

Geographies of possibility. Designing conditions for program-less urban voids in Italy and the Netherlands

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1. Introduction. From function to condition:

Re-framing infrastructural voids

“What function for this void?” is a question that appears purely technical, while it conveys an implicit vision of what space is and who holds the power and tools to define it. It inherently assumes that space – in this context, intended as urban voids – is an interruption to be healed, an

absence to be filled, or a disorder to be brought back to a state of order. However, when observing contemporary urban margins, and particularly those generated by large-scale mobility infrastructures, this programmatic question often proves deeply inadequate. Roadway remnants (Reliquati stradali), buffer zones, and interstitial spaces between infrastructures and the consolidated city are examples of spaces that do not wait for a

“What function for this void?” presents itself as a technical question, but conceals an implicit vision of what space is and who has the power and tools to define it. It assumes the void is an interruption to be healed, a disorder to be brought back to order. However, in infrastructural urban margins, design must not prescribe, but enable. It is not a leftover to be refunctionalized, but an operational field to activate transformation trajectories with planned transience, without predetermining the outcome.

We should instead ask ourselves: “What conditions must be defined so that this space can be acted upon?” This marks the shift from design as an answer to design as a question and research tool, an interface between institutional and usage times, norms, and practices. The ‘acted space’ is not a container to fill, but a condition to negotiate: giving space without necessarily making form, turning indeterminacy not into a fragility, but into a design resource, an operational threshold.

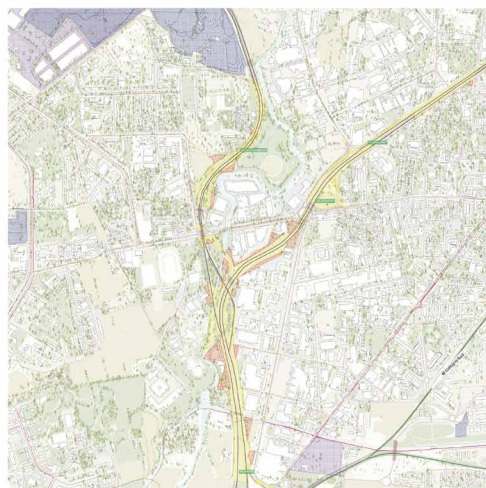
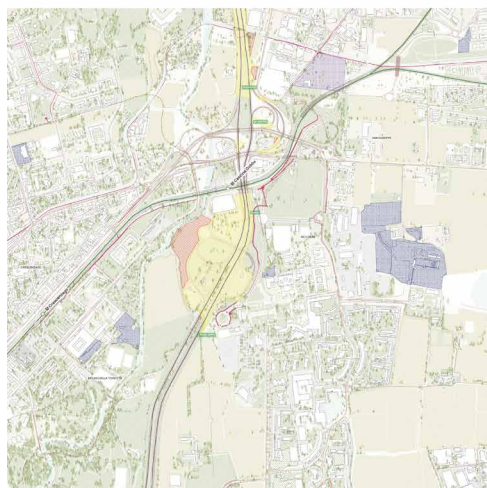
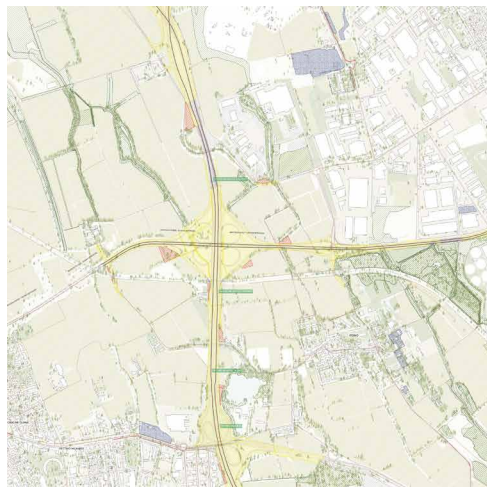
specific purpose but rather for circumstances that enable their activation.

