THRESHOLDS AND TRANSITIONS | Inbetween the public and private realm
* No place exists in a void and all places are inextricably a part of the relation of all sites.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To my very patient committee members.

- Prof Bill Galloway,
- Prof Hans Rott and Prof Steven Thompson, my committee members
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- and to movies and music which always sustains me
My thesis is an attempt to examine and study the in-between spaces between buildings. With my design as a vehicle, taking an entire block of Blacksburg, I have tried to explore the idea by which one could offer a transitional moment between buildings. The in-between spaces provide an opportunity to intervene and choreograph a space which re-engages the dweller through repetitive distractions. The design combines residential spaces with commercial establishments creating a mixed use condition in a city block which in its density, constantly alternates between the public and private realms. The resultant spaces between the buildings are spaces which are a combination of the planned and the improvised, in a constant state of flux forming the “passing place”. The spaces could create subtle interconnections which can be exploited and temporal experiences could be defined through architectural interpretation of transitional spaces.

Mixing uses is one approach in architecture that assists in making lively thresholds. I project the idea of a deliberate heterogeneity in architecture, where opposing objects are placed together as a part of a strategy to create complex and compelling buildings and their in-between spaces.
THRESHOLDS AND TRANSITIONS | IN BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE REALM

A MASTERS THESIS BY DEEPA RAMASWAMY

Thesis submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Architecture in the year 2005. Thesis defense took place on 8th of July/2005 at the city of Blacksburg in the state of Virginia.

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THE PERCEPTION OF SPACE IN TIME
Planned and unplanned outdoor spaces have always been a part of human settlements. The scale of an open urban space and the way it is used, however, has undergone massive changes over time. From medieval times to modern, the urban outdoor space has been permitting continuous adjustments and adaptations, in turn effecting the physical environment in which the city functions.

MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENTS AND THE CONCEPT OF SPACE:
Medieval cities with their dense building-locked plazas and narrow alleys give a different perception of space than the modern planned outdoor plaza. These cities and towns were often self evolved, carved over by uses. With dense living conditions leading to dark homes, the external spaces were designed for people to remain outdoors, making social contact on the street or square imminent as the houses often lacked light. The spaces, since self mutated in time. Their scales varied, but they succeeded in creating fluid, elastic and malleable outdoor in-betweens which sometimes had unprogrammed enclosures, later defined by usage. The self evolvement over time can be described as one of the reason in creating the medieval city and its extremely flexible open spaces. The absence of focus on the individual and his private space could also be a reason for the success of the vitality of these spaces.

The social and political conditions of the time were largely reflected in the development of medieval cities. Concentration of population in settlements occurred for political, defensive and commercial reasons. There was a widespread rise in the class of men engaged in the commerce of exchange or manufacture and settled for solely that purpose in groups. The densification of these groups developed around trade routes, castles or feudal fortresses or simply around a settlement of artisans. This growth however was different from the planned growth which occurred during the peak of the Roman civilization. The lack of a central political rule was one of the causes for the random medieval densification. As a result, haphazard developments led to a loss in the clarity of the street patterns. Straight right angled roads were being made crooked by overhangs crossing over the street.

The fortification of individual family compounds started creating blind alleys. Another aspect of the small, dense medieval concentration was constant invasions leading to a lot of defensive walls.

These spaces were very tight, dense and bound on all sides by built structures, creating a sense of place and also rendering a scale for people to relate to, as against vast huge open spaces which often could go unused.
THE RENAISSANCE AND THE CONCEPT OF SPACE:

The idea of freely evolved cities and open spaces changed to a planned environment in the Renaissance, wherein the city was preconceived and designed. The Renaissance focused on appearance and this led to a massive increase in the scale of open spaces. The city was no longer freely evolved, but became a work of art. The space in between buildings were large squares and plazas focusing on spatial effects, perspectival view corridors and geometric volumes. The visual expression became all important. For example, in the renaissance city of Palmanova built by Scamozzi in 1593, the streets all had same widths, 46 ft. This kind of rationalizing and formalizing of urban streets and spaces were designed to make concentration on the visual aspects possible. They were all created on the drawing board which stood in comparison to the medieval town which had everything defined by usage and time.

The Renaissance brought a renewed interest in history, literature, and the arts and was the birth of a whole new way of thinking, one which centered on the world of mankind. There was a need to rationalize and systematize the visible world. Perspective was used as a basis to experience the city visually. Within the city, distinctions arose between zones of governance and zones of productivity. This phenomenon created a new structure with the city establishing hierarchical relationships between main and secondary streets. Also, a corresponding increase in the number of public buildings, and in their grandeur, expressed itself in an increased monumentality within the city.

THE MODERN URBAN SPACE

The modern urban space brought to the forefront the physical-functional aspects of cities and buildings. Dwellings were focused on having light, air and ventilation with sufficient access to open spaces. These requirements led to detached housing, as against street facing housing. Requirements for separate residential and work areas were designed to assure good individual living conditions which also distributed physical benefits equally.

There was a distinct focus on the individual. The open spaces which facilitated play, contact patterns and meeting possibilities took a back seat to the materially and physically oriented planning strategy. The spreading and thinning of detached housing led to suburban sprawls with large lawn spaces with no apparent function or use to make them occupied. The distances between built spaces have increased from medieval times largely due to the automobile leading to a further reduction of outdoor activities.
THE SPACES IN BETWEEN
All urban situations have conditions where the buildings create planned or unplanned in-between spaces which eventually become a part of the civic landscape. The quality of life in these spaces is directly affected by the way it is designed, conceived, constructed and used. The way a space is used cannot be controlled as it mutates socially over time however the architecture of the space remains in its elements, form, material, details, joints and colors.

When an urban transition occurs, there is a formation of a threshold. These thresholds span various urban scales. When residential and commercial uses combine and coincide, there are several transitions and resultant thresholds which are naturally and artificially formed.

The built space can have blurred ambiguous contours, random and vague forms, inside and outside forms could merge and new flexible thresholds can occur. These spaces between the built, have evolved over time, often into an integral part of the city’s urban space. In effect, these in betweens can be seen as thresholds spanning urban transitions.

The way a space is used cannot be controlled as it socially mutates and changes over time however the architecture of a space can help the way it is used in its elements, form, material, details, joints and colors.

A THRESHOLD:

“The floor or ground at the bottom of a doorway, considered as the entrance to a building or room”
-Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary

“A transitional interval beyond which some new action or different state of affairs is likely to begin or occur.”
A doorsill.
The place or point of beginning; the outset.

In 1954, in Dijkstraat, Holland the city government had, Aldo Van Eyck turn around vacant lots in the city center into temporary play areas bordered by the old walls and existing ramshackle buildings.
study of a sketch of a Roman town square