

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF THEORIA AND PRAXIS: INTEGRATING CRITICAL
THEORY INTO DESIGN RESEARCH PRACTICE IN ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

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The Greek word Theoria, from which the concept of theory was derived, means to look at or contemplate on things, and it is considered in a complementary relationship to Praxis in which this particular look is enacted through a process of action. From antiquity onwards, the nature of this relationship has been questioned in terms of assimilating one into another. Particularly, in architecture, until recent decades, the role of theory in the design process and the role of praxis in research have always been seen inferior to one another. In this contestable relationship, the paper aims to focus on the boundaries between theoria and praxis and to question the possibility of blurring these boundaries through design research applied as a studio project at graduate level. In a former industrial zone, the site of the research project Izmir in Turkey, situated at the edge of a dense urban strata, in the middle of transportation lines and at the beginning of the urban gentrification zone of the city. The site, where not only spatial boundaries between different spheres (outside / inside, centre / periphery, public / private) but also temporal boundaries, between events and physical boundaries are twisted, tangled and overlapped, was re-functionalized as a University campus in relation to an urban regeneration process. However, the distinct definitions of public and private spatial arrangements needed to be reconsidered and designed in terms of social and cultural aspects of the sustainability of the site in the developing dense urban pattern. In the conceptual framework of this project, the boundaries of this territory were read / decomposed / analysed through structuralism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis sequentially. The design process that intertwined together with these different research approaches attempted to blur the boundaries not only between the campus and urban everyday flow, but also between theory and practice.

Keywords: critical theory, architectural theory, research by design, urban regeneration, everyday practice

1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship of architectural theory with practice is highly complicated. An invisible boundary between these two concepts built in antiquity and raised particularly in the course of the twentieth century prevents designers, theorists and researchers in the field of architecture from deploying them concurrently in their design research and processes. Theoretical and design productions were "subject to mood swings between the two," (Thompson 1995) and the role of theory in design process and the role of practice in research were seen inferior to one another. Nevertheless, the growing interest in "research through / by design" approaches in architecture in recent decades caused an increase in projects which spring up from the epistemological basis of both fields. Yet, in spite of this increase, the number of these approaches are still quite limited compared to the majority of classical design and research methods. As a response to this omission, this paper focuses on a design research applied through a studio project at graduate level to blur the intangible boundary between *theoria* and *praxis*.

Blurred boundaries of *theoria* and *praxis*:

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In keeping with the body of *theoria* on the development of architectural *praxis*, the focus of the design studio in 'Space and Digital Culture' Master of Architecture program in Yaşar University was placed on physical / mental boundaries of a particular district with urban everyday practices. Possessing many inherently tangled boundaries, Yaşar University Campus in which our school of architecture is situated was selected as the pivotal site in this district to trigger a series of changes. As a re-functionalized former industrial area in the course of an urban regeneration process, the campus locates at an unidentified territory between the old urban pattern, small scale industrial buildings and urban gentrification zone of the city (figure 1). Due to this in-between status, the campus is surrounded with the boundaries of these different usages as well as the boundaries that it actually creates for security reasons. In the course of the studio project, the graduate students were expected to explore these boundaries and to develop spatial interventions that blur them to flux urban everyday practices through unbounded territories. Aligning to the track concentrating on the value of design research for societal and behavioural change, this paper expounds the changes that the studio project aimed to engender in the boundaries of not only urban formation of the area but also students' approaches to the relationship between design and research. As a littoral activity between theory and practice the project was structured as a laboratory for the graduate program where the students deployed the theoretical knowledge that they acquired in the lecture courses into their design practice.