The traditional approach to systemic urban planning, founded on rigid normative models – and a preventive, conformist regulation of the territory – has been repeatedly shown incapable of responding to the transitional needs of these specific conditions. Bakema, through his concept of ‘from chair to city’ (1981), shares the illusion that comprehensive design can solve everything, leading to hyper-specialization that struggles with domains in between, such as mobility infrastructure. These infrastructures belong to every place and no place; they are situated on a scale entirely of their own, defying traditional architectural categorization and demanding a cross-sectional understanding of the landscape

(van den Boomen, Venhoeven, and College van Rijksadviseurs, 2012).

For example, part of the highway concessionaires’ assets consists of the so-called *reliquati stradali*, land parcels that are not used for mobility even though they were obtained through expropriation procedures for public utility. In the collective imaginary and in standard planning practices, the regeneration of these interstitial spaces is usually tied solely to their complete decommissioning and subsequent replacement. Urban projects such as the ‘High Line’ in New York and the *Cheonggyecheon* Stream in Seoul are a perfect example of the contemporary approach: the physical removal or deactivation of the infrastructure opens the way for a radical spatial substitution, a *tabula rasa*, as the simplest solution. Contemporary urban theory increasingly frames these margins as ‘involuntary landscapes’ – residual terrains that offer the greatest potential for new collective practices and experimentation because they escape the strict programmatic logic of the consolidated city, rather than as adverse effects of modernization (Fernández Per and Arpa, 2008).

In the short and medium term, where society is not ready to renounce the infrastructure, a critical question arises: how can the city coexist with these margins? How can we strategically rethink them? It was Frank Lloyd Wright who, starting in the 1920s with ‘Broadacre City’, first considered the extreme spatial consequences



of urban planning based on the automobile. Today, as Adriaan Geuze points out (Baart *et al.*, 1996), cities are situated in a network of asphalt with space in between. Everyone must move, making the highway the most used, however paradoxically, the most undervalued public space. We tend to regard the time spent getting from A to B as wasted time, prioritizing the enhancement of the 'static-city' and tacitly assuming that those who are static have more right to speak than those who move. Furthermore, roads are often rendered invisible behind a forest of noise barriers; the highway becomes

a mere corridor, and the motorist is entirely cut off from the surroundings and vice versa. Too often, these marginalized infrastructural borders attract dramatic typologies of functional programs. Because these functional programs are not disadvantaged by the disturbing conditions created by motorways – such as noise, environmental pollution, and spatial disconnection – they are deployed to 'fill and exploit the space'. Therefore, these voids are rapidly occupied by industrial areas, logistics hubs, and large-scale retail facilities with extensive parking lots. Alternatively, they are aesthetically sanitized

“Actionable space along, within and under the Milanese Ring Roads”. In red, reliquati stradali – in blue and purple pattern, urban regeneration and non-structured areas from Milan PGT.

Fonte: Drawing by the Author (2026).

Fig. 1.

through top-down interventions that overwrite the existing spatial identity.

Both approaches treat the void as a mere container to be filled, missing the opportunity to work with the latency of the margin itself.

As J.B. Jackson argued (1985), modern roads “no longer merely lead to places; they are places”. They serve two critical roles: as promoters of growth and dispersion, and as magnets around which new kinds of development can cluster. In the modern landscape, no other space has been so versatile, especially in areas where the landscape itself is no longer the economic driver. Crucially, these specific margins often lack a localizable demand and a clear and explicit institutional mandate. In these contexts, spatial design cannot and should not prescribe or overwrite; it can only enable.

While the preceding observations are specific to the reliquati stradali and analogous infrastructure-generated interstitial spaces, the interpretive framework they demand has broader theoretical resonance. Such unprogrammed territories, in particular, resonate with the concept of *terrain vague*, in which the absence of a definitive use is not a structural deficiency to be corrected but rather a state of expectation and potential (Solà-Morales Rubiò, 1995). Operating within these margins requires a deep paradigm shift, embracing a logic that recalls the ‘acting without acting’, as analyzed by the philosopher François Jullien (2007).

