

10. Exploring the contingency of small-scale urban transformation through interstitial practices at the site of a former war bunker

Clara Da Ros

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to mobilize the conceptual perspective of interstitiality to explore socio-material practices of small-scale urban transformation. More specifically, I mobilize research insights on interstitial thinking in order to understand the contingent character of micro-sociological practices that take place at the site of a former bomb shelter from World War II in Hamburg, Germany. The particular example of this bunker reveals specific entanglements of past and future through contemporary transformation projects of buildings remaining from history. Through its extraordinary character within the (civilian) urban fabric as a military building, the site of the bunker is approached as a magnifying glass which allows an observation of the unfolding of phenomena involving multiple materialities and temporalities at the same time. Focusing on practices carried out by participants in a civil society initiative at the site of the bunker, I consider these phenomena through the perspective of interstitiality combined with a practice-theoretical approach (Schatzki, 2019; Reckwitz, 2003) to observe the contingency of small-scale, neighbourhood-level transformation of the built environment.

In academic disciplines related to the built environment, the concept of interstitial spaces originates from architectural and urban design scholarship and is most often used to describe spaces of the urban fabric considered as being 'in-between'. An attention to interstitial spaces is of particular importance in a context where defining the urban is no longer limited to the perspective of a cohesive development but is broadened to include consideration of the multitude of configurations that make up contemporary urban space (Matos, 2009:

61–62; Silva, 2022: 177). In other words, the observation of in-between spaces contributes to highlighting the contingent character of urban dynamics.

Contingency implies a lack of predetermination and permanence; it implies uncertainty but also floating possibilities and openness, as in Doreen Massey's understanding of the 'openness of space' (2005), for instance. The concept of interstitiality is relevant for a more comprehensive picture of the contingency of urban life because it offers a view on those urban spaces that exist in one form or another although they were not necessarily intended as such. It could be, for example, that these spaces or buildings have lost their original function, their development has not functioned as planned or has had unexpected consequences, or that they lie at a crossroads, in between divergent spatial logics. These spaces therefore seem contingent by nature: They are there but not always considered or seen as part of the city, they are often the result of planning without having been planned, and they can even date back to a bygone period of planning.

However, as Cristian Silva writes, 'interstitial spaces are not simply empty, undeveloped, or vacant, and although they could remain relatively dormant, they are mainly latent domains that can become highly active while hosting contentious forms of urbanism' (2024b: 4). Following that thought, this research on collective practices at a bunker site looks at how local material practices are an integral part of the constitution and/or modification of such spaces, therefore also contributing to the material and discursive visibility of interstitial spaces within the urban fabric and within the making of urban futures. Indeed, in the context of socio-ecological and future-oriented urban transformations, the role of the inherited urban fabric must be considered. Spaces and structures that can be reused and repurposed are not merely places that have lost their original function. Rather, they are spaces where social meanings and materialities interweave. From this perspective, urban future-making is not only about creating future spaces; it is also about comprehending and accounting for urban legacies as potential places for contemporary socio-material practices of transformation.

This chapter is sequenced as follows: First, I introduce the general concept of interstitial spaces in order to give the reader a bird's eye view on this area of research before considering the interstitial practices of small-scale urban transformation. These are then illustrated by a selection of empirical observations from my doctoral research, focusing on a case study of a former bomb

shelter in Hamburg.¹ I discuss to what extent bunker remains in urban areas can be categorized as interstitial spaces and then present three empirical illustrations of the socio-material practices observed during ethnographic participations at the site: the practice of collective outside cooking, the storage and pickup of vegetables, and the production and storage of seed. In the conclusion, I highlight how the study of interstitial practices allows us to identify material and social actions that emerge in and reshape these in-between spaces by reusing and redefining them in a contingent manner. Combining interstitiality with a practice-oriented lens thus enables a deeper understanding of the practices that consistently change the urban fabric from within, and, through this, pushes for a micro-level approach to urban future-making.

Interstitiality

Interstitial space as an ambiguous concept

In the following, the terms *interstitial space* and *urban interstice* will be understood as related, similar concepts, although there are nuances between them. *Interstitial space* can be understood as a broader umbrella term, whereas *urban interstice* is used to designate and/or qualify the specific intra-urban spaces empirically investigated. It is necessary here to review what is most often referred to by these terms.

Over the past decades, a number of publications in academic disciplines related to the built environment have made reference to interstitial space, gathering under that term works on 'urban leftover spaces' (Tonnelat, 2008), vacant spaces 'rendered invisible' (Foster, 2014), 'marginal', 'ruderal' and 'wild' spaces (Gandy, 2011), oftentimes resulting from the fragmentation between other spatial logics (Matos, 2009). Also, interstitial spaces have been studied in

1 The upcoming doctoral dissertation consists of a qualitative investigation of transformation projects at two Hamburg bunker sites inherited from World War II. The first case – from which the selected data in this chapter originates – is a former civilian bomb shelter reinvested in by a neighbourhood civil society initiative, while the second is a former military combat tower converted into commercial and green spaces by a private investor. The selected data has been collected through ethnographic participant observations between 2021 and 2023 and is part of a broader data corpus including participant interviews, public documents, and site observations of the two bunker sites in the context of my doctoral research conducted at the University of Hamburg.

terms of the reappropriation of space by civil society (Moreau, 2024) – in the sense of Henri Lefebvre's production of space (H. Lefebvre, [1974] 2000) –, often also related to socio-spatial justice issues and urban politization processes (F. Lefebvre, 2021; Sanò et al., 2021) and climate change mitigation (Hugo and du Plessis, 2020). Interstitial spaces have been approached as 'spaces of possibility' in the margins of dominating urban logics, neglectedness leaving room for creative appropriations of the space and 'experimentation of different urban forms, which do not have to respond only to market or planning logic' (Loi, 2024: 2553).

