

# Liminal Material Culture

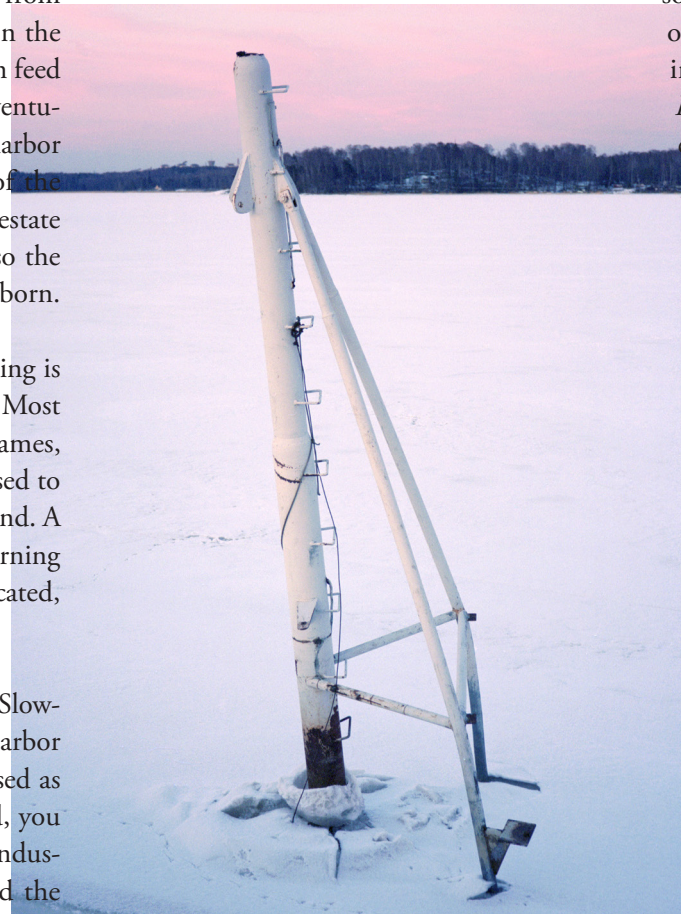
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After 140 years of operation the Sörnäinen harbor closed down in 2008, when a new harbor further away from the city center was finished. The atmosphere of the area in the years since has been desolate and melancholic. Plans for new housing and office buildings intend to refill the area, but it will still take two more decades for these plans to reach completion. In the meantime this enormous area is simply waiting. It is in a liminal state in its transformation from an industrial function to a public and housing function.

The development of the area has followed a pattern familiar from other coastal cities. When a city is still small, its harbor is on the outskirts. Maritime trade brings with it profits, which in turn feed the city and enable it to grow both in size and in economy. Eventually the city grows beyond its former limits, enveloping the harbor within the city fabric. At some point, the spatial needs of the harbor exceed the available land and at the same time real estate close to the city center perpetually grows more valuable, so the incentive to move the harbor and build housing instead is born.

What makes this kind of development even more interesting is that this specific land area is constructed out of thin air. Most of the Sörnäinen shoreline is infill land. The different names, Sompassaari, Kyläsaari, Verkkosaari refer to islands that used to be there but were one by one subsumed within the mainland. A similar method is used in the island state of Singapore, turning hills into new flat real estate where residents can be relocated, out of the way of the growing business district.

The landscape in Sörnäinen changes between every visit. Slowly but surely, new buildings rise and the layers of old harbor life are peeled away. The legacy of the harbor is still used as a branding tool though. In the first area to be finished, you can already witness newly built piers complete with industrial-looking heavy duty bollards, which are installed the wrong way around. Whether this is by accident or because the city doesn't want you to actually dock your ship by the residential area remains a mystery.



In areas where development has yet to begin, fields are taken over by huge piles of garbage waiting to be sorted or dunes of sand, soil and rock waiting to be used for construction. Unwanted cars and boats are left to rust wherever convenient. Traces of campfires and improvised seating pop up in different locations. Buildings are demolished or burn down.