In this framework, the intervention itself does not produce the direct effect, but instead establishes the fertile context that makes the effect possible. The design process does not dictate an end-state; instead, it orchestrates the material, ecological, and institutional conditions necessary for a plural, progressive, and situated activation.

Starting from this perspective, this contribution reflects on the trajectories towards such enabling conditions through didactic and research experiences developed between Milan and the Netherlands. In both geographical contexts, the interpretative approach to the margin is not proposed as a leftover or a reserve of land to be merely re-functionalized. Instead, the infrastructural void is approached as an operational field in which to test design forms capable of activating transformative trajectories, without determining their outcome *a priori*. The contribution reflects on how spatial design can function as an active mediator, translating divergent demands into shared trajectories and transforming the void into a threshold of coexistence. Where the discussion is grounded in observations specific to reliquati stradali and the institutional conditions of Milan’s ring-road infrastructure, this is made explicit; where the argument moves toward more broadly transferable design principles, the shift in register is likewise signaled.

2. Exploring the unprogrammed: Research-by-Design as a methodological framework

To translate the theoretical premise of enabling conditions into spatial practice, the approach is being tested with a research-by-design methodology through didactic experiences at the Delft University of Technology. Specifically, the pedagogical framework of the Master of Science design studio in Architecture and Urban Design served as an experimental laboratory to investigate infrastructural margins, for which highway interchanges and residual strips in the eastern urban region of Milan were selected as test sites to ground this theoretical framework on the properties of the Ring Roads of Milan, run by *Milano Serravalle – Milano Tangenziali*.

This research-by-design methodology draws on the epistemological assumption that spatial knowledge of infrastructural margins, such as those explored herein, can only be produced through design practices rather than through more traditional analytical or survey-based approaches alone. The role of the design studio in this approach is therefore not to implement the theory but rather to develop knowledge of the particularities of these margins, their resistance to programming, and the conditions under which they could be rendered amenable to change. As a methodology, the research-by-design framework does not offer a procedure for circumventing master planning; rather, it tests

the hypothesis that conditions for the emergence of unprogrammed voids could be discovered through the use of design inquiry. From an operational perspective, the methodology proceeded through three stages, each with a specific research purpose. The first stage of the research was based on the cartographic and analytical identification of the *reliquati stradali* and interstitial strips of the Milanese ring roads; the goal here was not to find solutions to problems but, rather, to decipher the underlying spatial, infrastructural, and ecological conditions of the margins 'over the infrastructure itself'. The resulting atlas of landscape types served as a research instrument, not a design brief: its purpose was to surface the specificities of each interstitial condition and to identify which properties resist conventional planning tools. Subsequently, the research shifted to comparative case studies that acknowledge and integrate mobility infrastructure into the urban fabric rather than hide or marginalize it (Cavallo *et al.*, 2018). The next phase was inherently comparative in nature; by considering cases in which mobility infrastructure had been integrated into the urban landscape rather than excluded from it, the studio was able to discover how such integration could be accomplished in other cases and determine the extent to which those enabling factors could be transferred to the unique constraints of the *reliquati stradali*. The point of the analysis does not lie in the cases used to conduct it, but in a framework through

which lessons about the particular enabling conditions can be gleaned, as well as their applicability in the Italian setting. The final phase took these lessons and developed design probes based upon the lessons derived from the analysis; the probes consisted of hypothetical uses of specific locations along the ring roads of Milan which sought to diagnose and uncover the latent urban synergies of the marginal strips rather than resolve them architecturally. This last point must be stressed since the output from the design process is not necessarily of any architectural value but rather is intended as an epistemological tool.

