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# Inhabiting through interstitial opacity

## Protective negotiations of suspended existence across Paris' liminalities

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### Paris' spaces of displacement between inclusion and exclusion

In the early hours of December 17, 2021, police enforcement from Paris and Seine-Saint-Denis gathered in rue Delphine-Seyrig, at the border between the 19th arrondissement and the municipality of Pantin, to evict and shelter people who had found refuge under the bridges along the Canal de l'Ourcq. Under the ring road of Boulevard Périphérique, more than a hundred people had been sleeping in tents and other precarious dwellings for several months, supported by associations and citizens.

Since the beginning of 2021, the prefecture had carried out 27 previous evictions, affecting over 7,000 people. Only a few weeks before the December 17 clearance, 237 people were forced to leave from a tunnel between the 19th arrondissement and Pantin and 331 people were evicted from a camp in Parc de Bercy, near the border with Val-de-Marne. These are just some of the hundreds of camps and spaces of makeshift inhabitation that have proliferated in Greater Paris over the years. Due to the transient nature of these camps, the inefficiencies of the French reception system, and the convulsive displacement and evacuation from central areas of Paris, many of these settlements can be found in proximity to major railway stations or along the borders of the city of Paris, in liminal, interstitial and discarded spaces between Paris *intra* and *extra muros*. Somehow moved by the same precarious and temporary condition of the transit, camps and makeshift dwellings settle in the liminal and interstitial, spaces longer there, but also not there yet, a *terrain vague* (Careri, 2002) that is simultaneously "a rapture and an opening up" (Mubi Brighenti, 2013).

In the context of contemporary Europe, our research looks at urban interstices and liminalities to examine the strategies employed by people on the move to challenge and transcend the obstacles posed by State power and negligence. Our objective is to construct an atlas of the undesirable that sheds light on persisting, if concealed, legacies. This investigation prompts us to question which spaces emerge as a consequence of the urgent movement of bodies that are forced to live in opacity and constant displacement. Based on this, these areas appear as *borderzones* (Squire, 2010), where the conflict between bordering policies and migrant activism is constantly repositioned. This infrastructure can be likened to an archipelago of sheltered spaces, which simultaneously exclude and include, they become "connected spaces of exclusion" (Rygiel, 2011) offering protection while perpetuating a state of suspended existence.

Drawing on literature focusing on the relations between control and care (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020; Agier and Le Courant, 2022) as well as the vast scholarship on refugees makeshift inhabitation and informal settlements (Minca, 2015), we found productive to build on the concept of 'holding'

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(Sharpe, 2016; Rendell, 2022) to indicate such spaces that provoke and challenge conventional notions of urbanity and the right to the city. We have called them "spaces of holding" (Mastromarino and Boano, 2023) to indicate thresholds where camp and city get blurred; where bodies on the move are transiting yet made immobile and controlled, where people's presence is concurrently visible and opaque, central as well as interstitial. Here, we highlight how the complexity of social and political reconfigurations of forced displacement and makeshift inhabitation is relevant for urbanists, geographers, and architects alike. We question the role of the interstice and its opacity in developing new planning vocabularies that could include the multifaceted nature of urban fragments, spaces that are testimonies of what cannot be witnessed (Derrida, 2007) and that legitimize autonomous infrastructures of livability for the undesired (Agier, 2008).

## Delphine-Seyrig: radical inhabitation across the interstices

The Greater Paris is an illustrative case that shows the paradoxically relational nature of interstices (Phelps and Silva, 2018), where infrastructures of mobility, urban borders and their liminalities have enabled stories of entrenched socio-spatial inequalities to merge with new reconfigurations of informal spaces and practices marked by the passage of people in transit. Historically, the city has undergone profound transformations following neoliberal strategies. The Haussmanian renovations, the plans of the hygienist revolution and the following projects of urban renewal have gradually contributed to create a city of material and social borderlands. Along these lines, the overwhelming presence of infrastructures of production and mobility, as well as its resulting interstices and voids, have shaped a metropolis where wealth, poverty and vulnerability coexist, albeit accentuating their stark separation (Secchi, 2013). Paris contributes to shedding light on the little known about those makeshift liminal geographies that are "smaller and less visible", "the sites that no longer exist", yet that, in the case of analysis, are "key to the production of migrant corridors in the context of Europe" (Jordan and Minca, 2023). These sites show the conflictual yet dependent relationship between the form and function of the camp and the horizon of the city. Within their endurance and opacity, liminalities manifest infinite possibilities of perpetual becoming that challenge dynamics of power and resistance and mobilize the marginalised and their singular identities (Mubi Brighenti, 2013).