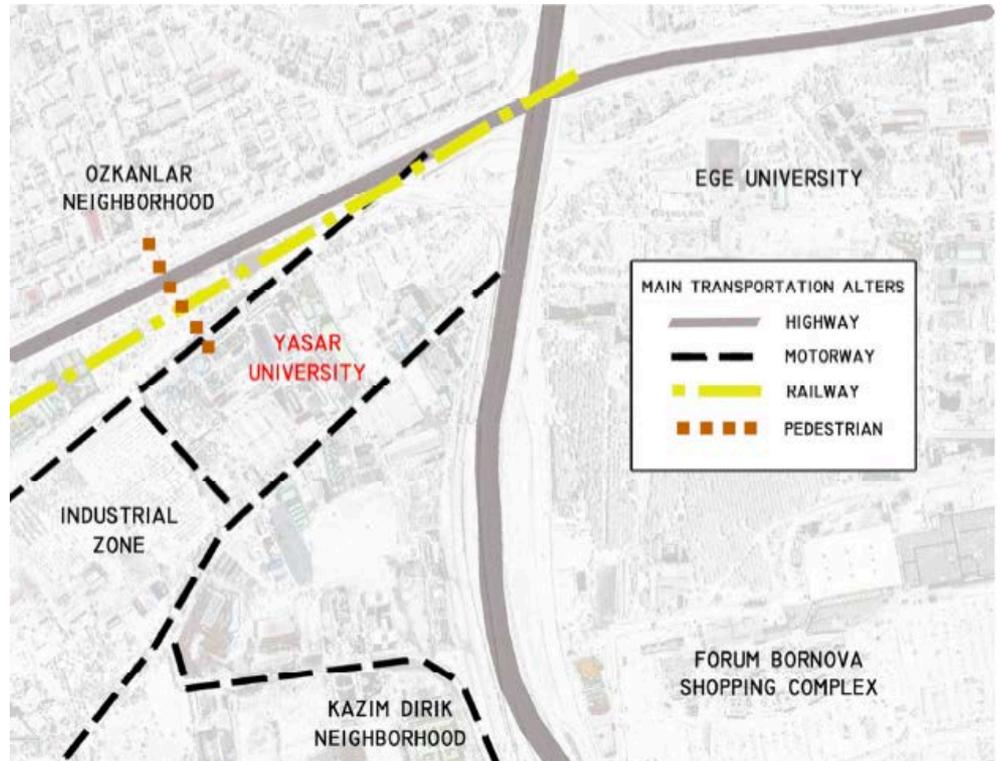


Figure 1 – Major transportation lines (Özgecan Zafer and Gizem Özmen's diagram, Yaşar University, Department of Architecture, Space and Digital Culture Master's Program, Design Studio I)

2 DESIGN RESEARCH WITHOUT ANY BOUNDARY

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“There is no line which sharply divides the matter composing [Mount] Everest from the matter outside it. Everest's boundaries are fuzzy. Some molecules are inside Everest and some molecules outside. But some have an indefinite status: there is no objective, determinate fact of the matter about whether they are inside or outside” (Tye 1990, p. 535).

Boundary is mostly considered as a dividing line between different matters, territories or systems. Thus, one may expect a definite line defining the boundaries of the area where Mount Everest exists. In reality, as artist Michael Tye suggests in the quotation above, most of the things, concepts or events have fuzzy boundaries, which cannot be exactly outlined. Outlining the boundaries of Mount Everest is a very challenging question. Nevertheless, to outline the inner and outer boundaries of a settlement, town or a city can be even more challenging. Especially in physically, culturally and socially complex urban environments, boundaries emerge as a littoral territory where different realities / systems merge into one another. Moreover, expanding mega-cities of the post-industrial world grow unceasingly, connecting different nodes, cities, even towns all together, blending all cultural and social disparities in their urban sprawl (Castells 2010, p. 434). This growth also occurs as condensation in the business centre, and this inward urban growth compels boundaries of urban nodes to merge into one another. These upheavals blur the existing boundaries of these quarters, making them a part of a greater system and forcing them to gather more complex and overlapped functions. Izmir, as the third largest city in Turkey, is going through a similar process, thus various districts of the city, which once were at the edges, are in the reconstruction process either naturally due to their increasing land value or by force of the regeneration projects developed by the municipality.

