`Out of frame': The (in)visible life of urban interstices a case study in Charenton-le-Pont, Paris, France

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'Out of frame'
The (in)visible life of urban interstices – a case study in Charenton-le-Pont, Paris, France

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ABSTRACT
This article examines interstices in the urban fabric using the example of two urban leftover spaces in Paris. The article first analyzes the institutional mode of treating these spaces, which explains the 'framing' of the interstice as a temporary functionless space. It shows how interstices are not only institutionally created and controlled, as opposed to free, but also find a functional place as a temporary margin of maneuver in a process of decay, recycling and renewal enforced by landlords, the police and maintenance teams. Second, the article examines the improvised modes of action developed by diverse people in order to use the interstice. The article looks at what happens in the gaps of urban planning, when activities find a place in the interstice not in order to transform it, and bring it back into the realm of urban places, but to take advantage of its 'in-between' position in the city. In practice, such activities are led by individuals who have to be 'just passing', because the frame (Goffman, 1974) built by landlords and their agents prevents them from taking place. Under some conditions, 'just passing' can give way to another type of involvement described as 'out of frame', which in this case, allows a group of homeless people to settle in the interstice for a more durable period of time despite heavy surveillance.

KEY WORDS
interstice, urban planning, leftover space, visibility, homeless squatters, Paris
Probably the most significant concept of the study is the term interstitial – that is, pertaining to spaces that intervene between one thing and another. In nature foreign matter tends to collect and cake in every crack, crevice and cranny – interstices. There are also fissures and breaks in the structure of social organization. The gang may be regarded as an interstitial element in the framework of society, and gangland as an interstitial region in the layout of the city. (Thrasher, 1927: 20)

Urban interstices have been approached by two different urban disciplines. For the early Chicago School of Sociology, the interstices studied by Thrasher were part of the larger ‘zone of transition’ where immigrants would learn how to adapt to the larger American society before moving outward to the more stable residential areas (Burgess, 1925). In the zone, interstices were made out of the numerous residual spaces stuck between industrial facilities, roads, canals and the poor tenements occupied by immigrant blue-collar workers. These spaces offered the youth, caught in the process of acculturation, a place where they could resist both their own family values and the values of the larger American society. They were, according to Thrasher (1927), places where young adolescents and adults would be offered a chance to be more creative by turning pieces of discarded junk into resources for their games and sometimes illegal trade.1

More recently, following the economic consequences of de-industrialization, interstices have reappeared in the discourses of yet another academic and professional field, urban planning and design. Because they are unused, at least by de jure designation, urban interstices are often viewed as a hindrance to the city. Fallow lands, especially, symbolize the decay and consequences of de-industrialization. Often cluttered with weathered, metallic structure, they evoke a changing economy associated with high unemployment and polluted neighborhoods (Bowman and Pagano, 2004). As a reaction to this, governments, notably in France, have been trying to keep track of empty lands and looking for solutions for their re-development (IAURIF, 1993, 1997; Salomon et al., 1986). However, projects are neither easy to come by, nor in sufficient numbers to counter the ongoing production of interstices resulting from a continuing urbanization (Atelier, 2000; Blot, 1993). Urban renewal itself actually produces new interstices, generally by-products, meaning spaces built from the start as functionless leftovers (Tonnelat, 2003b; Whyte, 1980).

In Europe, residual spaces such as wastelands and sides of expressways have also taken, in the last decade, a new significance as places for a potential renewal of professional design practices (EUROPAN 4, 1997). The idea, briefly, is that functionless spaces might offer to a profession, whose creativity is muted by too many technical, economic and cultural constraints, a place for new expression and new programs, freed from the usual...
straightjacket of regular allotment (Sola-Morales, 1995). This position
supposes that interstices are places of freedom, away from the norms of
society (Lynch, 1990). Closer to ‘nature’ and ‘wildlife’ (Hinchliffe et al.,
2005), they would help people find their authentic self and thus reveal true
needs that architects could base their design on (Cuppers and Miessen,
2002). However, this second approach is fraught with a difficulty inherent
to design. How to retain in a built project the indeterminacy of the inter-
stice that made it attractive in the first place? As the famous architect Rem
Koolhaas says: ‘How to engineer undesign?’ (Wolf, 2000).

But indeed, if interstices are places that satisfy needs otherwise unmet in
the city, as Thrasher suggested and as more recent studies have argued
(Hatzfeld et al., 1998; Lévesque, 1999; Roulleau-Berger, 1991), it is maybe
through a careful attention to these often invisible uses that urban design
might renew itself, translating into its own practice some of the demands
that such spaces give form to (Petcou and Petrescu, 2005).

However, before looking at such spaces from the point of view of their
possible occupants, we have to realize that interstitial spaces are always the
by-products of previous processes of urban planning and design that
strongly determine the conditions of occupation of these spaces. Urban
interstices have landlords, usually public, and are submitted to some forms
of control that have an impact on interstitial activities (Tonnelat, 2003a).
The article thus proposes a type of ‘place ethnography’, divided into two
complementary approaches, each corresponding to a different perspective
and a view of urban public space. Following Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of
production of space, the first approach, through interviews of employees in
charge of the land and analyses of official documents, examines the
dominant mode of treatment of the interstice. It corresponds to an insti-
tutional perspective and actions that design and empty the interstices,
always controlled by the main actors of development, surveillance, and
maintenance. The second part of the article, through on-site observation
and interviews, looks at the ad-hoc improvised interstitial uses, because the
persons that take place in the interstice always have to keep in mind the
frame (Goffman, 1974) of perception and action imposed by the main
actors, even if they do not adhere to it. We will see that this frame pushes
interstitial users to a behavior called ‘just passing’.

For planners, interstices are defined as the residual spatial products of
contemporary urban planning. They are useless leftovers of the process
of design and use of urban space. They include fallow lands of all kinds as
well as residual by-products such as dead corners or building set-backs. As
such, the main property of the interstice is its temporary absence of
attributed function; the interstice definitionally exists between a functional
past and future. From a user’s perspective, interstices are defined as avail-
able spaces in-between other more functionally identified places. Both
definitions share a common idea of in-betweeness. But whereas the first one focuses on questions of time, and therefore constitutes the interstice as a void vulnerable to visible occupation, the second one emphasizes questions of space. In order to link the two approaches, I propose to adopt a dual sociological vision of space that can accommodate both the users’ perspective and the urban planning perspective in an interdependent way. For possible users, interstices are resourceful environments, whereas for urban design, they are empty lots and problematic spaces. This double take corresponds to a double organization of perspectives common in urban public space. Isaac Joseph describes it:

The first perspective shows how much space is full and cluttered [...] and tends to adapt it to the constraints of circulation; the second perspective views [space] in terms of scenography, as an art of organizing gaze and hearing, and this art of action demands that space be cleared, able to accommodate several modes of exposure, empty or occupied by the pure form of mutuality, a space of narration and intrigue. (Joseph, 1998: 9, my translation)

How can these be productively articulated?

Two interstices in Charenton-le-Pont, Paris

I have chosen two interstices in Charenton-le-Pont, on the margins of Paris, France, that serve as an illustration of more general results observed elsewhere in Paris and New York City (Tonnelat, 2003a). I conducted fieldwork on these sites from October 1996 to June 1997, and again from February 2002 to July 2002. I conducted interviews with employees of all the organizations mentioned in the article. I also spent a significant amount of time in the sites, observing and talking to passers-by and inhabitants.

