by the state. The volume of designs that sought the *Falowiec's* aesthetic as aspirational was high which fitted in with the propaganda of the nation that preached success in the economic and design circles of Poland. As such, while not being the only available design typology in the country, they became synonymous with the most ambitious developments in the largest cities and a symbol of a pragmatic approach to speedy growth.

Towards Kaszëbsczi Architecture

Amid these socio-political and spatial developments, Mieczysław Różycki, a well-known Polish artist suffering from being targeted by Communist operatives, was anxiously seeking shelter or a way out of having to live in a major city and the cramped flat that he was assigned (Różycki 2024). In this, he responded to the threat by engaging in minor works and used a loophole in the Polish law, which exempted farming developments from the prefabricated concrete rule to maintain a stable supply of agricultural products in the nation (Ibid.). As such, he bought a plot of land in the North of Poland in the Kaszëbsczi region with a cottage to renovate and modernise (Ibid.). The specific location of this plot was Szumleś Krolewski, about an hour away by car, west of Gdańsk. While being fond of vernacular methods of producing eclectic art and jewellery (drawing from the local traditions and materiality that his region had to offer), Różycki enjoyed the obvious comforts that came from the modern world (Ibid.). Appropriating the cottage was Różycki's way of [re]claiming of his freedom to act without the limits of the government, and a reassessment of the vernacular typology was his way of propagating an ethico-aesthetics that divorced him from any signifiers of the state. In this, he aimed to develop the cottage in a way that would draw from and offer all the comforts he had grown used to but not rely too heavily on the standardised and inadequate solutions that the Communist state provided. The forced gregariousness between neighbours in a city and control over gestures and whispers became redundant in the open fields, and the endless forest leading up to a nearby lake.

Beyond its location that distanced Różycki from the watchful eye of the Communists, the cottage had an unusual layout for the assumptions of Communist Modernism (Różycki 2024). Jill Stoner suggests that this is one of the features of minoritarian architecture - its capacity to offer a space for the enactment of 'autonomy of a desiring subject at risk' (Stoner, 2012, p. 81). In saying so, she quotes Virginia Woolf, who (in *A Room of One's Own*) noticed that '[w]omen have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the verywalls are permeated by their creative force' (Ibid.). While Różycki was not under the same pressures as Woolf's writing would suggest, one can easily notice the liberating affect that he was attempting to reclaim in Szumleś Królewski.

The cottage is an example of the vernacular of the region. In theory, the form of a Kaszëbsczi cottage developed from an 18th century building with one room enclosed by peripheral walls to a more complex division of the interior based on buildings serving the small nobility of the region with symmetrically placed windows and central door on the longer elevation and a differentiation between functions of each room but grouped around a centrally situated hearth (Kurkowska 2015). The rooms adjacent to the kitchen in such a cottage would be divided with beaten clay walls, which could be easily broken down and rebuilt in case a change is needed. The kitchen would be the central and most significant room in the composition. It would contain a stone hearth that is a significant feature in the interior - a point heat source for the whole building. As for any ornaments on or within the building, such cottages did not seem to manifest more than what was necessary in the location and climate that they functioned in (ibid.).

Różycki's cottage seems to be following all these rules. In a certain way the history of the region, landscape, pathway that led to the cottage and the microclimate mapped out its features on the morphology of the building (see fig. 2). The building had a typical double-pitched roof in case of heavy snowfall and maintained an intimate relation with the landscape not only through the immediacy of the front door leading from the kitchen abruptly to the

Figure 02:
Różycki's Kaszëbsczi cottage from the outside.

Drożyński, 2025.

outside but also the positioning within the context responding to prevailing winds and nearby trees. Importantly, the cottage is a contiguity from the point of view of Communist assumptions on architecture – it was not efficient, nor was its form a logical continuity of reason, inconsistently drawing from the regional nobility, mapping the microclimate, and composed with the pragmatics of food processing and availability of material. Perhaps conceptually unattainable for the 'major architects' therein, but undoubtedly the construction made perfect sense for its builders. Saying this, and being vernacular and considered minor, it had the capacity to meander between ideological regimes.

In updating the internal finishes, Różycki drew in parallel with, if not explicitly from, the architectural design strategies for the village of Zakopane in the Polish Mountain-scape that was set up at the tail end of the 19th century to create an image of vernacularism. The so-called 'góralski' or Zakopiański style initiated by Stanisław Witkiewicz around the year 1886 was part of a strategy to build a strong foundation for a modern-day folk architecture in Poland (Moździerz 2020). This style was inspired by the architectural traditions of the region, especially the Podlahański style (ibid.). The Zakopiański style assumed a constellation of vernacular tropes such as a steep-sloped thatched roof, natural materiality including substantial reliance on the internal use of timber, and compact planar composition. While on the other side, it rearticulated vernacularism to suit contemporary (for its day) living standards with smooth internal surfaces meeting at right angles, complex inhabited walls, and an over-ornate but simple in execution craftsmanship in decorating structural internal elements. This, largely, constructed imagery of vernacularism was advertised as typically Polish and once common not only to a local region but across the nation. As such, the problem of the *becoming* of a vernacular architecture became an assemblage of elements that, from the point of view of Modernist architecture, looked like a minor work with an apparent sense of contiguity of ideas but without an organic logic behind it.

In the same way, the renovation of Różycki's Kaszëbsczi cottage was seen from the prism of what a vernacular cottage should be to a modern city dweller, and not what was functional for the climatic/cultural/material situation. As such, Różycki treated the overall form of the building with respect and restored the roof that had fallen in by replacing it with a more robust series of corrugated metal sheets for peace of mind (Różycki 2024). The modernisation of the building included fitting out a bathroom to modern-day (for 1970s) standards and introduced electricity and running water to the interior. In doing this, he took care to preserve the materiality of clay and stone as much as he could, and to maintain a point source heat in the kitchen, he introduced a more contemporary (in the 1970s) log burner. The internal finishes had to be replaced as time and humidity fluctuations were not easy on the fitout. He refaced the walls with a fabric with representational floral depictions and did the same with the ceiling (Ibid.). He also enforced some of the key walls with timber. The changes he introduced made contemporary (for him) life in the building comfortable and approximated the vernacular style that the cottage was originally conceived with, but not quite manifest a genuine expression of the land. The floral patterns on the finishes were not drawn from the vernacular way of weaving or decorating fabric that was typical for the Kaszëbsczi region, and the walls were much too smooth and straight for the construction type.

Fitting out the interior surfaces with polished hardwood timber in key locations provided opportunities for an

aesthetic that favoured right angles and straight surfaces. As such, it created a place for Różycki to hang his drawings and set up work surfaces for him to continue producing jewellery. In this, he also developed thresholds between living quarters (see fig. 3) and allowed them to become display spaces and storage of ceramics, much like the inhabited walls of the Zakopiański style. The becoming of the minoritarian vernacular here took a creative turn in assuming different versions thereof from different parts of the nation, referring to the imagery of minoritarian-vernacularism that was advertised as once typical for the Polish rural.

Figure 03:
The timber threshold in Różycki's Kaszëbsczi cottage.

Drożyński, 2025.

Figure 04:
The window in Różycki's Kaszëbsczi cottage.

Drożyński, 2025.

A final alteration was to enlarge the windows enough to allow Różycki to be able to read and see his art in detail, but at the same time, not enough to flood the interior with light. This, as evidenced by the treatment of a barn next to the house (with a glass wall at the gable end), was well within his capabilities. The windows in the cottage were dilated (but imperceptibly) and were secured with bars that would prevent unwanted entry and were a clear sign against the gregariousness suggested by the Communist ideology. In this treatment and with the way the timber and glass inside were treated and configured the interior at sundown and sunrise comes across as a dark space of free-floating surfaces which reflect light (see fig. 4). As such, the core driver of the development in this vernacular instance was guided by choices which were to aid in an aesthetic or ocular comfort similar to that of Modernist assumptions – calibrating the right amount of light but in a way that offers a different, somewhat darker atmosphere than the brightly lit and sterile Modernist interiors.

In this, the building played on the three characteristics of minoritarian literature in that it showed an alternative to the Communist principles of inhabitation and diverged from the social affect of radical collectivity and sharing. As such, it held a value for all that participated in the political theatre through a rearticulation of the architectural design methods and considerations. In doing so, it became political by rebelling against the fields of scrutiny in the architectural discipline at hand. Its aesthetic is political in the sense that it shows the contiguity that was immensely felt in Poland during Communism, which came from the contradictions in the deployment of the philosophy in real life. Saying this, and being a minor work, it was free to meander in the fields of meaning and did not pose a direct threat to the establishment.

Towards Concluding Remarks

Our interaction with the world, based on any drive or ambition, is by necessity circumscribed and does not carry the same chaos or richness that the world has to offer. In this, any intentional assemblage is epistemologically a contiguity of sorts, especially when abstract ideologies are at play. These ideologies are problematic as they simplify the world to propose a stripped diagram of it, presenting itself with an aspirational signifier of efficiency. Communist authorities showed signs of an affiliation to such a unifying set of concepts and stipulated a clearly defined set of common-sensical solutions that complied with a very narrowly defined approach to architecture and politics set out with a baseline condition of availability of resources and skillsets. At the same time, Communist leaders regulated policing in Polish communities, enacted through secret agents who produced an affect where spontaneous gregariousness was impossible to assert comfortably. As a result, Mieczysław Różycki felt he had to flee to the countryside, and in doing so, he [re]claimed a vernacular cottage in protest against the way he was demanded to live. In this, the space he asserted weaved in and out of the philosophies that underpinned the totalitarian regime.

Vernacular architecture is usually emergent of the local microclimate, morphology, culture, and fauna, as well as flora at hand, using materials that are easily available and abundant. As such, it is a mapping of its history, locality, and all its chaotic qualities. In its form, and discarding opportunities offered by more global technological developments, it is often treated as a minor work by the architectural profession. The becoming of the vernacular in our minds-eye

often seeks the minoritarian at the risk of missing all that does not fit into its definitive pattern. In this, our contemporary ways of understanding and respecting it will supplement what is not considered as vernacular and therefore valuable to maintain, creating a metamorphosis of the real – a trace of the mapping of the context. In this light, features of vernacular architecture that do not comply with the definition of architecture would be free to diverge from the dogma in ways that are truly productive of a real engagement that is unbound by repetitive solutions, as they do not serve to sustain the axiom. In this way, the contiguity of the logic of vernacularism is accepted. At the same time, the features that are recognised as vernacular will become ingrained in the operational reproductive system of the discipline, and when interacted with, may fall into the trap of being repetitive in the same way as the order of knowledge that defines it. Any work on vernacular architecture would, in this sense, be an assemblage of repetitive and intensely idiosyncratic solutions. In the case of this cottage, we see traces of modernist sensibilities and importance of the visual impact of design. At the same time, we may note other spatial features that give architectural significance to the building such as a space that is defined immediately outside of it and enclosed by the trees, or the specificity of the original hearth's proximity to the front door.

With a lack of continuity of cultural impact and no lived experience in maintaining skills and ways of thinking about the context and materials, the Kaszëbsczi construction approaches expressed features of a minoritarian craft. The *becoming* minor here in how the space was [re]claimed and allowed for the [re]claiming of liberties denied in a Communist city in asserting contiguous features through the blatant refusal to follow Modernist design principles and redefining vernacularism. In this, Różycki's aesthetic ambitions moved him towards a more contemporary way of understanding what vernacular architecture is. This way of *becoming* and treating a minoritarian through grouping contiguous opportunities to become was, at one time, made possible through its relation to the dominating axioms of thought – in this case, Socialist-Modernism, but at the same time, possible to engage with at a creative capacity through the inconsistencies in its definition and inability or unwillingness to follow self-contradictory legislative guidelines. As such, Różycki's cottage exemplifies the *becoming* of a field of knowledge that is between Modernist design and vernacular architecture and bears the features of Deleuze and Guattari's minor work. In this form, the cottage tells a story about anxieties and resourcefulness that Różycki exercised and taps into the broader affect prevalent in the country in 1970.

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Ana Berenice Gómez de León

FILTERED MODERNITIES:
Architecture at the Edge of Tradition and Transformation

Introduction

Architecture in rural contexts often emerges from a complex interaction between traditions and contemporary ideas of transformation, where both construction practices and the buildings themselves are frequently passed down across generations within families. In many regions, particularly those located outside formal centres of architectural production, built form is shaped less by professional design discourse and more by the cumulative knowledge, material practices, and cultural values of local communities. These processes produce architectural environments that continuously adapt to environmental conditions, economic realities, and shifting cultural meanings.

The rural settlement of Jamé offers a compelling context in which to examine these dynamics. The region's architecture has historically relied on locally available materials such as earth, timber, and stone, as well as construction techniques developed through long-standing interactions between inhabitants and their environment. These vernacular practices have traditionally enabled buildings to respond effectively to climatic conditions, daily routines, and local patterns of life, although such performance is not universal and requires empirical validation in each specific context.

In recent decades, however, these material and spatial traditions have increasingly been modified through the introduction of industrial materials such as concrete block, aluminium window frames, and prefabricated construction elements. These changes reflect broader cultural aspirations associated with modernity and improved living standards. Yet such interventions often disrupt the environmental logic and cultural continuity embedded within vernacular architecture.

This paper examines how vernacular architecture in Jamé responds to the interplay of tradition and transformation. Vernacular architecture can be perceived as a static or nostalgic condition. However, it can also be explored as a dynamic system of knowledge, evolving through adaptation, reinterpretation, and material substitution. Through a contextual analysis of local building practices, materials, and recent architectural modifications, the research explores how rural dwellings mediate between inherited construction knowledge and contemporary architectural aspirations.

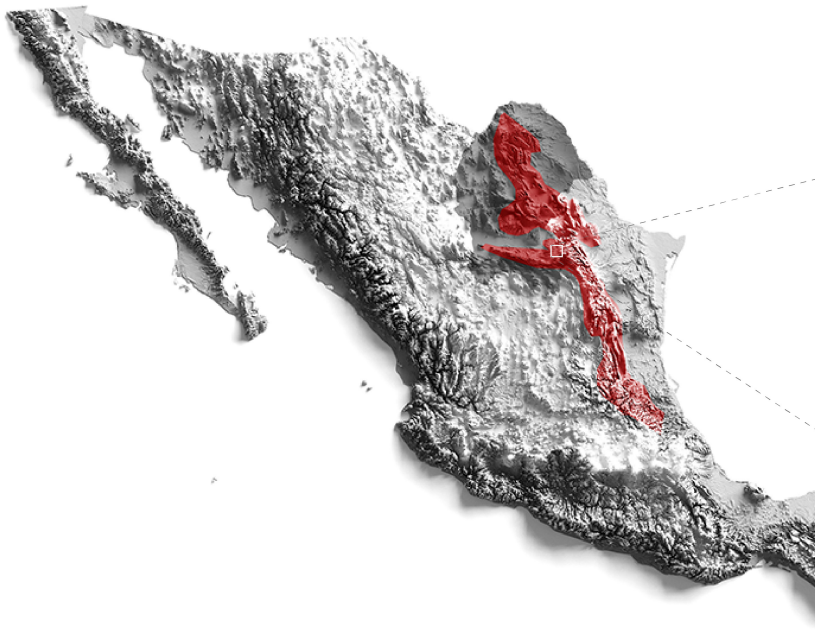
By examining the material transformations taking place within the built environment of Jamé, this study contributes to broader discussions on vernacular architecture, cultural identity, and the role of local knowledge in shaping context-responsive design practices. In doing so, it argues that the hybrid architecture emerging in this region should not be understood as failures of tradition or incomplete forms of modernity, but rather as situated responses to changing environmental, social, and cultural conditions.

Foundations of a Contextual Knowledge

In the early stages of human settlement, as the first civilisations began to take root across diverse regions, inhabitants instinctively sought forms of shelter that could offer both comfort and protection within the constraints of their immediate environment. A form of natural analysis took place, whereby communities observed the elements from which they needed to shield themselves, as well as those from which they could draw benefit. This process represented an intuitive and harmonious dialogue between the human body and the surrounding landscape, gradually giving rise to architectural expressions that evolved not only due to environmental demands but also in response to shifting social and political conditions.

Beyond their function as shelter, buildings in villages reflect what their inhabitants have in common, which, in addition to ideologies and culture, reflects the physical factors that surround them. Settlements cannot be understood solely as mapped places; they become lived environments through the activities and interactions of their inhabitants, continually shaped by both social practices and environmental conditions. While a place refers to the fixed configuration of elements within a stable environment, it is transformed into space through the movements, routines, and daily practices of its inhabitants (De Certeau, 117). This highlights the importance of understanding a settlement's physical and geographical characteristics, which both provide the framework for lived experiences and actively shape the form of its buildings.

The village of Jamé is situated in the mountainous terrain of northeastern



Mexico, in the municipality of Arteaga, Coahuila, nestled within the Sierra Madre Oriental, an extensive mountain range that runs along the eastern side of the country, stretching from the north towards the central region (Figure 1). The elevations in this range reach approximately 3,000 metres above sea level, with the municipality of Arteaga home to the region's highest peak, along with Santiago, Nuevo León, the Cerro de la Viga, standing at 3,715 metres.

The municipality is located between the parallels 25°09' and 25°32' north latitude, and the meridians 100°57' and 100°14' west longitude, with an elevation ranging from 1,300 to 3,700 metres above sea level. Average temperature ranges vary between 8°C and 20°C, while extreme averages may fall outside this interval. Annual precipitation ranges from approximately 300 to 700 millimetres. The climate is predominantly temperate sub-humid with scarce rainfall throughout the year, and these altitudinal conditions produce a temperate mountain climate and regular snowfall typically occurring in December and January (INEGI 2010, 1).

Views from most buildings in the town open onto pine trees and dense forest vegetation, reflecting the settlement's integration with its natural surroundings. Situated at an altitude of approximately 2,275 metres, the town's architecture is predominantly composed of earth-based materials, with more recent interventions constructed primarily from concrete block. While traditional designs may not always meet the practical demands of contemporary living, they continue to offer valuable inspiration. When thoughtfully reinterpreted, these forms can lead to architectural solutions that are both functionally effective and culturally meaningful.

In this region, early twentieth-century houses in nearby cities often incorporated colonial architectural elements, which were later emulated in the dwellings built along the mountainous slopes. According to King (2001, 14-15), both

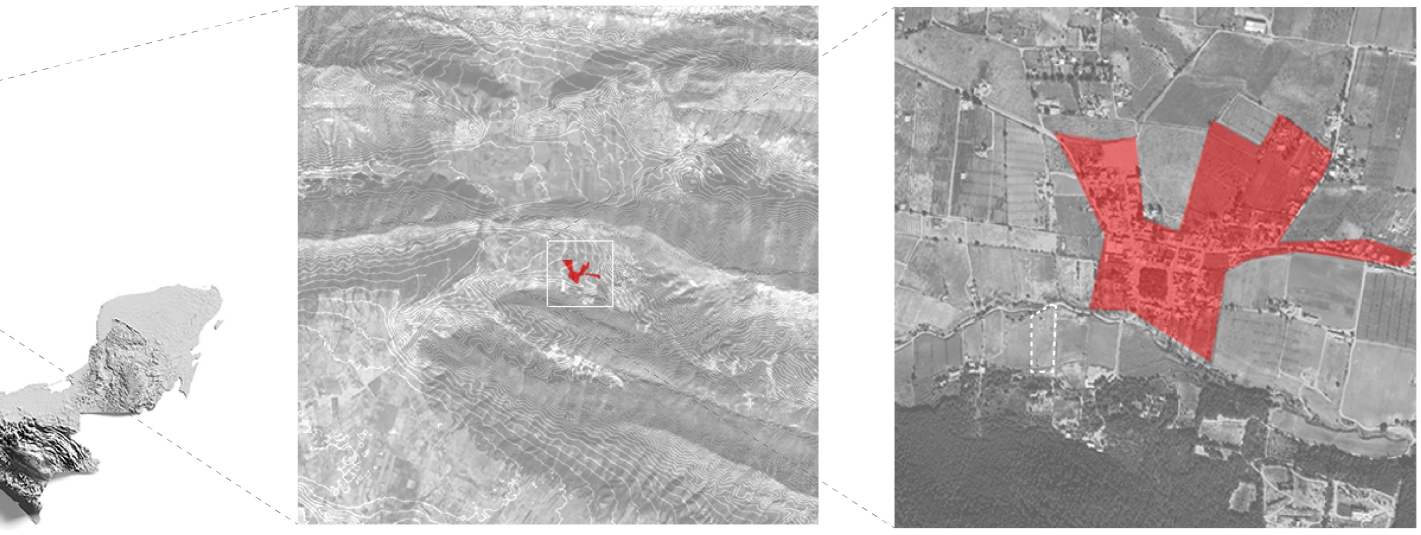


Figure 01:
From Left to Right: Mexico with the State of Coahuila Shaded and the Sierra Madre Oriental Highlighted in Red; Part of the Municipality of Arteaga, with Jamé Shown in Red; Jamé.