Bornova, where Yaşar University Campus is situated in, is one of these developing districts of Izmir. The settlement has a long history as a suburban summer place predominantly used by the Levant until the second half of the twentieth century. With the population exchange during the First World War and after the foundation of Turkish Republic, this identity profoundly changed and Bornova turned into the relatively less important small hinterland agricultural town of Izmir. The suburban railway line built in 1865 (Mert 2008, p. 25), lost its function during this transition and now stands a dividing line in the district and as a boundary for the expansion of settlements. However, the incredible growth of cities in Turkey during 60s and 70s increased the immigration from other parts of the country to the area and profoundly transformed its urban fabric from one-storey mansions with large gardens to dense tall apartment blocks (figure 2). The uninhabited agricultural areas behind the railway line had been occupied by workshops, ateliers and factories and used as a small industrial area until 2000 (figure 3). The re-launching of the railway system in that year enhanced the public transportation connection of the district with the city centre, thus the areas circling around its stations started undergoing re-functionalization. Due to the increasing land value, a number of gated community projects for the district have been developed; nevertheless, none of them have been finished or inhabited yet.

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Figure 2 – Apartment blocks in Özkanlar, Bornova (author's archive)



Figure 3 – The railways / New metro line (author's archive)

As a former paint factory, Yaşar University Campus was one of the first re-functionalized sites in this area (figure 4). Neighbouring one of the metro stations, it stands as an island bounded by high walls in the sea of small workshops and manufacturing plants. The long pedestrian bridge, crossing over both the railway and the highway constitutes the only connection of the campus

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with the housing neighbourhood called Özkanlar on the other side and the commercial centre of Bornova (figure 5). In spite of all the complexity and the forcing effects of newly developing areas around the site, the campus has distinct definitions of public and private spatial arrangements due to these high walls and controlled gates (figure 6). A large shopping mall is very close to the area, however, the intense traffic flow on the highway that separates the mall from this newly developing district prevents individuals from easily accessing its facilities (figure 1).



Figure 4 – Yaşar University Campus (author's archive)



Figure 5 – The Footbridge (author's archive)



Figure 6 – Bölge Metro Station and the front gate of the campus (author's archive)

3 INTEGRATING THEORY INTO DESIGN RESEARCH PRACTICE

In the context of the design studio, two students of the Graduate School of architecture, 'Space and [Digital] Culture' program, Gizem Özmen and Özgecan Zafer were asked to explore the physical / mental boundaries of Yaşar University Campus and develop spatial intervention proposals to create more littoral territories. The structure of the studio was based on a non-linear design process, therefore, rather than ending up with a single highly refined project, it aimed to make students question the existing situations from different theoretical perspectives and explore possible scenarios through group and individual studies. These perspectives grounded upon the pivotal concepts of contemporary architectural theories were profoundly discussed in two other lecture courses of the Master's program. Through a highly detailed schedule for the studio work organized according to the readings and topics of these two complementary courses, the students were expected to develop their design proposals in the light of the material presented and elaborated in them.

The first one, *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Architectural Discourses* taught by Professor Doctor Gülsüm Baydar, focused on "selected basic texts that address the interdisciplinary nature of architectural thinking" and aimed "to develop critical thinking abilities in understanding and interpreting the built environment" (Baydar 2013). Three main critical theories given in this course, which were structuralism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, constituted the fundamental structure of the studio. These three perspectives were determined as the basis of the methodology of the project because of their intricate relationship to architecture as architectural theory has been highly informed by these perspectives, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The second lecture-based theory course, titled as *Contemporary Urban Culture* and given by Instructor Melis Varkal, concentrated on the "socio-cultural studies in architecture" and "how traditional notions of the city, community and public realm are challenged in today's urban environments" (Varkal 2013). The concepts deployed in the studio were based on the *Contemporary Urban Culture* course and related to the study of urban life and everyday practices in the area. These revolved around the discussions on the relationship between the production of space and contemporary. To sum up, through the combination of two lecture courses and the studio, contemporary urban culture concepts were explored with different theoretical perspectives to design urban interventions aiming at blurring the boundaries that prevent everyday urban practices from flowing freely through different territories (figure 7).