Charenton-le-Pont is a small municipality bordering Paris on the east side along the Seine River. It is interesting for two reasons. First, as a first belt town, it is somewhat representative of the ‘zone of transition’, where Thrasher initially identified urban interstices, albeit in a more modern sense, between Paris and its suburbs. Second, throughout history, this small area has been successively cut and enclaved by large urban planning projects, all of which have produced urban interstices.

As early as 1830, the walls of Paris separated Charenton from the city. Then, in 1848, the first rail line linking Paris to Lyon and Marseille spliced the town in two parts; in the north a residential neighborhood organized along the Parc de Vincennes; in the south an industrial zone specialized in wine trade, thanks to its connection to the river and the rail tracks. Finally, in the 1970s, new road improvements such as the Paris Beltway (1968,
Porte de Bercy) and the Expressway A4 to Strasbourg (1970) further separated Charenton from Paris and the river (Cohen and Lortie, 1991). In parallel, urban renovation replaced dwindling industries with social housing projects, thus establishing a north–south class divide. Later, in the 1980s, new ‘projets urbains’ mixing stores, offices and housing were built in isolation from their surroundings as industries were moving out, hampering the potential for reconnecting the different city parts and producing a number of urban interstices.

Figure 1 shows the map of interstices in Charenton. Among them, two spaces have been chosen as terrains for this article. They are:

2) The Beltway Fort, a remnant of the Paris wall, a by-product of technical engineering and a border between Paris and the outer boroughs.

1. Institutional approach: ‘framing’ the interstice as a disorderly place

The article explores two ways of considering interstices, a dominant view and a subordinate view. The first one, often held by inhabitants and planners, is based on the alleged neutrality, objectivity, and classification stemming from the dominant conception of space as representational, and on which a large part of our social order is based. ‘The division of labour, the division of needs and the division of objects, all localized, all pushed to the point of maximum separation of functions, people and things, are perfectly at home in this spatial field’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 361). Institutional actors consider interstitial spaces as necessarily devoid of function. Subsequently, they view objects in the place as trash or dirt, and the people who enter them as out of place. Gerald Suttles offers a striking parallel in his study of the Adams neighborhood in Chicago when he describes the ‘no-man’s land’ between two slum areas.

No-man’s land creates a ‘social vacuum’ where the usual guarantees of social order and control are lacking. Ordinarily they are viewed as dangerous, and people cross them ‘at their own risk’ […] In actual fact this does not mean that these no-man’s lands are never crossed, even in the late hours of the night. What is far more important is the way crossing one of these areas can cast suspicion over the purposes of someone who does so at certain hours of the day. Unless their good intentions are obvious, they expose themselves to every suspicion. Momentarily, they are ‘adventurers’, and their state as well-intended citizens is suspended. Some people avoid them; some don’t care what happens to them; a few take them as ‘fair game’. (Suttles, 1968: 35)
Figure 1  Map of Charenton's interstices (in black).
Source: Tonnelat (1997). This map was drawn after a systematic exploration of Charenton's territory based on criteria of dirt, visibility and absence of displayed function.
This judgment can be explained by a definition of disorder inspired from Mary Douglas (1966) – ‘Dirt is what is not in the right place’ – as a mismatch between a place and an object or a person. A negatively valued object at a positively valued place (or conversely) creates disorder. The relation between the two does not make sense (Edensor, 2005). As illustrated by Suttles, as soon as an object or a person, no matter their own value, is seen in the interstice, disorder arises, respectively as dirt or mild deviance. But how is this mechanism enforced? How is the absence of value upon which the judgment of disorder is based constructed in the site? I will show that landlords, who do not want anything to happen in the interstice, thrive to make the place invisible, thus making sure that its use value remains close to nil. This action can be considered in a larger political economy perspective as one of the ways used by the state’s institutions to keep unused land (and its occupants) under control. As James Scott writes:

The techniques devised to enhance the legibility of a society to its rulers have become vastly sophisticated, but the political motives driving them have changed little. Appropriation, control, and manipulation (in the nonpejorative sense) remain the most prominent. (Scott, 1998)

Because the absence of function of the interstice is commonly admitted, the judgment of disorder that applies to it constitutes a widely shared frame of perception and analysis (Goffman, 1974). It sets the interstice as an empty and mostly invisible stage, not to be entered if one does not want to risk being labeled as out of place. However internalized, this frame must be constructed upon an actual and recognized lack of function of the interstice. There should therefore be a collective and observable effort to establish and maintain this frame.

Site production: juxtaposed territorial and technical logics

The Beltway Fort, the first terrain for this study, is itself a remnant of the last walls of Paris, built in 1844 under Adolphe Thiers. Outside the walls, added to this major construction was a non aedificandi zone, 250 meters wide. However sturdy, the walls were no match for improving weaponry, and the Prussian attacks on Paris in 1870 proved them obsolete. In 1919, right after the First World War, they were officially declared useless and taken apart. Although a large swath of brick housing projects gradually filled the area around the city, the Bercy Fort remained untouched, as the belt became the Sunday stroll of Parisian masses and the refuge of rebellious youth, the ‘apaches’ (Perrot, 2001). Finally in 1954, with the rise of the automobile in France, the construction of the Beltway started and, in 1968, the Porte de Bercy gave the site its contemporary shape and locked...
the Fort in a maze of shoulder lanes and entrance ramps giving access to the most intricate highway connection in France.

The status of the Fort shifted from a public domain to an ‘annex domain to the public domain’. Practically, it means that it belongs to the Beltway administration service as technical land supporting the access roads and ramps. Its function is only technical, fulfilled by its sheer bulk of stone and earth, while its surface remains empty. Its basement also shelters a station to pump the rainwater from below the Seine level up into the city sewers. Only its surface remains unused, an empty space on full ground.

Along the riverfront, the second terrain for this study, a construction process comparable to the Fort has taken place. From the 1960s on, the diminishing importance of river traffic allowed the National French Administration to sever Charenton from its riverbank by progressively building a six-lane expressway linking the city to the east. At the same time, a gas pipeline was buried between the river and the road. As a consequence, a narrow strip of land from 20 to 60 feet wide was left over between the expressway and the river. Since 1971, it has been the property of either the Port Autonome de Paris or the Voies Navigables de France, both public authorities in charge of the navigability of the waterways.

This configuration leaves extremely scarce available building space as several zoning rules impose a complex combination of restrictions written in the zoning ordinance of the municipality (Mairie de Charenton-le-Pont, 1995). First, a right of way along the river prohibits building on a 10 to 25 foot strip along the bank. Second, the pipeline reserves a 15-foot wide strip above it that must remain untouched. Finally, a safety margin of separation from the expressway renders most of the waterfront unbuildable. In both terrains, the constraints imposed by separate technical networks render the space useless for institutional uses. As a consequence, this area remains empty and almost unseen in Charenton. The city map shows a long stretch of land lining the only street without a name in this municipality.