Gómez, 2025.

in northeastern Mexico, and in some regions of southern Spain, similarities can be seen, especially in dwellings. These elements include flat roofs, door and window openings strategically placed and formed, single-story houses with adjoining small barns, a zaguán, which is a patio-corridor used to connect all rooms, relatively large kitchens, as these are the hubs of family activity, and a patio with a water well or cistern.

Although the architectural elements were adopted stylistically, they were implemented pragmatically to respond to the environment. As shown in Figure 2, the largest openings face south, while the east façade has only minimal openings.

However, due to distinct climatic conditions and differing patterns of daily life, these features required adaptation. The mountainous terrain experiences much stronger air currents than the semi-arid valleys below, demanding alternative strategies for climate control (Figure 3). In rural areas, where daily routines typically began early to accommodate agricultural labour, such architectural elements remained both functional and symbolically significant. As a result, these features were reinterpreted to respond to environmental conditions while still preserving key aspects of traditional design and reinforcing the cultural identity of the house.

Figure 02:
Dwelling with Main Door and
Big Windows Facing South.

Gómez, 2025.

Figure 03:
Mountainous Landscape of the Region.

Gómez, 2025.

Conceptual and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in architectural and anthropological scholarship. It draws primarily on literature review and contextual analysis to examine vernacular architecture from perspectives that understand the built environment as a cultural artefact shaped through lived practices, social relations, and material engagements. This approach positions the research as a critical reading of how vernacular knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and transformed within a specific context.

By analysing foundational texts and impactful research, the study seeks to uncover the relationships between vernacular architectural practices and broader cultural and environmental considerations, while also exploring their role in sustainable design. This process serves as the primary means of contextualising the research within the broader academic dialogue, building a comprehensive understanding of how these concepts intersect in the context of rural architecture in the north-east of Mexico.

The Cultural and Material Dimensions of Vernacular

A distinction has been made between key dimensions of vernacular architecture, including material properties, environmental performance, and cultural meaning. While these domains often intersect in practice, they are not inherently equivalent, and their relationships require critical examination rather than assumption.

To describe a building as vernacular, as Glassie (2000, 20) suggests, is to acknowledge the inherently cultural and context-dependent nature of all building. The term vernacular reflects a movement from the unfamiliar to the familiar; it is used to describe buildings that embody values distinct from those typically upheld in academic or formal architectural discourse. Once referred to as folk architecture, these structures were regarded as a counterpoint to the ideals of refinement and progress often promoted by institutional narratives, rooted instead in shared knowledge, tradition, and everyday practice. They represent a different kind of value, one that is grounded in lived experience.

The study of vernacular architecture, motivated by an inclusive approach, seeks to foreground cultural diversity by drawing attention to relegated building practices and forms. It recognises the layered realities of conflict, adaptation, and difference within the built environment.

Popular architecture emerges as a direct response by communities to their own needs and values. Relying wherever possible on local materials and techniques, they draw upon historical models that have been reiterated over time, consistently addressing the environmental constraints imposed by climate with remarkable ingenuity; these structures demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to their surrounding natural and built contexts, and prioritise practical adaptation over theoretical or aesthetic ambition (Coch 1998, 67). In this sense, vernacular architecture has long embodied forms of technical intelligence embedded within everyday building practices.

Rudofsky (1964, 5) observed that many solutions developed within so-called ‘primitive’ environments anticipate or rival modern technological approaches, revealing that features often considered recent innovations have long existed

within vernacular architecture (Figure 4). By foregrounding these overlooked practices, architectural narratives that privileged monumental works and professionally designed buildings can be questioned, drawing attention instead to the intelligence embedded in anonymous and community-based construction.

While there is much valuable knowledge to be gleaned from vernacular architecture, it's important to recognize that, like everything, it has its limitations. Oliver (2007, 124) states that the enthusiasm for vernacular architecture permeates and objectively veils its benefits. It is often considered,

Figure 04:
Revisiting Vernacular Materials for their Thermal Performance and Cultural Significance: Traditional Adobe Wall alongside Contemporary Adobe Architecture.

Gómez, 2025.

by its enthusiasts, superior to modern architecture, as is the use of traditional materials. Although the latest have many advantages, their capabilities compared to modern materials cannot be evaluated lightly, whether structurally, ecologically, or aesthetically, to name a few. For instance, the production of steel consumes fossil fuels and water, while the extraction of timber places pressure on forest resources. Consequently, meaningful comparisons require clearly defined criteria when assessing which material, or even which type of construction, may be considered more appropriate in a given context.

Rapoport (1969, 83) argues that dwellings should not be understood merely as responses to climate or the availability of materials, but also as expressions of cultural values, social organisation, and patterns of everyday life. From this perspective, vernacular buildings emerge from the interaction between environmental constraints and culturally embedded ways of inhabiting space. Within this context, traditional builders often demonstrate remarkable skill in responding to climatic conditions, carefully selecting sites and materials suited to local microclimates and adapting established building models to specific environmental circumstances.

Therefore, materials play a fundamental role in vernacular architecture, not only because of their practical and environmental suitability but also due to their cultural significance and local availability.

In the mountainous regions of northeastern Mexico, the widespread use of earth in construction emerged from the abundance of soil deposits naturally occurring along the slopes. This readily available resource, combined with straw, formed the basis of local building techniques. When mixed, these materials enhanced the structural integrity and flexibility of walls, resulting in constructions well-suited to both the environmental conditions and the rhythms of rural life.

The volumes used are primarily rectangular with straight lines, which complement the use of traditional materials in construction. The walls were predominantly made of adobe, while the roofs were made of terrado, a layer of inorganic soil covered with lime and sand mortar to prevent water infiltration. These roofs were supported by beams or logs (Figure 5), and in some cases, additional reinforcement was provided through tejamanil, shingles laid transversely or diagonally across the beams, or by entablerados, planks placed over the beams (King, 2001). Tejamanil, derived from the Nahuatl word tlaxmanilli, gained popularity by 1580 in certain towns of New Spain (Butzer and Butzer 2000, 21), making it well-established by the time it was implemented in Arteaga, which was founded in 1591.

Most dwellings in Jamé are still constructed using earth-based materials, a tradition that has endured for over a century. In recent decades, however, some structures have undergone modifications reflecting a local reinterpretation of modernity in pursuit of improved domestic conditions, residents have introduced materials such as concrete blocks and corrugated steel, interventions that, somewhat paradoxically, have often diminished the buildings' thermal performance under these specific climate conditions. These changes mark a rupture in the intrinsic relationship between the built environment and the cultural values of its makers and inhabitants. This break is manifested in a variety of ways, including altered spatial configurations, shifts in material use, structural changes, building extensions, and, in some cases, overtly expressive architectural forms.

Due to limitations in transportation, vernacular architecture depended largely on materials readily available within the immediate environment and on locally rooted construction knowledge. This reliance not only encouraged the conservation of resources but also fostered the development of regionally distinctive architectural expressions. The physical and aesthetic qualities inherent to each material shaped building techniques that were carefully adapted to their specific characteristics, resulting in solutions finely tuned to both place and practice.

As economic conditions, technologies, and cultural aspirations change, vernacular traditions evolve through processes of reinterpretation and material transformation. In many contexts, these changes produce hybrid architectures that combine inherited building knowledge with new construction materials and techniques.

In this light, vernacular architecture is not merely a stylistic expression but a living system of knowledge, shaped by generations of trial, adaptation, and response to specific environmental and cultural conditions. It reflects a form of slow, adaptive intelligence, one that mediates through climate, material, and daily life with quiet resilience. By recognising its value beyond aesthetic nostalgia, we begin to understand vernacular architecture and the way it has been approached into modernity trying to be as context-responsive to contemporary design.

Changes within the built environment of Jamé can be observed most clearly through shifts in construction materials and building techniques. Over time, traditional earth-based materials such as adobe, stone, and timber have increasingly been supplemented or replaced by industrially manufactured

Figure 05:
Dwelling Roof Structure Supported by Wooden Logs.

Gómez, 2025.

elements including concrete block, corrugated metal roofing, and aluminium window frames (Figure 6).

These material substitutions are rarely driven solely by technical considerations. Instead, they are often shaped by changing cultural perceptions of modernity and progress. Industrial materials are frequently associated with durability, status, and contemporary living standards, leading many residents to incorporate them into existing structures or new constructions. However, these interventions do not always produce improvements in environmental performance. In many cases, replacing thick earthen walls with lightweight masonry or concrete blocks reduces the thermal mass of buildings, increasing indoor temperature fluctuations and diminishing the climatic responsiveness that characterised earlier vernacular constructions. The resulting architecture is therefore neither purely traditional nor fully modern. These hybrid constructions illustrate how vernacular architecture evolves through adaptation rather than simple continuity or replacement.

Tradition and Innovation: A Cultural Dialogue

The relationship between tradition and innovation is often shaped by sociocultural perceptions that influence how communities build, adapt, and ascribe meaning to architecture. Tradition is frequently seen as old, impoverished, or static, particularly in marginalised or rural contexts, while modernity is framed as aspirational, progressive, and materially superior. These dichotomies, however, obscure the complex and often dynamic interplay between inherited practices and new influences. Within the built environment, innovation does not simply replace tradition but transforms and redefines it, often producing hybrid expressions that reflect both continuity and change.

Tradition is understood as the repetition of practices rooted in accumulated knowledge and procedures developed over time within a particular society. Innovation, by contrast, refers to the introduction and application of new products, methods, or conceptual frameworks (Do Rosário and Kong 2021, 1). However, these two forces are not oppositional.

As traditions are shaped and transformed by innovation, new traditions are continually adapted and adopted. Tradition consistently emerges from acts of invention, and both constitute intrinsic components of culture. Many of the traditions recognised in the present day originated as innovations that were assimilated through cultural exchange, subsequently preserved and disseminated across time and space from diverse origins. Consequently, all imaginative or necessary creation is initiated by an external stimulus, whether geographical, ideological, or otherwise.

Building on this understanding, Zumthor (1988, 16-17) observes that contemporary life is increasingly characterised by the normalisation of contradiction, driven by multiple factors. The erosion of traditions has contributed to the fragmentation of cultural identities, while the complexities of economic and political systems often elude comprehensive understanding or control. Boundaries between domains become blurred, and

Figure 06:
Traditional Adobe House with Concrete Block Intervention and Modern Aluminium Windows.

Gómez, 2025.

mass communication contributes to the construction of an artificial world of signs and representations. Within this context, arbitrariness tends to dominate. Hence, the importance of buildings as objects that enable the resurfacing of memories embedded in the depths of time. Such perceptions offer a sense of calm and evoke an intuitive awareness of the world in its entirety, grounded in the belief that nothing lies beyond the scope of understanding.

Therefore, the question of agency becomes central in understanding vernacular architecture and its relationship between continuity and transformation. Unlike formally designed architecture, which is often attributed to individual authors or professional institutions, vernacular buildings typically emerge through collective processes of making, use, and adaptation. Construction knowledge is transmitted through practice rather than formal training, and buildings are frequently modified by their inhabitants over time in response to changing needs and circumstances. In this sense, the built environment reflects the accumulated decisions, skills, and experiences of communities rather than the intentions of a single designer. Through this distributed authorship, traditions are not simply preserved but continuously reinterpreted, allowing innovation to emerge from everyday practices and reinforcing the close relationship between vernacular architecture, lived experience, and the evolving cultural identity of a place.

Reclaiming Vernacular Logics in Contemporary Design

To address today's environmental and cultural challenges, contemporary architecture could rethink sustainability through the lens of vernacular knowledge. This does not mean reverting to the past but rather recognising vernacular architecture as a forward-looking model grounded in centuries of adaptation. Its principles offer not nostalgia, but insight. When understood as strategic rather than static, hybrid architectures, those that blend traditional and contemporary elements, can be reframed not as compromised forms, but as resilient responses to complex realities. In this sense, reclaiming vernacular logics becomes a critical act of design agency: one that bridges heritage with innovation, and locality with sustainability. This approach offers a means of filtering modernity, adapting it to context and tradition, rather than enforcing it.

Moscatelli (2023, 20) highlights the importance of establishing continuity between past and present through the pursuit of identity, without resorting to the falsification of history or the mere replication of tradition. It is essential that designers recognise that any project must begin with an understanding of historical knowledge and local culture, alongside an analysis of the climatic conditions specific to the context. Once historical knowledge has been assimilated, it becomes possible to formulate responses to contemporary challenges. This understanding provides a critical foundation for incorporating vernacular architectural principles into modern design, fostering the development of more resilient structures that are responsive to both the needs of inhabitants and local environmental conditions.

The integration of traditional materials and design principles into contemporary architecture contributes to the preservation of a regions or community's cultural identity. Moreover, such an approach fosters a sense of continuity between historical heritage and present-day architectural

practice (Hu, Suh, and Pedro 2023, 7).

Vernacular principles offer valuable strategies that, when appropriately implemented, can help achieve sustainable design, particularly in the development of environmentally conscious architecture that strives for both functional and aesthetic improvement. Vernacular architecture emerges as a direct response to local conditions, having evolved over time to reflect the environmental, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is embedded. Far from being the product of unsophisticated or coarse design, it demonstrates a high degree of responsiveness to its surroundings and reveals a nuanced understanding of material, climate, and community needs.

Sustainable architecture, broadly defined, encompasses design approaches that are ecologically and energy conscious, aimed at minimising the environmental impact of the built environment. Within vernacular traditions, sustainability is evident not only in the thoughtful use of local materials and climate-responsive design but also in the preservation of heritage and the integration of social and environmental awareness into building practices.

Given the multidimensional nature of sustainability, including environmental, social, and economic considerations, numerous vernacular elements may be adapted to inform contemporary sustainable solutions. There exists an ethical imperative to engage with design strategies that are locally grounded, cost-effective, and proven over time. In this regard, vernacular architecture offers critical lessons and enduring models for building practices that are resilient, inclusive, and environmentally attuned, that should be critically evaluated to be inherently sustainable or transferable.

From Intuitive Shelter to Environmental Awareness: Toward Resilient Futures

Designing with the strategic use of environmental elements through passive systems enables improved building performance and year-round energy efficiency. In the case of Jamé, the area's mild temperatures, moderate humidity, and consistent wind patterns create favourable natural conditions that can significantly enhance occupant comfort when effectively harnessed.

As a result, natural ventilation and orientation can significantly improve thermal comfort and reduce reliance on mechanical systems, although their effectiveness depends on climatic conditions and patterns of use. This reliance on passive climate control strategies not only reduces energy consumption but also mitigates the environmental impact associated with active systems. These environmentally responsive design strategies, rooted in local tradition, have been replicated in recent projects, albeit with appropriate adaptations, to achieve similar outcomes under contemporary conditions.

An illustrative example of vernacular environmental adaptation in this region the use of small wall openings, which, while functioning similarly to skylights, were in fact nothing more than modest apertures located near the upper sections of interior walls (Figure 7). These openings were typically left unprotected and served to allow the escape of warm air from the rooms and the entry of direct or diffused sunlight, depending on the hour and orientation. In doing so, they preserved an uninterrupted connection between interior and exterior environments, facilitating not only light and air circulation but also the entry of ambient natural sounds.

Figure 07:

Wall Opening. Gómez, 2025.

These elements were generally confined to interior partitions or walls that faced open courtyards within the property boundary, never those directly exposed to the street. While such features were highly effective in supporting the agrarian lifestyles of the past, they present certain limitations when considered in relation to contemporary modes of living. Unlike modern windows, these openings do not allow for regulated lighting conditions or artificial illumination based on aesthetic or functional demands associated with more varied daily schedules.

Historically, life in the region was centred around agriculture. In contrast, contemporary use of these dwellings has shifted considerably; many have been converted into holiday homes, used predominantly during weekends or vacation periods. Consequently, both daily routines and time-related needs have changed.

Although adobe has proven to be highly effective in regulating temperature and humidity, may also be viewed as impractical due to its considerable thickness, and its performance depends on factors such as construction quality, maintenance, and climatic conditions. As a result, materials such as concrete blocks, despite their inferior thermal performance, are increasingly being used in new constructions. Interestingly, earthen materials have begun to experience a resurgence in popularity, influenced largely by architectural trends emerging from some regions of the United States, where a renewed appreciation for earth materials has emerged (Aspíllaga et al. 2024, 123). These materials are now sometimes perceived, particularly by outsiders, as aligned with contemporary design sensibilities or even luxurious.

In Figure 8, a recent construction shows a holiday house in Jamé featuring a contemporary use of vernacular architecture. Unlike typical local dwellings, which are usually single storey, this house comprises two levels. The design blends with the local built environment while reflecting the renewed popularity of earthen construction in the region. However, this perception of modernity and the revival of earthen materials as a fashionable trend is not necessarily shared by the local population. For residents of these communities, modernity is often associated with the use of industrial or stone-like materials such as concrete and certain types of masonry, which are regarded as symbols of aspirational living.

Yet despite these contrasting perceptions, vernacular solutions remain highly relevant. They are typically cost-effective, as they are grounded in and responsive to local environmental, cultural, and material contexts. In addition to their affordability, such

Figure 08:
Contemporary Intervention in a Holiday House in Jamé.

Gómez, 2025.

approaches offer significant ecological benefits. Drawing inspiration from vernacular architecture, particularly using locally sourced or native materials, can greatly reduce the overexploitation of natural resources, thereby promoting more sustainable construction practices and minimising environmental impact (Dabaieh, Maguid, and El-Mahdy 2022, 7).

Readily available natural materials such as earth, reeds, straw, wood, and jute have long served as the foundation for traditional construction methods, particularly in the widespread use of sun-dried mud blocks and adobe structures. These bricks, being modular in form, are not only easy to fabricate and assemble but also straightforward to repair, given the local abundance of raw materials. To enhance structural stability and reduce the risk of cracking or shrinkage over time, various natural additives may be incorporated into the mixture. Substances such as lime, organic fibres, and plant-based mucilage, extracted from species like *nopal* and *lechuguilla*, are commonly used to improve the cohesion and resilience of earthen constructions.

In comparison to industrially produced materials, vernacular materials generally have a significantly lower environmental impact, making them a viable and often preferable alternative for sustainable construction. The widespread adoption of standardised, industrial materials has contributed to the homogenisation of construction practices across diverse contexts, giving rise to a universal architectural language that frequently neglects local environmental conditions. This shift has not only diminished regional identity in the built environment but has also increased dependency on energy-intensive systems and external resources (Fernandes, Mateus, and Bragança 2014, 623).

Key principles of sustainable design include the optimisation of site potential,

the preservation of regional and cultural identity, the reduction of energy consumption, and the conservation of natural resources. Further considerations encompass the use of environmentally responsible materials, the creation of healthy and comfortable indoor environments, and the adoption of efficient operational and maintenance strategies. In this regard, materials employed in vernacular architecture offer significant advantages, contributing positively to the fulfilment of these sustainability objectives.

Such materials typically require little to no transportation, as they are locally sourced, and involve less energy-intensive production processes. Being natural, they are often organic, renewable, and biodegradable. While the demand for specialised craftsmanship is sometimes perceived as a drawback, it is important to note that the overall expense of these structures remains comparable to that of standard concrete slab construction. In this context, directing a greater portion of the cost towards skilled labour may be seen not as a limitation, but as a meaningful contribution to local economies and the enhancement of construction quality.

It is important to recognise that such materials are not inherently unique to a specific place. While earth construction is frequently associated with local identity, similar soil compositions suitable for construction can be found globally; therefore, their cultural significance emerges not from the material itself, but from the practices, knowledge systems, and meanings attributed to its use.

On the other hand, contemporary materials and an industrialised construction culture have contributed to the idealisation of concrete and steel-based systems, leading to their widespread incorporation into vernacular architecture. The blending of industrial and traditional materials (Figure 9), exposure to biotic and abiotic agents, and the lack of formal regulations concerning earthen construction, have resulted in maintenance and restoration efforts that are often inappropriate or incompatible with the original fabric of traditional earth-based architecture (Rotondaro 2004, 28).

Several studies have examined clay and sand deposits in northeastern Mexico to assess their suitability for earthen construction. In a recent study (Aranda, Domínguez, and Jiménez 2023, 631-632), random soil samples were collected from three states, including Coahuila, revealing soils well-suited for adobe production and other earth-based construction techniques. In Saltillo, light beige sandy clays of medium plasticity were identified, while in the Tunal clay bank, that is about six miles from Jamé, black clayey sands with similar plasticity were found. These findings confirm the regional availability of appropriate earth materials, supporting the potential for sustainable construction practices rooted in local resources and vernacular traditions.

Salman (2018, 57) states that elements of sustainable design are inherently embedded within vernacular architecture, which has evolved over time through the use of locally sourced materials and context-specific technologies. Arising from the interplay between natural conditions and cultural practices, these forms establish an optimal relationship between people and their environment.