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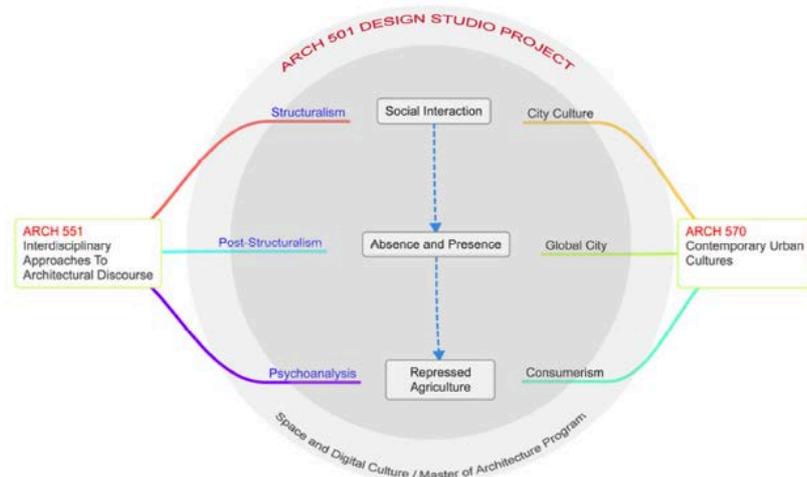


Figure 7 –The structure of the studio project (author's diagram)

3.1 STRUCTURALISM: SYSTEMS OF NETWORKS

The first critical theory used to explore the boundaries in the area was structuralism. In the conceptual framework of this movement, from Ferdinand Saussure's research on linguistics to the studies on semiotics in architecture, students were expected to explore the boundaries of the site "in the context of the larger [abstract] structures [which] they are part of," rather than in "isolation" (Barry 1995, p.39). Since, structuralism is concerned more with the system of relations between the units rather than the content, meaning or the matter of units themselves (Eagleton 2003, p. 83), the links between individuals cut off or weakened by the boundaries of "city culture" were searched in the wider contexts of recurring urban patterns. The concept of "city culture" was utilized in reference to Lewis Mumford's descriptions on modern life and its urban practices (Mumford 1938) in the first half of the twentieth century and Terry Eagleton's more recent interpretations defining the concept as a production of an industrial world for modern societies (Eagleton 2000). Considering the controversial relationship between webs of social interaction of city culture and physical and mental boundaries, the students chose pedestrian and vehicle networks in and around the campus as main urban links to undertake a structuralist reading.

The metro station and the footbridge, which connects the station, campus, Özkanlar neighbourhood, commercial centre of the district and the city centre to one another were pivotal in this investigation. The students identified the long footbridge crossing over both the railway and the highway as the only connection of the campus to the commercial centre of Bornova. With the aim of finding out how often and for what purposes this bridge was used by the locals, the graduate students prepared questionnaires and applied them randomly to passers-by on both sides of the bridge (figure 8). These concise questionnaires inquired on the individuals' occupation and the spaces that they usually visit both on the other side of the bridge and generally in the area. This study revealed that the local inhabitants who live in Özkanlar neighbourhood of Bornova were using the bridge just for the purpose of reaching the metro station (figure 6). Only a minority of these inhabitants have ever visited the area behind

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the railway line. The questionnaire made on the campus side of the bridge, manifested a similar story. Except for the students who lived in Özkanlar neighbourhood, the majority of them have never gone to the other side. Interestingly, the students indicated that they prefer to go to Forum Bornova shopping mall to meet their daily living needs, in spite of the heavy traffic flow on the highway in-between and of the proximity of shops right at the foot of the footbridge on Özkanlar side.