Renewal projects: competing visions

Only a short local widening, previously an island, now attached to the land by the expressway, partially escapes the constraints. In this precise location, the municipality, headed by its mayor, a strong national right-wing political figure in the 1980s and 1990s, has claimed and obtained the transfer of the management of the land for public purposes. Therefore, the riverfront is now divided between three public landlords making redevelopment projects quite difficult, to say the least. In fact, the Port Autonome and the city have planned two independent projects, each on their own piece of land. The almost total absence of cooperation between them, fueled by a desire to gain or recover control of the land, has stalled the work. In one
instance, the city could not build a high school, to be managed by the regional administration, since it was not the owner but only the manager of the land. This technicality gave the pipeline company the legal excuse not to pay for the high cost of moving the pipeline. As its manager explains:

If construction is planned and if it is in the best interest of the public domain, then we, Trapil [the pipeline company], have to pay to move the pipeline. Otherwise the developer must pay for the cost. In the case of the high school, Trapil claimed that the construction was not in the best interest of the public domain since the land was property of the harbor.2

However, the municipal administration didn’t relinquish control over the land to the Port Autonome, as it should have done following the demise of the project. In order to keep the land, the deputy mayor for urban planning only defines it as property of the state and evokes a new but poorly defined project for a green space.

Deputy mayor: The city obtained a transfer of management for this land. It means that the city has the right to occupy it, to fill it up, provided it is not commercial. But officially, it is still national public property.

Author: And your project?
Deputy mayor: There is a project, which is mostly a rebuilding of … of landscaping the island and it is mostly a design project of, hum … [changes topic]3

The Port was also unable to develop its part of the land, since the municipal zoning plan had ruled out any new occupation except for leisure and had blocked access from the land. It was wary that the city would claim the transfer of more land and thus tried to keep a minimum of industrial activity going, unknown to the city.

On the industrial strip, there was a marble vendor, but they are gone. We are about to rent to a new client, but if you talk to the municipality, don’t mention it. If we don’t do anything, we won’t have any more land in Charenton. We also have our own interest to protect!4

The Seine riverfront is thus both an industrial wasteland, a technical leftover of the expressway and an administratively disputed land. That makes it quite a complicated interstice. Both terrains are considered as lacking a function by their respective landlords, who see them as potential but difficult development areas. As the port manager says:

Maybe one day, we will see the interest in developing this strip. It is not abandoned, but it is true that today we can’t make it much more than what it is now. We can’t do much more on this land than what it is.5
Maintenance and surveillance: the visual organization of emptiness

Technical constraints and administrative rivalries all contribute to the creation and continuing existence of the interstices chosen for the study within the city fabric. This situation, however, must not let us think that these spaces are left to decay. Landowners are certainly aware of their property and do not want it to become a dumpsite. They therefore impose a minimal maintenance, which, however costly, keeps the interstice in a state of emptiness rather than in a more dangerous state of disorder. I argue that the control and maintenance applied to the sites largely contributes to their marking as useless. There should therefore be directly observable spatial features purposely set up so as to communicate the site’s interstitial status and the dominant perspective to the general public.

The Beltway Fort is under the responsibility of three different technical services, each in charge of a specific function. The Direction de l’Équipement du Boulevard Périphérique makes sure that the walls are actually supporting the shoulder access lane to the expressway. This does not require much maintenance as the walls are solidly built. The Service de l’assainissement seems to have a little more work on the site as the pumps in the basement of the Fort suffer frequent leaks. In 2001 they spent a significant amount of time on site pouring concrete around the pipes. Their presence was discreet, however, as they always worked underground. Since the Beltway administration has decided to save on site maintenance, the Fort has been labeled accessible to the public and the maintenance automatically transferred to the Direction des Parcs et Jardins et des Espaces Verts. The Paris Parks department is thus officially, but unwittingly, in charge of the Fort. The gardeners of the district already have a lot of work with the recently completed Parc de Bercy and are not willing to care for a quasi-wasteland surrounded by road traffic. Teams of three to four gardeners come only four times a year for about a week. They provide a minimal maintenance only aimed at preserving a clean appearance for car drivers. They organize the plants as a dynamic landscape not to be entered, but viewed. For example, about a new plane tree that they had to plant, the head gardener explains:

We did not place it inside. It was useless. We planted it at the border, to reinforce the tree line and mask the site.

The vegetal screens work efficiently to hide the inner areas of the interstice as much as possible, freeing the gardeners from spending more time on maintenance. Actually, several spaces in the Fort do not show the same attractive landscape as the one offered to drivers. Litter is allowed to collect in places hidden from the exterior and only removed when it becomes too visible.
This visual organization leaves room for illegal occupation that at times has to be restrained. The most discreet places in the Fort are regularly squatted by homeless people who settle there to sleep for the night. In 1999, it had become so visible that the gardeners called the central platform a ‘bum’s nest’. Under pressure from the landlord, the Beltway administration, they hired a private company to remove the cobblestones and plant deterring thorn bushes, watered with an automatic system plugged into the pipes in the basement. However drastic, these conservative measures didn’t last long. The watering system, unchecked, soon broke down. Cave-like holes appeared in the bushes, offering new precarious night shelters. The failure of this apparatus reveals that the current dirt control system does not work from inside, but is a function of the visibility of the site.

On the Seine riverbanks, the Port Autonome is well aware of a comparable situation since, every week, they have to truck away the waste dumped by numerous vans and cars unwilling to dispose of their trash properly. The problem is summed up rather simply by one of their employees in charge of this part of the riverbank: ‘dirt attracts dirt’.

On weekends, it becomes a public dumpsite. It costs a lot of money. The containers are trash bins that I had put there. But trucks go there and dump on the weekends. You know there is nobody. Any guy can go with his rubbish. He goes there to store things, he dumps directly on the roadside! So we better have the site closed.6

And since the Port does not want to be threatened with eviction by the city for lack of maintenance, they have to keep a close eye on it.

There was guy, at some point, he had a tow truck. He took his … I saw him several times, I watched him, well, I had him watched, and he came to work on cars, he did mechanics.7

Competition over the land thus brings a new level of visibility, as both institutions are afraid that the other will comment publicly on the image of the site for political reasons.

But surveillance also works inside. It is dependent on the technical networks that cross the interstice. The pipeline buried along the bank is signaled by small orange signs planted in the ground that become a lot more numerous around a little zone occupied by shacks built by homeless people, which seems to worry the manager, who increases the pressure on the city and the Port administration to enforce order:

We cannot kick the squatters out ourselves. We flag them, in this case to the Port Autonome, and our surveyors pass by regularly to check if there is any change, if there is someone digging a hole, etc. The surveillance is a little tricky in this area, I must admit. In this area and others. You know, the
watch depends on the risk. An area where nothing happens, we don’t go everyday. To the contrary, in zones where we know there are risks, we will beef up the … There is at least one visit a week, one visit a week.

For the city administration, dirt, used here is the sense of Mary Douglas, is a complex issue. Since not all land belongs to the Port, they cannot publicize an image of neglect as a weapon to gain control of the land. Besides, they legally had the obligation to renew the land transferred by the Port within five years, which they have failed to do, or to give it back, which they do not want to do. Therefore, the state of uselessness which defines the site satisfies all parties involved by preserving a possible future use. To maintain it as such, the city sends its municipal police everyday to check on the squatters and works closely with the national police. Unable to evict the squatters, they resort to a constant monitoring aimed at keeping the site legible:

We have a quasi-monthly report on the dozen or so homeless people who are in the area and who do not want to leave, because, even when it was very cold, we tried to suggest to them something else, but they absolutely wanted to stay within their own clan, in the cold. We brought them blankets, we brought them food, but they were absolutely not willing to go to what they call a ‘closed environment’.8

But the real goal is to make sure that the squatters will not become permanent occupants and thus won’t be an obstacle to the redevelopment of the land.