Formal, material, and spatial changes can be read as signals of transformation, registering both the resilience and the reinvention of local architectural languages. This perspective reframes vernacular-modern hybrids not as transitional or deficient, but as critical artifacts within a design ecology that is continually adapting, learning, and projecting alternative futures.

Figure 09:
Combined Use of Industrial and Traditional Materials.

Gómez, 2025.

At the Edge of Tradition and Transformation

The analysis of vernacular architecture in Jamé reveals that rural built environments are not static remnants of the past but dynamic systems shaped by ongoing processes of material and cultural negotiation. The architectural transformations observed in the region demonstrate how local building traditions adapt in response to shifting environmental conditions, technological availability, and changing perceptions of modernity. Rather than representing

a simple replacement of tradition with contemporary construction methods, these changes illustrate a gradual process through which inherited knowledge and new materials are continuously reinterpreted.

One of the most visible manifestations of this transformation lies in the substitution or combination of traditional earthen construction with industrial materials such as concrete block, corrugated steel, framing in windows, and prefabricated components. While these materials are often introduced in pursuit of durability, status, or perceived modernity, they frequently alter the environmental performance and spatial logic that historically characterised vernacular dwellings. In this sense, the built environment of Jamé reflects an architectural landscape in transition, where material experimentation produces hybrid forms that negotiate between climatic adaptation, cultural aspiration, and economic practicality.

These hybrid architectures should not be understood merely as incomplete modernisation or as the erosion of vernacular traditions. Instead, they represent situated responses through which communities actively reinterpret their architectural environment. Vernacular architecture therefore operates less as a fixed typology than as an evolving system of knowledge embedded in everyday practices of construction, repair, and adaptation.

Understanding vernacular architecture in this way has important implications for contemporary architectural practice. Rather than treating vernacular forms as aesthetic references or nostalgic symbols, designers and researchers can approach them as repositories of environmental intelligence and culturally embedded spatial strategies. When critically engaged, these traditions offer valuable insights into developing architectural responses that are environmentally responsive, materially grounded, and culturally meaningful.

This study navigates the boundary between descriptive observation and interpretative analysis. While certain arguments regarding cultural meaning and identity are necessarily subjective, claims related to material performance and environmental behaviour are treated with caution and framed as context dependent. The case of Jamé illustrates how architectural modernity in rural contexts is often not directly imported but locally filtered through existing building traditions and material practices. These transformations should not be interpreted as failures or losses of vernacular knowledge, but rather as part of a broader, cyclical process of synergy between tradition and change, one that reflects a form of filtered modernity unique to this context. While traditional earthen construction has been replaced or combined with industrial materials, contemporary architectural discourse has also begun to re-engage with earth-based techniques, recognising their environmental performance and cultural significance. This suggests that material transitions in vernacular environments are not simply linear shifts from traditional to modern systems, but part of a recurring process in which older knowledge is periodically rediscovered and reinterpreted.

By situating vernacular architecture as a dynamic system shaped by time, culture, environment, cultural identity, and principles of sustainability, this research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of built form, not as a fixed artefact, but as an evolving practice rooted in place. In doing so, it highlights the value of design approaches that are not only ecologically grounded but also responsive to local needs for adaptation, ultimately bridging tradition and transformation.

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Figures

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Hafsa Olcay

DIGITAL ANCHORS OF DISPLACEMENT:

[Re]claiming Space on the Unsettled Grounds of Athens

Introduction: Unsettled Grounds of Athens

Athens has faced a succession of overlapping crises in recent decades. Austerity measures weakened social protection, reduced public spending and exacerbated poverty (Matsaganis 2013). These contributed to rising homelessness, inequalities and greater social precarity. Unemployment and reduced access to services, on the other hand, disproportionately affected vulnerable groups (Arapoglou & Gounis 2015). Within this climate, political unrest and neoliberal urban policies further shaped the city's governance with significant impacts on neighbourhoods that have been historic hubs of activism, resistance and solidarity, where state responses to poverty and displacement shifted towards stricter control and policing measures (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou 2011).

The arrival of thousands of forcibly displaced people during the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (Makrygianni 2017) compounded these pressures, and the solidarity networks extended their attention to the issues faced by forcibly displaced people (Arampatzi, Kouki & Pettas 2022). As the state proved unable to meet demand, informal responses emerged as complex ecologies of care, cultural exchange and political claim in forms of self-managed squats, repurposed buildings and grassroots social centres (Tsavdaroglou 2018). These initiatives actively contested what their participants viewed as insufficient and disempowering responses of the state. Rather than reproducing the asymmetrical relationships implied by 'charity' and 'aid' where displaced people are positioned as passive recipients, solidarity initiatives advocated for social relations based on mutual participation and equality irrespective of background or legal status (Alexandri 2015). As several scholars noted (e.g., Kaika 2012; Leontidou 2014; Alexandri 2015), such practices worked against the

'othering' embedded in many migration policies by placing people side by side rather than in binary oppositions.

These infrastructures, however, had to operate under precarious conditions. Following the June 2019 parliamentary elections, the newly elected government targeted refugee squats which led to public evictions and the dismantling of occupied spaces like *City Plaza* which was a former hotel turned refuge and solidarity hub (Kotronaki, Lafazani & Maniatis 2018). Soon after, the COVID-19 pandemic brought further constraints and disrupted those fragile ecosystems. For many arriving the city after 2015, Athens thus remained an unsettled and unstable ground. As physical refuges were lost or became increasingly insecure, the digital sphere continued functioning as a ground for claiming presence. Social media, websites and online archives were mobilised for coordination, advocacy and cultural heritage preservation by acting as digital anchors when the material ground grew increasingly constrained.

In this paper, which is part of a broader project on architectures of displacement, I examine these practices, which I call 'digital anchors', as part of the wider political and spatial practices in Athens. Drawing on my fieldwork and digital research, I centre on three initiatives: *Hotel City Plaza*, *Communitism* and *Musikarama*, each of which harnessed both physical and digital strategies to sustain community and solidarity in the context of forced migration. These cases show that in contexts of forced migration, the sites of architectural production are not always visible or limited to physical form but extend to the digital realm. It suggests that attending to these hybrid and relational assemblages, we can unpack a broader conception of architectural agency while engaging with disrupted, unsettled grounds of forced migration.

Notes on Methods and Context

This paper draws on my doctoral fieldwork in Athens from 2018 to 2019 and my subsequent digital research into what I describe as the city's digital geographies of displacement. This period sits between two political moments, which are the so-called 'long summer of migration' in 2015 and the June 2019 parliamentary elections, after which refugee solidarity infrastructures came under sustained state pressure. This was a formative period in which solidarity activities were at their height yet faced growing threats, which made it possible to observe both the consolidation of physical spaces of care and the emergence of digital practices that took on a new significance as material footholds diminished.

The 2015 migratory arrivals brought tens of thousands of forcibly displaced people into Greece, and the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 effectively closed the Balkan route which trapped many newly arrived migrants in the country for extended periods (Oikonomakis 2018). As state responses were widely perceived as inadequate or hostile, solidarity groups established self-managed refugee squats and other initiatives that combined accommodation with cultural and political activities that are often described as "political infrastructures of care" (Kapsali 2020). Following the July 2019 parliamentary elections, a coordinated campaign to evict refugee squats in central Athens further disrupted these already fragile arrangements. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded these pressures and accelerated the loss and displacement of physical solidarity spaces. As physical spaces were increasingly unsettled, digital practices became more central for

coordination of events and activities as well as maintaining continuation for solidarity initiatives.

These digital activities had symbolic weight for maintaining visibility, sustaining narratives and projecting claims on the city, but they also intervened directly in lived spatial realities. Online announcements, event coordination and archiving shape where and how people gather, mobilised resources and sustained relationships in the city. In this way, the digital actively participated in producing the geographies of displacement and solidarity in Athens. Throughout my fieldwork, I traced how the transformations of physical sites were accompanied and sometimes mitigated by digital efforts through observations on the ground and online, which revealed hybrid geographies at the core of this study. These provided insights into how solidarity infrastructures are both socially and spatially organised, and how their architectures intersected with political action.

In this paper, I focus on three initiatives to navigate digital practices linked to displacement in Athens each of which illustrate different modes of digital anchoring. These cases offer distinct spatial trajectories and a diversity of spatial tactics from political housing and cultural heritage preservation to mobile/nomadic cultural production:

1. ***Hotel City Plaza***: a large-scale, self-managed housing squat,

2. ***Communitism***: a cultural heritage project that transformed into a digital archive under threat of eviction,

3. ***Musikarama***: a grassroots musical collective that operated across venues before building a studio in 2019.

While these initiatives had their unique trajectories and relationships to space, they were also interconnected through events and collaborations that cut across their boundaries. *Musikarama*, for example, undertook performances both in *City Plaza* and in *Communitism's* original building. Together, they were part of a wider solidarity ecology that linked local struggles in Athens to broader transglobal networks.

Theoretical Frameworks

On 'Hybrid Spatialities' of Forced Migration

In the recent years, studies of migration and Information and Communication Technology begun to examine how digital technologies mediate identity, belonging and mobility in different ways, particularly within media and migration scholarship. Georgiou (2013, 2019), for example, explores how digital engagement can function as expressions of belonging for diasporic communities, while Leurs (2015) and Latonero and Kift (2018) conceptualise "digital passages" to describe the intertwined physical and virtual routes migrants navigate in the formation of hybrid identities. Alencar, Kondova and Ribbens (2019) focus on migrants' use of smartphones in Netherlands as part of their journeys and a means to preserve memories, and Galis and Makrygianni's (2022) engage closely with individual journeys of migrants in Athens, and how digital practices can produce "ruptures in the sovereignty scapes" by carving alternative modes of presence within restrictive governance frameworks.

Read spatially, these accounts point to hybrid practices as modes of claiming presence within geographies of forced migration. Both physical and digital practices can be understood as acts of claiming space by producing footholds—however temporary—within

shifting conditions of governance and precarity. While scholarship on hybrid spatialities is expanding across multiple disciplines, there remains scope to deepen and diversify the contexts in which these practices are examined, both individually and collectively, as forms of spatial claim. This paper takes up that opening by engaging these debates through an architectural lens, in which such spatial realities have received comparatively limited attention. For architecture, attending to hybrid spatialities brings into view modes of spatial production that challenge an overpowering focus on material site as the locus of claim, and instead draws attention to how architectural practice both informs, and is informed by, digital infrastructures emerging through practices of solidarity.

On 'Claiming Space' with Digital Anchors

This paper adopts a relational approach to architecture and draws from critical spatial practice to read it as continually made and remade through the interplay of relations, practices and networks (e.g., Awan, Schneider & Till 2011). In contexts of forced migration, this approach is particularly necessary to unearth lived realities where the materiality of spaces for forcibly displaced people is subject to erasure through various forms of inflicted precarity, temporariness and various forms of political hostility. Following Lefebvre's work, Mitchell (2003: 81) contends that space is not only where rights are contested, but also "actively produced". Here, claiming space is an act of practicing rights against being disenfranchised by structural orders and property regulations.

Since the austerity crisis in Athens, solidarity groups have pursued socio-economic alternatives operating outside capitalist models that disproportionately disadvantaged those most affected by the crises (Travlou & Bernát 2022). In the context of forced migration, these solidarity infrastructures extended architectures of displacement beyond refugee camps and other sites of confinement.

As physical occupation of urban space became increasingly disrupted and precarious, digital practices emerged as an integral component of these efforts. Digital networks were mobilised to sustain claims to space, memory and history, and to counter isolation and erasure. In this way, social media pages, knowledge exchanges, announcements, event listings and online archives functioned as spatial practices for communities to organise, connect and maintain presence even when the physical ground was unstable or absent.

Connections and Disruptions

Focusing on this aspect of claiming space, I position digital practices of solidarity as part of the wider solidarity infrastructures in Athens. In these contexts, online presence becomes a ground of action that is political with a transformative potential. Attending to the hybridities between digital and physical spaces, we can get deeper insights into how initiatives like *City Plaza*, *Communitism*, and *Musikarama* sustained their claims when histories of the displaced and other marginalised groups were aimed to be deliberately erased or overwritten, and how digital traces helped preserve and support their presence. Such claims often operate through everyday acts of co-presence, material care, and shared governance, echoing what Hou (2010: 5) describes as the tactical production of space through community-led action.

The interaction between digital technologies and geographies of displacement, however, extends far

beyond these localised efforts. It spans a wide range of practices from top-down, institutional interventions to more hybrid and bottom-up configurations. A prevalent framing of such efforts has been through "digital humanitarianism" discourse (e.g., Akhmatova & Akhmatova 2020; Johns 2023; Aradau 2024). However, the logics in which humanitarianism operates, and its associations with moral economies have been widely critiqued for the unequal power dynamics they reproduce (e. g., Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011; Redfield 2013) and therefore, is not deployed to frame the digital practices discussed in this paper.

Digital systems, indeed, are not inherently emancipatory. This is particularly evident when considering the longer histories of participation and control embedded in digital technologies. Infrastructures once associated with openness and participation have also been shaped by commercial imperatives, surveillance logics and forms of centralised governance, producing uneven conditions of access, visibility and control (van Dijck 2013; Andrejevic 2007). In humanitarian contexts, these dynamics are compounded by the fact that widely used tools from biometric identification to predictive analytics originate in military and security sectors (Duffield 2016), and subject their participants to systems of control and extraction that can reproduce the very forms of domination these interventions claim to redress.

These critiques point to a broader pattern where digital systems, even when presented as participatory or accessible, may not deliver on these promises, or may even work to the opposite end. Rather, their effects are contingent on the conditions in which they are deployed and need careful evaluation. In what follows, I examine three cases that aimed to operate outside top-down governance structures. These initiatives used the digital to sustain political agency, connect with struggles both locally and beyond, and to make claims on the city despite its unstable physical grounds instead of remote forms of management or depoliticised 'care'. The following cases examine how these dynamics unfold through different spatial registers in Athens under conditions of instability.

Three Modes of Digital Anchoring

Hotel City Plaza: Anchoring Housing within Transglobal Solidarity

The difficulties faced by Greece's forcibly displaced population significantly worsened when the Turkey-EU agreement went into effect in March 2016. When demands were not met by governmental and humanitarian solutions, activists and solidarity networks resorted to direct action by taking over abandoned buildings across Athens to accommodate stranded individuals and families. To address the shortcomings of governmental and humanitarian initiatives, many disused buildings in Athens have been occupied to host displaced people and families that were then stuck in the country. One of these was the former *City Plaza Hotel* (often referred to as *City Plaza*) in central Athens, which, although one of many such squats, soon became the most emblematic.

City Plaza was occupied from April 2016 to July 2019, and it united activists from around the world in what Squire (2018) refers to as a collective opposition to the disposable nature of migrant life. Around 380 refugees lived in the building by May 2016 Squire (2018: 120), and it developed into a self-run community that included childcare, legal assistance, language instruction and spaces for political

organising. The symbolic geography of *City Plaza* went well beyond its Athenian street, even if its seven stories were the physical anchor in the city. The collective broadcast political messages from around the world on social media, including calls for international days of action, campaigns against deportations in Europe and news of protests in Turkey, Palestine, and Afghanistan. It also announced local assemblies, solidarity dinners, and demonstrations.

In my mapping of public posts from a single month in 2018 (Figure 1), the initiative's digital traces extend outward from Athens to multiple continents and form a cartography of alliances that collapse geographical distance and borders into political proximity. This positioned *City Plaza* as part of a transnational movement and showed that struggles over housing, migration and dignity in Athens were connected to those beyond its cityscapes.

During my fieldwork in and on Athens, I observed how *City Plaza's* digital networks, particularly through social media, interwove events across the city's solidarity landscape. The first-floor social hub was a dynamic space for a wider network of grassroots collaboration. It hosted shared events with groups such as *Musikarama* which undertook musical performances, and the digital outreach turned into a street-level engagement.

These connections were maintained and amplified online. Facebook posts and livestreams publicised events, documented activities and connected the community to struggles and allies far beyond Greece. In this case, we see how physical and digital infrastructures can operate together to sustain political presence, even in contexts where the future of a space is uncertain. Its digital footprint did not simply record what happened inside the building but

Figure 01:
A map showing public posts from the Facebook public page of City Plaza from 30 November to 21 December 2018 with links across geographical borders.

Olcay, 2021.

extended the reach of its activities, built networks of support and contributed to a shared urban geography of solidarity.

City Plaza's digital anchoring extended its political agency far beyond its physical site. By broadcasting struggles and alliances across borders, it wove the housing struggle in Athens into a global solidarity network. Here, the digital was not supplementary but constitutive of the squat's urban geography and sustained its reach while under threat of eviction.

Communitism: Anchoring Cultural Heritage in Flux

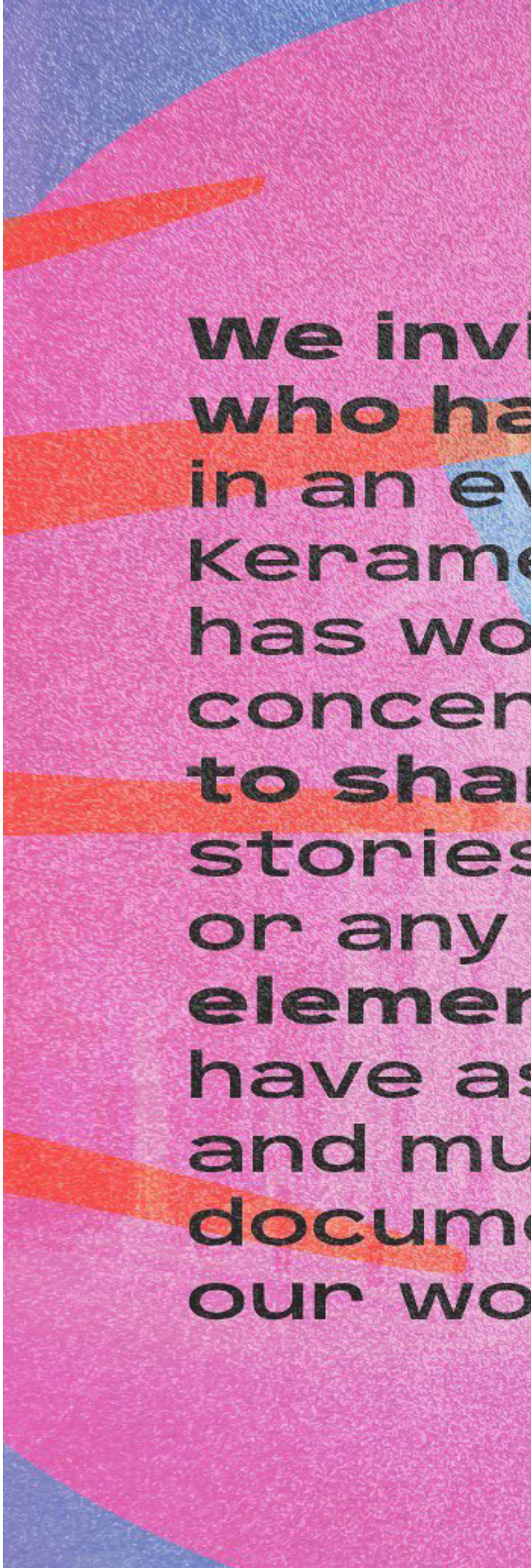
About a mile away from *City Plaza* and in the heart of Metaxourgeio where neoclassical architectures meet multiple layers of contested urban histories, *Communitism* sought to revive a disused building, Kerameikou 28, through self-managed cultural production. This project began as a self-managed cultural and community space in an unutilised building through practices of creative communing. The project members stated that their approach is based on "sharing spaces, means of production, competences and time, through practices of cooperation, solidarity and mutualism" (*Communitism* n. d.). The purpose of the project was both to revive disused heritage buildings and to reimagine them as commons through cultural production. The building hosted art exhibitions, theatre performances, skills workshops and public discussions, often in collaboration with migrant and refugee groups, before it left the building in June 2023.

During its use, and despite hosting many activities, the project was under constant pressure as it did not hold legal ownership to the building. On their Instagram page, *Communitism* announced the end of their residing in Kerameikou 28 after six years (*Communitism* 2023a).

In May 2023, they issued a call to supporters across their social media accounts (see Figure 2) to contribute to a digital archive including this note (*Communitism* 2023b):

> We invite artists and creative professionals who are motivated by our purpose to work with us to raise awareness to as many people as possible about the cultural heritage that is being lost from Metaxourgeio - but also throughout Athens - day by day.
>
> We invite anyone who has participated in an event within Keramelkou 28 on has worked on any essay concerning our practice, to share with us photos, stories, texts or any other archive elements, in order to have as complete and multi-aspected documentation of our work as possible.
>
> We call on the social & creative spaces we have been in collaboration within the past years, to hold space for the communities hosted in Kerameikou 28; A wave of creativity is about to burst in the city!

