

Expanded Effects of Re-naturalisation Gestures

By **Céline Bodart** (BE) – PhD architect, researcher at the Gerphau Laboratory and professor at the Paris-la-Villette school of architecture



A large number of E17 awarded projects are calling for a re-naturalisation of existing grounds. Whether these are former industrial soils or infrastructural sites, river-beds or -banks, urban squares or in-between spaces, what is at stake for each situation is the restoration of a balance between human settlements and non-human dynamics. Even more, with a closer look at the E17 projects on this topic, it appears that the re-naturalisation gesture is not claimed as an end in itself. Not a proper goal, it is rather a linking means, a local intervention sticking together the various spatial and temporal pieces of the overall transformation.

The re-naturalisation becomes a strategic part of new transforming processes, animated by the will to shift and trouble the dominant narratives inherited from decades of massive urbanisation of living milieus. Such processes insist on the necessary renewal of the principles guiding the urban design, giving rise to a refreshed set of action verbs: how can the re-naturalisation gestures orientate alternative ways to *thicken* and *soften* the project footprint? To *gather* various voices, concerns, and interests – both human and non-human? The E17 session offers to rethink how the re-naturalisation gestures embedded into the project-process can generate new narrative of urban transformations.

I. Unseal Urban Surfaces to Thicken the Living Dimensions

The nature of urban surfaces has been conditioned by the evolution of mobilities. The more we have motorised our transport modes, the more we have fragmented the urban areas and sealed their grounds. With the perspective of 'Living Cities', various competition sites offered to experiment new ways of recovering from such conditions, as in Åkrehamn (NO), a coastal town with beautiful beaches and landscapes, yet suffering from a lack of a clear urban structure resulting from a car-based development. Winning project, *Grønn Og Glad. A community of All Beings*, proposes to reconfigure the city centre starting with unsealing existing surfaces: 'Let's break up the asphalt and bring back non-human beings!' The surfaces to re-naturalise are not picked up by chance: they draw a new landscaped continuity, a backbone on which various methods to revitalise the existing block structures are articulated (fig. 1). The gesture of re-naturalisation is thickened when the restoration of soils is coupled with the reconfiguration of the ground floor of the city.



I – Åkrehamn (NO), winner – Grønn Og Glad > See more P.21

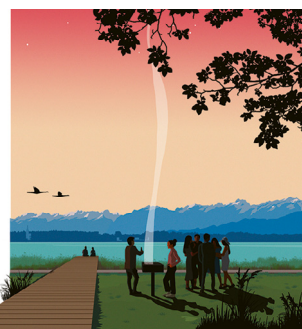
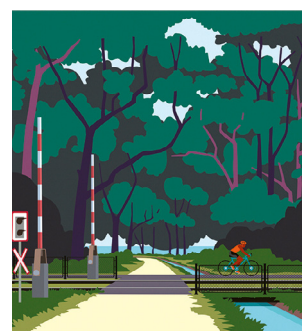
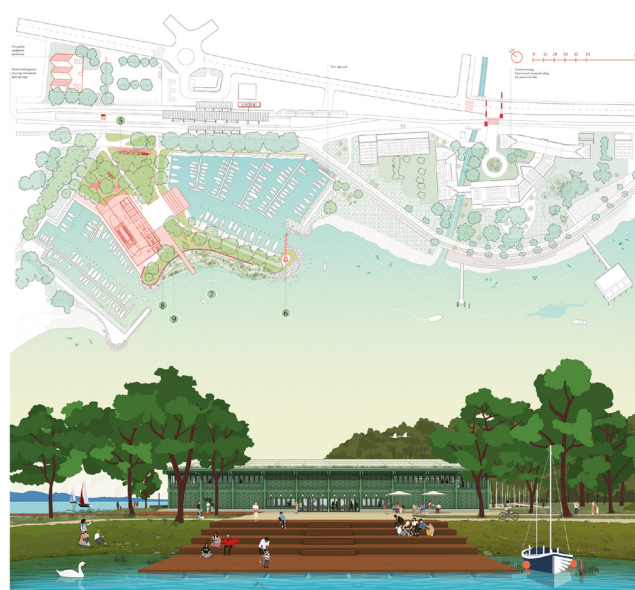
In Lochau (AT), a small village located on the shore of the Constance Lake and benefitting from close connection with natural surroundings and mountains, the inhabitants endure the strong presence of a mobility corridor separating the village from the lake. To overcome this current barrier situation, runner-up project *Forget-me-not* engages to re-learn how to look at the overall area from its potential qualities as an ecotone – i.e. a meeting place between multiple ecosystems. From the shore, the tracks of some ecological continuities (along many existing streams) are restored and strengthened, but also extended towards the surrounding landscapes, this way thickening the contact line between land and water (fig.2). The hydric pattern of the territory is re-naturalised to stitch together what the road infrastructures had once fragmented; it becomes the support for renewed social activities and cultural practices thanks to the recovered continuities.