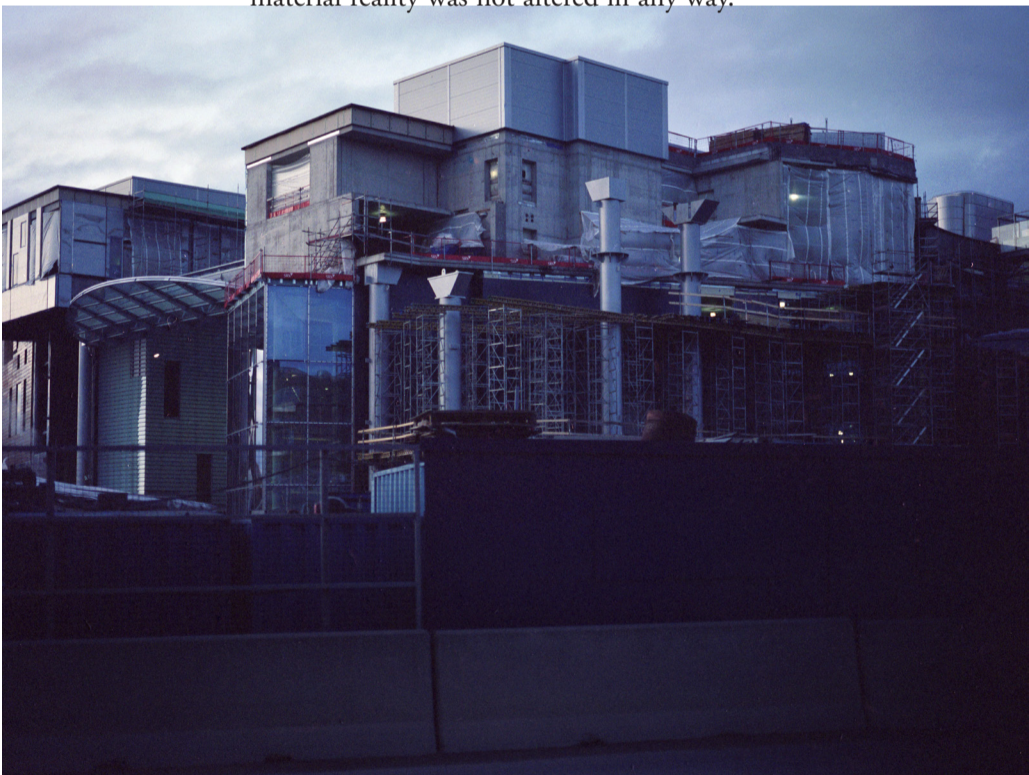
Contemporary cities tend to have clearly assigned areas for different kinds of activities. Some areas are for shopping, some for playing. Even though the digital age promises otherwise, there are still mostly distinct areas for working and for dwelling. Tim Edensor claims in his book *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* that dereliction offers “spaces in which the interpretation and practice of the city becomes liberated from the everyday constraints which determine what should be done and where”. In an atmosphere where modernist city planning notions of assigning and separating functions still prevail, an unassigned space within the urban fabric is often read as “empty” or a “wasteland” since it isn't a space for either social or economic reproduction. They are merely considered as sites for future investment.

In reality, these areas are everything but empty. They play host to a wide array of activities. In Verkkosaari there are fishers that have re-landscaped the entire shoreline of a tiny peninsula where Aki Kaurismäki's *Man Without a Past* lived in a shipping container. There was a much-publicized squatted social center and it's adjacent romani campsite, both later demolished invoking safety concerns. Illegal raves have taken over buildings and right next to these locations the largest EDM music festival in Finland overtook the area for five consecutive years. Judging by the material traces that are left behind, a lot of people use the area but it is still not unusual to run into no one while walking through it.

In addition to human activity there is of course non-human activity. Flora and fauna of different kinds live and grow wherever they see fit. They do not care about the constructed dichotomy of urban (human) vs rural (natural), by which some life forms are considered “out of place” within the city fabric. Previously developed but currently unused plots, also known as brownfields, have turned out to be diverse ecosystems, sometimes even more so than their green counterparts — parks, maintained forests — that many city dwellers might consider more “natural” or enjoyable. Brownfields can combine a wide range of features within small areas and mix naturally occurring and domesticated species from nearby gardens. They provide refuge for both larger city dwelling animals and smaller invertebrates that favor the weeds and wildflowers that thrive in nutrient-poor land.

Deciding what belongs and does not belong in a specific place is not only limited to plants and animals. Strictly planned built environments lead to homogeneous spaces where the “other” is excluded. Modernism brought with it standardization, which inevitably creates an image of a “normal” subject or inhabitant. Specific assigned functions also control the way in which it is acceptable to use any given space. It is not acceptable to sleep on a bench and it might be frowned upon if you started dancing in a shopping center. When these abstract norms are figuratively written in stone by the built environment, it becomes a powerful tool in reproducing existing social conditions. Non-normative space provides conditions for an alternative. Like Edensor puts it: industrial ruins and derelict spaces “open up possibilities for regulated urban bodies to escape their shackles in expressive pursuits and sensual experience.”

The difference between normative and non-normative space is often a fine line. There is a well known example of this in the old harbor area. Once an official association was set up, the previously illicit public Sompasauna — routinely demolished by city employees and rebuilt by volunteers several times over during its first three years of existence — turned practically overnight from an illegal eyesore to the literal poster child of the city’s ad campaign, professing Helsinki’s vibrant grassroots urban culture. The sauna changed category from non-normative to normative via a ruling of city officials, even though the material reality was not altered in any way.



Just like the sauna, more mundane but unwanted traces that different interactions leave on the built environment are removed through maintenance. Sanne Kanters asserts in her thesis that maintaining a “fixed” physical state of the built environment creates an illusion of permanence. The desired societal paradigm is thus reconstructed every day through cleaning and repairing, thereby made to seem like a natural phenomenon. In derelict areas traces of use and interaction are left for everyone to see, bringing to the foreground the diversity of different ways of existing in the city.

Written archives are necessarily not the whole picture, which is why it is necessary to assess not only a culture’s written history and stories, but also its objects. There is a field within archaeology which asserts that concentrating on not just the most valuable and rare objects, but instead also examining mundane and neglected substances such as trash, creates a more comprehensive image of a material culture. This method can be applied to not only cultures past, but also the contemporary moment. We have collected some of these traces in form of photographs and objects in hope of creating a kind of documentary or pseudo-archeological survey of the life that the former harbor area has been living in a state of waiting.



SOURCES:

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 IMAGES BY SEAM

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Liminal Material Culture is exhibited at Kosminen as a collection of photographs and pseudo-archaeological objects with this accompanying essay.

Seam is a new spatial practice that aims to tackle architectural discourse and the built environment through writing and design.