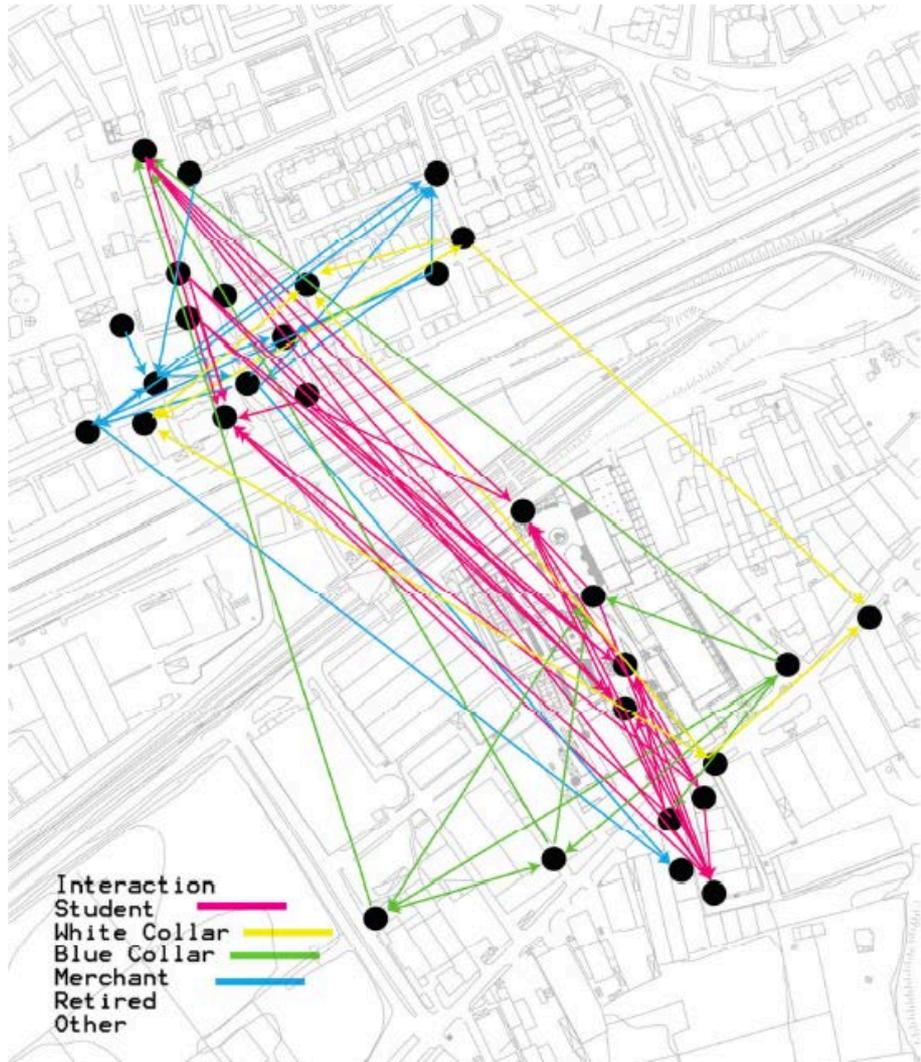


Figure 8 – Visualization of one of the questionnaires (Özgecan Zafer's diagram, Yaşar University, Department of Architecture, Space and Digital Culture Master's Program, Design Studio I)

The graduate students of the project drew out a very interesting construe from this analysis. Arguing that the psychological, social, cultural, in other words mental boundaries in the interactions between individuals are much more adamant than physical ones, they decided to focus on blurring these mental boundaries and let this intervention modify the physical ones through everyday practices. In the light of these findings, graduate students made their preliminary design proposals. Considering the fact that the students of Yaşar

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University are the only group of individuals who have the potential of visiting all the neighbourhoods around and establishing personal connections with individuals in those neighbourhoods, they decided to assign these students as the agents of the change.