Overall, the term *urban interstices* designates urban 'voids' (López-Piñeiro, 2020: 54), 'vacant lands' (Foster, 2014), and 'gaps' within urban infrastructure (Phelps and Silva, 2018; Silva, 2022). This sample of wordings reveals that such spaces have been approached as *terrains vagues*, in the sense outlined by Ignasi de Solà-Morales as a '[v]oid, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation' (2013: 26). The perspective and terminology of interstitiality is to be understood within the urban research landscape as one of the avenues to study urban voids (López-Piñeiro, 2020: 13). Through that lens, these in-between spaces have gained the attention of urban research, which delineates their constitutive character within various processes of urbanization and highlights the ambivalent nature of vacant urban spaces. These may, for instance, be empty but not useless (e.g. urban wilderness [Gandy, 2011]), functionless but not meaningless (e.g. the liminal spaces around motorways [Loi, 2024]), or in the form of Japanese *roji* alleyways [Imai, 2013]).

Most of the current literature, however, primarily seems to operate from an assumption that what is designated by the language of *interstices* – at times as an adjective, at times as a spatial concept – corresponds to a more or less vague definition of in-between spaces, hovering in some indeterminacy (Hugo and du Plessis, 2020: 592). Additionally, these in-between spaces are often defined as empty (or perceived as empty), abandoned, neglected, or marginalized, and understood as non-places. The condition of vacancy then appears to be the common denominator that classifies all these perspectives under the term *interstitial space*.

It seems, however, that this approach, while surely relevant and rich with insights on leftover spaces, remains somewhat confusing and incomplete. Indeed, in the context of the various ontologies associated with urban interstices (Loi, 2024; Silva, 2024b), dictionary definitions of *interstice* and *interstitial* are not sufficient to establish the term as an operational concept for the social sciences. It remains sometimes unclear whether the language of *interstitial space* is

used to designate specific types of spaces or rather shared characteristics (such as vacancy or in-betweenness). Nevertheless, scholars applying this term have contributed greatly to the analysis of various socio-spatial urban phenomena which draw attention to questions of in-betweenness and what takes place in the 'gaps' (Phelps and Silva, 2018) of the urban fabric. Various authors have therefore taken an interest in developing a more systematic conceptualization of an 'interstitial approach' to urban studies. The following section introduces these propositions.

Interstitial spaces as more than empty spaces

To specify the understanding of interstitial space on a conceptual level, here I highlight recent approaches stating that interstices need to be comprehended beyond the framework of vacancy. In other words: Interstitial spaces are not merely empty spaces (Kärrholm, 2016; Silva, 2024b). In a study of the transformation of retail spaces as an empirical instance of an interstitial phenomena, Mattias Kärrholm writes that the concept of interstitial space encompasses a process. Indeed, interstitial spaces are not merely empty spaces but can also manifest as other forms of intermediary spaces (Kärrholm, 2016) and are 'always a socio-spatial or socio-material process'; this argument therefore underlines that interstitial space is about neither materiality nor sociality but a contingent combination of both (ibid.: 139).

Silva also writes about this necessity of pushing the understanding of interstitial spaces beyond vacancy and to frame 'interstitiality as an interdisciplinary domain for the analysis of [...] spatial in-betweenness' (Silva, 2024b: 2). The research agenda for urban interstices proposed by Nicholas A. Phelps and Cristian Silva allows an even more systematic grasp on interstitiality, providing a typology of four aspects of interstitial space (Table 1), characterizing interstices in geographical as well as in social terms (2018).

Table 1: Four aspects of interstitial space according to Phelps and Silva, as in their proposed research agenda for urban interstices.

Aspects of interstitial space	
Scales of interstitial space	Interstices of proximity (small-scale)
	Interstices of transition (metropolitan scale)
	Regional interstices (polycentric scale between cities)
	Interstices of remoteness (non-urbanized spaces between urbanized areas)
Temporal aspect: the pending nature of interstitial space	Past and future productive, economic or speculative value of interstitial space
	Latent social, environmental or ecological value of interstitial space: urban wilderness, green infrastructure, (temporary) socio-spatial usages, and practices by civil society
The (non-)planning aspect of interstitial space	Expected and intended outcomes: planned character of some interstices as 'buffers'
	Unexpected or unintended outcomes: interstices as consequences and as new urban matter with which planning must contend
The paradox of the relational aspects of interstitial space	Apparent absence of relation due to the disconnected character of interstitial space
	Interstices present relational properties nevertheless

Source: Phelps and Silva, 2018: 1209–18.