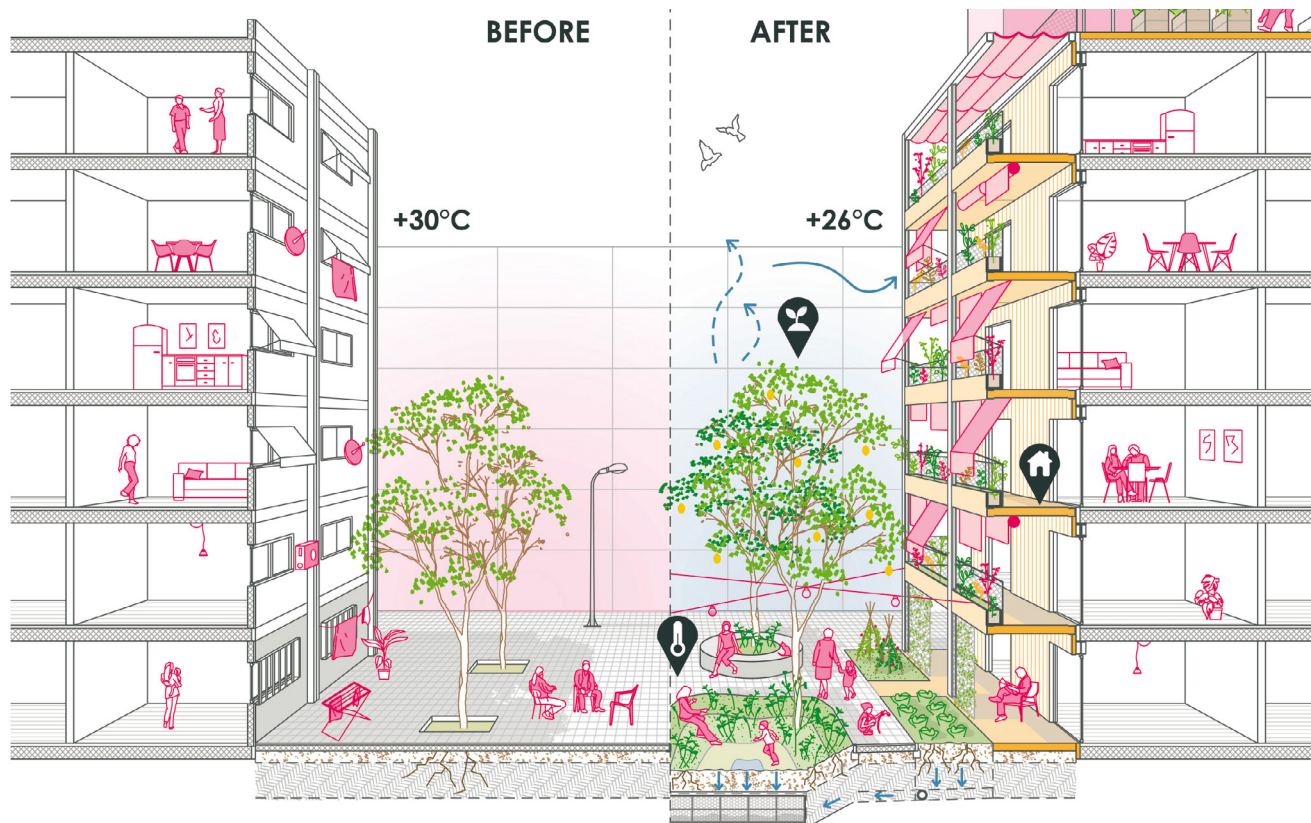
The E17 projects remind us that the re-naturalisation of urban surfaces is not an opportunistic and punctual operation, nor is it a one-dimensional action. It is a transforming process to give a 'living thickness' – both horizontally and vertically – to the existing inhabited milieus.