3.2 POST-STRUCTURALISM: CONTRADICTORY DUALITIES OF THE BOUNDED AREAS

In keeping with design research practice based on the theoretical courses, students focused on a post-structuralist reading of the boundaries of the site in relation to the concept of a global city. This was the second phase of their studio project. Jacques Derrida's (1986) explanations of de-construction as a method to de-compose and re-compose a system, and Bernard Tschumi's (1988) *Manhattan Transcripts* as a quintessential, yet one of the rare examples of post-structuralist urban reading were crucial for this analysis. Differing from structuralism, which depends on studying on parallels and unity of stable systems, post-structuralism seeks for contradictory dualities, disunities and shifts in flows (Barry 1995, p.71). Thus, post-structuralist reading of an urban space requires looking for cultural, social and/or spatial contradictions and disparities. However, in opposition to this reading, globalization depends on the idea of homogenization. From especially the second half of the twentieth century onwards, globalization has been forcing cities of different cultures to become more homogeneous, safe and clean similar living environments (Zukin 2009). Bornova, as one of the important districts of would-be global city of Izmir, has been profoundly affected from this homogenization process. In this conceptual framework, the students of the project decided to concentrate on one of the contradictory dualities in the area that enhanced the existing boundaries and stemmed from the effects of globalization. What has become absent in the urban culture and memory of the district and what is currently present was chosen as the primary duality.

Searching for the places around the campus that were present in narratives, nevertheless absent in the physical environment, the students discovered many important sites in terms of their connection with the collective memory of the inhabitants of the district. The distinctive places mentioned in the local songs, personal memoirs or official history of the site such as a very famous fig tree or the pathway where one of the Ottoman sultans walked, were mapped digitally and related information was attached to this digital map. In these forgotten stories, the ones that are related to the culture of the Levant constituted the biggest group. In the cases of places inherited from them, the relationship between absence and presence was reverse. Their houses, churches and cemeteries still existed, but the life related to them was mostly missing. A number of uninhabited Levant mansions in the area with their large gardens and high walls were no more than unknown places for most of the locals. Physical accessibility to those places was not blocked, but the memory associated with them. The boundary here rested upon the slippery ground of the memory *per se*; it was built by oblivion. In order to blur this boundary, one of the students, Özgecan Zafer proposed four different memory paths originating from Yaşar University Campus and connecting the inheritances of Levant culture in the district to one another (figure 9). The other student, Gizem Özmen, on the other hand, proposed a green network linking up the large gardens of these mansions and the Yasar University Campus to one another. A signage system accompanying with these paths and network was designed to provide not only inhabitants, but also passers-by with information on the forgotten presence of this culture in the collective memory.

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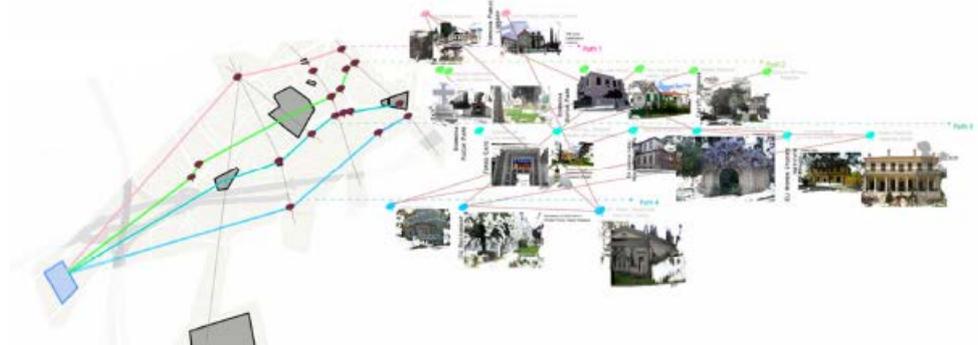