First, there is the *scalar aspect*, meaning that interstices are observable at different geographical scales. ‘Interstices of proximity’ are small-scale ‘spatial configurations where alternative (out of planned purpose) social practices can occur’ (Silva, 2022: 101), ‘interstices of transition’ are found rather on a municipal or metropolitan governance level, ‘regional interstices’ represent even wider combinations of local authorities, and ‘interstices of remoteness’ are defined as the largest scale of interstices, to be found between urbanized areas (Phelps and Silva, 2018: 1210–11). The second aspect is the *temporal* aspect of the interstice, what Phelps and Silva designate as the *pending nature* of interstices, which implies a latency between the past existence of this space, its present state, and its potential further economic development or social reappropriation (ibid.: 1212–14). The third aspect of interstices is their *balancing between*

planning and non-planning, since some interstices can be the expected result of planning and design processes but can also be an unintended outcome. Finally, the fourth aspect of interstices is a paradox of their *relational properties*: What characterizes an interstice is often a form of disconnection or divergence from its surroundings. However, interstices seem to nevertheless demonstrate relational properties as ‘urban fragments which are physically separate but connected by lines, channels, mains, pipes and other elements concerned with promoting movement’ (ibid.: 1216). It seems that it is even because of their characteristic of not fully belonging to the surrounding spatial types – because of their ambivalence – that interstices act as ‘connectors’ and why their ‘in-between’ aspect becomes clear (Silva, 2022: 114).

This typology of urban interstices offers a helpful tool to render the concept of interstitial space empirically useful in identifying what kinds of spaces can be described as interstices in more detail, while still highlighting their ambivalence and contingency in each aspect.

In a 2020 study on interstitial spaces in Tshwane, South Africa, Jan Hugo and Chrisna du Plessis aimed to delineate the potentials of retrofitting urban interstices for climate change mitigation. In doing so, they too developed a categorization of interstitial spaces, though identified seven types: ‘under-utilized parking spaces’, ‘roof spaces’, ‘in-between spaces’, ‘neglected spaces’, ‘open plots’, ‘servitude spaces’, and ‘other or interior spaces’ (2020: 595). The authors’ criteria for this typology were a series of morphological and spatial characteristics of interstices which they quantitatively sorted with a focus on assessing the spaces’ frequency to which the spaces occurred, and the total area they covered. This emphasized the spatial potential of interstices for urban climate change resilience (as opportunities for small-scale contributions to urban climate adaptation and mitigation strategies [ibid.: 593]). While this typology, through a quantitative approach, offers a possibility for a characterization and differentiation of interstices beyond the mere condition of vacancy or qualification of a space as leftover, I insist on the relevance of furthering the perspective on interstices with qualitative approaches. Indeed, there is, for instance, still a confusion between the generic use of *in-between spaces* as a description for urban interstices and its use as a subtype of interstitial spaces in Hugo and du Plessis’ typology. This confusion hinders a clearer understanding of what exactly happens in these spaces that explains their categorization as interstitial spaces and, moreover, as a subtype of interstice.

This is where it becomes necessary to mention that the study of interstitial spaces needs to include further insights into material practices contributing

to form these spaces, for 'a more comprehensive approach [that] render[s] interstitial spaces as environmentally diverse and socially and politically meaningful' (Silva, 2024b: 19). In the present chapter, material practices refer to the social practices exhibited at the bunker site that involve and utilize diverse material elements: the physicality of the bunker itself as well as other materialities mobilized by participants in a civil society initiative present and active at the site. More precisely, my perspective draws from an interest in the social experiences related to the materialities encountered at the bunker site during participating observations in the activities of the civil society initiative's Kultur Energie Bunker Altona Projekt e.V., or (KEBAP e.V.). Referring back to the proposition by Phelps and Silva to understand interstitial spaces through their four aspects (Table 1), it is necessary to gain further empirical insights into the relationality of interstitial spaces. By exploring urban interstices from a practice-theoretical approach that understand everyday practices in their repetitive but also contingent character, as the place of the social (Schatzki, 2002; 2019; Reckwitz, 2003), there is an opportunity for a small-scale observation of how relationalities become apparent when practices are analytically unravelled.

Interstitial spaces as indicators of interstitial practices

Based on the grounds outlined above, I consider the approach of interstitial practices as a conceptual opportunity to combine insights from urban design disciplines as well as from a sociological, practice-theoretical perspective. Using a practice-oriented approach in addition to morphological and spatial analysis allows us to render the concept of interstitiality even more usable to studying the urban environment and urban life from a sociological perspective. Previous research focusing on how practices are a constitutive part of the study of interstitial spatial phenomena underlines the relevance of this opportunity. Wendy E. Steele and Cathy Keys have, for instance, clarified how the interstitial space 'intersects with the everyday practices of dwelling and home' (2015: 113) and therefore have insisted on the importance of considering 'interstitial spatial practices' in both theory and empirical studies (*ibid.*). In their study on everyday housing practices related to interstitial spaces, the authors therefore argued for a 'greater recognition of people's use of interstitial spaces' (*ibid.*: 123). Silva too underlined that '[i]nterstitial spaces are spatial and political arenas that frame the emergence of interstitial practices' (2024b: 4). Furthermore, Martina Loi advanced the argument, based on her observation of daily practices taking place in the interstitial space around a motorway, that

it may not be a functionless and vacant space but rather generates interstices around itself: 'secondary spaces that are consequently dominated by their massiveness' (2024: 2550). In these spaces, Loi investigated urban interstices generated by a massive infrastructure from the perspective of its users and considered those interstices as '*loci* for other modalities to produce urbanity' (ibid.: 2560). Interstitiality, once again, is then not exclusively a geographical characteristic of certain spaces but is also a quality of both the materiality and the sociality of these spaces.