In this framing, the departure from Kerameikou 28 was presented less as an ending than as a shift in form, with activities and networks repositioned to operate across the city. The call for contributions to a digital archive turned the moment into an act of documenting as another spatial intervention through extending the situated activities onto an online archive that could be accessed, shared and expanded. Social media activity during this period—with some posts receiving over 200 reactions—points to a reach that extended well beyond the building's immediate surroundings. Following the move, *Communitism* was re-established in another building. Its digital archive remains as a record of continuity through rupture and preserves a collective memory by providing a platform to sustain visibility during periods of physical instability.



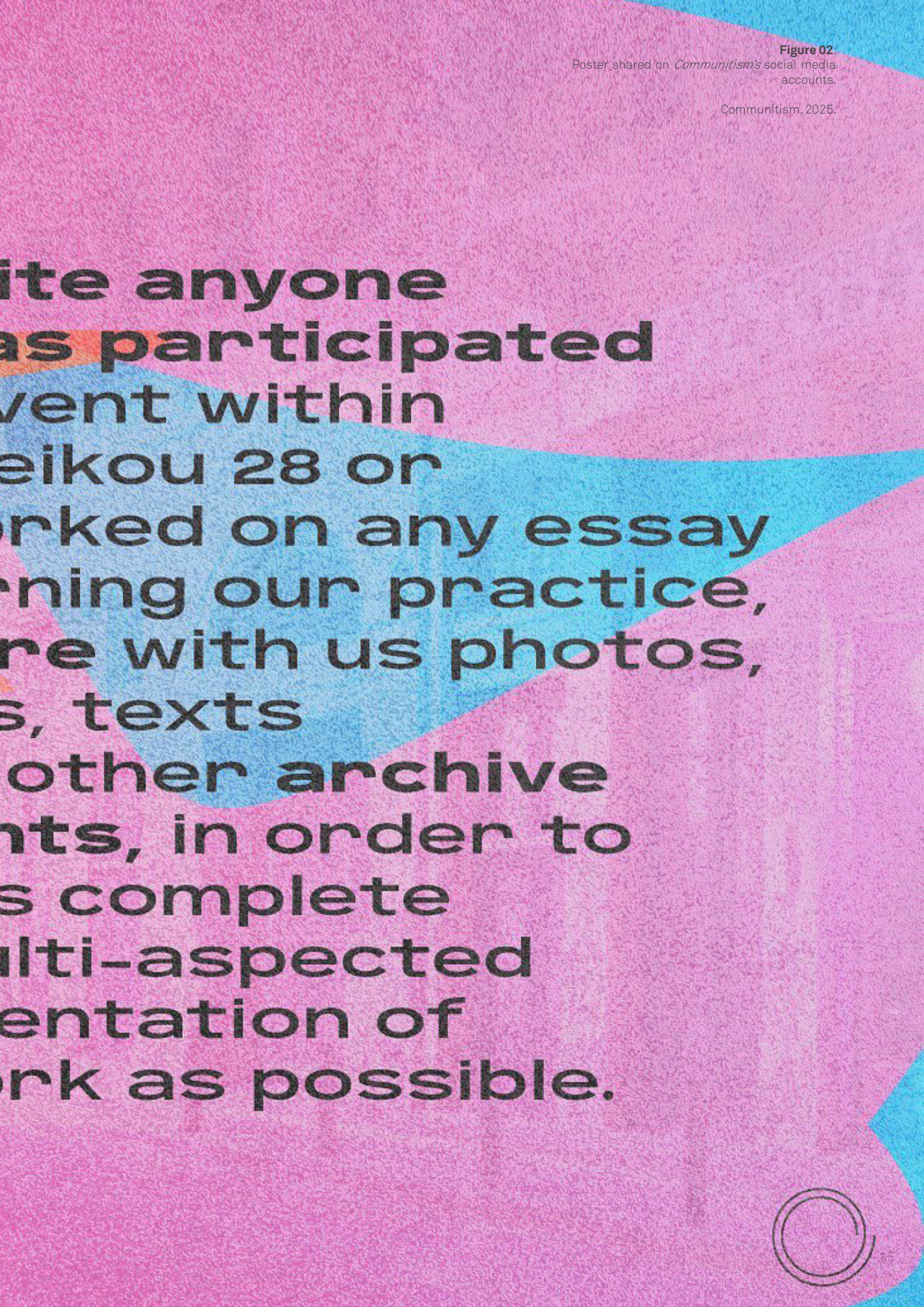


Figure 02:
Poster shared on *Communitism's* social media accounts.

Communitism, 2025.

Musikarama: Anchoring Soundscapes

While *City Plaza* and *Communitism* projects were based on specific buildings, *Musikarama's* solidarity work unfolded largely through mobility, where they initially used multiple urban sites and digital platforms to create and sustain their activities. The project started in 2017 as a grassroots initiative and brought together musicians from refugee, migrant, local and international backgrounds. The group initially had no dedicated venue and instead, they performed in solidarity spaces, public squares and cultural hubs across Athens including City Plaza and Communitism, and collaborated with other grassroots initiatives such as *Khora, ANKAA, ECHO Mobile Library,* and the *Jafra Foundation*.

Music in this case offered a mode of spatial occupation that did not rely on property rights or permanence. Inhabiting what could be called ephemeral soundscapes, their performances temporarily transformed streets, courtyards and squares into sites of political visibility. This mobility also allowed them to reach audiences in places often excluded from cultural life: in 2019, they performed in *Moria Refugee Camp* on Lesvos and organised music lessons in *Malakasa Refugee Camp*.

From its inception, *Musikarama's* identity and audience were sustained by its digital presence. Social media platforms functioned as noticeboards for performances, calls for collaboration and invitations to rehearsals. Video recordings of live events circulated online and supported their reach to extend beyond those physically imminent. During the COVID-19 lockdown, when in-person gatherings were impossible, they shifted to online jam sessions, lessons and tutorials to maintain community and visibility despite the loss of shared physical space.

In July 2020, *Musikarama* organised two public events: a Dabke and Greek Dance Class and Dabke and Jamming Session (Figure 3). The first was organised in collaboration with the *Syrian & Greek Youth Forum (SGYF)*, and the second with both *SGYF* and *Palmier Solidarity House*. SGYF was active in Athens between 2018 and 2023, and described by its members as a collective that promotes human rights and works towards creating platforms for active citizenship in Greece through cultural exchanges to foster knowledge for "a better future for all". (*SGYF* n.d.). *Palmier Solidarity House,* on the other hand, was a seven-apartment building in central Athens that offered "solidarity cohabitation" for about 40 refugees.

These event posts extended beyond only introducing schedules and logistics of the event. They provided explanations of *Dabke,* a Middle Eastern folk dance found mainly in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Iraq, and explained "jamming" as a collaborative, improvisatory way of making music. They also outlined the roles of the three organising committees and extended invitations to local and international solidarity groups, along with former and current residents of squats worldwide (*Musikarama* 2020). With these online circulations, these events became embedded in a wider network where social media acted as both a noticeboard and meeting ground that anchored Musikarama's soundscapes and cultural activities within Athens' geographies of solidarity.

The digital anchoring allowed the group to remain visible, coordinate across multiple venues and mobilise audiences in a city where spaces for such gatherings were often temporary or contested. Such digital anchoring connected *Musikarama's* cultural production within a dispersed geography of solidarity and extended its claim to space both locally and transglobally.

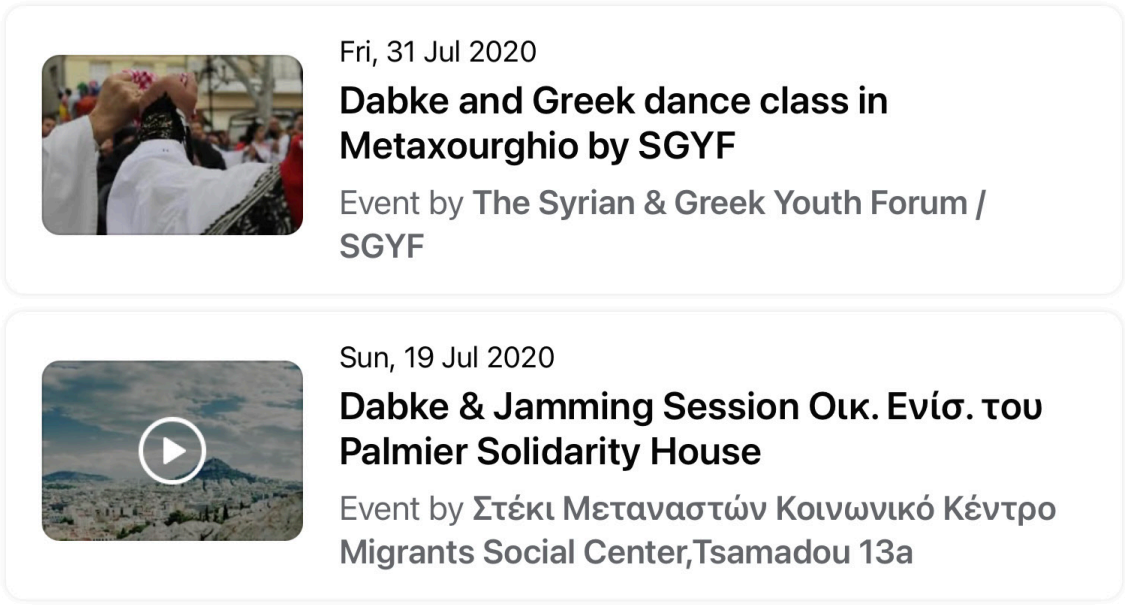


Figure 03:
A Screenshot of two events posted publicly on Musikarama's Facebook Page: Dabke and Greek dance class and Dabke and Jamming Session.

Musikarama, 2020.

Across Hybrid Practices

Taken together, the three cases show how digital anchoring emerges through different spatial registers in response to conditions of precarity and displacement. Although each initiative operates at a different scale and through distinct practices, they are linked by a shared understanding of space as relational and contingent which is sustained through ongoing coordination rather than secured through stable occupation alone.

At *City Plaza*, digital practices of claiming space worked to extend the occupation of a building into a wider field of transglobal solidarity which allowed political presence to continue even as the future of the building itself became uncertain. In the case of *Communitism*, digital practices redirected efforts of supporting a specific heritage building to preserving collective memory and cultural production through archiving in the face of eviction and relocation. For *Musikarama*, digital platforms supported mobility and helped sustain musical practices and collaborations across a series of temporary sites, performances and moments of spatial loss.

Despite these different configurations, digital anchoring functioned as a way of maintaining spatial presence when physical occupation was unstable, contested or short-lived. Rather than replacing material space, digital practices remained closely entangled with it, extending or reworking spatial claims as circumstances changed. Read together, the cases point towards forms of architectural agency that are not tied to enclosure or permanence, but instead emerge through the capacity to sustain relations, memory and visibility on unsettled ground.

Discussion: Hybrid Claims to Space on Unsettled Grounds

The three cases presented in this paper show how digital anchoring becomes a spatial strategy in situations where the physical grounds of solidarity are disputed, unstable or completely absent. By increasing reach, maintaining visibility and facilitating forms of political presence that endure despite disruption, the digital in each case complements the physical location rather than taking its place. In this way, these practices represent what Leurs (2015) and Latonero & Kift (2018) refer to as "digital passages," in which digital and physical pathways are intertwined and mutually constitutive, and exemplify what Galis & Makrygianni (2022) define as the emergence of ruptures in sovereignty regimes through claims of alternative modes of presence.

These hybrid activities can be read as acts of claiming space which involve more than just physical occupation. They involve reclaiming agency, memory and presence in areas that are more difficult to control or evict. In the case of *City Plaza*, digital networks placed the housing fight of the squat into a broader geography of solidarity by amplifying it into a transglobal register. *Communism's* digital archive preserved collective memory beyond physical tenure by transforming a building's function into a cultural repository. Through its online coordination and promotion, *Musikarama's* itinerant cultural output brought solidarity soundscapes to areas that would not otherwise be included in cultural life.

Nevertheless, despite the rigour of these political acts and their influence, they are not without limitations. As Travlou and Bernát (2022) note, solidarity initiatives have often operated as essential substitutes for state support, yet their reach has remained constrained and uneven. In practice, digital anchoring can privilege those who already have access to devices, connectivity, linguistic competence or a degree of legal and social security that allows for public participation. Undocumented migrants, people with limited digital literacy or those unwilling or unable to appear visibly online may therefore remain marginal to these forms of engagement, even within solidarity frameworks.

Furthermore, digital presence is never a neutral tool due to how digital systems are entangled with surveillance logics, commercial imperatives and institutional control (van Dijck 2013; Andrejevic 2007; Duffield 2016). The same channels that convey messages of solidarity can also profile communities, harvest data and make them visible to state surveillance. This is an inevitable condition as digital anchoring allows for new kinds of political agency, but it also functions inside systems that could jeopardise the same independence it aims to protect. Rather than suggesting withdrawal from these spaces, this calls for a critical and strategic engagement by recognising the risks while leveraging the openings they create. These struggles will inevitably operate within such tensions and the challenge is to navigate them in ways that preserve autonomy, sustain presence and continue claiming space even under the constraints of hostile or extractive systems.

Navigating these tensions demands an expanded understanding of architectural 'site' which follows the shifting assemblies of people, activities and digital platforms through which presence and solidarity are sustained. In Athens, unsettled grounds shaped by economic austerity, evictions and restrictive migration governance have given rise to architectures that are both digital and tangible, as well as relational and tactical. These hybrid spatialities

reveal social and technological infrastructures beyond buildings as sites to claim and contest space.

Concluding Notes

This paper has examined how solidarity initiatives in Athens mobilise digital anchoring as a spatial tactic in contexts where the physical grounds of presence are unstable, contested or absent altogether. Through the three cases — *City Plaza, Communitism* and *Musikarama* — it has shown that digital practices can extend physical acts of solidarity by enabling visibility, coordination, participation and political presence to endure despite material disruption. This way, these initiatives demonstrate that claiming space is not limited to occupying buildings or plots of land, but also involves sustaining relationships, memories and visibility across platforms and geographies.

The paper has also underlined the hybrid nature of these practices: digital and physical realms do not stand in binary opposition but operate in constant interplay by shaping and reinforcing one other. This interplay can open new possibilities for political agency, yet remains bound up in wider conditions of precarity. Digital anchoring is shaped by the same economic, legal and infrastructural inequalities it seeks to resist, and it unfolds within systems entangled with surveillance and commercial logics. As such, these practices operate within enduring tensions between visibility and vulnerability, autonomy and dependence, as well as solidarity and exclusion.

Rather than viewing these contradictions as grounds for withdrawal, this paper argues for a critical and strategic engagement with digital infrastructures which capitalises on their capacity to sustain presence while mitigating their risks. The dispersed and mobile constellations of people broaden conceptionalisations of architectural site where activities and platforms through which solidarity is enacted. Recognising hybrid spatialities as valid and significant sites of practice, architectural discourse can engage more comprehensively with displacement, solidarity and the politics of presence, particularly in contexts where the physical ground remains unsettled.

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Figures

Figure 01 A map showing public posts from the Facebook public page of City Plaza from 30 November to 21 December 2018 with links across geographical borders, Olcay, 2021.

Figure 02 Poster shared on *Communitism's* social media accounts, Communitism, 2025.

Figure 03 A Screenshot of two events posted publicly on Musikarama's Facebook Page: Dabke and Greek dance class and Dabke and Jamming Session, Musikarama, 2020.

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Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, Emmanuelle Agustoni and Aurèle Pulfer

AFFECTIVE CARTOGRAPHIES:
Using Space as a Translation Device in Collaborative Processes

How far does the action of a seed go? A sunflower seed lost in a wall is capable of blowing out that wall. A thing with so small an outline. (...) Things are bodies, that meant that things are actions. ***The limit of something is the limit of its action and not the outline of its figure.***
Gilles Deleuze, Course on Spinoza, 17/02/1981

From a matter of location to a matter of reach

To consider affect, we return to the work of the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who defined an affect as that which increases or decreases the power (*potentia*) of a body (E III, D2). While teaching a course on this in 1981, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze defined affect as a passage from one state to another, triggered by the touch of the world (Deleuze 2008, 293–324). He explained how as the sun touches your skin and you feel its warmth—affection—, your power increases—affect. Affect, then, is inseparable from the way the world touches a body. Thus, our world becomes larger the more affects it registers, that is, the more our bodies are entangled with the world: power becomes a larger material entanglement.

Three years before, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet had connected this affective extension with the idea of the surrounding world of animals brought forth by the biologist Jakob von Uexkull at the beginning of the 20th century (2007). Uexkull wrote that the surrounding world of a given being is "a piece cut out of its surroundings", like a "soap bubble" that extends around the body, containing "all signs accessible to the subject" (Uexküll 2010, 43). We can see, then, how this affective extension, this surrounding world that includes us and that which affects us and is in turn affected by us, all enfolded in a shared field of contact, can be understood as a body's spatiality. This spatiality may be individual or collective: we can speak of the spatiality of a neighbour or of a neighbourhood, as well as that of human and more-than-human collectivities. (Jalón Oyarzun 2017).

To these notions, we should add another of Spinoza's assertions which, although it has become something of a cliché in recent decades, retains real relevance for our subject: "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (III, P2, sch). That is, we cannot fully know the extent of a body's surrounding world, i.e. we cannot fix it, locate it. Because of this, if we want to engage space from an affective perspective, we must shift from understanding form as the contour or silhouette of a body to grasping the immeasurable, yet effective, reach of its agency and its surrounding world.

In the already mentioned 1981 course, Deleuze spent some time considering the notion of the limit; precisely, how the "limit of something is the limit of its action and not the outline of its figure," because "the question is not where a form ends, (...) already an abstract and artificial question. The real question is: where does an action end?" He goes on to consider the limit of a seed, "whose contour I can follow with my finger (...) [to] then learn that a seed lost in a wall can make it break apart." Furthermore, he considers the limit of a forest. As we arrive to its edges, "we cannot say when we are no longer in the forest. (...) There was a tendency, and the limit is not separable from a kind of tension towards said limit. It is a dynamic limit (...), that of its power or action. The thing is therefore power and not form. The forest is not defined by a form, it is defined by a power: the power to grow trees until it can no longer do so."

Still, our architectural representation tools and methods often recede into the well-known area of the measurable and the projectable, be that the coordinates that define a location, or the figure that clearly delimits any given entity and makes it manageable. And as we move deeper into an algorithmic milieu grounded in the *grammatization* of both material and immaterial phenomena, this issue has only intensified, further increasing abstraction[01]. Already in 1974, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, pointed to the effects of that abstraction in our understanding of space and its relation to everyday life, as he differentiated between conceived, perceived and lived spaces, and contended how the multiplicity that defines social space cannot be reduced onto one single representation (Lefebvre 1991). For Lefebvre, representations were a tool of power and social domination, an expression of mathematical abstraction and the logic of instrumental reason, where exchange value is privileged over use value.

A few years earlier, German philosopher Theodor Adorno had also criticized the idea of representation, here understood beyond the limits of spatial representation, as he believed it was subjected to capitalism's *exchange principle* (*Tauschprinzip*): a tendency to render all things and dimensions of life commensurable, substituting identity for difference through exchange value (Adorno 1973). Within that framework, representation operates as a form of violent reduction: in attempting to render something present through conceptual or symbolic means, it risks erasing difference, those non-identical qualities of the thing represented. However, Adorno also pointed out how art could sometimes bypass these constraints, insofar as it operates through an idea of excess or remainder (i.e. that something that cannot be fully measured or accounted for). On top of this, he also underlined the importance of making mediations visible by highlighting the constructed nature of representation.

We want to close this reflection on the challenges faced by representational practices by considering the work of literary scholar Fredric Jameson. He considered representation was always in linked to ideology, for it is shaped by the material and symbolic conditions of capitalism. Just as representation increasingly fails to refer to real social relations, making the totality of capitalism ungraspable and thus producing an effect of disorientation and loss of political agency, he advanced the idea of cognitive mapping as an aesthetic strategy to figure the individual's place within the social and global totality (Jameson 1991). He based this work on *The Image of the City* (1960) by Kevin Lynch, in which the American urbanist described the role of meaningful urban anchors in the creation of mental images that help orient users within space. Fredric Jameson extended this notion by addressing the disorienting

nature of capitalist space beyond the scale of the city, adding further layers to the concept of orientation. A concept which thus became not merely an operative, physical function, but a deeply symbolic one which highlighted the political nature of the images that allow us to situate ourselves, and thereby to establish possible paths of action, within contemporary space.

In recent years, as we have moved deeper into an algorithmic milieu built on ever-greater discretization, the epistemic gaps identified by these authors have only intensified, amplified by the spread of a culture of immediacy (Kornbluh 2024). In turn, this has made it more difficult to critically conceive spatial production under capitalism and work together on shared spaces. We have endless visualizations, but we lack representations understood as collective interpretations of a given situation that might enable a form of social orientation, and thus, possible shared horizons. If we see how a citizen experiences and conceptualizes her surrounds and how she situates the issues that affect her, and compare them to how they are conceptualized and operated upon both by the public institutions and private entities increasingly responsible for the production of space in our cities, we see a severe challenge to any credible possibilities for the democratic co-design of our cities[02]. These gaps short-circuit a socialized attachment to everyday environments, thus voiding the possibility of a shared responsibility towards their future. Our attachment becomes individualized, and thus dissociated from common issues or horizons, encouraging political detachment[03] as well as public resistance against change and policies that are often perceived as technocratic, unfair, and disconnected from citizens' everyday life[04].