We know very well who is in there and we know very well what they are doing. They are completely willing to leave. Well, willing … They told us: ‘Give us one month notice so we can get back on our feet, but otherwise we will leave’.9

This shows how the possibility of a project constitutes the main horizon within which the site is seen by the institutions in charge of the land. It doesn’t mean that the terrain is actually empty, but that any activity has to be temporary and, if possible, not too visible, building, just like in the case of the Beltway Fort, an exterior appearance of order visible for everybody and an invisible hidden interior where disorder is tolerated. In some cases, the interstice even becomes a site to treat marginal situations by the city or the port authorities.

This land actually affords the fixing of situations that are a little bit quirky, a little bit on the margin. Actually, if we didn’t have this flexibility in Charenton, sometimes we would have a hard time to settle an isolated problem for a couple of months, or … for example a boat undergoing renovation, it is a spot we can offer the owner of the boat. Before it gets
relocated. For now it allows to settle all these problems, I would say, hum … at the margin, transitory situations.¹⁰

The institutional timeframe of the interstice

The terrains show how the planning process and maintenance keep the interstice apart from other more recognized places by defining a specific timeframe within which the land has to be devoid of function and remain visibly empty. This strategy aims at preserving the availability of the land for future, if hypothetical, urban development projects. Both sites have an exterior façade that masks an interior space prone to disorder. More important, the land is controlled or at least monitored by a relatively large number of institutions in charge of the land. We can thus speak of an institutional production and use of the interstices as margins of maneuver of a dominant order. Visibility seems to carry most of the burden of delimiting the interstice both in terms of its external limits, presented as a more or less natural landscape, and in terms of its internal spaces made out of zones visible and hidden from the outside. This observation leads one to believe that institutions, however vigilant, cannot keep a constant watch on these spaces. The second part of the article explores uses that precisely escape the control of appearance applied by landowners, but always keeping in mind that these uses are exposed to the visibility defined by the dominant frame.

2. Improvised uses: out of frame activities and ‘just passing’

Despite the apparent emptiness of the interstice and the surveillance exerted by the institutional landlords, certain activities manage to take place in the interstice. How do they take place? How do they come to see the interstice as a space of opportunity? How do they cope with the judgment of disorder that automatically applies as soon as they enter the interstice?

There is obviously one category of people who have a reason to enter the interstice: the maintenance teams. For them, only the second question is relevant. How do they not feel out of place? Here, an interactionist notion of frame comes in handy. According to Goffman, public situations that are regulated by a certain frame also usually accept a certain number of ‘out of frame’ activities. They correspond to individual involvements to which the public does not have to pay particular attention and can therefore be ‘disattended’. One such instance cited by Goffman is the rated nonperson. ‘It is clear that on many occasions, not only certain events but certain persons will be disattended. Guards, janitors, and technicians all routinely function as nonpersons, present in a relevant way but treated as though not present’ (Goffman, 1974: 207). All the characters named by Goffman share
a common property with workers in the interstice: they wear a uniform as a portable visual expression of their involvement (Paperman, 2003). All the maintenance and control teams are dressed according to the mission they fulfill in the interstice. In fact, since they all come to keep up and enforce the uselessness of the terrain, they can actually be considered as the guarantors of the dominant frame out of which they operate.11

There is another category of users that I have only mentioned in passing: homeless squatters. Obviously, these people cannot benefit from the same status of the valid-non person as the maintenance and control teams. However, they also need to remain out of frame if they do not want to be perceived as deviant. It is through being disattended that they are allowed to stay. How do they do this?

Disorder associated with the interstice is directly caused by the lack of meaningful correspondence between a place and a person. Being in the interstice is being out of place. There is, however, another involvement described by Goffman that can take care of this delicate problem. When taking place is not an option, one solution is simply not to take place by remaining on the move, a behavior that I call ‘just passing’. Of course, ‘just passing’ is not an involvement as readily disattended as working in the back-stage of the main frame. However, it can be ignored because it displays a motive of presence that is located outside of the interstice, in a place beyond it. The interstice thus becomes a shortcut to someplace else, both between a past and a future but also between other surrounding places, which brings about the second perspective on urban space.

‘Just passing’ is not just a way not to take place and to avoid a judgment of disorder. It is also a way of relating to the space of the interstice. Why come to a place where there is nothing to do? Here I turn to the theory of ecological perception. According to Gibson (1979), perception is never the result of a static sensory apparatus capturing various stimuli coming from the external environment. On the contrary, perception is all the more acute when we are actually moving through space, thus building a succession of (mostly visual) perspectives better able to capture surfaces to be used or not for a specific course of action. If one is moving through space, objects are merely seen as obstacles or practical occasions for a change in a course of action. They are not to be judged anymore but used. This perception can be made explicit by the idea of affordances suggested by Gibson (1979). It supposes that the visual world is not made out of pure forms but out of availabilities. It is a world of objects and surfaces proposing themselves to be seen, accessible to perception. Affordances are the resources of the environment made available for ‘pick up’ through a unique combination of external conditions and a person’s physical and mental grid of perception. These include not only the conditions of movement in space but also the conditions to perceive and handle an object.
Does that mean that, in order to take advantage of the interstice, one must always be moving? Furthering Gibson’s idea of ecological perception, Shepard (1984) argues that the availability of affordances picked up in the environment does not only depend on the actual movement of the body through space, but also on the mental conditions of perception imposed by dominant modes of representation. This would explain why the dominant frame, through its enforcement by diverse maintenance teams, pushes the possible passer-by to adopt a perception under ‘reduced or ambiguous conditions’, which posits the interstice as an a priori empty space. The reduced conditions correspond to a situation where most of the perception of the interstice is determined by ‘mental sets or attentional biases (which are largely established by the external context)’ (Shepard, 1984: 431), here the dominant frame imposed by institutional actors, thus preventing closer attention to the actual space of the interstice. On the other hand, once the risk of being perceived as out of place has been deflected through a displayed involvement such as ‘just passing’, it becomes possible to develop a side involvement more able to relate to the space of the interstice. As Goffman (1963: 56) puts it:

the act of purposefully going about one’s business, of looking ‘as though one is coming from some place or going to some place’, involves a dominating objective that leaves the actual focus of attention free for other things; one’s destination, and therefore one’s dominant involvement, lie outside the situation.

The side involvement, operating in the shadow of the dominant one, would thus benefit from ‘favorable conditions’ (Shepard, 1984) of perception and bring together sensory and abstract representation more akin to the picking up of affordances.

From this development, I suggest that both ‘just passing’ and being ‘out of frame’ are sustainable involvements in the interstice. We will see that their modalities reveal different levels of visibility dependent on the spatial and social organization of the interstice.