Following these elements, it then becomes relevant for the sociological study of space to consider not only how interstices appear and are considered by planning and architectural research, but also which practices in relation to them emerge and what these practices reveal about the contingencies of contemporary urban life. For instance, in a study on 'in/formal reappropriation' practices of the interstitial spaces of residential alleys in Melbourne, Australia, Miza Moreau draws attention to the idea that 'we do not need to think of urban interstices necessarily as spaces in between purpose and identity but rather as *underdetermined* spaces where various actors have realized different purposes and potentials' (2024: 1043). The concept of interstitiality can provide sociological thought with further venues. As Theodore Schatzki notes, 'differentiating practices and arrangements subtends recognition that different practices can be carried on amid, with, and through one and the same arrangements and that particular practices can be entangled with multiple arrangements' (2019: 37). In this context, interstitial thinking contributes to an analytical differentiation between arrangements and practices in that it draws attention to the dynamic relationalities and contingencies of what happens within and between urban arrangements. Moreover, from this perspective, it appears that in-between practices, such as those at the bunker site, need to be analytically grasped as constitutive of the emergence and the life of an interstitial space.

Additionally, the approach of interstitiality allows an understanding of the presence of such marginal spaces within the urban fabric not only from an urban studies standpoint but also from a practice-theoretical one. Socio-material practices reveal processes of interstitiality in a small-scale context, characterized by various temporal meanings and in a constant, repetitive practice of in-betweenness. In this sense, drawing on interstitial thinking to approach material practices can be fruitful. Especially in the case of historical buildings that carry political meanings and relate to the politics of memory, such as the bunker from World War II in my case study, I argue that this perspective is rel-

evant to be included in further sociological urban research in order to analyse the meaning(s) of materially reinvesting inherited urban materiality.

The concept of interstitial space has often been referred to and developed in urban design, architecture, and interdisciplinary urban studies literature, but less often in the context of sociological research on urban spatial phenomena and practices. According to Kärholm, '[d]espite the interest shown by some architects in the concept of the in-between and the interstitial, the concept has not been theoretically developed or thoroughly investigated in terms of its function for urban life. [...] In order to make the concept of interstitial space effective in discussions of architecture and everyday life, we need to be more precise about its meanings and objectives' (Kärholm, 2016: 136). Taking up this argument, we can draw more attention in the field of sociology (of space) to the study of interstitiality with regard to collective material practices at urban sites. Since researching meanings and relational processes running through various moments and places of social life is one of the core objectives of sociology, it appears necessary to join Kärholm's argument and to explore the concept of interstitial spaces from a sociological perspective. In the following, I lay out selected empirical illustrations from the reuse of the bunker to examine how the concept of interstitial space can be applied to small-scale urban transformation dynamics and extended to interstitial practices – in this case, practices of appropriation and change taking place at an historical site.

The bunker as an interstitial site and the role of interstitial practices

As a leftover from history, the bunker in Schomburgstraße in Hamburg embodies the idea of an interstitial space that is not an empty *terrain vague*, but an abandoned building, having lost its original function and located in between other spatial logics (e.g. the park, the residential areas, the city streets) and awaiting potential new purposes. At the same time, it is a massive structure constructed to withstand the blasts of explosives. Its openness and flexibility are therefore limited, necessitating substantial financial and technical investments for reuse or conversion projects. In the following, I discuss the extent to which the investigated bunker case can be considered as an interstitial site.

Figure 1: View of the bunker in Schomburgstraße (Hamburg), seen from Walter Möller Park, June 2021.



Source: Author.

Between all the types of spaces studied in relation to interstitial space (margins, *terrains vagues*, cracks, gaps, borderlands, urban voids, margins, non-places, and leftover, abandoned, neglected, overlooked, or dormant spaces, etc.), Steele and Keys draw a connection: ‘Common to all of these is that interstitial space is hidden, grey and ambiguous’ (2015: 113). A former high-rise war bunker can itself be considered as a hidden, grey, and ambiguous urban interstice: As a remnant from World War II, this grey building, decommissioned of its original function,² seems like an unmovable leftover, disconnected from the surrounding civilian urban fabric (Figure 1). Of such

-
- 2 Bunkers from World War II are generally considered as having lost their original function simply due to the end of World War II. Additionally, in the 80 years since 1945, various bunkers have experienced transformations, reusages and/or abandonment, necessarily replacing their original function planned by the Nazi regime during World War II. The former bomb shelter examined in this chapter was used as a storage building in the 1950s, then upgraded to a nuclear shelter during the Cold War, before being decommissioned from the civilian protection programme (*Zivilschutzprogramm*) in 2014 and sold by the federal government to the city of Hamburg in 2020.

bunkers, those that have not been destroyed, removed or converted into new usages since 1945 appear like in-between spaces, not quite fitting into the landscape of the contemporary city.³

In a first tentative step, I therefore categorize remnant bunkers in urban areas themselves as a type of urban interstice. On the one hand, this is because of their architectonic features and appearance differing from the usual urban environment, separating them from their immediate surroundings. Although they are obviously a very different type of built environment than motorway infrastructures, bunkers similarly carry an 'extreme normativity' (Loi, 2024: 2560). Even though bunkers are materially built from concrete, a usual material in cities, they still diverge from other concrete buildings: Their walls are several meters thick and windowless, their ventilation and pipe systems serving solely as a hope of survival during bombardments, and their layout and technical equipment sometimes intended for storing munitions and transmitting fighting orders (in the case of military bunkers⁴). In other words: They are an architecture of war, built for military purposes, not for urban life. As a *fortification*, in the sense of Derek S. Denman, bunkers answer to a specific spatial logic as a 'technique of power in which warfare, the design of the built environment, and the organization of space are intertwined' (2020: 231).