2. Unlock In-Between Spaces to Gather Multiple Voices and Concerns

In a dense urban context, the subtraction strategy opens up new ecological dimensions. But removing the sealed layers from urban inhabited areas can also be engaged as an inclusive project-process of social revitalisation.

Combining re-naturalisation gestures with socio-economic regeneration is the promising challenge met by *Un viento que sigue soplando*, runner-up in Barcelona (ES). The E17 project site is about a mono-functional housing estate built between the 1950s and 60s and today confronted with various problems, such as the poor quality of the built-up frame, the lack of public facilities, the dysfunctional public spaces, and so on. To re-naturalise the existing urban voids, the project is based on the introduction of a new urban/landscape device: the 'pocket gardens', which are a new kind of



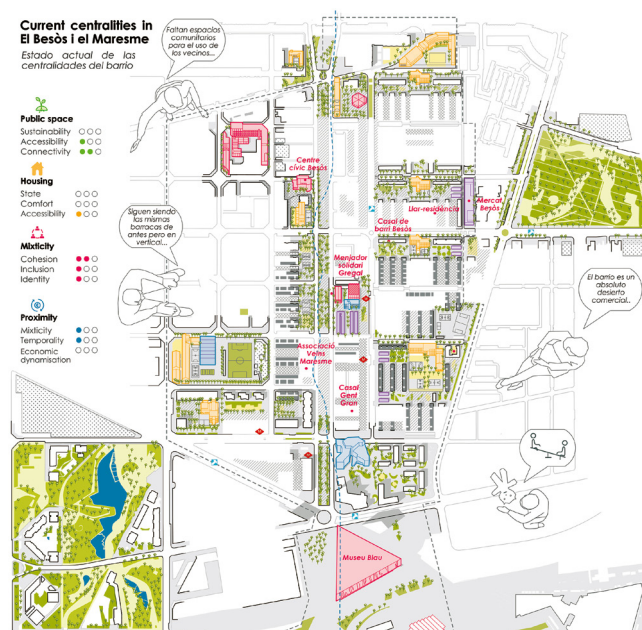


community gardens bit by bit re-colonising the in-between spaces with the active support of local inhabitants and authorities. Pocket gardens offer to revive with the top- and sub-soil and care for the water cycle in urban milieus (fig.3). They also operate as the missing connection-scale, bridging together domestic and collective urban practices with ecological continuities on the large scale. Re-naturalisation gestures call for a trans-scalar approach, as far as the role given to this new piece of urban nature is to gather individual, social and environmental dynamics raised by the transformation project-process.

3. Undo All the Certainties to Soften the Transformation Process

Such project methods insist on the importance of recovering a human scale, of restoring proximity practices by holding together multiple voices and concerns. What is at stake is to imagine new ways of repairing the existing, committing the crafting of open processes, both agile and collaborative, but avoiding any predefined finalities.