Figure 9 – Memory paths of absent / present, (Özgecan Zafer's diagram, Yaşar University, Department of Architecture, Space and Digital Culture Master's Program, Design Studio I)

3.3 PSYCHOANALYSIS: REPRESSED AND HIDDEN BOUNDARIES

The third and last phase of the project was a psychoanalytic reading of the boundaries in the area brought about by the growing consumerist culture and its effects on urbanism. Consumerism has become the driving force behind the urban decisions of the state in the post-industrial world (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 94). Undoubtedly, "the growth of cities" has been "one of the most impressive facts of modern times" (Wirth 1938, p. 2), however urbanism along with highly promoted consumerist culture has been imposing certain life styles, everyday practices and modes of production on city dwellers since especially the second half of the twentieth century. In most of the cases, this process resulted in similarly developing "modern" cities with suppressed distinctions. Conversely, psychoanalysis, as a method of critical thinking, depends on revealing the repressed or buried material, since it is originated from a form of therapy "aimed to cure mental disorders" by focusing on the issues hidden in unconscious mind (Barry 2005, 96). This attribute makes it an excellent analysis technique to look at the urban material in cities repressed by the consumerist modes of production and consumption.

The rapid urbanization due to the unexpected growth of internal migration in Turkey during the 1960s caused Bornova to lose some of its distinctive attributes. Promoting cheap labour and related production systems, this process strengthened the role of small-scale industries in the economic growth of the district. The students of the project made a detailed historical and archival research to find out what assets of the area were repressed during this rapid urbanization. Agricultural productivity of the area with its well-known local goods were the standouts of these lost assets. Among these goods, the ones called "Bornova muscat grape" and "Bornova okra" were the most famous ones due to their large percentage of the commercial activities and export products in the district before the urbanization process (Mert 2008, pp. 152-57). Diagnosing the disappearance of these goods and the culture of their agricultural production as an important repressed asset of the district, the students decided to supplement their memory paths and green network proposals with urban garden components of Bornova muscat and okra. In Gizem Özmen's proposal these gardens designed as a modular system consisting of pots for okra and hanging wire canopies for muscat grapes to be composed and functioned according to the particularities of their positions on the green network (figure 10). Yasar University students, as the agents of blurring boundaries, were made responsible from the maintenance and cultivation of this system.