The Beltway Fort: ‘just passing’

The Beltway Fort resembles a garden stuck in the middle of highway shoulders. Although it has no specified function, various types of people often cross it on their way to a goal beyond the site. These people always behave in the most inconspicuous fashion and tend to avoid each other’s paths. Numerous glances only serve to assert one’s direction and consciously avoid encounter. This observation makes the Fort a place of passage where the only displayed reason to come is the ‘shortcut’. Actually, most people entering the site know where they are going and do not stop on their way.
The remarkable aspect of their path, however, is that it does not always lead them from a normal public space to another via the interstice but, rather, it leads them from interstices to interstices. Bernard, a middle-aged man met at the bastion, explained to me how he uses the interstices to go from his shack, in a nearby railroad brownfield, to a church in the 13th arrondissement without ever getting out to the street. He prefers running the risk of being considered out of place to the stigma of being a homeless person in public space. Following people at a distance, I was able to sketch a map of an interstitial network where the Beltway Fort is an important crossroads. Figure 2 shows how all these interstitial lines meet at the Fort.

**Figure 2** Invisible interstitial network – Paris and Charenton.
*Source: Tonnelat, after a IGN map, 1997.*
Despite these movements, the site does not become a place for encounters between all the interstitial walkers who carefully avoid one another. Disattention works also among passers-by, thus not offering many opportunities for interactions between people, or between people and the site.

Nor is the density of connections an opportunity to initiate exchanges with the dominant traffic, in this case the automobile flow. As surprising as it may be, cars and trucks often manage to park in the Porte de Bercy. The curves of the access lanes offer spots where drivers can rest without having to pay for parking (but not leave their vehicle). Besides, the location of the Porte is ideally connected to the expressway and the beltway. Delivery drivers on scooters often wait by the curb for the radio call that will send them anywhere in the metropolitan area for a pick up. Contact, however, is not easy. It is handicapped by a situation of automatic suspicion. Men and women who expose themselves to the eye of drivers are considered as potential criminals and prostitutes (Wilson, 1991). At the only bus stop in the Porte de Bercy, by the side of the Fort, women waiting for the bus often feel uneasy as the traffic by the curb slows down and drivers gaze at them with a suspicious smile. In the same way, a group of three Polish homeless people who come from the riverside to panhandle at the only traffic light in the Porte de Bercy is often looked upon by drivers as a disturbing appearance from an invisible world. Only hitchhikers, who openly display their motive of passage under the shape of a written cardboard sign, sometimes find credit with drivers and get a lift. For it to work, however, they are slowly drawn to the only acceptable spot for this purpose, the start of the ramp to the expressway towards the east. Somehow there, the remoteness of their destination is more consistent with the speed of cars. The Porte de Bercy is infrastructure at the scale of the agglomeration and the national territory and only involvement commensurable with it can find place in it.

Suspicion is situational. The fact that people on the side of the road are or are not outcasts is irrelevant. It is their very presence and visibility in areas where the traffic slows down that constitutes the basis for the judgment of disorder. Homeless people who like to take a break in their journey and rest on the site for a little while know this well as they choose their spot carefully, invisible to slow car traffic.

One spot on the top of the central platform is used as an informal night sleeping area. It is located beside internal paths but in view of distant and fast car traffic. The individuals spending the night there make up for this visibility by hiding their mattresses and sleeping bags in the bushes during the day. However, at regular intervals, as more people use the platform and as their visibility grows, the Beltway services push the Parks department to take action by removing all hidden possessions or, as mentioned above, they even have tried to make the place permanently inhospitable, although the strategy has failed. Another location in the Fort, visible from fast and
distant traffic but hidden from internal paths, is often used as a rest area offering a wide panorama of the Seine, the sky, and the unending movement of cars. Wanderers interrogated evoke the feeling of connection to the surroundings that the site offers. Together with the actual network of paths crossing the site, this observation builds on the quality of the interstice as a space in-between to make it into a point of view on the places that originally created it as residual.

However, if ‘just passing’ allows people to cross the interstice, it does not seem to allow for more durable involvement with the site. Surveillance is too pervasive.

The squatted riverfront: ‘out of frame’ involvements

One activity that partially escapes institutional control on the riverfront is an illegal habitat set up by a few homeless people in the narrowest part of the strip very near the Porte de Bercy. For those already inhabiting the strip, or who managed to settle because they hold European Union citizenship, life conditions imposed by landlords and police surveillance reveal the role of visibility as well as tactics used to escape it.

Invisibility is the first condition imposed on activities that might take place on the riverfront, so that no bad publicity comes to the institutional actors. Within this window, the ability to clear the space on demand is paramount since invisibility is a fluctuating notion. As a result, all activities observed in the interstice have to show two qualities: cleanliness and temporariness. Staying clean means that inhabitants are not to mess with the outward appearance built by maintenance and surveillance teams. The ability to leave on demand is the guarantee that the timeframe imposed by urban planning will not be disturbed, should a project come to fruition. Both these constraints actually force inhabitants to a motive of passage.

The constraints are made visible by maintenance teams such as the pipeline surveyor or the cleaning teams sent by the Port Autonome. In addition, they are also made clear to the squatters who internalize them. Police forces insist on keeping the place clean, a demand that, as illustrated below, the squatters interpret as a threat of eviction.

Gaston: Over there, they will be kicked out in March.
Author: How do you know that?
Gaston: Why do you fucking care?
Author: I do. It’s the same land. If they get kicked out, how come you are not at risk?
Gaston: From which direction did you get here today? From here [upstream] or . . . [pointing downstream]?
Author: From Paris. I passed in front of their place on my way here.
Gaston: So you understand, don’t you?
Author: I don’t know, because it is too messy, is that right?
Gaston: Ah!
Author: That’s it? … Did the cops tell you that?
Gaston: Mm, mm [noding]
Author: And they decided that in March … Out! … But you, it’s ok?
Gaston: Yeah. Here it’s clean, right?15

This pressure by the police is consistent with the idea that dirt is a judgment of disorder that City Hall does not want to see applied to the site. It also seems that the message from the city, saying that squatters have to be ready to leave when a project starts, has been well transmitted:

Author: And you, do you have problems with the municipal police?
Laurent: No, no. They are nice to me. They come by almost everyday. They know that when something comes here, I will leave. It is clean here.16

To respond to these constraints, the inhabitants have come up with two different spatial solutions that allow them to stay in the interstice for a time that can be quite long, from a couple months to over ten years. Both are ‘out of frame’ involvements that can be disattended. The first one is temporary parking under the guise of a work site, while the second one can be called camouflage within the site. Both can be considered a delegation of an ‘out of frame’ motive to the built environment, pretty much in the same way as maintenance teams delegate theirs to the uniform. The main difference here is that the settlements are not portable but a direct actualization of affordances picked up in the interstice.

Temporary parking

Gaston, a middle-aged man from Belgium, lives in a small trailer, parked half on the roadway and half on the grass. His way of dealing with the constraint of movement is to pretend to be parked for a short while under the cover of a temporary construction site, such as roadside improvement. The trailer, a small metallic round-roofed cabin on two wheels, obviously does not look like housing. It has no windows, and seems barely big enough to fit a bed. However, Gaston manages to make it a livable place thanks to a very tight organization of the interior space and a careful management of the exterior image.

First, the trailer is not blocking the little road. Nor is it completely settled on the grass so that it leaves a right of way along the river. On the edge between the road and the grass, it refuses to take place for good, just like a car temporarily stopped in a forbidden spot. More importantly, the settle-
ment is entirely polarized according to the visual lines that cross the site from the north, from the office buildings and the highway to the river. From this direction, the trailer offers nothing to the eye but a clean white façade. The other side, to the contrary, looks like a disorganized mess of recuperated materials. Thick rubber rugs to protect the cabin from the rain cover the flank and the roof of the trailer. Anybody seeing the place from the river or the opposite bank could immediately guess its real nature. However, from the other side, pedestrians and cyclists do not seem to pay the slightest attention to the installation. The door, on the front side of the trailer, even wide open, does not even offer a peak into the ‘bedroom’. As the only window,

Figure 3  Temporary parking on the riverfront.
It is the sole source of light and remains a black silhouette cut into the trailer. This organization is not due to chance. Gaston complains that he often has to repaint his street façade tagged by wandering youth in search of visible media surfaces for fear that his cover as a temporary work site collapses and the police evict him.