This kind of commitment is at the core of winning project *Terraqué* in Guérande (FR), aiming to re-naturalise and revitalise spaces spread beyond the historical ramparts of the city. At first, the project depicts a poetic image of the large territory, taking care of its multiple nature-cultural agencies and celebrating the hybrid atmosphere interwoven into the coastal landscape. How to preserve and stimulate the potentialities of the existing? *Terraqué* proposes to re-characterise the territory as 'a wet city' and to stage the progressive reduction of soil sealing. With this end in view, the project method works 'by touch and not by slickness' in order to shuffle different temporalities of action ('the obvious', 'the visions', and 'the distant horizons'), crossing some 'invariants': a set of operations affirmed as the necessary prerequisites for the desired transition of the territory. The modes and forms of representation favour the evocation instead of the explication or the



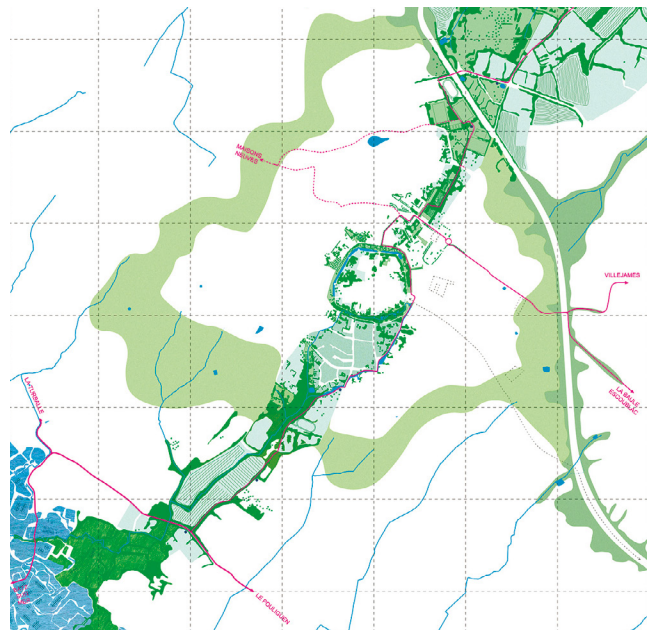
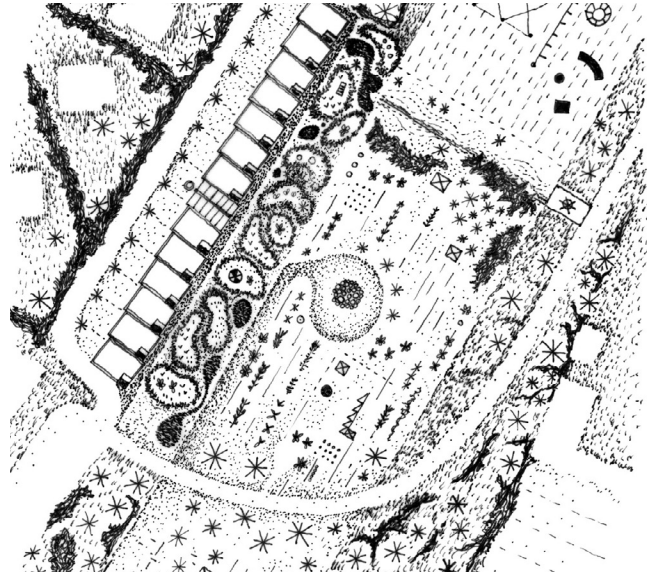
3 – Barcelona (ES), runner-up – Un viento que sigue soplando
> See more P.26

demonstration (fig.4). The ways of wording and drawing the project tend to forge a new urban poetry of the un/certainty.