On the other hand, bunkers can be seen as interstices on a symbolic level: As historical remnants, they form an interstice, a space in between times, a leftover from history, inherited from the very specific context of war, rendered functionless by the end of World War II and by the passing of time. Similar to various bunkers from the Cold War, former World War II bunkers can be considered as urban ruins carrying historical and political meanings (Bennett, 2017). In a study on bunker remains in the Channel Islands, Gilly Carr refers

3 It is necessary to mention here that a number of former bunkers which have already been converted into office or apartment buildings, often by the use of additional stories or partly renovated facades, could be instances that seem to question my argument here. However, I still argue that even those transformed and inhabited bunkers can be approached as peculiar components of the overall urban fabric, since oftentimes the construction works have left parts of the original building apparent, making even the renewed building a specific element of the areas they are located in (illustrative instances in Hamburg can be found, for example, in Barmbeker Straße 185 or Heussweg 114).

4 Further research insights on the case of the conversion of a former military bunker (combat tower) from World War II will be published as part of the upcoming doctoral dissertation by the author.

to such leftovers as ‘scars of occupation’ (2010). Former World War II bunkers in Hamburg can be considered in a similar manner: as marks from a violent, totalitarian, and fascist past inscribed not only in the history of the country but also in the urban fabric of a metropolis.

Beyond considering the bunker itself as an urban interstice, we can also observe contemporary social practices taking place at the bunker and how these reinforce its interstitial character. There are two reasons for this: First, as Kärholm and Silva encourage, is to move beyond an application of the category of the interstice which is too often based almost exclusively on aspects of architectonic isolation within the urban environment and on functionlessness. On this basis, linking the interstitiality concept to a sociological approach of practices carries the potential of revealing additional characteristics of urban interstices. Second, a variety of bunkers have already been converted to fulfil new functions (real estate, power plant, museum, retail, etc.), and others – such as my case study here – are becoming places of spatial reappropriation practices that highlight the potential of reusing historical structures as part of urban social-ecological transformations. Within this diversity of bunker conditions, it seems that we cannot speak about bunkers in a homogeneous manner and categorize them generally as interstices but rather that we should approach each of them with an attention to its specific situation. Moreover, some bunkers may appear empty physically, but most are usually still permeated with the heaviness of historical meaning and debates around the politics of memory. This heterogeneity of situations calls for a more detailed analytical approach and is reminiscent of the ambiguous aspect of interstices already mentioned by Steele and Keys (2015: 113). The aim is to choose an approach that provides both precision for each empirically studied site and a comprehensive overview of the interstitial mechanisms that may enfold at historical sites, hence to look at practices and not merely the morphology of interstices to obtain more detail and data while retaining the possibility of conceptual abstraction.

The empirical instance of the bunker-reusing project in Schomburgstraße is indeed an example that underlines the possibility that interstices are not only ‘foci of futurity and planning imaginations around “the city to come”, which speak on their transitional stand towards being urbanized’ (Silva, 2024a: 39; quoting Fields, 2023).

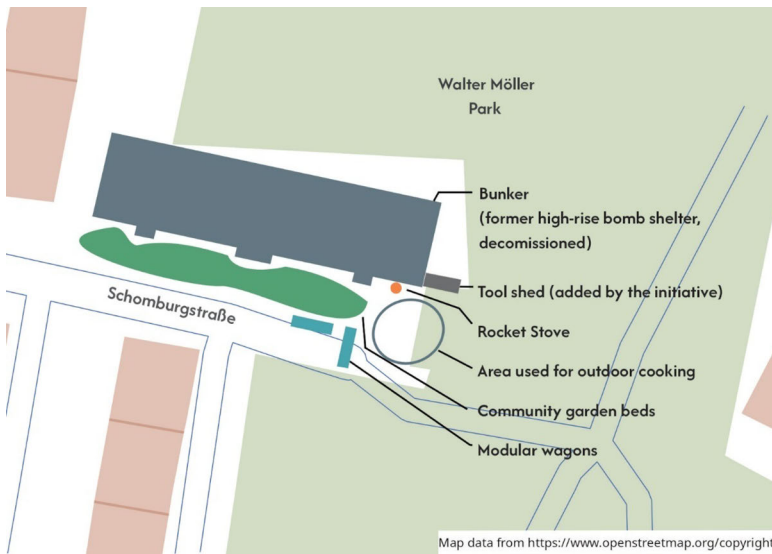
They are also more generally *foci of temporalities* of urban materiality, since they harbour within their now-interstitial character inherited architectures alongside memorial and political meanings, as well as present practices and

future projections.⁵ As in Phelps and Silva's typology detailed above (Table 1), temporality is one of the main characteristics of interstitial spaces, in that the existence of these spaces as leftover underlines their origin(s) in the past but the contemporary latency around them implies potential future usages at the same time. In the socio-material context of reusing a former war bunker, the investigated activities render visible multiple times and multiple social meanings associated with the bunker building. As interstices, sites such as the investigated bunker do not merely operate as a focal point of futurity, in that it is being reused for urban transformation purposes; it also functions as a focus of legacy through its historical character and curation activities. The example of the bunker in Schomburgstraße may be a peculiar and rare one; however, I argue that this does not make it any less relevant, for multiple other types of spaces may bring a similar inherited character into the urban fabric, and the study of urban futures cannot (and should not) bypass them.