Author: Does it piss you off that they come paint here?
Gaston: Yes!
Author: And you paint over?
Gaston: What do you think?
Author: I don’t know . . .
Gaston: I paint over.
Author: It is nice and white now . . .
Gaston: 4 or 5 days ago, painting . . .

[. . .]

Author: So, you make sure that the trailer is neat, very clean . . .
Gaston: Yes, but with these little assholes here . . .
Author: Not easy . . .
Gaston: When you are sleeping, you are sleeping. You don’t hear nothing! That’s the problem. A crime, no . . . we are not going to say it is a crime but . . .
Author: A guy that comes to do graffiti, it’s not so bad, is it?
Gaston: No but hey!
Author: Got to paint over!
Gaston: And when the police come, the municipal police!
Author: Yes?
Gaston: Woooww! [fakes anger with his hand and face]17

He therefore has to spend a significant part of his meager pension on the upkeep of his place. This is the price to be allowed to stay. His staying is predicated on a construction of invisibility: a polarized façade. As a result, the ‘out of frame’ involvement displayed by the inhabitant and his settlement is successful in claiming disattention from both cars and pedestrian onlookers.

Camouflage

The other tactic used on the site by the inhabitants consists of a camouflage that makes their houses blend in with the environment. In this way, their settlement is not visible enough to probe a judgment.

Camouflaged shacks are placed on the grass ribbon, just behind the curb and the little bushes and trees planted along the road. They use recycled materials such as plywood and cardboard assembled in an
apparent disordered patchwork. All these materials have aged and acquired the same colors as the surrounding vegetation, between green and brown. The shacks are not enclosed by fences, but they are guarded by dogs whose leashes exactly delimit the public from the private space in an invisible way. Entrances are pushed to the back, on the Seine side, or concealed by a panel or a tree on the side of the barrack. Most people who pass by the shacks pay no attention to them. If they see them, they are able to disattend them and in any event do not acknowledge them. The camouflage is sufficient enough for passers-by not to notice. In fact, walkers, joggers, skaters and bikers almost never turn their head aside to peak at the shacks. If they slow down, the dogs are prompt to bark and trace the limit of the settlement.

Camouflage is a less costly tactic than temporary parking, since it requires less maintenance. However, the most adapted spots, the ones that offer a sufficiently dense environment to blend in, are not numerous. This is why the shacks are all contained in the narrowest part of the strip towards the Porte de Bercy where they are the most discreet. There is a risk, however, with this tactic. It can be revealed and presented to the public and perceived as a disorderly appropriation of space as recounted by the port manager:

One day, we were summoned to a meeting, because the mayor was complaining that, outside the windows of the inhabitants and workers of Charenton, there were bums. I think that they mostly made the mistake of being shown in a television show, which is called ‘Envoyé Spécial’, I believe. It was at the time of the presidential elections. They were shown. They had been filmed. They had first been interviewed and then followed to the open-air market in Charenton, where they were chased away by the merchants. I think it wasn’t good publicity for them. I think this is what caused the complaints.18

The meeting was held by the head of the national police under pressure by the mayor, in order to secure an eviction. The squatters, however, did not bother the Port Autonome and were allowed to stay. In the video aired on national TV at prime time (France 2, 1995), the squatters were asking for help: ‘Mister Chirac, do something for the outcasts!’ However, the local interpretation by the city, the police and even the more tolerant port authorities was that they had made a mistake by becoming visible. They had suddenly entered the frame in which they did not belong. This event pushed the municipal police to force the inhabitants to further camouflage their shacks and become even more hidden. One construction, a little apart from the others, was burned by the police shortly after the incident,19 revealing the heightened level of tension around the presence of the homeless people and setting the limits of tolerated visibility for a camouflage.
Figure 4  Camouflage on the riverfront.  
Out of frame communication: the management of the ‘skin’

Despite the constraints, the tactics of temporary parking and camouflage become a spatial display offering an acceptable façade to their inhabitants, which allows them to engage in other activities than just securing a place to sleep. Of course, they do not have an easy life. Alcoholism is widespread and winters are difficult. The death rate is exceptionally high and only two people in five years have managed to get back into an apartment. However, if they are willing and eager to move to regular housing, none of the residents would agree to spend a single night in a homeless shelter. They have built a home on the bank that they deem infinitely freer, more secure and comfortable than the temporary beds provided by the state and non-profit organizations.

Author: You could have gone to a Paris municipal shelter?
Gaston: No, I don’t want to
Author: You prefer to stay here, why?
Gaston: Here, I am free.
Author: Free, what does that mean?
Gaston: Free, it means a lot of things.
Author: For example?
Gaston: I come in, I go out . . . right? I go here and there, there, there, there, there and there. I am free!20

Interestingly, movement, which is forced on the inhabitants of the interstice, is also understood as a freedom not afforded by official shelters.21 In fact, most of the residents on the riverfront actually walk quite a distance to get help from an association across the river, in another municipality, where they can receive welfare,22 get mail and take a shower. Foreigners who are not entitled to state money find alternative ways to make a living, such as copper recycling from wires that they burn on the site, or from panhandling at the single red light around the Beltway Fort.

But the most important opportunity offered to inhabitants on the site resides in the ability to strike new relations with passers-by. Of course, this is quite difficult for two reasons already discussed: the police surveillance and the invisibility sought by the tactics of spatial settlement. Invisibility is by far the most impairing constraint, since it builds something like a skin between a private space of intimacy and an open space of passage. For example, in the case of the trailer, only a slim sheet of metal separates the bed and the road. The opening of the door and the three steps leading up to it are the only materialization of a transition between these two different spaces. That is an obstacle to encounters, since even the most innocuous gaze can be felt on each side as an infringement on private life. As a matter of fact, the residents are quite happy with the respect given to
their privacy, but they also repeatedly complain about the inability of passers-by to see them and acknowledge their presence.

Author: But people, they never stop to look?
Gaston: No.
Author: They pass this way, and then back?
Gaston: Yes.
Author: They don’t look, nothing.
Gaston: Blinders!23

The image of blinders is a pretty good illustration of the way disattention works as most passers-by actually refrain from turning their heads, even if they try to get glimpses from the corner of their eyes. The only solution found to this problem of isolation is a thickening of the skin between public and private space that can allow a stranger to establish contact with the residents without entering their private life. This occasion arose once in 1995, when a widely followed public transportation strike put a lot of workers on their feet to reach work. Suddenly, the riverside became a main thoroughfare, and the bank residents managed to connect to it. A couple, for example, set up a table at the limit between the grass and the curb and started to offer hot tea and coffee. In exchange, the passers-by would give a coin or more and strike up a conversation. This was a good intermediary ground between public and private that actually allowed for meaningful encounters. Following this, a movie was shot on the site and screened at an art cinema in Paris. Also, a photographer distributed his pictures of the site to the inhabitants who started to build a more comfortable relationship to their situation as they could show visitors a material proof of a form of recognition of their presence. Eventually, the couple that set up this table was able to move into a subsidized room in Charenton. (For a while, thanks to an agreement with the police, they kept coming back to cook lunch in their shack as it was forbidden in their hotel.) For them, the site actually served as a transitional place of passage where they were able to build new relations from which they could rebound and get a new start.