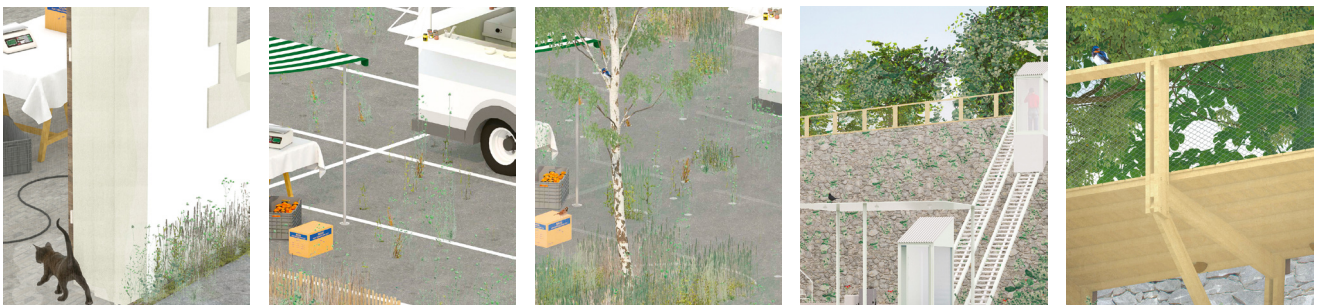
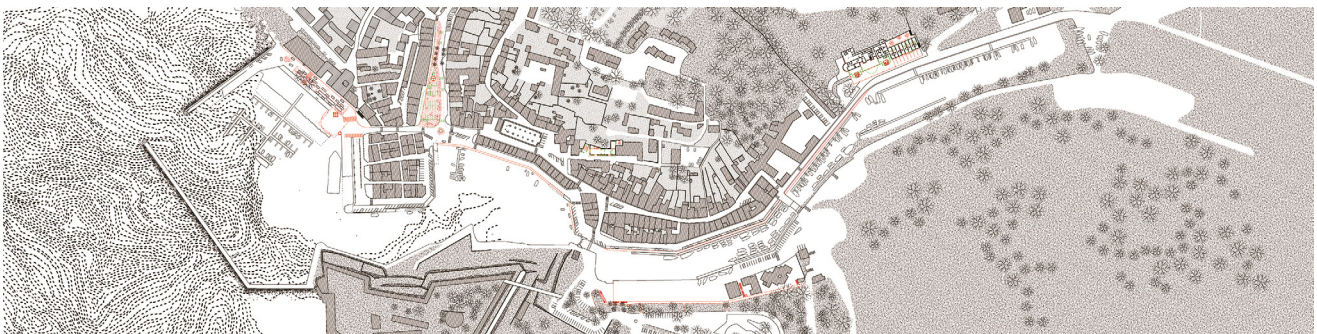
Many E17 awarded projects question ways of becoming living of European cities through innovative approaches tending to soften the project authority and certainty. Ideas like the control or domination of territories are left behind, making room for a new genre of project-process caring for the socio-spatial potentialities of the 'infra-ordinary' (G. Perec). In Le Palais (FR), a city located on the island of Belle-Île-en-Mer and already put at the forefront of the climate change, runner-up project *Interstices* explores what new ways of living could be in such places in a long-term perspective, but with a careful attention to the already-there. The project approach echoes the ones of incrementation and others acupunctural urban tactics, but here, they are redeployed at the micro-scale, caring for the minuscule, for the smallest potential quality of the ordinary and the existing (fig.5). The scope is to experiment an urban project-process freed from its anthropocentric habits, scrutinising into the *interstices* of the existing fabrics what could be seen as potential ground of hospitality for the *other-than-humans*. The aesthetic of the 'next-to-nothing' (V. Jankélévitch) takes part of a softening strategy of urban transformation.

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The re-naturalisation gestures embedded into the E17 awarded project-process go well beyond the sole re-greening of existing urban surfaces. The restoration of natural dynamics enriches the living conditions for both humans and non-humans, but also prevents risks associated with climate change (flooding, heat wave). It provides new spatial strategies to bridge together the existing urban fragments and new collaborative approaches to care for their social and productive practices. With such gestures, it is also another narrative of urban transformation that is being written. To thicken, soften, gather and more specifically to slow down – these are the emerging action principles conferred with which the becoming living of our cities is narrated.



4 – Guérande (FR), winner – Terraqué > See more P45



5 – Le Palais (FR), runner-up – Interstices > See more P61