Figure 2 shows a site map of the investigated bunker site and its on-site practices, as described in the following section, which presents preliminary observations of a selection of some of the activities carried out by the civil society initiative Kultur Energie Bunker Altona Projekt e.V., or KEBAP e.V. The initiative originally started its activities in protesting a coal plant in 2009. Departing from its intention to develop alternative possibilities for energy and heat production, participants started making plans to convert the bunker in Schomburgstraße as a potential heat plant for the neighbourhood. This goal being a long-term and resource-intensive endeavour, the initiative then organically evolved around additional activities in order to engage with the neighbourhood and interested visitors even before completion of the energy plant. After investing the area surrounding the unused bunker with urban gardening beds and modular wagons, the initiative gained access to the indoor spaces of the bunker in 2016. Today, it organizes around multiple goals, ranging from more overarching transformational goals such as the heat plant project to a rooftop garden, cultural offerings for the neighbourhood, and an historical exhibition.

5 A more detailed development of this topic will be published in the upcoming doctoral dissertation by the author.

Figure 2: Site map of the bunker area.



Source: Author; illustration created from map data from OpenStreetMap, <https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>, accessed via Cadmapper, <https://cadmapper.com/>.

Collective outside cooking

The first empirical example of interstitial practices at the bunker site is the collective activity of outdoor cooking offered by the initiative approximately once a week during the gardening season, usually following afternoon gardening activities. It is open to all: members, visitors, and sometimes even passers-by who spontaneously join in. On the occasions where I participated in this collective cooking, the group usually consisted of only a few people; however, I also experienced some busier days where 10 to 15 people came – especially on sunny days.

Figure 3: A view of the collective area set up at the foot of the bunker.



Source: Author.

In Figure 3, one can see the space where the meals took place:⁶ The table and some of the supplies are already prepared, and the garden is visible in the background, along the bunker wall. As much as possible, the meals are chosen depending on what is currently possible to harvest in the garden, or at least are based around one ingredient from the garden. The most exemplary recipe during my visits to this event was a pumpkin soup with a homemade orange spice mix, especially agreeable on mild late summer and early autumn days. The meals are cooked using a rocket stove (Figure 4). Built by the initiative, this

6 The white pergola visible in the picture has since been removed by the district authorities.

low-tech wood-fired stove gives a sort of camping atmosphere to the activity, and a sign with the word *Stadtteilküche* (neighbourhood kitchen) hanging above the stove reveals how the initiative considers this collective cooking activity: as an offer directed at the neighbourhood, as a social space for residents. While one or two people were responsible for starting up the stove, others were doing the chopping and preparing of ingredients, using kitchen utensils stored by the initiative in a modular wagon installed along the sidewalk (Figure 2).

Figure 4: A view of the rocket stove while cooking.



Source: Author.

What, then, is the interstitial aspect of cooking outdoors? For the duration of one late afternoon, a dinner is served outside, and it takes place not at a restaurant terrace but rather at a location similar to a camping site, with a

bit more equipment. The tables and kitchen utensils are brought out, the vegetables and drinking water are gathered, the rocket stove chamber is opened, the fire is started, and the space is opened to members and passers-by. There is the cooking, the eating, and the cleaning of dishes with the remaining drinking water, then everything gets put away, the rocket stove and the wagon closed before participants leave the space. Between afternoon and evening, this place at the foot of the bunker becomes a dining room. And this occurs on a regular basis, between the bunker and the street, both inconspicuously and openly. Additionally, the modularity of most materials used (the wagon, the rocket stove, the tables) is a materialization of an interstitial practice because it makes things appear and disappear again: They take space now and then, unfolding in a social situation.

Storage and pickup of cooperative agriculture deliveries

The second example is a storage room inside the bunker, where produce is delivered from an agriculture cooperative outside of Hamburg, an action that also takes place on a weekly basis. Figure 5 shows this room on the ground floor of the bunker, where the vegetables are stored, waiting for neighbourhood members to come by and pick up their share. This means that inhabitants of the neighbourhood who have a share in this agricultural cooperative come by the bunker once a week or once every two weeks and pick up their basket of vegetables. These members of the neighbourhood are not necessarily also members of the initiative, although some are. Imagine a person interested in supporting local agriculture in order to contribute to a more sustainable future, buying a yearly share supporting a farming cooperative near their city. The relay point to pick up the weekly or bi-weekly delivery is located in a former war bunker, which in turn means that perhaps every week, this person, for five to ten minutes, steps into a cold, silent, unusual building that maybe makes them think of history and of past totalitarian violence. This does not mean that members of the cooperative think about the bunker's history every time they visit; over time, the bunker has probably become a familiar place to them. At the same time, the bunker's cold temperatures make it an ideal place to store fresh produce. This scenario shows the presence here of a form of in-betweenness that is probably quite subtle yet nevertheless intriguing: A fleeting moment in-between, encompassing the temporal materialities of the weekly vegetables and the substantial concrete walls of the bunker. Through the practice

of picking up, the room inside the bunker becomes part of the members' urban spatialities.