A key research finding to emerge from this three-phase process was that the spatial conditions of these margins cannot be adequately understood through a static analytical frame: temporality is constitutive of what these spaces are, not merely a scheduling concern for their transformation. This is a specifically methodological claim – it concerns what research-by-design can make legible about infrastructure-generated voids – rather than a prescription for how planning should be organized. At the level of the design process, this insight was operationalized through the structuring of outputs as open scenarios rather than closed blueprints. The design outputs were structured not as final blueprints, but as toolkits and future scenarios (*Toolboxen en toekomstscenario's*) (de Boer *et al.*, 2019). For instance, structuring design probes across

temporal milestones – 2030, 2050, and 2100 – was not a planning choice but a research device: it forced an explicit engagement with how the spatial potential of a given margin shifts as infrastructural demand, ownership structures, and institutional frameworks evolve. The implication for planning practice – that temporal phasing and planned transience should replace fixed land-use assignments – is a conclusion of the research, not a premise of the method. This distinction is reinforced by the convergence between the studio's findings and the independently developed future-scenario methodology of Dutch mobility research (TU Delft mobilizers team, 2025).

3. Mechanisms of Space: Between adaptive visions and planned transience

To understand how unprogrammed territories can be activated, it is essential to analyze the administrative and legal mechanisms that regulate urban space. The research highlights two highly complementary paradigms: the Netherlands and Italy. In the Dutch context, spatial planning has progressively consolidated a profound sensitivity toward planned transience. This approach is institutionalized through the recent *Omgevingswet* (Environment and Planning Act), which unifies previously fragmented regulations into an integrated vision of the territory, seamlessly encompassing environment, urbanism, mobility, water, energy, and health. At the core of this systemic approach are the

Omgevingsvisies – shared and narrative territorial visions developed cohesively across state, provincial, and municipal levels. These visions do not have direct, strict regulatory power; instead, they are long-term strategic plans that guide the creation of implementation plans.

A fundamental principle of this paradigm is the notion of *ruimte voor ontwikkeling* [space for development], which facilitates adaptable norms and permits administrative exceptions provided they are consistent with the overarching strategic vision. This shift from spatial mitigation to spatial orchestration fits in with those ideas. A practical manifestation of this is the *Omgevingsvisie Beurskwartier en Lombokplein* in Utrecht and the experience of the *Stimuleringsfonds* (Hinterleitner and de Jonge, 2022), which exemplify how a territorial entity can establish an integrated long-term vision while intentionally leaving room for localized spatial adaptations (Gemeente Utrecht, 2017). This is in addition to the understanding that a consensus on spatial issues must be reached. As a result, tools such as test plots, in situ experimental prototypes, and “living labs” that promote cooperative, iterative processes are used in spatial design.

These practices enable intervention on uncertain spaces without crystallizing them into predetermined land uses, proposing gradients of transformative potential through shared, adaptive scenarios that remain verifiable over time (Havik, 2014). In this framework, mobility is treated as the backbone of the spatial structure

(van den Boomen, Venhoeven, and College van Rijksadviseurs, 2012), and public participation is mandatory and anticipatory, often relying on co-designed scenarios to manage systemic urban transitions.

Conversely, the operational void in Italy is often due to institutional inertia and a widespread fragmentation of decision-making responsibilities. Regional (PTR/PAI), provincial (PTCP), and municipal plans (PSC/PUG or PGT) are examples of the various administrative levels that make up the Italian spatial governance system. The rigorous division distinguishes these levels between strategic and regulatory instruments, and their coherence is frequently purely formal rather than structural. The system is still incredibly inflexible, largely dependent on mandatory building standards, prescriptive norms, and land-use zoning that do not allow many adaptive changes. Authorizing administrative derogations is extremely difficult, and mobility is typically treated as a distinct, isolated sector rather than as a cohesive spatial driver. Furthermore, public participation is generally reduced to a formal observation phase following the adoption of a plan, rather than serving as a proactive co-design tool.