We believe that a critical practice of representation needs to be reclaimed. In what follows, we address this challenge through a form of *affective mapping* attuned to the action of things rather than their form, thus moving from a matter of form to a matter of reach. This form of mapping is attentive, not to the countour of buildings, parks and neighbourhoods, nor to the indexes, benchmarks and statistics abstracting any given situation into economic frameworks, but to the material entanglement of said matter and abstractions with a city's inhabitants to understand how they affect, that is, touch each other. We do this while retaining two key ideas from the aforementioned authors: on the one hand, the role these representations can play as social compasses to help position and orient communities within capitalism; on the other, the need to keep mediation processes present,

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[01] French philosopher Bernard Stiegler defined *grammatization* as "the transformation of a temporal continuum into a spatial discrete (...) with a view to reproduction." While Stiegler reduces this "process of description, formalization, and discretization" to "human behaviors (cal-culations, languages, and gestures)," our data-driven society is determinedly producing this grammatization in larger settings. See: https://arsindustrialis.org/grammatisation.

[02] See for instance the abyss between the urban indexes and benchmarks, or the digital twins statistically performing our cities (Kitchin et al. 2015; Herrero 2017), and the experience of energetic poverty and health issues multiplied by the extreme phenomena of climate changes (Economist Impact 2022; Ferrando Vitales 2025; Chaudhry 2024).

[03] We can consider here the term "anti-politics" which has come to describe phenomena that undermine politics as a necessary domain for democratic governance. It is linked to citizen disengagement, as well as mistrust of leaders, institutions, and the electoral process, and its expression might range from skepticism and estrangement to anti-establishment or anti-democratic attitudes (Fiket et al. 2022).

[04] We can see this in the French movement of Gilets Jaunes, where a series of climate adaptation policies, affected the everyday living condi-tions of the most vulnerable sectors of society, and specially of non-urban classes, leading to a movement of resistance that risks encourag-ing anti-climate change positions (Kinniburgh 2019). See also: (Plottu and Plottu 2009, 2021).

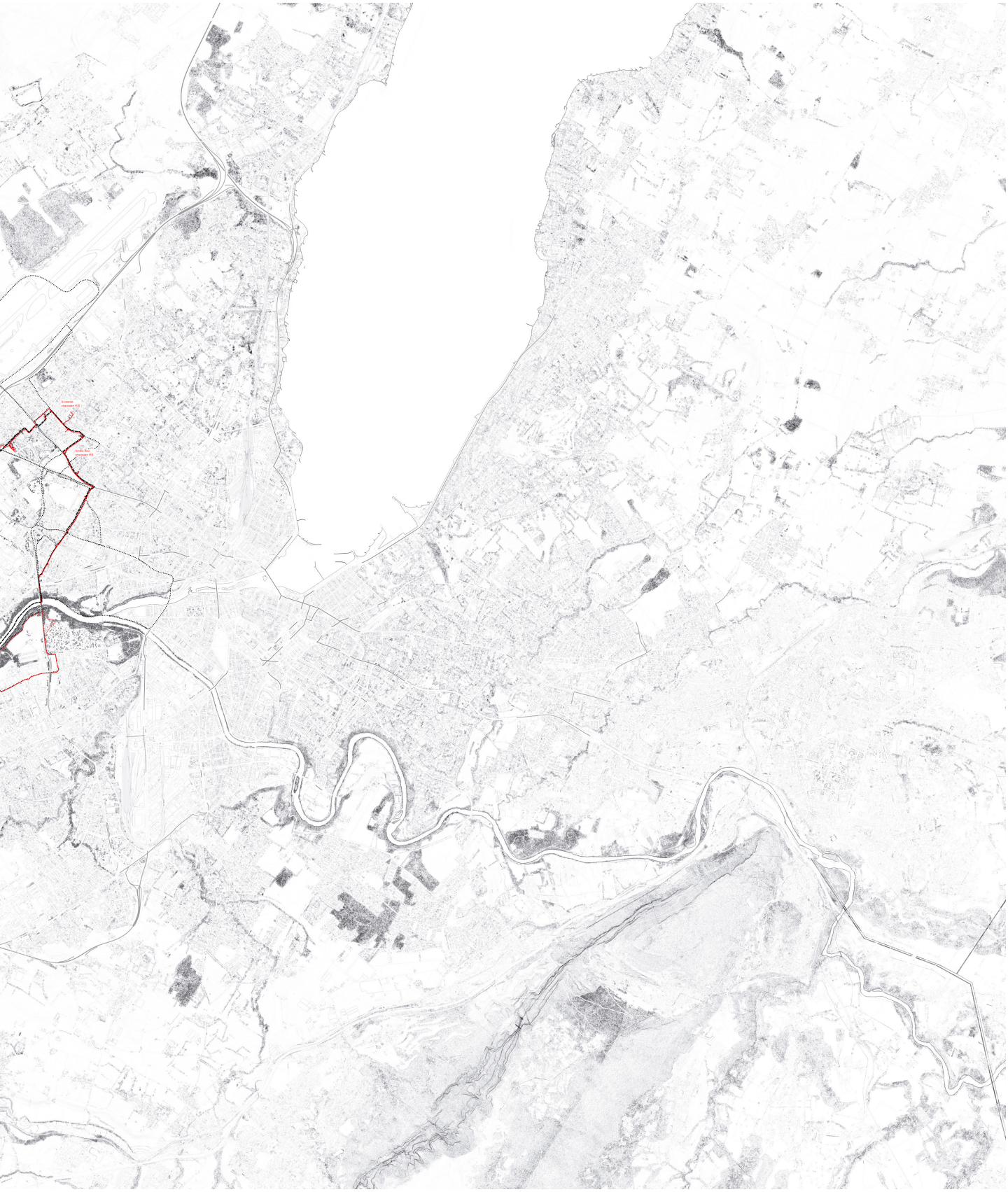
i.e. always making the constructed nature of representation visible, making the map not the goal, but the mediator of a larger dialogical practice at the core of our co-design strategies.

How far does a neighbourhood go?

Our research started with a basic question: how far does a neighbourhood go? Of course, there are administrative limits that tell us. In the case of Vernier, in the Swiss Canton of Geneva, we can easily download those from swisstopo, the Swiss Federal Office of Topography. It is a 35.3 MB GeoPackage file that contains all the administrative units and national boundaries of Switzerland. When loaded into our QGIS software, we get a perfect non-dimensional line showing the administrative limit of the municipality of Vernier. From there, and echoing Richard Long's exercises of walking a line, we attempted to follow that abstract line on site while tracing our path with the GPS of our phone. Of course, there were obstacles, and a new line appeared (Fig. 01): a non-dimensional line once more, but one that showed a trembling, fuzzy quality of particular interest. Cultural historian Bernd Hüppauf has reflected on this aesthetic fuzziness and how it "loosens the bond between a picture and the thing represented". As it breaks with the logic of imitation, the fuzzy image opens up a fertile field of uncertainty, its *unfinishedness* demands an active, compositional imagination, as it asks to be completed without ever being able to be finalised, thus implicating the body into a shared space of exploration (Huppauf 2009). Can we then employ fuzziness as a way of bringing people into a shared process of territorial understanding? This initial experiment became a way for ourselves to understand the tension we wanted to inhabit, and led the way to the interviews, online survey and mapping exercises that followed.

Figure 01:
GPS track of the initial walk trying to follow the administrative limit of the municipality of Vernier superimposed on ALICE's Geneva base map.

Emmanuelle Agustoni, Aurèle Pulfer, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, ALICE, 2022.



We organized fifteen walk-along interviews with neighbours from the different districts of the municipality of Vernier[05] (Fig. 02). These neighbours were enlisted through citizen associations and the contrats des quartiers (neighbourhood contracts), a tool employed by the municipality of Vernier (and others within the canton of Geneva), to mobilize residents, merchants, and associations to identify needs and implement concrete projects, financially supported by the town[06]. This gave us a diversity of engaged interviewees, ranging from teenagers to elderly citizens, that helped us create a plural narrative of the territory, certainly not with sociological value due to its limited number, but truly effective to establish the basis for our mapping experimentation.

Walk-along interviews are done by a researcher walking along the interviewee, so that the environment traversed helps trigger her environmental know-hows and memories that might otherwise go unnoticed. In our case, the interviewees were asked to select a path that was relevant in their everyday activities, either the path to school, to buy groceries or that of leisure strolls. On top of that, we had an open and semi-structured set of questions prepared to launch or animate the conversation. However, it was often left aside to follow up on the environmental relations presented by the interviewee. These interviews were also recorded in audio and video, and their path tracked with a GPS app.

The interviews were then transcribed and analysed with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti* to produce a structured database of excerpts. These excerpts where then geolocated along the path followed by matching the GPS track

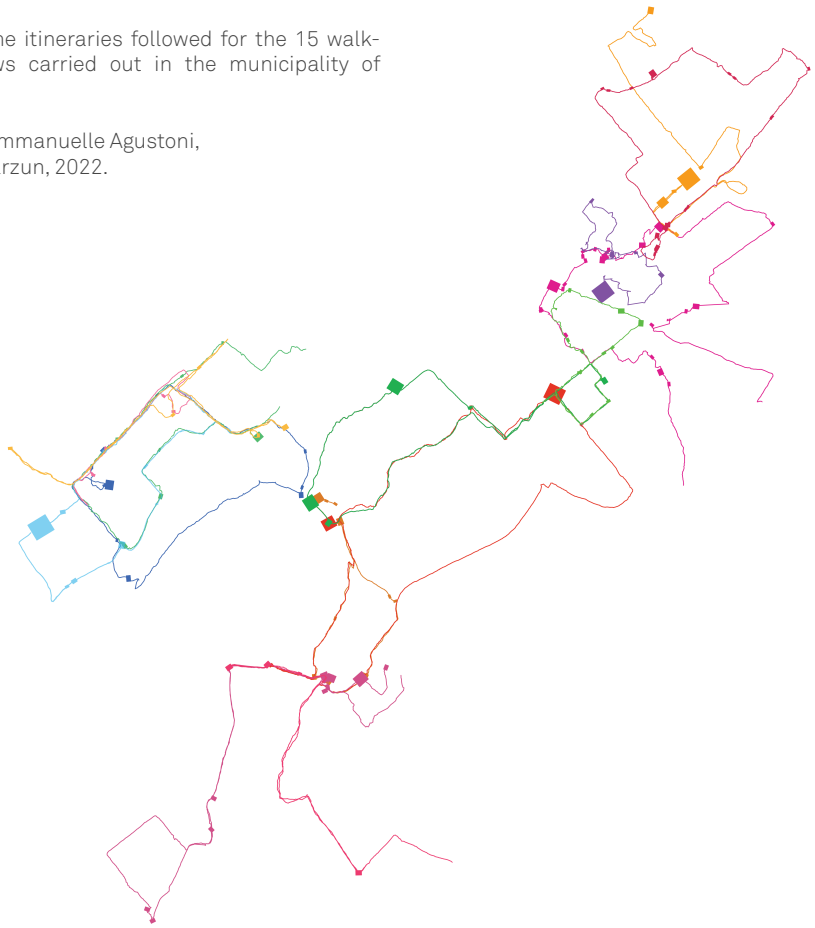
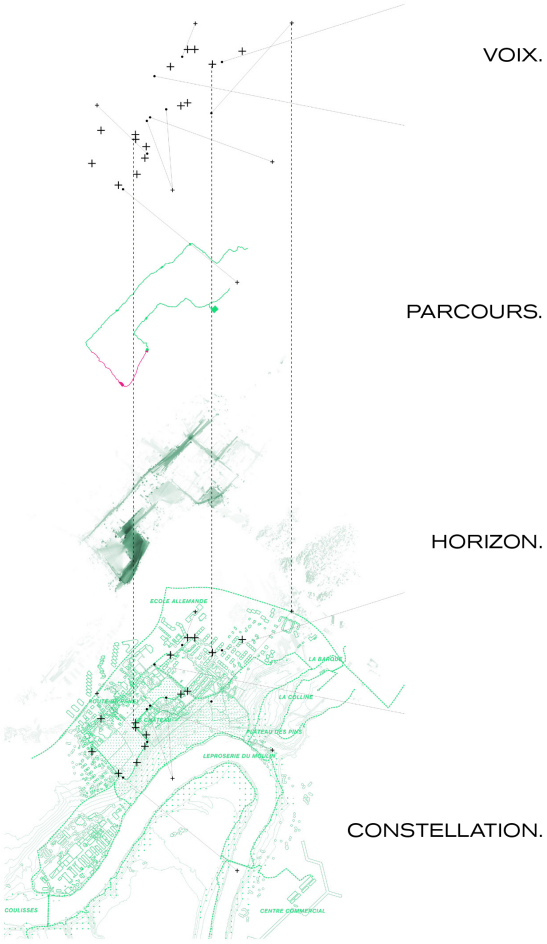


Figure 02:
GPS track of the itineraries followed for the 15 walk-along interviews carried out in the municipality of Vernier.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2022.

with the audiorecording timestamps. These were the **voices**, a first layer of information that was displayed along the **path**, which not only show where the interview had taken place but also introduced a temporal dimension, increasing the width of the line wherever the interviewee had stopped, along with topographical information, as it changes colour depending on the slope of the path taken. To that path, we added the **horizon** layer, produced by composing a succession of viewpoints visible from the route taken. The goal was to reveal the depth of the space and the variable extent of the gaze in different places. Finally, this was completed by a **constellation** layer, which gathered a series of significant places mentioned within each interview. For instance, one interviewee mentioned the Piscine du Lignon, a public swimming pool next to the large housing blocks of the same name, built in 1963 and home to more than 6,000 residents. The pool and its surrounding areas operate as a point of encounter not only for those living in the tower blocks, but also for residents from nearby quartiers, thus functioning as a shared ground among neighbourhoods. Other elements were less known but still significant, such as a bench on the other side of the Rhône, located outside the municipality and overlooking Le Lignon's architecture, where the interviewee would sit with her friends during her morning walk. All these places, small or large, more private or more public, carry particular significance for its residents' sense of identification with and attachment to the town.



All these elements were mapped and traced back to the point at which they were mentioned, thus expanding a single data point—a coordinate—into an entanglement through the creation of a bundle of heterogeneous data. This allowed us to show the extent and discontinuous nature of the interviewee's lived experience and the different territories it drew in into her *surrounding world*. Thus, the final combination of these four layers allowed us to consider **how far did the neighbourhood of the interviewee go** (Fig. 03) (Fig. 04) (Fig. 05). Of course, just as Georges Perec understood that any attempt to exhaust a place would be just that, an attempt, these experimental affective mappings do not aspire to exhaustivity. However, they do create an alternative understanding of the municipality of Vernier, providing an opportunity to transform spatial imaginaries.

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[05] This was done with the help of the Culture department of the municipality of Vernier.

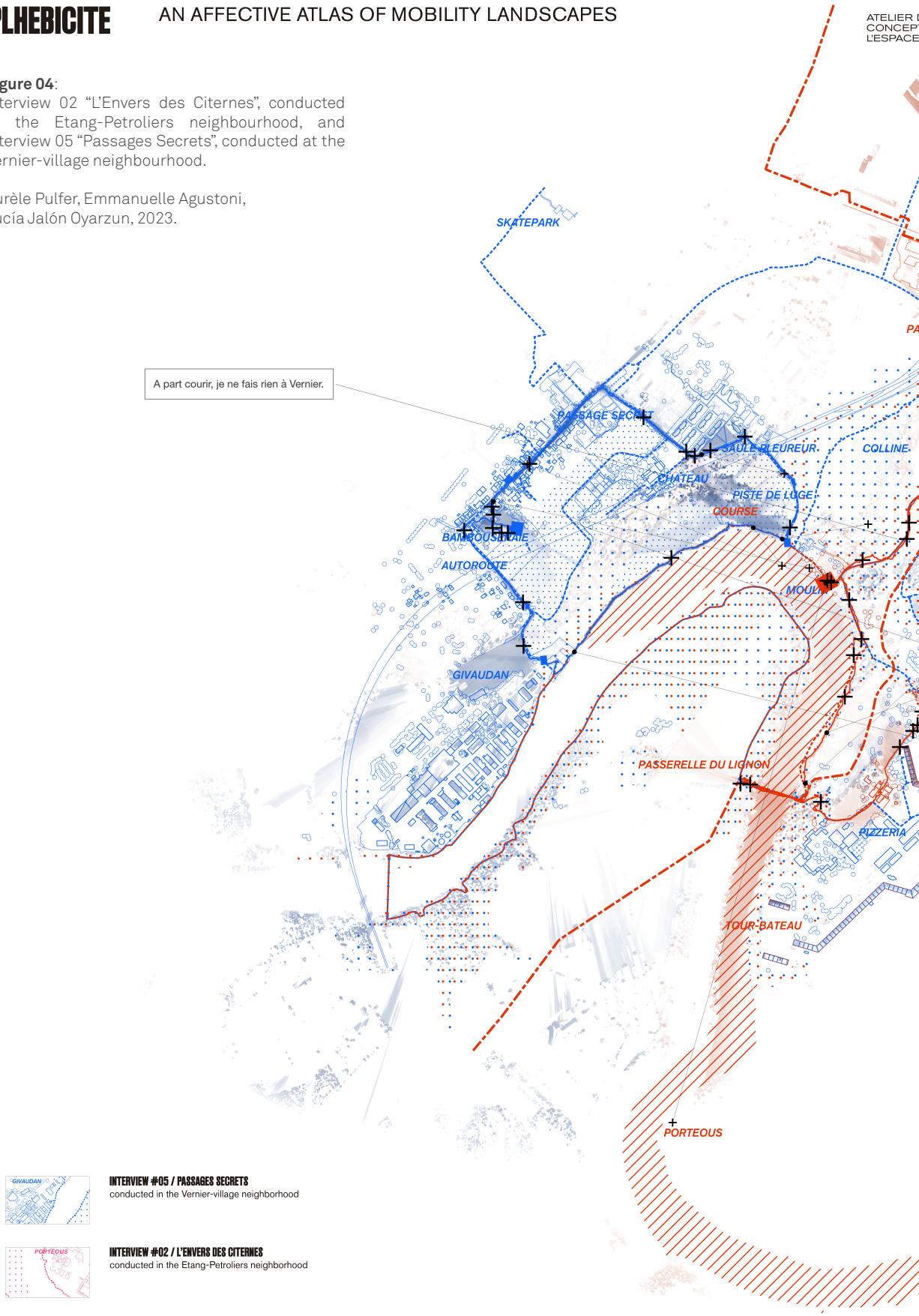
[06] For more information on this instrument, see https://www.vernier.ch/vie-pratique/engagement-et-participation/contrats-de-quartier.

Figure 03:
Composition of affective mappings.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

Figure 04:
Interview 02 “L’Envers des Citernes”, conducted at the Etang-Petroliers neighbourhood, and Interview 05 “Passages Secrets”, conducted at the Vernier-village neighbourhood.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.