Figure 5: A view of the storage room for the vegetables delivered by the agricultural cooperative.



Source: Author.

The Norddeutscher Saatgutbunker: Seed production and storage at the bunker

The third example is the production of seed in the garden, which is then stored in the bunker. Every gardening season, not only are fruits and vegetables harvested: Seed production is also a part of the gardening practice. During collective workshops, the initiative invites participants to collect seeds from the

garden plants, both edible and ornamental. This workshop usually takes place in the fall, and under the guidance of a well-versed volunteer, participants learn to harvest the seeds, which are then sorted into envelopes and filing systems to then be stored in a small room in the bunker. The seeds are stored in the bunker because the building offers stable temperatures throughout the year (due to its thick concrete walls), which are suitable for seed storage. Should the humidity levels be too high in the building because it still is not insulated as a 'normal' building is, the seeds are temporarily moved to one of the modular wagons owned by the initiative. Harvesting its own seeds allows the initiative to grow plants in subsequent gardening seasons, or to exchange seeds with other local initiatives during a so-called *Saatgutbörse* (seed market). However, some of the seeds, for instance, wildflowers that are a good fit for bees, were intended to be shared with the public at various events to promote biodiversity, supporting wildlife such as bee populations, and distributed in small packages with the designation 'Norddeutscher Saatgutbunker' (North German Seed Bunker) printed on them.

Categorizing the bunker site as interstitial space harbouring interstitial practices

These three empirical instances underline a specific component of the interstitial space of the bunker site: the material practices carried out throughout the space. Indeed, these examples bring to the fore the important role of material practices in the formation of a hybrid space, harbouring activities that juggle various matters and temporalities. In a routinized manner, these practices mobilize a variety of materialities: By practicing gardening, cooking, and storing seeds and vegetables around and in the bunker, they make use of the premises of the historical building as well as added elements such as modular installations, gardening tools, storage units, and so on. Regarding the aspect of temporality, the activities practiced alternate between modifying the bunker's space and 'leaving it', through modular and temporary albeit repeated usages.

Circling back to the conceptualization by Phelps and Silva (Table 1), these observations of interstitial practices provide evidence regarding the four aspects of interstitial space:

- (1) Concerning the *scalar aspect*, the investigated bunker site can be categorized as an interstice of proximity, due to its geographical location within a neighbourhood and the local civil society's engagement with it. More than

just owing to its location, it is also characterized by the initiative's clear ambition to carve out a small-scale, neighbourhood space, available to members as well as to passers-by.

- (2) Regarding its *temporal and pending nature*, the bunker itself, as an historical artefact, testifies to its former function, the memory of which still lingers within its walls. Additionally, the bunker site as a place of spatial reappropriation, with temporary, regular, and modular usages through the initiative's activities, reveals its 'latent social, environmental or ecological value' (Phelps and Silva, 2018: 1213). The Kultur Energie Bunker Altona Projekt e.V. initiative developed around a main goal and then successive additional activities such as the installation of the garden on the sidewalk while awaiting access to the bunker's indoor spaces, and the installation and regular use of the modular wagons, taking advantage of their more or less temporary condition. The current state of the bunker is itself a mix of pending projects, whether it be the regular practices carried out or the overall transformation goals that are in continuous planning by volunteers.
- (3) This leads us to the *(non-)planning aspect* of interstitial space: Although the bunker is the result of a planning process during World War II, its current state and usage is the result of a succession of semi-planned evolutions of the initiative's activities, the main one being the bunker's reappropriation by an initiative initially devoted to sustainable energy production but which has evolved into working to turn the space into a neighbourhood offering while curating its historical meaning. Overall, the initiative revolves around a number of objectives, all linked together by the ambition to achieve local sustainability through collective planning and negotiating processes.
- (4) Finally, regarding the *relational aspect*, observing the bunker reuse as an interstice helps to reveal how the bunker relates to its surrounding environment: Throughout vegetal and social practices at the site such as gardening and outside cooking, the bunker is set in relation to the neighbouring park, the sidewalk, the street, the passers-by, and, more generally, established as a neighbourhood place. Additionally, the practice of storing vegetables puts both the bunker and the members of the neighbourhood in relation to the city's agricultural surroundings and the initiative's partnering agricultural cooperative. Similarly, the production and storage of seed becomes a hybrid connection between the materialities of the garden, of the bunker, and of the participants' practices, including their knowledge production and sharing of botanical processes and temporalities. Therefore, the exam-

ple of the bunker site not only ‘qualifies’ as an interstitial space within the urban fabric but also reveals that its contemporary constitution arises from *interstitial practices*.