The process of designing infrastructure margins in Italy takes on an entirely new dimension when confronted with such structural rigor and systemic fragmentation. In this situation, spatial design needs to fill the voids created by institutional inertia by taking on an anticipatory and

generative role. It turns into a tool for triggering exploratory tactics, utilizing open scenarios and visual aids that can foster communication between a wide range of highly diverse actors, such as local government officials, infrastructure managers, citizens, and academic institutions. With the unique capacity to transform conflicting examples into recommendations for shared paths, design presents itself as a situated and active mediation. Rather than being imposed with a definitive physical form or a prescribed function, its true agency is found in the predisposition of fertile contexts. By doing this, spatial design serves as a mediator between strict norms and required spatial adaptations, as well as between institutional timeframes and actual times of use. It effectively makes up for the lack of systemic flexibility. It turns the infrastructural margin from a disputed boundary into a negotiated operational threshold by generating essential spatial knowledge, creating relational networks, and supporting decision-making.

Dimension	The Netherlands (Planned Transience)	Italy (Institutional Inertia)
Legislative Framework & Vision	Integrated Vision: Territorial vision without a direct regulatory value, integrating environment, urbanism, mobility, water, energy, landscape, and health into a single framework Omgevingsvisie: Operates as a strategic, long-term vision. Each level (State, Province, Municipality) has its own Omgevingsvisie coherent with the upper level. The vision orients a single regulatory/implementation plan.	Fragmentation: Plans for strategy and regulations are kept apart. Plans are lost throughout various normative and thematic domains. Multiple Levels: Even if there are instruments at several levels (municipal PSC/PUG, provincial PTCP, and regional PTR/PAI), they do not always communicate. Often, coherence is only formal and not structural. No Single Instrument: The discipline of land use is extremely dispersed.
Focus & Orientation	Citizen-oriented: Transition-oriented: Visions work to coordinate systemic transitions (energy, mobility, water, climate, demography, biodiversity).	Professional-oriented: Instruments (e.g., PGT) are highly technical and designed for professionals. Conformity-oriented: Plans are oriented toward conformity, working on land-use destinations, mandatory standards, constraints, and building parameters rather than integrated strategies.
Flexibility & Land Use Rules	Ruimte voor ontwikkeling: The Omgevingswet presents “space for development,” which includes adaptable standards and the potential for deviations if they are consistent with the goal. Planned Transience: Offers gradients of transformative potential and permits interventions on uncertain spaces without solidifying them into preset land uses.	Rigid System: The Italian system is highly rigid, heavily reliant on prescriptive norms, mandatory building standards, and structural plans that are difficult to modify. Derogations: Administrative derogations are difficult and complex to authorize.

Dimension	The Netherlands (Planned Transience)	Italy (Institutional Inertia)
Public Participation & Process	Anticipatory: Participation is mandatory and anticipatory, beginning right at the definition of the strategic vision. Tools: Adopts co-designed, shared, adaptive, and narrative scenarios verifiable over time. Uses “Test plots” (actual test fields in the territory) and “Living labs” (collaborative, iterative processes).	Reactive: Participation is often only formal, reduced to simple “observations” and only after a plan has already been adopted. Co-design: Real co-design practices are rare and not really mandatory.
Agency of Design & Infrastructure	Infrastructure: Mobility is recognized as the backbone of the spatial structure. Densification is oriented toward transit nodes (TOD). Design Role: Voids are treated as spaces of public possibility. Design serves to direct conditions rather than define functions. Centrality of the Scenario: The scenario acts not as a definitive plan, but as an open, adaptive hypothesis that can be updated through prototypes, observations, and changes in the uses.	Infrastructure: Mobility is typically seen and handled as a distinct, stand-alone industry. Design Role: Because of institutional inertia, design must play a proactive and creative role. Design acts as a situated and active mediator. Activating Scenarios: Initiates open-ended, exploratory scenarios that can foster communication between diverse actors. It creates shared trajectories by translating divergent instances. Predisposition of Contexts: Supports decision-making processes, creates relationships, and produces knowledge.