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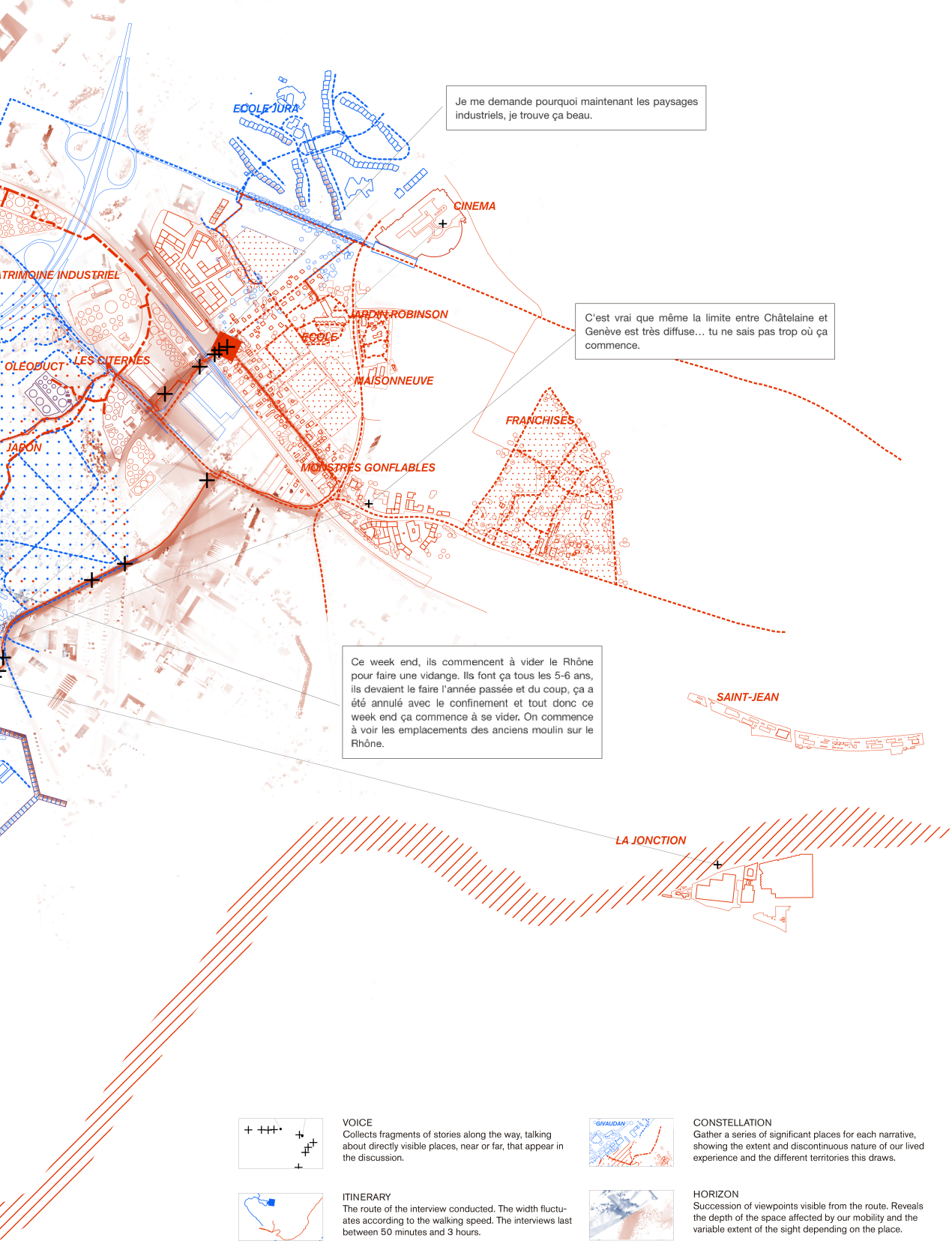


VOICE
Collects fragments of stories along the way, talking about directly visible places, near or far, that appear in the discussion.

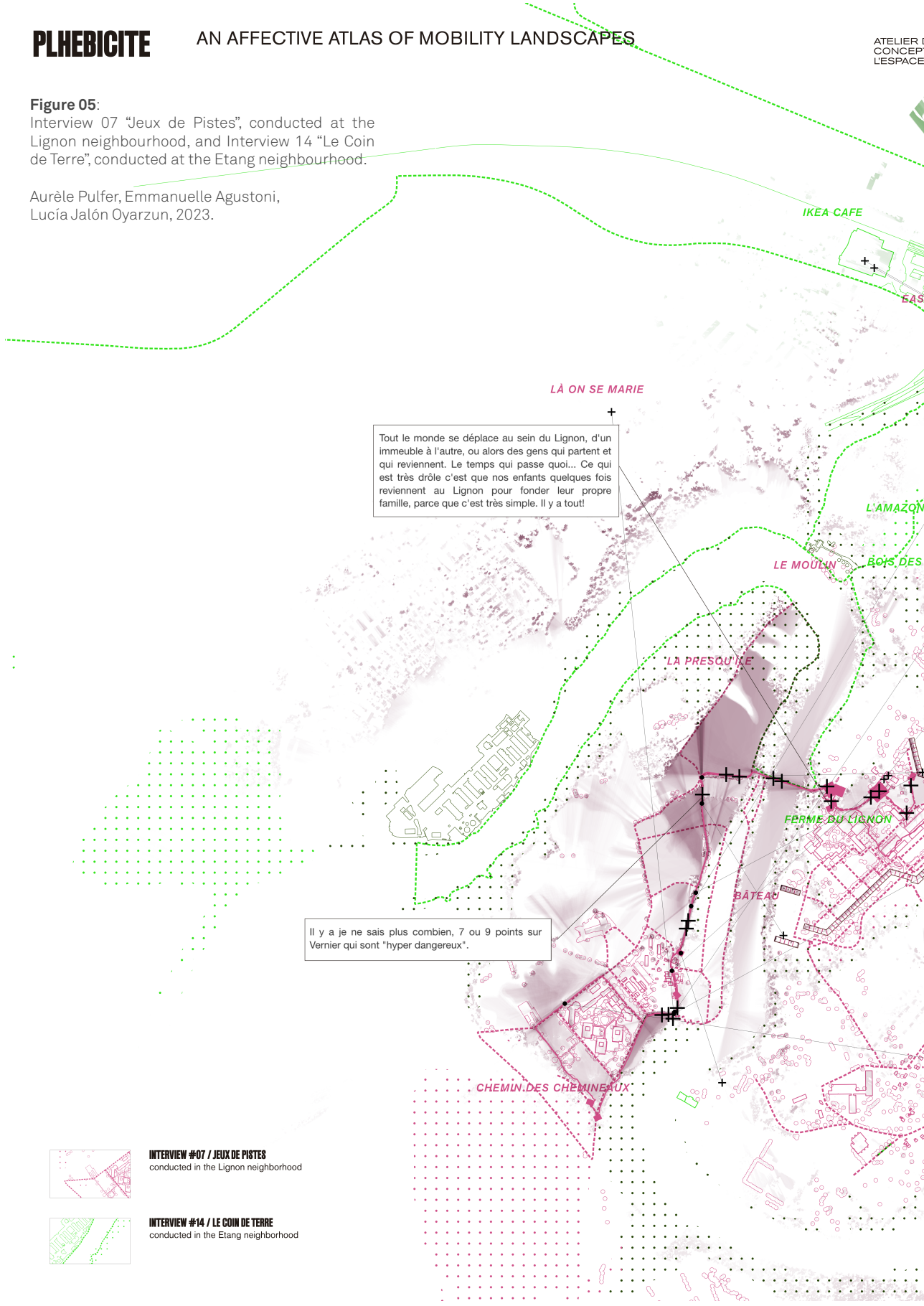
CONSTELLATION
Gather a series of significant places for each narrative, showing the extent and discontinuous nature of our lived experience and the different territories this draws.

ITINERARY
The route of the interview conducted. The width fluctuates according to the walking speed. The interviews last between 50 minutes and 3 hours.

HORIZON
Succession of viewpoints visible from the route. Reveals the depth of the space affected by our mobility and the variable extent of the sight depending on the place.

Figure 05:
Interview 07 "Jeux de Pistes", conducted at the Lignon neighbourhood, and Interview 14 "Le Coin de Terre", conducted at the Etang neighbourhood.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.



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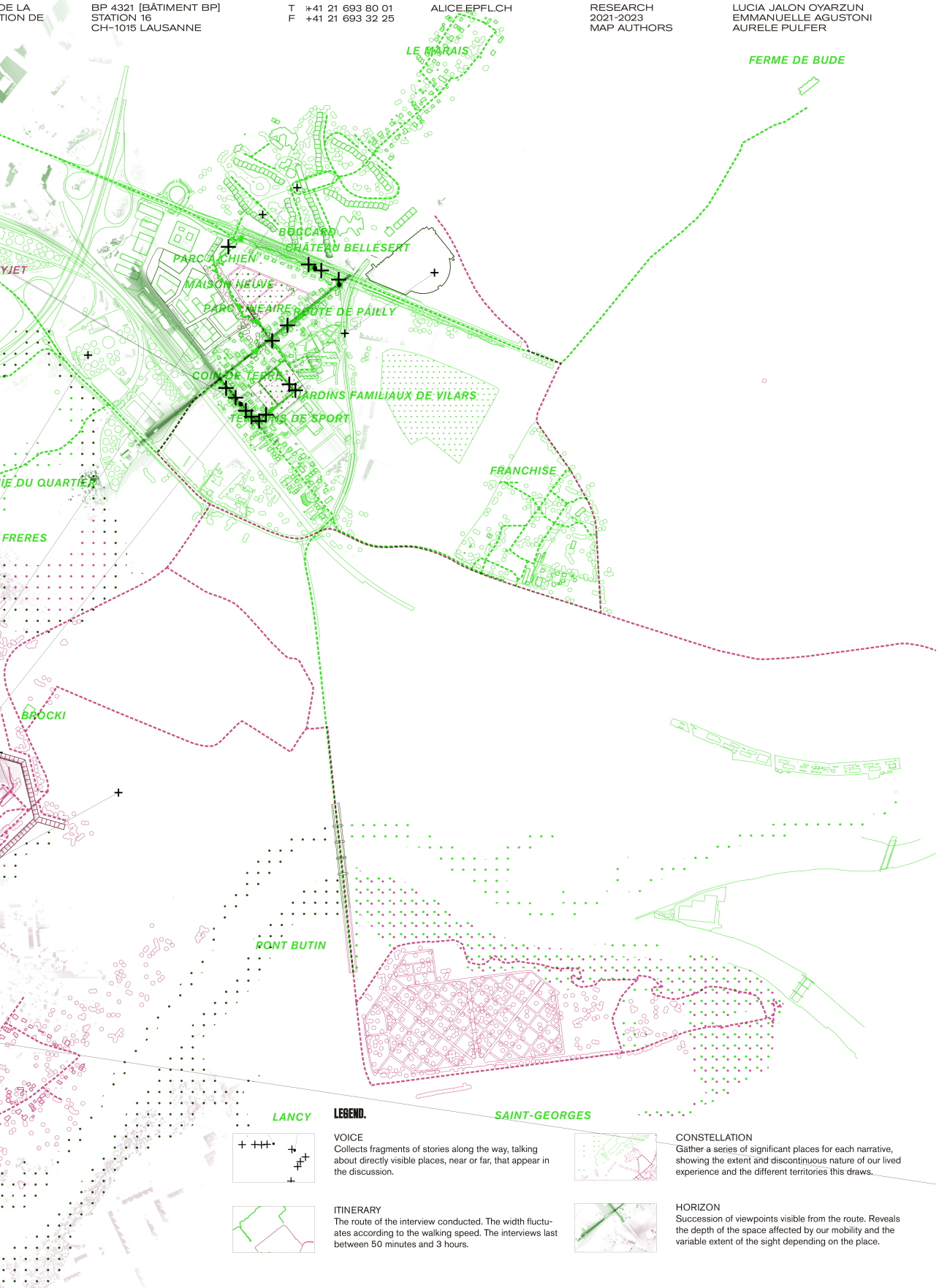


LEGEND.

VOICE
Collects fragments of stories along the way, talking about directly visible places, near or far, that appear in the discussion.

CONSTELLATION
Gather a series of significant places for each narrative, showing the extent and discontinuous nature of our lived experience and the different territories this draws.

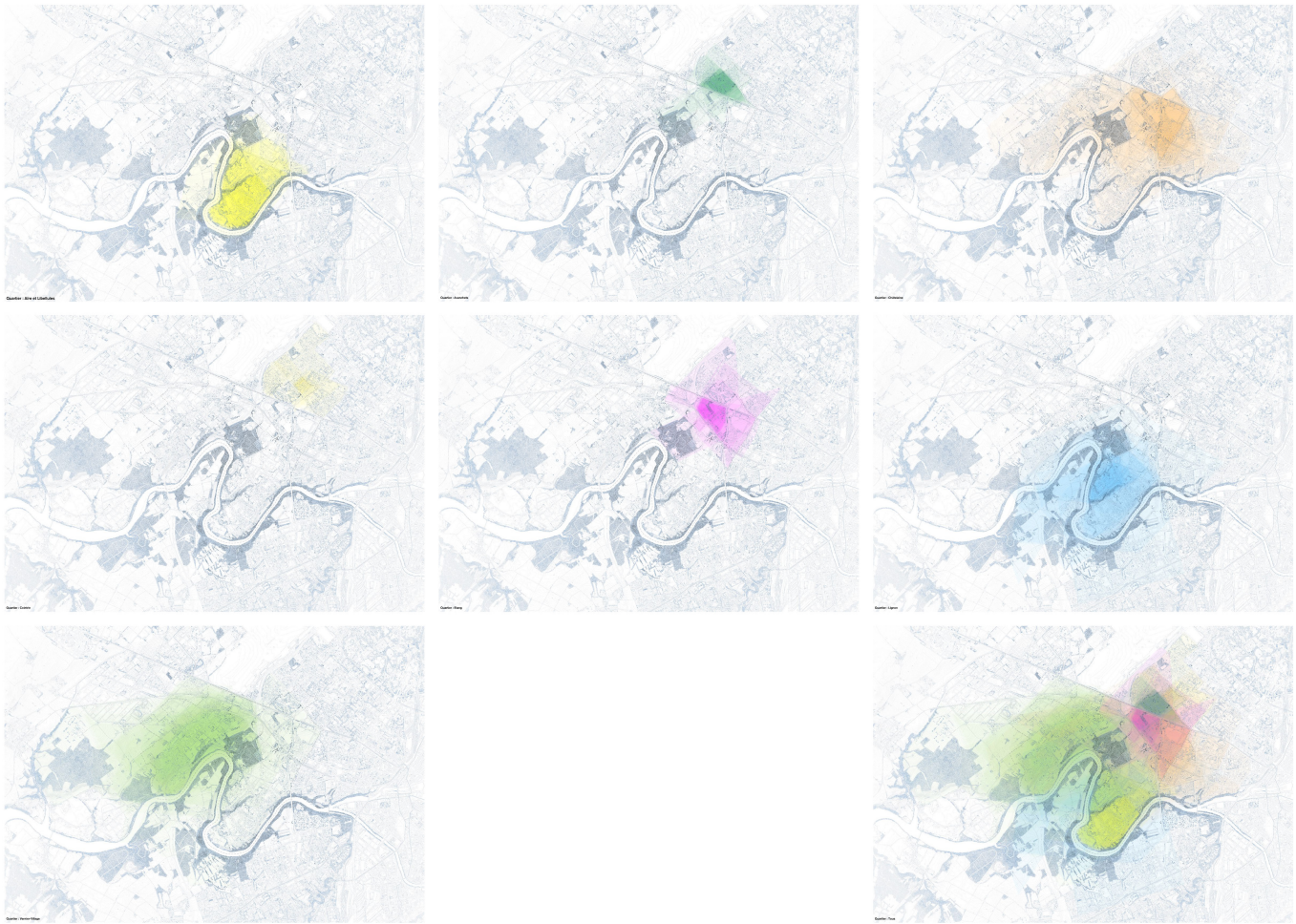
ITINERARY
The route of the interview conducted. The width fluctuates according to the walking speed. The interviews last between 50 minutes and 3 hours.

HORIZON
Succession of viewpoints visible from the route. Reveals the depth of the space affected by our mobility and the variable extent of the sight depending on the place.

In parallel to these interviews, we launched an online survey using the tool *Maptionnaire* which enabled us to pose questions based on maps where respondents could draw, pinpoint and detail their answers. It allowed us to echo online the triggering effect of the environment in the walk-along interviews. More than 300 residents of the municipality of Vernier took part in it over the course of three months. Their responses were translated into a series of cartographies that explored themes ranging from meaningful communal spaces to the perceived boundaries of their neighbourhoods. This last question proved especially significant: by layering together the diverse answers from the survey, we constructed a composite image—a kind of constellation—that echoed, at the scale of the neighbourhood, the trembling line traced in our first walking experiment along the town's administrative border. What emerged was a collective and inherently fuzzy picture that challenged the rigid, legal demarcations of the official districts or *quartiers* of Vernier (Fig. 06)

Space as translating device

In this final section, we argue that a mapping approach attentive to affects and to the diverse forms of place attachment that permeate everyday experience can be mobilized within urban co-design processes. Rather than treating space as a neutral backdrop, this approach understands it as a mediating ground through which heterogeneous experiences, knowledges, and stakes can be rendered commensurable. It does so in two complementary ways: first, through the creation of new



urban figures as collective images of the city capable of translating and re-articulating fragmented realities; and second, through the notion of an embodied territory, understood as a material interface where, when brought into shared situations, diverse actors and concerns become entangled and open to negotiation.

Regarding the first trajectory, we see how an affective approach to space enables a form of representation, understood not just as a mimetic reproduction of a given situation, but as a political construct ingrained with a narrative dimension: a form of *figuration*. Rossi Braidotti has used this term to refer to "materialistic mappings of situated, i.e., embedded and embodied, social positions" (Braidotti 2011). For instance, the emerging figure of the neighbourhood as a constellation of place attachments can operate as a *translating* or *mediating device* capable of articulating concerns across disciplines, languages and communities. Therein, *space* becomes the common denominator between these different layers, enabling their integration into accessible, shareable forms.

Furthermore, *figurations* help us move beyond mimetic frameworks of architectural representation onto agential ones; Donna Haraway explains how although "figures pertain to graphic representation and visual forms in general, (they) do not have to be representational and mimetic, but *they do have to be tropic; that is, they cannot be literal and self-identical. Figures must involve at least some kind of displacement that can trouble identifications and certainties*. *Figurations* are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds. (...) (1997, 11).

One of the questions of our *Maptionnaire* survey might help us see these ideas in action. We asked participants to locate and qualify relevant spaces within the municipality according to **a)** places where people from different neighborhoods gather, that is, common grounds between quartiers; **b)** symbols, meaning elements in the environment, either material or inmaterial like histories or trees, that are key to define the identity of Vernier; and **c)** important places of the everyday, either because they are regularly visited or because they offer a meaningful experience. We then composed those answers per *quartier* in a series of nine maps, one for each neighbourhood, where the places mentioned more often are those that appear more intensely (Fig. 07). Per-sonal attachments come together to reveal a bottom-up plural *figure* that, when discussed and worked upon collectively, can offer grounds to new kinds of public conversation and action. Is co-design possible without collective figurations of our cities? And, can we imagine this kind of composite as a basis for new forms of *natureculture* contracts within our communities[07]?

For the second trajectory, we move to the project **PLURIELLES**, developed one year after **PLHEBICITE** in collaboration with the municipality of Vernier and the independent artistic curator Hélène Mariéthoz.

Figure 06:
Composition of the answers received to the quesion "Could you sketch the limits of your neighborhood? We are not looking for a precise answer marking the administrative boundaries, but rather your perception. How far, to what places, does your experience of the neighborhood extend?".

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Antoine Foehrenbacher, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

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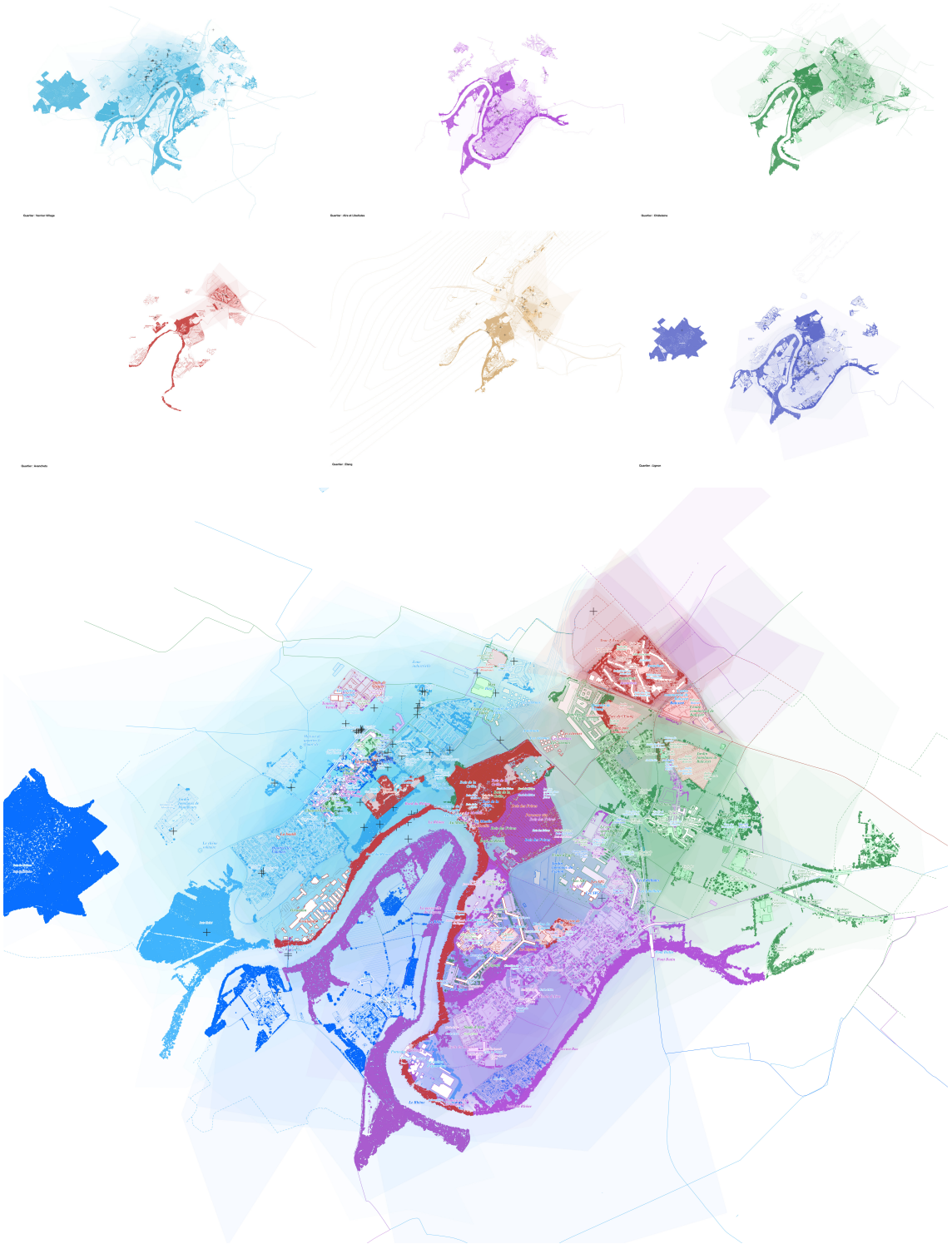
[07] Donna Haraway introduced the term *natureculture* in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), to overcome the dominating dualism of Western modernity that considers nature and culture as two separate realms. With this term, she sought to highlight the inseparability of both nature and culture, as living beings, technologies, meanings, and environments are always produced together in hybrid assemblages.