The current state of the Parisian borderland is marked by the circular infrastructure of the Boulevard Phériphérique, which separates the city from its suburbs, generating a series of spaces of blurred function and management. This is the case of Porte-de-la-Chapelle, as well as Porte-d'Ivry, Delphine-Seyrig or Porte-de-la-Villette, where bridges, liminal wastelands and debris serve as sheltered roofs of exclusion for people seeking asylum on hold or in transit. Through participant observation during militant and aid activities between 2021 and 2022, we have explored the case of the makeshift camp of Delphine-Seyrig. Supported by associations, the camp first settled in October 2021, with some 15 tents occupying the pedestrian pathway along canal-de-l'Ourcq, under the bridge of the Boulevard. The camp was equipped with tents of various sizes, chairs, cooking utensils and waterproof cover sheets provided by associations or new arrivals. According to our observations and unstructured interviews with people supported and volunteers, most of the people inhabitants came from Afghanistan and planned to leave the country via Calais, thus living there temporarily before continuing their route. Despite the camps, Delphine-Seyrig is an area of daily commute and leisure for the citizens of Paris and Pantin. Compared to other inhabited liminalities in the capital, here the leftover interstices, people's vulnerability and the hysteria of the city coexist, highlighting the impending spatial tension that makes such interstices part of a borderscapes that keeps people's existence on hold. In other words, this tension prompts progressive hostility, police stops, and evacuations, yet also several acts of resistive support by support networks.

The camp was evacuated several times between 2021 and 2022 – in December 2021, then again

in January, August and September 2022 – with people returning after the eviction, as in an eternal mechanism of rejection and enduring existence. Like other cases such as the Tunnel, la Marseillaise, and Porte de la Chapelle, Delphine-Seyrig, too, attests the ambivalent condition of the migrant, as stranded on hold between ambivalently hostile and supportive geographies.

## Inhabiting beyond the threshold, dwelling beyond shelter

The spatial dimension of globalization, along with the perpetual reconfiguration of boundaries between security and insecurity, knowledge and the unknowable, certainty and experimentation, has defined the attributes of modernity in both scientific and political realms. As a consequence, the threshold emerges as a topographical construct for scrutinizing contemporary spatiality and conceptualizing design. The term "threshold" carries a multitude of connotations: in French, *seuil* simultaneously signifies the act of passage and grounding. In German, *Schwelle* refers to the door lintel, and its structural potential is encapsulated in the verb *schwellen*, which conveys the notions of "swelling, expanding, and rising" (Benjamin, 2004). In common English usage, "threshold" also implies the sense of "restraint, hesitation, or vacillation" when approaching a particular territory. Crucially, the threshold should not be misconstrued as a rigid boundary; instead, it is an expansive zone, an infrastructure that, while acknowledging the existence of both an inner and an outer realm, does not rigidly segregate them but rather encompasses them in a fluid manner (Stavrides, 2010). In alignment with Agamben's perspective, it renders them virtually indistinguishable (Agamben, 2015).

In the mentioned case, these interstices also serve to enact the strategic and opaque mechanisms of rejection promoted by the French government, as well as the EU tactics of refugee deterrence. As argued by Harsha Walia, physical walls are not EU's primary mode of deterrence (Walia, Kelley and Estes, 2021), as the increasing of complex mechanisms of surveillance, police control or illegal pushbacks are all contributing to a progressive dematerialisation of borders in more opaque and differentially legitimised measures to keep people on hold and fortify fortress Europe. Therefore, borders and liminal territories inhabited by people on the move constitute the material configuration of the double mechanisms of state exclusion, through national and urban frontiers, but also dematerialised transnational thresholds morphed by migration and the criminalising policies of the EU. Despite the geographical distance from the national frontier, Greater Paris becomes the border itself, a main hub on the route to reach the UK and a strategic territory to "keep people stranded in convoluted geographies" (De Genova *et al.*, 2022)

At the same time, these spaces are far from being vacant and transparent; they are spaces of difference, where individuals stumble, converge, and collide, where people become opaque. In this context, the architectural threshold serves as a metaphorical device for a pedagogy that necessitates alternative approaches. It beckons us to recognize latent potentialities that exist beyond conventional representations, distorting cartographic norms while implicating a scenography that resides between the realms of the expressible and the visible, thus distorting both image and language. This superfluity remains ineffable, almost suspended, residing in the interstitial, fraught with contradictions and aporias. Hence, the inquiry into architectural thresholds assumes, regardless of its contextual placement – whether in philosophy, geography, or design – a political dimension, and serves as a valuable tool for the pursuit of critical discourse. It prompts us to question "whose city" (Phelps and Silva, 2018) emerges from liminality, and what is the role of planners in maintaining those areas in which vulnerability and loss find spatial legitimacy. These interstices, spaces of holding, where inhabiting in opacity means maintaining infrastructures of livability yet perpetuating a state of suspension, show the unequivocal interweaving of urban dimensions as a "politics of visibility" (Mubi Brighenti, 2013).

Although we condemn the inhuman tactics of dispersion and displacement that force people on the move to inhabit uninhabitable places (Simone, 2016) lacking facilities and institutional support,

we also acknowledge the importance of holding these areas in which fragile lives endure and resist. Reaffirming functions, identities, and autonomous legitimacies through opacity, these territories become third spaces where "the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 35). Despite not considering these camps and makeshift interstices as solutions to legitimise the persevering negligence of States and international organisations, these liminalities open to the temporary inhabiting "with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016), resisting people's permanent state of being on hold.

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