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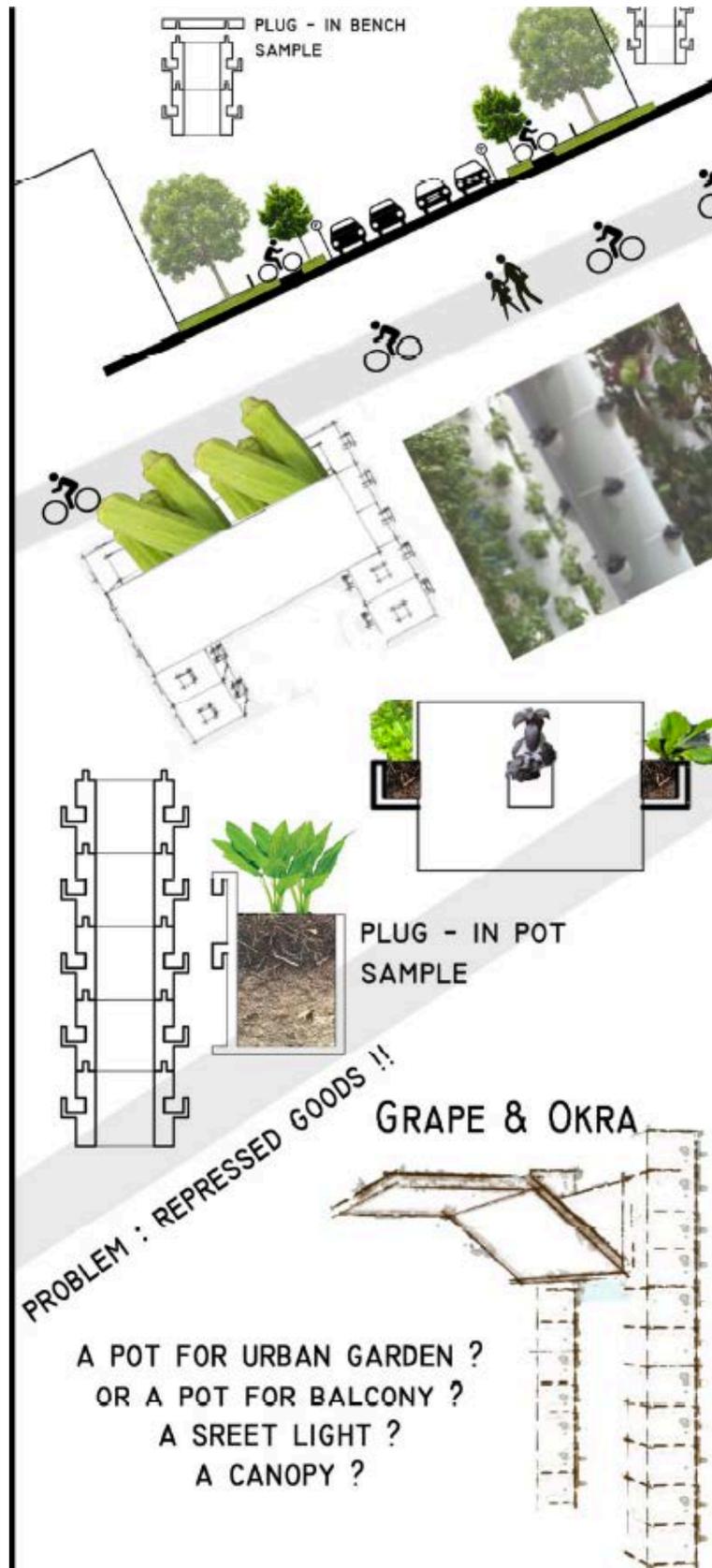


Figure 10 – Urban Gardens, (Gizem Özmen’s graphic, Yaşar University, Department of Architecture, Space and Digital Culture Master’s Program, Design Studio I)

4 CONCLUSION

Considering design research as an activity on a littoral between two different epistemological bases of theory and practice, the structure of the project in the graduate studio was based on a non-linear process depending on exploring urban boundaries through critical readings and designing interventions to blur the effects of these boundaries in everyday practices around Yaşar University Campus. Rather than ending up with highly refined grandiose planning decisions and proposals, the project framed sustainable small-scale interventions through bottom-up ideas that stemmed from gathering highly localized information acquired through different critical perspectives. Instead of gentrification of the sources of urban boundaries, reconciliation of disparities through highlighted connections and hidden commons, and defining the boundaries themselves as distinct territories of this reconciliation process were the major attempts in all the facets of the proposals. Memory paths and urban gardens not only blurred the mental boundaries of the locals with the Levant and agricultural memory of the district, but also revealed its distinct cultural assets repressed in the process of rapid urbanization.

The students of the program along with the undergraduate students of the University were assigned as the agents of this change. University students were chosen not only for their potential of contributing to littoral activities with their unique position as a temporary dweller of the neighbourhood but also for their own benefit to blur their own mental boundaries embodied as the walls of the campus. Students of our 'Space and Digital Culture' Master of Architecture Program, on the other hand unveiled the potential of using littoral territory between *theoria* and *praxis* as the basis of developing new knowledge through the design process by integrating different theoretical perspectives into design research practice. Looking at the same urban area with its social and cultural complexity through the lens of different critical perspectives and deriving different conclusions raised their awareness of various possible analyses and design responses. Thus, this project *per se*, might have initiated a fundamental behavioural change in their individual approaches to not only research methods but also architectural design processes.

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