There, we wanted to highlight precisely how key sociocultural aspects, from local urban intelligences based on the citizens' direct experience of their environment to shared cultural meanings like those explored in our previous project, resist easy quantification and are subsequently often overlooked in co-design processes, leaving their potentials untapped. Once more, we looked at space as translating device. However, we sought to frame it, this time, not from the perspective of represented space, but of lived material space. Thus, we asked how the territory, as lived and practiced in its everyday could work



once more as transdisciplinary *lingua franca* for environmental conciliation and encourage an efficient inclusion of these qualitative elements.

With this in mind, we organized a series of interviews, walks, workshops and visits with neighbours but also city officials, professionals, thinkers, civil leaders, etc., where, not just representations of space but actual lived space, was used as a material interface to make cultural identities and immaterial practices linked to the territory appear through a collective setting. This way, specific spots throughout Vernier, from a newly instated pedestrian street to the overwhelming oil tanks at the core of the town or a refugee centre, allowed us to weave together a multiplicity of stakes, affects, concerns, approaches, memories, know-how, desires, and forms of expertise. This material fabric became synthesis, and *figure*, through its elaboration into a fanzine that collected all encounters and was shared with the city neighbours (Fig. 08) in parallel to a series of art interventions that took place to activate these places.

Figure 07:
Composition of the answers received to common grounds between neighbourhoods, symbols of the town and everyday places of relevance.

Aurèle Pulfer, Emmanuelle Agustoni, Antoine Foehrenbacher, Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

Conclusions

Out of these experiences, we can turn back to our theoretical framework and see how by pushing against the quantification imperatives ingrained in our drawing tools, we have been able to enrich it and expand it. If Spinoza and Deleuze allowed us to move from contour to action as a way of understanding the limits of any given thing, either a neighbour or a neighbourhood, the mappings have revealed the fragmentary nature of this extension and the inherent allegorical nature of its continuity or synthesis: the extent of someone's affective extension must be re-composed out of these fragments through figuration. Similarly, if Lefebvre warned against the reduction of lived space into abstract representations, we have shown that their silencing is not necessary. Our work suggests that existing forms of representation, often even coded into our drawing tools must be critiqued and pushed to their limits, so that representation can be reconfigured as a site where affect and lived experience are present and actively negotiated. Indeed, we have shown that, even working with digital technologies, the partial and "fuzzy" quality of the mappings, specially achieved through the notions of horizons and constellations, preserves what, inspired by Adorno, we have called a remainder: those non-identical aspects that resist full capture. Finally, we have built on Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping to bring it back to its urban origins while retaining the force of its allegorical and political dimensions, acknowledging that without collective figurations of our cities, no co-design is possible.

Finally, throughout this process we have confirmed space's ability to translate and assemble worlds through its power of embodiment, either physically as in the interventions of **PLURIELLES** or figuratively as in the mappings of **PLHEBICITE**. Embodiment *implicates* us, it brings us into the fold of a shared reality. In his unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza wrote that we cannot think of us, humans, as an *imperium in imperio* (TP 2.6), that is, we cannot think of ourselves as separate from the world: we cannot remain untouched. That's why we believe that touch, reclaimed by an affective approach to space and a politically conscious approach to representation, can work both as path and compass to new forms of architectural knowledge and spatial co-production.

Figure 08:
PLURIELLES fanzine.

Emmanuelle Agustoni,
Antoine Foehrenbacher,
Léonore Nemec,
Aurèle Pulfer,
Lucía Jalón Oyarzun, 2023.

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Figures

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Youfeng Liu

DESIGNING WITH NON-HUMAN THINGS:

The Impact of Text-to-Image Generative AI on Human Roles in the Conceptual Stage of Interior Design

Introduction

Interior design occupies a distinctive position within the broader design disciplines as both a spatial and image-based practice (Rice 2006; Hollis 2017). It operates across functional, aesthetic, technical, and experiential dimensions, relying on images not merely to represent ideas but to think through space itself. Consequently, shifts in image-making technologies directly influence how interior designers imagine, communicate, and construct design intentions, particularly during the conceptual stage, where sketches and visual explorations support early spatial reasoning and client engagement (Bettaieb and Attiah 2022).

In the dimension of technology, philosophical accounts emphasise that technologies are actively human extensions (Colomina and Wigley 2016; McLuhan and Gordon 2023). and reveal the nature of technology (Heidegger 1977). Contemporary AI extends this trajectory and is increasingly framed not as a neutral instrument but as a transformative technological condition and creative interlocutor (Witt 2024; Sreenivasan and Suresh 2024).

Within interior design, text-to-image generative AI intensifies this shift by introducing a language-driven mode of early design exploration. By translating textual prompts into images, these systems bypass the technical complexity of conventional software and enable rapid visualisation suitable for individual and co-creative client contexts (Ploennigs and Berger 2023). However, AI-generated images remain constrained by contextual understanding and linguistic mediation, etc. (Shneiderman 2021; Sukkar et al. 2024). As Hicks et al. (2024) note, AI is not concerned with truth but produces truth-like outputs, reinforcing the need to treat such systems as supplements rather than substitutes for established design practices.

Against this background, this paper examines how text-to-image AI repositions the interior designer within the conceptual stage. Drawing on philosophical, disciplinary, and technical perspectives, and supported by controlled sketch-based explorations, it argues that designing with non-human things neither replaces human creativity nor preserves the designer's role unchanged. Instead, it reconfigures the designer as a critical mediator who negotiates intention, meaning, and spatial possibility with a non-human generative system.

Humans and Non-humans

Humans

From a biological perspective, human brains and bodies provide the intellectual and physical basics for design and invention. Human brains build a capacity for language and reasoning, and a distinctly upright human bodies free their hands to use tools (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025). Both enable humans to learn, create and invent, and to achieve their intentions. In this case, humans are an essential and key condition for inventing all things surrounding them. As stated by Fuller (1938), a human is not only a body and a brain but also an extension of technology or a first tool that can be modified. This view stands in tension with the arguments of Colomina and Wigley (2016) as well as McLuhan and Gordon (2023), who offer competing accounts of the relations between humans and non-humans. Therefore, it is necessary to consider non-humans in the world while humans place themselves at the centre.

Non-human Technology

Non-humans include not only creatures but also inanimate items, such as artefacts (Björgvinsson et al. 2012). Artefacts refer to human-designed and made objects. In this research, non-human artefacts focus on technology and technological objects that include physical (e.g., interior space) and non-physical (e.g., AI platform) objects. Although it is hard to define whether technology is human-designed or human-founded, this is based on human desires. This section analyses technology and the relations between human and non-human technology or technological artefacts.

Heidegger (1977) suggests that technology is a way of revealing. For example, a concrete dam reveals that rivers can store and release energy as a resource. The technology allowed things to emerge from hiddenness into presence (Heidegger 1977). In the dimension of interior design, the technology of stonecutting reveals the chance of home layouts. This results in the chimney stacks being constructed, enabling the fireplace to be moved from the central position to the wall (Hollis and Stone 2022).

Furthermore, when humans use technology to design and invent technological objects or artefacts (e.g., mobile phones, AI platforms), these are human extensions, based on the views of Colomina and Wigley (2016) and McLuhan and Gordon's (2023) views. For example, wheelchairs aid mobility; social software provides remote interaction (Giacomin 2014; Coulton and Lindley 2019). Therefore, the artefacts enhance human capacity.

Technology has negative impacts on humans. Modern technologies, as a Gestell (Enframing), can turn everything (e.g., humans) into resources (Heidegger 1977). This could hide the essence, such as humans turned into a war resource by war machines. This also supports Colomina and Wigley's (2016) view that humans threaten themselves. However,

Martin Heidegger's (1977) view should depend on the specific situation and context. In the dimension of home, domestic technologies (e.g., washing machines) become human hands or extensions to wash clothes rather than making humans a resource.

Moreover, humans can no longer adequately understand technology from the view of individual technological devices (Böhme 2012). This presents the complexity of technological objects. For example, text-to-image AI is built in the intersection of multiple technologies (e.g., Information Technology, display and hardware manufacturing). When we try to understand AI, multiple technologies must be accessed. This impossible separation and complexity reduce the complexity of interaction between users and AI, such as text and voice, bridging humans and non-human AI.

Interior Design

Interior and Design

The term interior design can be divided into interior and design. The interior is integral to buildings, which provides a border between the interior and exterior (Rice 2006; Brooker and Stone 2010). It includes the context surrounding the structure (Hollis and Stone 2022). Additionally, Interior also refers to image (Hollis 2017). Here, the interior can record before and plan the future. This is evidence of domestic life and recalls the existing things, such as a painting recording human life (Rice 2006; Hollis 2017). Therefore, interior design is inevitably endowed with the characteristic of a 2D image and is built on the image.

Design refers to a range from conceptualisation to practice (Giacomin 2014); aims to invent something (Colomina and Wigley 2016). Both views lay the foundation that interior design is practice-based. This practice is achieved through connection among designers, clients and constructors, design tools (e.g., software) and construction; and during the process, images are a major way to present the designer's concept. Therefore, interior design is an image and practice-based discipline. This research focuses on interior design based on images as well.

Interior Design

Interior design is a distinct discipline that differs from graphic, fashion, and industrial design (Brooker and Stone 2010; Brooker and Scarpa 2007), despite the shared reliance on images across all design fields. Unlike the narrower focus of industrial and graphic design, interior design engages a broader set of concerns, including spatial planning, decoration, functionality, engineering, and safety, and serves a more diverse and context-specific user base, from individuals in domestic settings to larger communities in commercial environments, whereas industrial and graphic design typically target mass markets and common consumer preferences.

Interior design is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on product, industrial, furniture, graphic, and fabric design (Brooker and Stone 2010), while also integrating architecture, urban design, conservation, and psychology (Hollis and Stone 2022). Collaboration is central to this practice, with interior designers often working alongside specialists such as furniture designers (Brooker and Stone 2010). Additionally, extensive collaboration with technical teams, including structural and electrical engineers, is also integral to the design process (Brooker and Stone 2010; Hollis and Stone 2022; Hassan Hashim et al. 2023). Such dependencies illustrate why Brooker and Stone (2010) and Brooker and Scarpa (2007) distinguish interior

design from other disciplines, noting that graphic designers, for instance, rarely engage with technical engineers.

Traditionally and presently, interior design encompasses all interior projects, from decoration to renovation within buildings (Brooker and Stone 2010; Brooker and Scarpa 2007), and is widely understood as a space-making discipline (Bettaieb and Attiah 2022; Al-Farran 2019). It provides spatial solutions through a linear workflow extending from pre-design to construction (The American Institute of Architects 2007). In integrated and non-integrated workflows, the early research stages, pre-design and conceptualisation remain consistent (The American Institute of Architects 2007). Similarly, the Royal Institute of British Architects (2020) positions this research phase between strategic definition and conceptual design. The design team must develop initial concepts while addressing cost, engineering strategies, and project risks (Royal Institute of British Architects 2020).

Today, the conceptual stage is increasingly shaped by text-to-image AI tools. Although the strengths, weaknesses, reliability, and accuracy of AI-generated images require further scrutiny (Fareed et al. 2024), such images can visualise designers' ideas within seconds and are already viable for both individual use and co-creative client sessions (Ploennigs and Berger 2023). Accordingly, this paper adopts an interior designer's perspective and focuses on the conceptual phase as the central site of investigation.

Concept Stage of Interior Design

During the concept stage, designers interpret client requirements, including the initial budget and intended functions, and examine relevant precedents, professional expertise, etc., to envision what the client needs. Designers commonly communicate these preliminary ideas through hand-drawn sketch layouts and spatial plans, which support the formation of early design proposals (Bettaieb and Attiah 2022). In some cases, designers also develop sketch renderings or conceptual visualisations to articulate materials, atmospheres, stylistic directions, and other experiential qualities.

Notably, this stage varies across practice, because each designer, design team or firm conducts this according to their own workflow, organisational scale, etc. The role of the image in interior design is crucial, though the variability of the designer workflow, etc., is unavoidable. Images are not visual explorations based on sketches or design software. Their purpose is to pioneer design possibilities, broaden the designer's perspective, and facilitate communication with clients throughout the design process. The image, as a tool, operates both within design processes and as an element within text-to-image AI systems. The following sections, therefore, connect interior design and text-to-image AI by examining the role of the image.

Non-human Technology in Interior Design

With the advances in computer technology, image production and modes of visual communication have been transformed. Interior image is generated not only through traditional media (e.g., drawing and painting), but also computational tools (e.g., Adobe Photoshop and Rhino). Such tools have markedly increased productivity and enabled greater complexity from computational tools to parametric design (Kudless 2024). Yet the growing capabilities of these systems also introduce steep learning requirements and more elaborate image-making

processes, distancing designers from the immediacy of their own imagination. By contrast, sketches retain the advantages of speed and productive ambiguity: "sketches thrive on ambiguity and speed" (Kudless 2024, 93); therefore, this provides a direct bridge between mental images and visual expression. Meanwhile, many computational tool applications remain oriented toward production and technical workflows rather than exploratory design (Kudless 2024), prompting renewed reflection on how emerging technologies may reshape design thinking itself.

With the leap of text-to-image AI tools, AI have begun to support early-stage exploration. Text-to-Image AI have seen a notable rise in solving design problems (Pena et al. 2021). These can rapidly generate and iterate visual concepts (Gür et al. 2024) and, despite being constrained by their training data (Kudless 2024), can broaden designers' conceptual horizons. During the process, Text-to-Image AI transforms abstract ideas of humans into visual form, making complex information more comprehensible through visualisation (Bankar and Ket 2021).

AI and Text-to-Image AI

AI has increasingly been framed as a transformative technological condition within creative and design contexts, comparable to the material shift represented by iron in the Iron Age (Schmidt 2020); and is now characterised not merely as an instrument but as an interlocutor capable of engaging in creative relations with humans, machines, and architectural environments (Witt 2024). Parallel perspectives propose that software is perceived as intelligent when experienced as human-like (Tanugraha 2024); and describe AI as exhibiting abilities associated with human cognition (e.g., problem-solving) (Sreenivasan and Suresh 2024). Despite emerging from distinct research traditions, these views converge in aligning AI with earlier definitions that relate it to human intellectual capacities.

Text-to-image AI has surpassed human capabilities and exerted a profound influence on the design field (Coelho and Labrune 2024). It works by describing the subject, shape, and purpose to generate images (Gür et al. 2024). Text refers to textual descriptions entered by users via typing or voice input, and image refers to 2D AI-generated sketch images that are produced by data training and algorithms. In image-reliant disciplines (e.g., art and graphic design), human language inputs become the primary variable shaping outcomes in addition to AI datasets. "sketch" here differs from pencil or pen sketches, is an inherent quality designers embrace during the design process (Kudless 2024). Therefore, a more detailed text generates more precise image results. For example, the average length of text inputs is 27.16 words in Midjourney (Xie et al. 2023), even if prompt length alone does not determine fidelity (Paananen et al. 2024; Lan et al. 2025).

In the dimension of human-non-human technology interaction, text-to-image AI can be understood as a translator between the human mind and images. Users can communicate with things that can talk back or with other things (Coelho and Labrune 2024). This transition reshapes the role of interior designers, foregrounding their linguistic articulation of spatial and aesthetic intentions. AI-assisted tools can enhance workflow efficiency and support decision-making, thereby generating more creative and efficient design solutions (Sreenivasan and Suresh 2024); and enhance the efficiency of design workflows, with these technologies driving the

emergence of more innovative and creative designs (Şekerci et al. 2023). This could contribute to designers being replaced by AI in the industry, especially in areas where the final outcomes are images.

Overall, text-to-image AI reconfigures human–non-human interaction in design, shifting image-making from a human-directed activity toward collaborative production with an AI black box. This shift positions designers as both visual creators and linguistic mediators. Through Heidegger's concept of "revealing," such technologies open new possibilities for imagining and experiencing interior space. However, AI outputs remain predictive constructs shaped by datasets and linguistic precision; therefore, AI cannot reproduce the cultural, emotional, and interpretive dimensions essential to meaningful design.

Text-to-Image AI in Interior Design

While many computational tools have traditionally centred on production rather than creativity, text-to-image AI introduces a new capacity to expand imaginative reasoning within interior design (Kudless 2024). In this context, the images generated act as open-ended propositions, speculative prompts.

Text-to-image systems not only redefine the conceptual stage but also operate as creative sketch-generation tools (Gür et al. 2024), enabling designers to rapidly explore thousands of visual variations (Rafsanjani and Nabizadeh 2023; Hassan Hashim 2023); and subsequently produce realistic images suitable for communicating design concepts promptly (Paananen et al. 2024), offering a clearer presentation of conceptual ideas than traditional hand sketches, particularly where photorealistic images enhance shared understanding.

Text-to-image AI is not merely an additional representational tool but a non-human generative collaborator that intervenes in how designers imagine, articulate, and communicate spatial intentions. The following sections examine this transformation through the interrelated dimensions of text-to-image AI tools application.

Exploration A
Image Generation with Human Sketch

During the application in interior design practice, text-to-image AI involves modifying existing images (e.g., in-painting) and generating new images based on uploaded images. AI-driven in-painting is integrated into recent prompt-based image models (Benjamin et al. 2023). In in-painting, selected regions of an image are regenerated based on textual prompts, producing multiple alternatives for user selection (Ploennigs and Berger 2023).

In the image generation, designers input both images and text prompts, and the generator synthesises new image outputs by learning and recombining patterns embedded in the training data (Benjamin et al. 2023). Through this process, the style or specific elements of the reference images can be altered in response to textual input (Ploennigs and Berger 2023), making this approach suitable for translating sketches into realistic images.

In this exploration, colour and materials were deliberately excluded in order to focus on form and the relationships between interior elements. A black-and-white sketch was uploaded to ChatGPT 5.2 with an identical text prompt, and images were subsequently generated (Figure 1). The interior elements here encompass plane (wall, floor, ceiling), fixtures, furniture, and objects.

The resulting AI-generated image was able to broadly articulate the design intentions embedded in the hand-drawn sketch, despite its ambiguity. As shown in Figure 1, the generated image reflects key spatial and formal characteristics of the sketch, including the shapes and relative positions of the chair, sofa, desk, potted plant, charger, wall light, and the direction of both natural and artificial lighting. Although variations are evident, the overall spatial relationships and compositional structure remain recognisable.

Moreover, the densely hatched area of the author's sketch could not be accurately recognised by the AI system, and the recognition errors mainly focus on this area. For example, the table positioned close to the wall was omitted. From an image-analysis perspective, this might be because of the tonal contrast produced by the organisation of linework. Additionally, the area that directional flow and structural composition of line is translated to curtains and textures on the sofa and wall. These misrecognitions were partially corrected through prompt adjustment, such as re-inputting the instruction that "the back wall of the sofa is not a curtain but a wooden board."

These reveal the limitations in image recognition capabilities of text-to-image AI, and the personalised, expressive line treatment, such as hatching and line-based tonal contrast, can influence AI recognition processes, thereby affecting outputs. This may suggest that designers to adapt their drawing styles to accommodate AI recognition to improve the accuracy of translating conceptual sketches into generated images. However, it is questionable whether the hatching and line-based tonal contrast influence the above errors. For instance, the natural lighting direction in the sketch and the lighted wall light through the light-dark contrast are accurately depicted in the ChatGPT 5.2-generated image.

Figure 01:
From user sketch to AI-generated image (ChatGPT 5.2).

Liu, 2025.

The author sketch

AI-generated image (ChatGPT 5.2)

User prompt:

This is a sketch regarding a study space, includes chair, desk, sofa, plant and wall light, generating this to be a realistic image, from interior designer perspective.

