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On Liminality: Towards the Non-Extractive Spatial Practice

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Abstract

This essay aims to advance creative research within architectural and artistic discourse, with a particular focus on the significance of site-specific practice. In light of contemporary trends in architectural sustainability and ecological discourse — especially the notion that everything is already built — this study explores and interprets key spatial phenomena, including liminality, sensitivity, and ephemerality. Through the lens of an urban ruin, it examines how these transient qualities manifest within the built environment, offering critical insights into the evolving relationship between architecture, temporality, and ecological consciousness.

Contemporary architectural theory increasingly gravitates toward the radical reinvention of the existing built environment, emphasizing the necessity of adaptive reuse and sustainability. Scholars such as Hertweck, Topalovic, Nehmer, and Krieger advocate for “repair as a social practice” (Zambeletti, 2024, para. 1), while Malterre-Barthes envisions “a non-extractive future, made of what we have” (Malterre-Barthes, 2024). These perspectives challenge us to rethink our engagement with the built world, urging a paradigm shift from expansion to reinterpretation. This raises a fundamental question: How can we creatively reimagine the existing in ways that generate novel, unexpected, and dynamic futures? This essay argues that such an approach is intrinsically linked to the immersive potential of “found spaces” and must be grounded in a site-specific methodology to foster further meaningful interventions.

Keywords: liminality, liminal space, non-extractive practice, ephemeral space, site-specific

Somewhere

"Nothing can happen without happening somewhere," writes Meta Hočevar in her small but powerful book (Hočevar, 2003, p. 10). This "somewhere" carries the promise of space, and the belief in space, whether real or imagined, tangible or intangible. Despite its occasional appearance as a relic of a bygone era, the phenomenological consideration of spatial frameworks is a crucial aspect of study. It guides us towards the mental development of the idea of space – towards what Adrian Forty aptly describes as "a mental construct through which the mind comprehends the world" (Forty, 2000, p. 256). By analysing these constructs, we uncover spatial potentials. The discovery of these new potentials not only leads us to further necessary creative explorations and interpretations of space but also inspires and motivates us to do so.

Liminal Space

We recognize liminality as a quality of urban space in those niches where certain unextracted, thus far unisolated potentials, exist. Unmined, unexploited, undivided, they have endured through time and have been shaped by contextual conditions. These potentials remain sufficiently vague by extraction and unconfined by definition; unrefined and unpurified; and just porous enough for new readings. Shaped by these aspects, the liminal phenomena of the city are carriers of indeterminacy. Entirely between one and another meaning, they belong neither here nor there to any of the polarised dichotomies. They are elusive spaces of the urban experiential threshold (Zeković, 2024).

We cross one of these thresholds when we enter an urban ruin. Not necessarily entirely dilapidated, the ruin has, over time and through shifting circumstances, lost its utilitarian function – its original purpose. As an open and fragile structure, it offers space and layers of its memory as an invitation to a dialogue. By embracing urban ruin as the primary spatial framework and introducing action within it, we create the conditions for a liminal space for the spectators, as experience itself also demands a spatial realization. This liminal or "threshold space" is an active, dynamic, uneven, and unstable space that arises from the synergy between the primary space, the event unfolding within it, and the observer's ability to translate all these into experience (Zeković, 2015, p. 37). Moreover, we must understand its authentic nature to capture it more subtly from a phenomenological perspective.

Sensitive Space

This space is inherently a sensitive space. Emanuele Coccia says, "...what we call space (is) an enormous sensorium – that does not wait for our senses to open and translate the world into experience" (Coccia, 2020). And he is right. We are not needed for such a space

to live deeply and gracefully on its own. On the other hand, we are necessary to harness the liminal potentials of such spatial phenomena and consider the next steps towards a less aggressive urban future, inevitably tied to what has already been built. A radical reassessment and reinvention of the entire existing built environment will be required from us to survive on the edge of sustainability. In this regard, deconstructing the potential of the city's liminal phenomena is a crucial process that will bring forth new narratives and ways of reimagining the city.

Ephemeral Space

This space is, by its nature, an ephemeral one. As Bernard Tschumi famously asserts, architecture is the space itself and the events unfolding within it (Tschumi, 2012). Despite the transience of the boundary spaces this synergy creates, they remain an enduring possibility, subtly denying that permanence, in a spatial sense, is of any real significance. Short-lived in execution and long-lived in consequences, these spaces are determined by an intrinsic intention. They are the embodied promises of an experience that will inevitably move the dream of permanency farther from the actual physical space into the memory of a person who walks away with it.

An urban ruin encloses all this and, through its vulnerable existence, challenges us to reconsider a site-specific urban alternative. The responsibility of architects and designers as “agents of transformation” (*Non-extractive Architecture(S), a Directory of Design Without Depletion*, n.d.) must prevail in favour of enabling new experiences through non-extractive practice. Working with what we have rather than tearing it down and erecting it anew helps us contain the contextual histories in our future cities. Furthermore, by intentionally facilitating reuse in our architectural and artistic endeavours, we leave porous layers for a space to breathe, enabling an active engagement of that space with the events and actions happening within. In the sense of performance, this type of space is always ready to embrace it and evolve with it.

To gain a deeper understanding of the city and its possible liveable future, it is crucial to explore the layers of in-between space, ephemeral space, sensitive space, unextracted space, boundary space, and all of its branches. These concepts offer a framework for rethinking urban environments, guiding us towards new interpretations and possibilities that embrace the fluidity and complexity of the spaces we inhabit.

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