4. Making Space: Strategies for the 'Acted Space'.

To effectively transition from the imposition of rigid functions to the cultivation of enabling conditions, the design process must profoundly redefine its operational tools and theoretical postulates. The four strategic points that follow are grounded in the research and design experiences described above. Still, they carry a deliberately broader scope: while they were generated through engagement with the specific conditions of the Milanese ring-road margins, they are articulated here as transferable design principles applicable to analogous unprogrammed infrastructural voids. This shift in register – from context-specific findings to generalizable strategies – is intentional, and readers are invited to test them against their own sites while remaining attentive to the institutional and spatial specificities that may modulate how each applies. The concept of making space – as evoked by the thematic core of this inquiry and echoing Gert-Joost Peek's *Maak plaats* study models and location-synergy frameworks presented in *De mobiele stad* (van den Boomen, Venhoeven and College van Rijksadviseurs, 2012) – requires a methodological repositioning that moves beyond the conventional boundaries of urban planning. In the highly complicated areas of infrastructural margins, the act of making space requires the implementation of particular tactics that would result in what may be referred to as the creation of 'acted space'.

The first premise of this theory is that these areas cannot be considered empty spaces that would have to be populated by already existing programmatic volumes; rather, they represent a very complicated situation that needs to be enabled. This spatial project offers a number of possibilities; it facilitates new physical connections, introduces new social and ecological relationships, and provides various uses. It is a design attitude that orchestrates the spatial potential, allowing the place to reveal its own programmatic vocation over time rather than having one imposed upon it artificially.

The second strategic point concerns temporality – not as a scheduling variable but as a constitutive property of these margins. In conventional planning, time is understood as the interval between inception and completion. The research process discussed previously revealed that this approach to framing cannot be applied to the case of the reliquati stradali and other such voids because the conditions under which these spaces exist will undergo an endless process of evolution based on factors such as changing traffic needs, changes in property status, and legislation shifts, none of which can be fully anticipated in advance. In this respect, the idea behind the Dutch principle of planned transience is relevant at the level of governance, but what the studio research revealed is that this principle can be embodied in the design process. The third aspect of strategic thought, while related

to the second, is nonetheless a separate issue. It pertains specifically to the position of the designer in a situation where spatial change happens not according to linear causality, but via non-linear adaptation. It was demonstrated by comparing the two distinct forms of governmental administration of space in Holland and Italy that decisive changes in the spatial margins of infrastructures take place neither as a result of planning nor as the consequence of one authoritative design strategy, but rather by way of accumulation through experimentation and negotiation. Here, what was made clear by the research was the implication for designers: the most productive stance for them to take is not that of the creator who defines and designs form, but of the facilitator whose task it is to shape the conditions for successful negotiation. Here, the function is not assumed in advance but emerges through use, becoming an emergent property of the spatial project.

The fourth strategic point synthesizes the preceding three: indeterminacy must be treated as a spatial resource rather than a deficiency. This is perhaps the most counterintuitive claim the research supports, and it is one that the two governance contexts illuminate in different ways. In the Netherlands, indeterminacy is institutionally legible – adaptive visions and *ruimte voor ontwikkeling* create a framework within which an unresolved space can be held open without being experienced as a failure. In

Italy, by contrast, the absence of such institutional scaffolding means that indeterminacy is typically interpreted as a planning gap requiring urgent resolution, and this interpretive reflex drives the “fill and exploit” logic. What the studio research demonstrated is that design can serve as a partial surrogate for this missing institutional capacity: by producing spatial knowledge, building relational networks among actors, and generating open scenarios rather than closed solutions, the design process can render the margin’s indeterminacy legible as potential rather than as absence. Indeterminacy becomes a spatial threshold to cultivate, not a void to colonize. The margin is no longer a field of contention among competing functional powers, but a device for building unexpected urban synergies – and this, in both the Dutch and Italian contexts examined here, is the true operational meaning of the acted space.