All generated elements/contents should be similar to the uploaded image, and do not change relations/proportions among the elements (furniture, fixtures, lighting).

Exploration B
Image Generation with AI 'Sketch'

Following the initial exploration, the author proposed that I recognition could also be presented through AI-generated textual outputs. To further investigate the identified limitations of AI, the interaction between text-to-image AI and humans in the sketch-to-image generation and the role of designers during this process, a second exploration was conducted (Figure2). To maintain continuity with the initial test, ChatGPT 5.2 remained the testing platform, and the same method regarding the author's sketch was also applied. The key variation was that the first AI output is not an image but a text, followed by image generation.

The findings indicate the limitations observed in the initial exploration. As illustrated in the transition from User: Sketch (B&W) to AI: Sketch (B&W), shown in left side of this figure, misrecognition is evident not only in AI-generated images but also in AI-generated text (e.g., errors of depicting the back wall). For example, the stylised horizontal lines on the doorframe (passing through the hanged clothes) were interpreted as a drying rack, and the floor was transformed into floor tiles, reflecting difficulties in recognising drawing techniques (e.g., dense hatching or layered linework). Drawing on an exploratory enquiry conducted by the author with ten randomly selected individuals, the same floor was perceived as wooden rather than tiled, highlighting a clear difference between humans and non-human AI.

Without modifications to the text prompts, these errors were carried into subsequent visualisation, AI: (Sketch B&W) in the centre of the image. Small or visually ambiguous objects were misidentified or omitted entirely (e.g., the pot handle and cooktop being replaced by a tap and sink, the disappearance of wall material textures and the power box). Additionally, inaccuracies in the proportions of fixtures were observed (e.g., the counter and the right-hand door).

By contrast, higher recognition accuracy and clarity were achieved in AI: sketch (B&W) to AI: image (Figure 2), compared with the AI recognition on a human's hand-drawn sketch (Figure 1). Based on the clear AI: Sketch B&W, ChatGPT 5.2 was able to transfer nearly all details (e.g., shape, position, and ratio) into the realistic image. This suggests that clearer images with fewer stylised or intersecting lines are more conducive to accurate AI image recognition than sketches that contain artistic techniques. Nevertheless, identification and generation errors remained, such as those related to ceiling lighting, indicating that AI performance remains imperfect even under improved conditions.

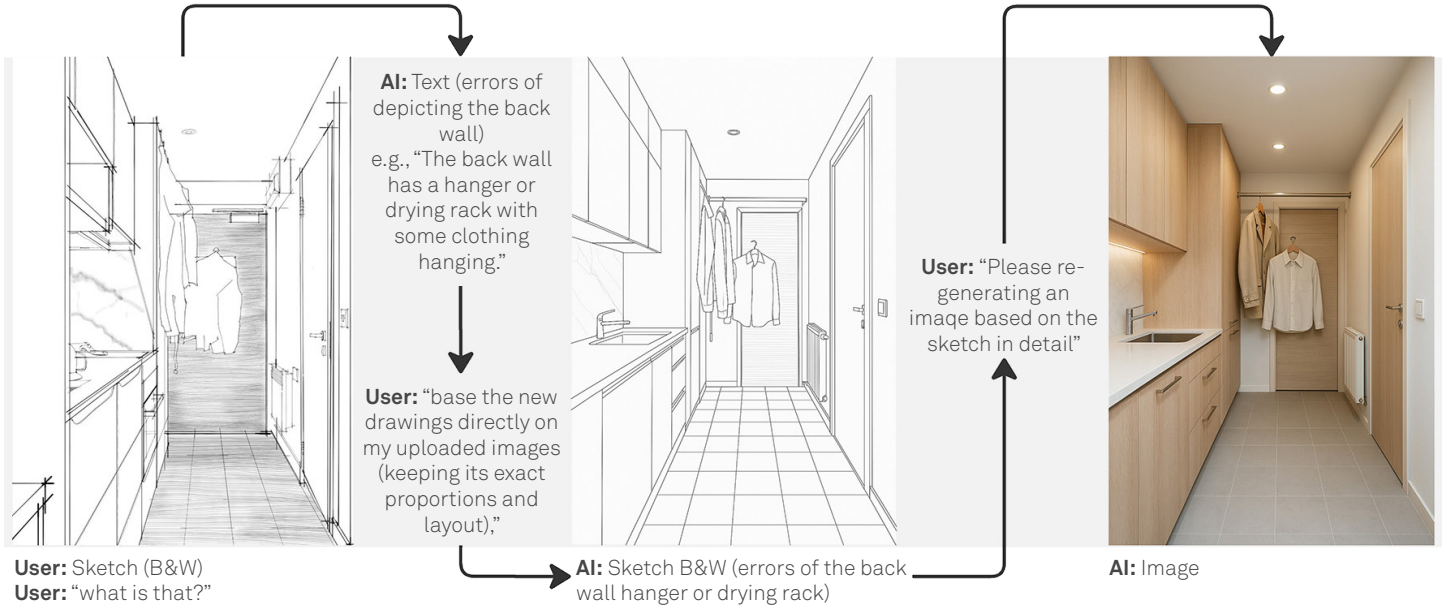
These findings suggest that designers may need to adjust sketch clarity or representational styles to support more accurate AI-assisted visualisation. For example, when a sketch without dense hatching areas and artistic techniques was input into ChatGPT 5.2, the AI-generated image was clearer and closer to the original sketch (Figure 3).

Figure 02:
Transformation from user sketch to AI-generated 'sketch' and realistic image (ChatGPT 5.2).

Liu, 2025.

Figure 03:
Transformation from user sketch to realistic image (ChatGPT 5.2).

Liu, 2025.



User: Sketch (B&W) = User inputs Sketch (B&W); User: "text" = User prompts "text"
AI: Sketch B&W (errors of the back wall) = AI outputs a sketch B&W with errors of the back wall; AI Text (confirmations) e.g., "Text". = AI generates text for confirmation, for example, "Text".

The author sketch

AI-generated image (ChatGPT 5.2)

Building on the above, *exploration A* and *B* indicate that text-to-image AI plays a productive yet constrained role in interior design practice. While such tools can effectively interpret clear spatial characteristics and accelerate early-stage design exploration, their performance diminishes when confronted with stylised drawing, intersecting line structures, or objects with limited visual salience. The results underscore the continued necessity of designer expertise in shaping input quality, interpreting outputs, and managing recurrent limitations in AI recognition. At the same time, interaction with AI systems may prompt designers to reconsider and adapt their sketching practices. It should be acknowledged that the explorations are limited by the text prompt variations, AI platforms, the number of experiments and samples.

Limitations

First, AI often struggles to align visual outputs with human intention due to linguistic ambiguity and contextual limitations (Shneiderman 2021;Sukkar et al. 2024). This issue was also revealed in the image modification experiment (Figure 4). ChatGPT 5.2 executed in-painting correctly only after repeated revisions of prompts, while similar attempts to modify lighting positions failed despite multiple inputs. Although longer prompts are generally associated with higher-quality images (Gür et al. 2024), lexical precision is equally critical. Paananen et al. (2024) suggested that effective image depends on accurate, context-specific vocabulary, with improvements achieved through alternative terms or adjusted word order.

User:
Uses 'in- painting' to refine the image.

"Make the selected area the same as that in the imaqe I uploaded before, do not change other things"

User:
Uses 'in- painting' to refine the image.

"cover the selected area with the white part in the selectea area. Do not change any other things"

User: Image (photographed and uploaded by the author)

AI: Image (partly adjusted)

AI: Image

User: Sketch (B&W) = User inputs Sketch (B&W)
User: "text" = User prompts "text"
User: Text = User used 'Text' in this generation
AI: Sketch B&W (errors of the back wall) = AI outputs a sketch B&W with errors of the back wall
AI: Text (confirmations) e.g., "Text". = AI generates text for confirmation, for example, "Text"

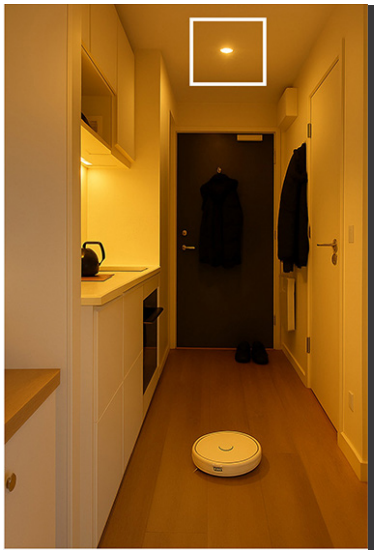
These highlight the complexity and uncertainty of human–text-to-image AI interaction in design practice and reveal a gap between human and AI interpretation. Text-to-image AI cannot replace image-editing tools (e.g., Adobe Photoshop) or the central role of human designers. Instead, designers remain essential as active mediators who guide and coordinate AI-generated outputs through discipline-specific terms or expert vocabulary.

Second, reliance on a single AI platform (ChatGPT 5.2) is insufficient to substantiate the findings. When the same text and image were input into ChatGPT 5.2, GenAI Adobe Photoshop and DALL-E 4o, the diversity of AI-image generations was observed (Figure 5). The images differed substantially in style and interpretation, even if basic elements in the author's sketch remained, such as desk, chair, light and sofa. Among them, the image generated by ChatGPT 5.2 most closely aligned with the original sketch, which is why the same AI platform was applied in the above explorations to control the variations. Moreover, this also revealed that the diversity of AI platforms may contribute to diverse functions. For example, in-painting with GenAI Photoshop demonstrates potential for extending human creativity.

Figure 04:
AI-mediated execution of human textual prompts in ChatGPT 5.2.

Liu, 2025.

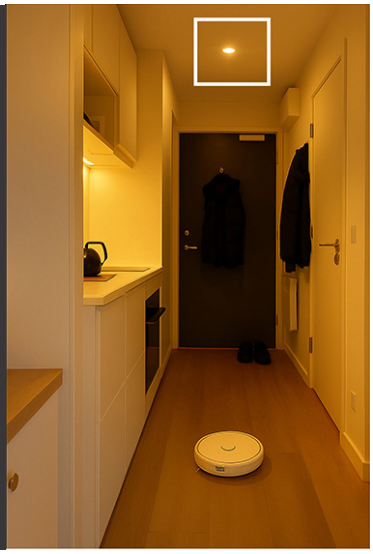
(adjusted)



User: Image (AI-generation based on the author's photograph)

User:
Uses 'in- painting' to refine the image.

"Slightly and horizontally move the lighting to the riaht side (near the cabinet at the imaae) in the selected area. Do not change any other things (brightness, fixture, finiture, etc)"



AI: Image (unchanged)

The author sketch

AI-generated image (ChatGPT 5.2)

AI-gene

User prompt: This is a sketch regarding a study space, includes chair, desk, sofa, plant and wall light, generating this to be a realistic image, from an interior designer perspective. All generated elements/contents should be similar to the uploaded image, and do not change the relations/positions among the elements(furniture, fixtures, lighting).

erated image (GenAI Adobe Photoshop)

AI-generated image (DALL-E 4o)

Figure 05:
Comparison of AI-generated images across ChatGPT 5.2, GenAI and DALL-E 4o.

Liu, 2025.

Non-human Extension

Non-human Extensions of Human Creativity

The generative process and non-human perspective of text-to-image AI extend users' creativity. Creativity, as an original idea, shifts how humans see, understand, and interact with their surroundings (Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne 2014). In this study, greater attention is paid to personal creativity. "Personal creativity refers to the novel ideas or experiences that any person can have..." (Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne 2014, 239). In this context, users' creativity is grounded in human experiences. User interaction with text-to-image AI constitutes a novel experience, characterised by bidirectional and diverse AI responses shaped through iterative training on AI datasets.

In addition to creativity, AI expands designers' imaginative capacity by introducing emergent possibilities that broaden design horizons (Paananen et al. 2024; Sreenivasan and Suresh 2024; Kudless 2024). Operating through non-human data-driven inference, text-to-image systems generate outputs that often diverge from expected logic, producing novel results (Bankar and Ket 2021; Fareed et al. 2024). Such outputs function as productive disruptions. As Kudless (2024, 93) argues, "maintaining a balance between coherence and nonsense is crucial for harnessing AI as a tool for exploration, speculation, and architectural imagination", which is also supported by Fareed et al. (2024).

Nevertheless, AI is limited in stimulating human creativity, particularly at the level of interaction. While early encounters with AI may disrupt established routines and prompt creative engagement (Csikszentmihalyi 2014), AI-generated images remain predictive constructs shaped by datasets and linguistic inputs rather than human art (Kudless 2024). Moreover, AI outputs are constrained by their generative processes and training data. This issue also stems from the structural biases inherent in existing image databases, which often overrepresent certain architectural styles and reproduce digital images derived from photographic conventions (Sukkar et al. 2024). Both benefits and limitations were revealed in the application of in-painting in sketches in GenAI Photoshop.

Exploration C
Extensions of Human Sketches

When textual prompts do not specify detailed requirements (e.g., specific colours or fixtures), the generative chains of AI are further disrupted. To explore the potential of AI extension under such conditions, the text prompts were deliberately constrained, and the variables included the difference in in-painted areas, ranging from small to large, object-specific regions to larger zones encompassing fixtures and furniture. This enables the possibility of changes in interior elements to be explored within the images. The same sketch produced by the author was input into two AI platforms (GenAI Photoshop and ChatGPT 5.2). GenAI Photoshop extended new data-driven content from the edge of unselected areas (the black area of the area for in-painting, Figure 6); ChatGPT 5.2 translated the content to realistic visuals, enabling clearer comparison across the entire image.

In addition to prompts, the results were strongly influenced by the size and geometry of the in-painted areas, with the edges of selected regions acting as key sites for AI-driven extension. Differences between human intention and non-human interpretation became evident: for example, a table lamp–shaped selection was recognised as a television, the second image of Image

(GenAI Photoshop) (Figure 6), while larger, square selections generated new furniture emerging from incomplete domestic boundaries, as presented in the third image of Image (Area for in-painting). In addition, both platforms produced incoherent or substitutive transformations, such as chairs replaced by a light-coloured sofa or a cabinet replaced by a television in the first and second images of Image (ChatGPT 5.2), respectively. Although such outcomes may disrupt established spatial hierarchies, such as the television disrupting the central role of the fireplace (Hollis 2013),

GenAI Photoshop, User: "This is a living room of a flat, giving your advices through visuals. ChatGPT 5.2, User: "this is a human sketch regarding a living room, convert this into a realistic image, based on the sketch in detail, as an interior designer. only change the different areas and remain the unchanged areas."

Figure 06:
Extension of creativity through GenAI to ChatGPT 5.2, Liu, 2025.

they can prompt designers to reconsider alternative spatial arrangements and design possibilities.

While this test does not fully demonstrate AI's capacity to extend human design imagination, such as the number and diversity of samples tested, the contingency of experiments and lack of participation from other practitioners, it identifies AI-generated images as non-human perspectives that can assist designers in reconsidering alternatives and imagining unfamiliar possibilities. When integrated into interior design practice, text-to-image AI functions as a dynamically responsive collaborator, producing visual outputs derived from large-scale datasets. The design process is thereby reconfigured as a human–non-human collaboration, in which non-human technologies occupy a responsive role, while designers increasingly engage as interpreters and evaluators who critically mediate AI-generated propositions.

Conclusions

This paper has examined how text-to-image AI reconfigures human roles in the conceptual stage of interior design by positioning AI not merely as a representational instrument but as a non-human technological collaborator. By drawing together philosophical understandings of humans and non-human artefacts and the technical and epistemic specificities of AI image generation, the study demonstrates that such systems do not simply supplement existing workflows; they actively prompt designers to adapt AI platforms.

Within interior design, a discipline grounded in spatial practice, interdisciplinarity, and visual communication, the introduction of text-to-image AI marks a significant shift. Images have served as intermediary objects that enable designers to externalise ideas, test alternatives. AI-generated imagery inherits the communicative potential of sketches while altering its logic: instead of emerging through complex design software, images now materialise from linguistic articulation and algorithmic inference.

Through three explorations mainly using ChatGPT 5.2 and comparative tests across GenAI Photoshop, the study shows that text-to-image AI can rapidly translate sketches into plausible visualisations, accelerate iteration, and support early-stage of design by generating image-based propositions that expand designers' imaginative and speculative reasoning.

Moreover, the findings demonstrate persistent constraints. AI remains vulnerable to misrecognition when confronted with stylised drawing techniques, intersecting linework, or visually ambiguous objects. Image-editing tasks that require precise local control (e.g., in-painting execution and fixture relocation) expose the interpretive gap between human intention and AI response. More fundamentally, dataset bias and platform-specific behaviours delimit the range of visual outcomes, reinforcing dominant patterns and photographic conventions within training data.

Rather than displacing designers, these dynamics reposition them. Designers remain central as linguistic articulators, curators, and critical mediators who guide input quality, interpret AI outputs, and manage recurrent limitations within human–non-human workflows. Accordingly, the conceptual stage becomes a site where creativity emerges through negotiated interaction with non-human things, and where design is reconstituted as the capacity to translate and coordinate between technological capability and humans.

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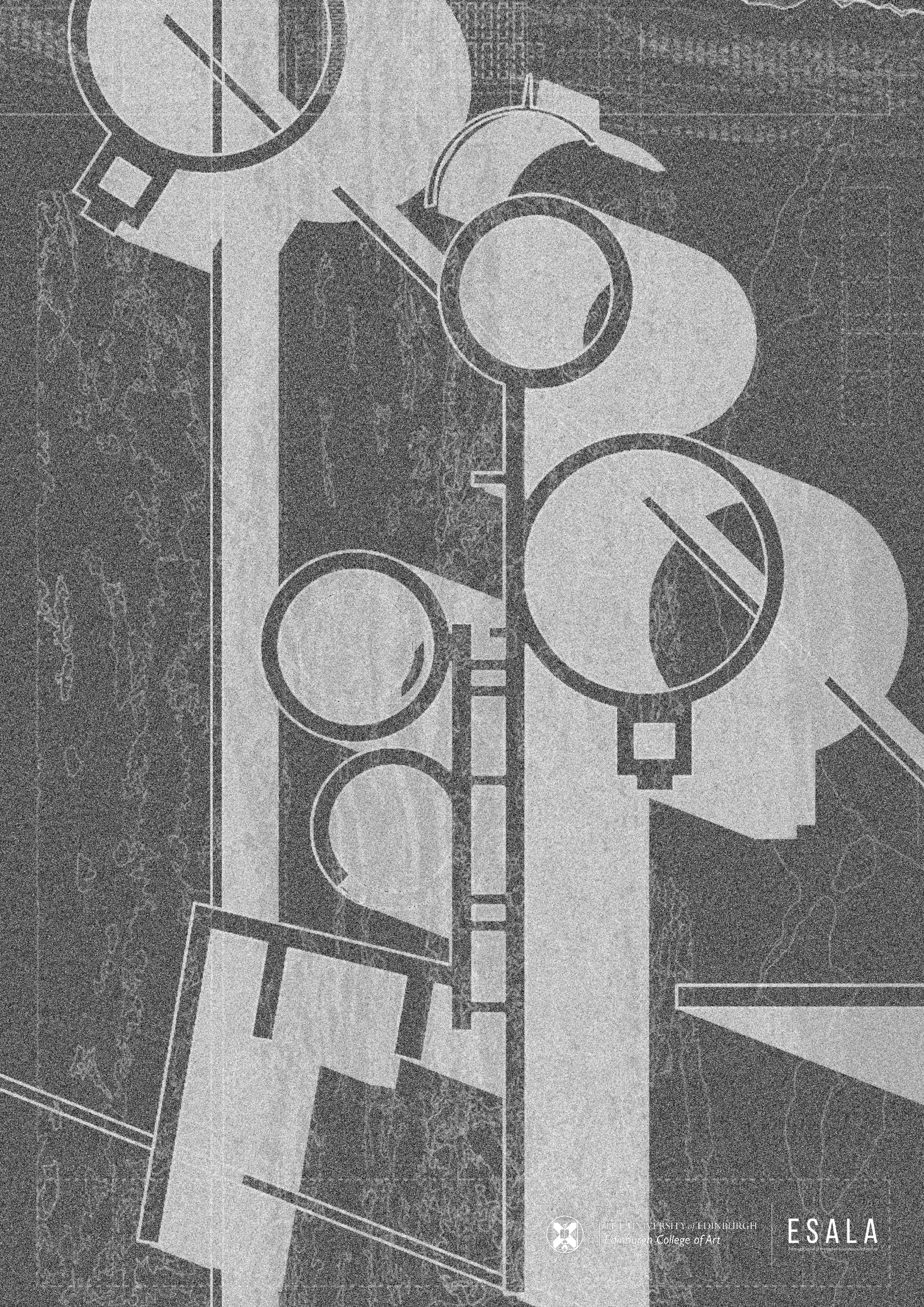

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