For most residents, however, the end is not so happy. The contradictory conditions of invisibility and communication are too difficult to negotiate and they tend to shut themselves off in the invisible part of their world, behind the visible skin. Medication (anti-depressant and tranquilizers) and alcoholism has become a common exit towards death. From 1997 to 2002, eight inhabitants have died of accidents related to alcohol (including Gaston, my main informant).24 Also, three shacks and the trailer were burned. At least two of these events occurred following accidents due to drunkenness. Along with the heightened surveillance of the site, these deaths contribute to a slow disappearance of the interstitial capabilities of the site.
Both the rigidity of the dominant frame and the resulting isolation created by squatters contribute to a growing inability to sustain channels of communication between out of frame activities, maintenance teams, and passing pedestrians.

3. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to uncover some of the links that tie interstitial uses with the dominant world of urban planning and design. At least two interesting relations can be deduced from the cases presented here.

First, there seems to be a very strong relation between the history of the site as a functionless void between a past and a future and the possibilities of interstitial use. In fact, the interstice takes place in a specific time frame entirely determined by the envisioned (im)possibility of renewal. The control and maintenance of the site serve not only to keep the interstice in a state of availability for renewal, but also to communicate the uselessness of the site to the public at large and to would-be occupants. They give shape and legibility to the dominant frame that posits that there is nothing legitimate to do in the interstice within the temporality of urban planning. This observation is a testimony to the power of administrative categorizations, all the way into the zones that were precisely supposed to escape them. As James Scott writes, this power is largely dependent on discrete agents working for diverse and sometimes competing administrations:

State officials can often make their categories stick and impose their simplifications, because the state, of all institutions, is best equipped to insist on treating people according to its schemata. Thus categories that may have begun as the artificial inventions of cadastral surveyors, census takers, judges or police officers can end by becoming categories that organize people’s daily experience precisely because they are embedded in state-created institutions that structure that experience. (Scott, 1998: 82)

In this regard, we can say that these interstices, defined as leftover spaces of urban planning and design, are not spaces of abandonment and subsequent freedom for possible users. This finding goes contrary to the often accepted idea, defended by Kevin Lynch (1990) and others, that open spaces, whatever their status, are places of expression of an authentic self freed from the artificial roles imposed by society’s more mundane spaces. Indeed, the frame imposed by the dominant and legitimate players forces the eventual interstitial user to a strict and limited role, one that I have described as ‘just passing’.

However, and that is the second observation, I want to argue that the apparent rigidity of the frame and its attached roles, paradoxically, affords
a flexibility that is sometimes liberating for otherwise impossible social relations. From the point of view of the institutions in charge of the land, the frame is a way to preserve land tenure without having to spend too many resources. Even if interstices have to be kept up and controlled, the amount of work is not so costly that it offsets the gains sought by renewal (for the riverbank) or the regular functioning of the facility, of which the interstice is a residual by-product (Beltway Fort). The costs are low because the interstitial frame allows for ‘out of frame’ activities that can be disattended by the landlords and by the public at large without the former feeling accountable or the latter offended (which is unfortunately what happened when television made the squatters visible, thus forcing them into the frame and creating a public disorder). This flexibility also allows landlords to practice recycling at the margin, such as when they permit boats to dock temporarily or when they recycle trash out of public sight. This observation is consistent with a functionalist idea of the interstice as a place to recycle society’s margins (Douglas, 1966) and eventually reintegrate it into the regular realm of places. One cannot help but wonder if this recycling is not fulfilled at the larger scale of the state for the homeless themselves (Hopper, 2002).

But, in some cases, interstitial users can also find flexibility within the dominant frame. The possibility of remaining ‘out of frame’, whether it is a cover or not, is actually a direct consequence of the institutional labeling of the interstice. It is not people gaining control, but something that inheres in the framing of space as devoid of function and of which they can take advantage (a complex affordance). Temporary parking or camouflage allow interstitial users an involvement with the site that was at first not deemed possible within the time and frame of the major actors.

Here I want to argue that one positive consequence stems from this possibility. ‘Out of frame’ involvements open the way to backchannel communication between interstitial users and the public. The rule of disattention is a great isolator for the squatters. However, the lack of communication between passers-by and homeless people is not inevitable. The informal authorization not to see, on the part of people ‘just passing’, can also work to help contact by avoiding structural offenses to the frame and the gathering at large. Actually, passers-by using the interstice as a shortcut have no reasons to feel at risk because of an illegitimate appropriation of space. For example, there is a striking difference between a man lying on the sidewalk (Breviglieri, 2002) or in a subway car (Bordreuil, 1993) and the riverbank squatter. As the former threatens the consistency of the public order, he only elicits rejection, compassion or charity as the result of a stigma. On the other hand, the interstitial squatter will from time to time be able to encounter people. He or she will do so, not as a disorderly presence, but as a person whose social status is temporarily suspended, because he or she
is ‘out of frame’, while the visitor is ‘just passing’. By giving the homeless a role, the frame imposed by the major mode also gives him or her the opportunity to meet others as a ‘normal’ person, through backchannels of communication. According to Goffman (1974: 221), exploiting the ‘disattend track of communication’ can allow:

their maker to stand up to adversity in a way that suggests to him or to third parties who might be watching him that he is not to be trifled with, not to be discounted, and yet the individual who called forth the display has no reason to feel that insubordination has occurred and that a response is required.

Therein probably lies much of the freedom afforded by the interstice.

One interesting point in the examples is that ‘out of frame’ involvements work better than ‘just passing’ to allow backchannel communication. The difference may be expressed in terms of physical spatial configurations determining the conditions of visibility. The riverfront allows the squatters to delegate the legibility of their ‘out of frame’ involvement to the built environment (the trailer and the shacks), thus freeing the person from the burden of justification. On the other hand, the extreme visibility of the Beltway Fort forces everybody to carry the signs of temporariness. In the first case, the separation between role and person can work by distributing the role to the spatial display while leaving the person free. This is one main interstitial affordance picked up by homeless people. The site served them both as a cover and as a habitat.

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Notes

1 Interestingly, James Short, publisher of the second print of Thrasher’s gang study in 1963, decided to suppress the chapter devoted to the gang’s uses of the interstices, ‘Wanderlust’, arguing that:

His descriptions of the wanderings of gang boys away from home and school sound a decidedly romantic note, but it may be questioned whether such an unstable existence provided the nurturance and security needed by the boys
perhaps even more than the gratifications inherent in ‘new experience’. (Short, in Thrasher, 1963: xl)

This moralist position made Thrasher’s study seem akin to the more recent views of the interstices as spaces prone to dangerous disorder.

2 ‘Si des travaux sont prévus et qu’ils sont dans l’intérêt du domaine public, Trapil doit payer les travaux. Sinon les travaux sont a la charge de l’aménager. Pour le lycée, Trapil a soutenu que les travaux n’allaient pas dans l’intérêt du domaine public puisque les terrains étaient portuaires.’