5. Conclusions. Giving space without making form: Indeterminacy as a resource

To ‘make space’ requires the strategic disassembling of rigid programmatic assumptions. However, the ultimate operational threshold of this methodological shift is encapsulated in the corresponding concept of “giving space”. Giving space is essentially an act of voluntary withdrawal by the designer and the planner. It does not imply taking a step back from the designer’s professional responsibility, but rather redirects the focus on the conditions, synergies,

and tensions that can be designed rather than to the form itself. Giving space means resisting the disciplinary urge to produce a finite, immediately resolved architectural form. It requires acknowledging that the tangible object is not invariably the essential, or even the most efficacious, response to spatial marginality. It implies that creating spatial, ecological, and institutional conditions constitutes a definitive transformative action.

The discipline of urban planning has often been perceived as indeterminate and lacking a defined program, a structural fragility – an urban tear that must be urgently mended. The void is conventionally seen as a spatial failure, an anomaly that the city must absorb and normalize. The research presented here argues the contrary and grounds that argument in two very different institutional contexts. In the Netherlands, the *Omgevingswet* and the culture of *Omgevingsvisies* have built a governance apparatus that can hold indeterminate space open productively: adaptive visions, *ruimte voor ontwikkeling*, and mandatory anticipatory participation together create the institutional conditions within which a margin's potential can be curated rather than foreclosed. In Italy, no equivalent apparatus exists – and yet the research showed that design practice, operating through open scenarios and relational brokering among diverse actors, can partially substitute for this absent institutional flexibility.

The contribution is not symmetrical: the Dutch model offers systemic adaptability; the Italian condition demands situated, case-by-case invention. However, in both contexts, the same spatial logic applies – indeterminacy is not a weakness of the margin but a resource, and the design project's most significant act is to render it legible as such. In doing so, the spatial project allows the infrastructural margin to transition from a contested boundary of exclusion into a porous, operational threshold from which new and unforeseen forms of coexistence can emerge.

Therefore, the 'acted space' proposed in this contribution completely subverts the traditional programmatic sequence. It is not an empty container waiting to be filled with predefined functions, nor is it a blank slate waiting for a master plan. To bridge the divide between top-down infrastructure and bottom-up appropriation, various groups must consistently engage in discourse regarding this social, spatial, and temporal context. In this case, creating space without creating form means creating the interface rather than the object. Establishing the rules of engagement, enabling perceptual and physical access, creating relational networks, and guaranteeing environmental resilience are all part of it. Still, the final spatial arrangement is left to evolutionary and practical adaptations. The project serves as the catalyst, not the final dictator, of urban form.

This open-ended approach recalls Richard Sennett's reflections on the concept of the open city, where the primary objective of urban design should be "to create a sense of beginning" rather than delivering a closed, finished product (Sennett, 2007). If the modern urbanist sought to provide definitive answers to close the spatial discourse, the contemporary designer working in unprogrammed infrastructural territories must do the opposite: use the project as an instrument of inquiry that keeps spatial possibilities open. What this research adds to that general claim is a more precise articulation of how. The fundamental question shifts from "what function for this void?" to "what conditions must be built for this space to be acted upon?" – but the research shows that answering the second question requires three things the first did not: a reading of the margin's specific latent conditions, a comparative understanding of what institutional and spatial configurations have enabled analogous voids to be activated elsewhere, and a design practice oriented toward diagnostic hypotheses rather than resolved forms. Function is no longer the premise of the project but its emergent outcome – something that develops through use, negotiation, and time, and that the spatial project supports without ever finally dictating. The primary task of the urban designer, in this frame, is not to fill the void but to construct the precise conditions under which it can begin to be inhabited on its own terms.

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