Conclusion

[T]he massive materiality of the infrastructure and the way it interacts with space makes the emergence of interstices possible.
(Loi, 2024: 2560)

In a manner similar to – yet also distinct from – the motorway in Loi’s work, the bunker in Hamburg presents itself as a specific form of urban interstice. As a leftover from history, it is simultaneously an overlooked place and a massive materiality, rendered (seemingly) functionless by time but not devoid of historical and political meanings. Departing from the idea that the bunker itself can be framed as an urban interstice, the selected observations from Hamburg revealed material practices that I proposed to characterize as interstitial practices. I argued that not only the space as a whole can be approached using the lens of interstitiality, but also the practices taking place in the context of the reappropriation of the space. Studying interstitial spaces through investigating their associated interstitial practices also supports attempts to render the contingency of urban future-making visible, since ‘interstices *cannot be known in advance*: the interstice is not simply a physical place, but very much a phenomenon “on the ground”, a “happening”, a “combination” or an “encounter”’ (Brighenti, 2016: xviii). We can observe this phenomenon unfold at sites such as the bunker case presented in this chapter, where urban futures are woven into present practices and envisioned through the reappropriation of a place from the past and adding a new layer of meaning(s) to it. Another insight from this case is that reappropriation projects of inherited spaces must contend with complex material structures as well as with temporal and political meanings.⁷ A reflexive and critical approach is necessary for reinvesting in such spaces, particularly in the case of buildings with violent histories. The new layer of meaning generated by future-oriented material practices does not

7 A more in-depth development of these aspects will be published in the upcoming doctoral dissertation by the author.

suppress the bunker's previous layers of meaning. Adopting the lens of interstitial spaces and practices reveals these multiplicities, which are significant elements to consider when studying the social dynamics of urban future-making in relation to the inherited urban fabric. Therefore, not only can the approach of interstitiality be applied to sites such as the bunker; such an approach also presents an opportunity to be combined with a sociological practice-oriented perspective through interstitial practices. Through the observations in this chapter, I hope to have awakened an interest in increased dialogue between the interstitial approach and a practice-oriented perspective. This will allow us, by investigating micro-practices of change, to grasp with ever more detail what is concretely happening at these interstitial sites.

References

- Bennett, L. (ed.) (2017) *In the ruins of the Cold War bunker: Affect, materiality and meaning making*. Rowman & Littlefield, London.
- Brighenti, A.M. (2016) Introduction. In A.M. Brighenti (ed.), *Urban interstices: The aesthetics and the politics of the in-between*, Routledge, London.
- Carr, G. (2010) The slowly healing scars of occupation. *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 3.2, 249–65.
- de Solà-Morales, I. (2013) *Terrain Vague*. In P. Barron and M. Mariani (eds.), *Terrain Vague*, Routledge, New York.
- Denman, D.S. (2020) On fortification: Military architecture, geometric power, and defensive design. *Security Dialogue* 51.2–3, 231–47.
- Fields, D. (2023) Speculative urbanism. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 55.2, 511–16.
- Foster, J. (2014) Hiding in plain view: Vacancy and prospect in Paris' Petite Ceinture. *Cities* 40, part B, 124–32.
- Gandy, M. (2011) Interstitial landscapes: Reflections on a Berlin corner. In M. Gandy (ed.), *Urban constellations*, Jovis, Berlin.
- Hugo, J. and C. du Plessis (2020) A quantitative analysis of interstitial spaces to improve climate change resilience in Southern African cities. *Climate and Development* 12.7, 591–99.
- Imai, H. (2013) The liminal nature of alleyways: Understanding the alleyway roji as a 'Boundary' between past and present. *Cities* 34, 58–66.

- Kärrholm, M. (2016) Interstitial space and the transformation of retail building types. In A.M. Brighenti (ed.), *Urban interstices: The aesthetics and the politics of the in-between*, Routledge, London.
- Lefebvre, F. (2021) Rethinking space and politics from the urban interstices. *UXUC – User Experience and Urban Creativity* 3.2, 52–63.
- Lefebvre, H. ([1974] 2000) *La production de l'espace*. Edited by R. Hess (4th ed.), Anthropos, Paris.
- Loi, M. (2024) Urban motorways as spaces of possibility: Urban interstices and everyday practices around a motorway in Sardinia. *Urban Studies* 61.13, 2548–64.
- López-Piñeiro, S. (2020) *A glossary of urban voids*. Jovis, Berlin.
- Massey, D.B. (2005) *For space*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Matos, R.S. (2009) Urban landscape: Interstitial spaces. *Landscape Review* 13.1, 61–71.
- Moreau, M. (2024) In/formal reappropriations: Spatialised needs and desires in residential alleys in Melbourne, Australia. *Urban Studies* 61.6, 1031–48.
- Phelps, N.A. and C. Silva (2018) Mind the gaps! A research agenda for urban interstices. *Urban Studies* 55.6, 1203–22.
- Reckwitz, A. (2003) Grundelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken: Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 32.4, 282–301.
- Sanò, G., G. Storato, and F. Della Puppa (2021) Interstitial urban spaces: Housing strategies and the use of the city by homeless asylum seekers and refugees in Trento, Italy. *Social Anthropology* 29.4, 976–91.
- Schatzki, T.R. (2002) *The site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park.
- Schatzki, T.R. (2019) *Social change in a material world*. Routledge, London.
- Silva, C. (2022) *The interstitial spaces of urban sprawl: Geographies of Santiago de Chile's Zwischenstadt*. Routledge, London.
- Silva, C. (2024a) Interstitial constellations and their evocative emptiness. *LoScuaderno: Explorations in Space and Society* 67, 38–43.
- Silva, C. (2024b) The spatial ontologies of interstitial spaces: Insights from Belfast's 'interfaces' and the spatialization of the in-betweenness. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2419062>.
- Steele, W. and C. Keys (2015) Interstitial space and everyday housing practices. *Housing, Theory and Society* 32.1, 112–25.
- Tonnelat, S. (2008) 'Out of frame': The (in)visible life of urban interstices – A case study in Charenton-le-Pont, Paris, France. *Ethnography* 9.3, 291–324.