3 ‘La ville a un transfert de gestion, c’est à dire que la ville a le droit de l’occuper, de remplir tout, du moment que ce n’est pas commercial. Mais officiellement, c’est toujours du domaine public national. – Et le projet? – Il y a un projet qui est surtout un projet de reconstruction de ... de repaysagement de l’île et surtout un projet d’aménagement, heu ... [change de sujet].’

4 ‘Sur la bande industrielle, il y avait une activité de marbre, mais elle est partie. On réinstalle un nouveau client mais ça si vous voyez la commune, vous n’en parlez pas. Si on se laisse faire. on n’aura plus de terrain sur Charenton. On a aussi nos propres intérêts à défendre.’

5 ‘Peut-être qu’un jour on aura intérêt à aménager cette bande-là. Elle n’est pas abandonnée, mais c’est vrai qu’aujourd’hui on ne peut pas en faire grand chose d’autre que ce qu’elle est. On ne peut guère faire plus sur cette bande que ce qu’elle est.’

6 ‘Le weekend, ça se transforme en décharge publique ici. Ça coûte fort cher. Les containers, c’est les poubelles que j’ai fait mettre en place, mais c’est des camions qu’on vient benner la le weekend. Vous savez il n’y a personne. Ici n’importe quel gugusse vient avec ses cochonneries. Il vient stocker, vient benner sur la voie directement. Donc on a intérêt à ce que ce site soit fermé.’

7 ‘Il y a un type, à une époque qui avait une dépanneuse, qui emmenait ses ... , je l’ai vu plusieurs fois, je l’ai surveillé, enfin, je le faisais surveiller, et ben il venait bricoler, faire de la mécanique.’

8 ‘On a un relevé quasiment mensuel de la quinzaine de SDF qui se trouve dans le secteur et qui ne veulent absolument pas partir parce que, même quand il faisait grand froid, on a voulu leur proposer autre chose et ils ont absolument voulu rester dans leur clan à eux, au froid. On leur a apporté des couvertures, on leur a apporté de la nourriture, mais ils n’étaient absolument pas désireux d’aller dans ce qu’ils appellent une structure fermée.’

9 ‘On sait très bien qui sont dedans et on sait très bien ce qu’ils font. Eux sont tout à fait désireux de partir. Enfin, désireux, ... ils nous ont dit: «prévenez nous un mois avant pour qu’on puisse se retourner, mais sinon on partira.»’

10 ‘Il permettent effectivement de régler des situations un petit peu biscornues,
un petit peu en marge. Effectivement, si on n’avait pas cette possibilité de Charenton, quelquefois on serait effectivement très ennuyés pour régler un problème ponctuel de quelques mois, ou ... par exemple un bateau qui est en chantier, dont le propriétaire veut procéder au réaménagement, c’est un site qu’on peut lui proposer. En attendant qu’il soit réaffecté. Pour l’instant il permet de régler effectivement tous ces problèmes, je dirais heu ..., en marge, de situations transitoires.’

11 This position sometimes allows the employees to pretend to be working when they are in fact using the place for more personal pursuits. I have been told by several Park employees that the room under the Beltway Fort was used in the years preceding fieldwork as a party place. This apparently had to stop when it became known by the Park administrators.

12 This would be in line with Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis (2006) or with the ‘lived experience’ of dérive as proposed by the Situationists (Knabb, 1995).

13 The customs also use the Porte as a last gate to stop incoming traffic to Paris and search trucks.

14 According to the gardeners, at night, some prostitutes working the nearby Porte de Charenton bring their clients to the bastion to have sex. I haven’t observed this activity but a few condoms found in this specific area of the site seem to confirm this account.

15 The quotes are excerpts from recorded conversations with one inhabitant, Gaston (all the names were changed), who became my main informant in spring 2002. ‘Eux vont dégager au mois de mars. – Comment tu le sais ca? – Qu’est-ce que ça peut te foutre? – Mais si, c’est le meme terrain. Si eux ils dégagent, comment ça se fait que toi tu risques rien? – D’ou tu es venu toi? De là? (aval) ou ...? (amont) – De Paris, je suis passé devant chez eux en venant. – Alors t’as tout compris, non? – Je sais pas, parce que c’est trop le bordel, c’est ca? – Ah! – C’est ça? ... C’est les flics qui t’ont dit ca? – Mm, mm (acquiescence), – Et ils ont prévu qu’en mars, pfouit! ... Mais toi c’est bon? – Ben ouais, hein. Moi c’est propre, hein.’

16 ‘Et vous, vous avez des problèmes avec la police municipale? – Non, non, ils sont gentils avec moi. Ils passent tous les jours ou presque. Ils savent que le jour où il y aura quelque chose ici, je m’en irai. C’est propre ici.’

17 ‘Ca te fait chier qu’ils viennent peindre la? – Oui – Et tu le repeins? – Qu’est-ce que tu en penses?- J’en sais rien. – Je repeins. – Elle est bien blanche quand meme. – Il y a 4 ou 5 jours, en train de peindre. [...] – Donc en fait tu fais vachement attention que la roulotte soit bien clean, bien propre. – Ben ouai, mais avec ces petits connards là ... – C’est pas facile ... – Quand tu dors, tu dors. T’entends rien! C’est ca qui est malheureux hein. Crime, non ... on va pas dire crime mais ... – Le mec qui vient juste faire un tag, c’est pas trop grave, si? – Non mais ho! – faut repeindre! – Et en plus, quand la police elle passe, municipale hein! – Ouais? – Houuuuuuuu! (mime la colère avec son visage et sa main).’
18 ‘Un jour, on a été convoqué pour ce problème là parce que le maire de Charenton se plaignait que, sous les fenêtres des Charentonnais, il y avait des clodos. Je crois qu’ils avaient surtout eu la maladresse de passer dans une émission de télévision, qui s’appelle Envoyé Spécial, je crois. C’était au moment des élections présidentielles. Ils étaient passés. Ils avaient été filmés. Ils ont été interviewés d’une part et ils avaient été suivis sur le marché de Charenton où ils se faisaient virer par les commerçants. Je pense que ça n’a pas dû leur faire une bonne pub. Je crois que certainement les plaintes sont venues de ça.’

19 All the accounts of this incident given by the municipal police or by the inhabitants differ. According to the police, they burned the shack because the squatter had been taken to the hospital to be treated for tuberculosis. According to one resident, the police map of the site was out of date (they never admitted to keeping a map of the settlement). They made a mistake when they counted the shacks and burned the wrong one. The inhabitant now lives under a shoulder of the highway.


21 As I show in another case study where a shelter was set up in a nearby rail track brownfield.

22 Revenu Minimum d’Insertion, a welfare stipend given to people ineligible to receive unemployment money. The amount was 2300 FF/month at the time of fieldwork (about €350).

23 ‘Mais les gens, ils ne s’arrêtent jamais pour regarder?- Non. – Ils passent comme ça, et puis dans l’autre sens? – Ouais. – Ils regardent pas, rien quoi. – Des oeilères!’

24 The deaths on the riverbank are as invisible as the activities. The National Police pick up the bodies who are transferred to the morgue. The police briefly try to find relatives of the deceased, but nothing is undertaken to improve the conditions of the inhabitants or research the causes of the death. It is as if they were simply disappearing.

25 I use this expression in reference to Howard Becker’s Art Worlds (Becker, 1982).

References


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