

Negotiating (In)visibility, Liminality and Urban Coexistence in the More-than-Human City

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taraxacum_sect_R1.JPG



Resilience and cityscapes

Cities as entanglements of more-than-human worlds

- Cities as **natural-social hybrids** (e.g. Braun 2005; Demeritt 1994; Haraway 1991, 1997; Latour 1993, 1999; Swyngedouw 1996, 2006)
- The city as **second nature** (William Cronon 1992 Nature's Metropolis):
 - First nature: the original, unbuilt world
 - Second nature: artificial nature, built on top of first nature (terracing hills, draining swamps); it becomes a "second nature" for humans
 - + **Third nature**: the environment affected by irreversible degradation, such as plastic and nuclear pollution
- Shift in perspective:
 - from a framework of human impacts on the environment → the effects of our **entanglements with other kinds of living selves**
 - **multispecies** frameworks of analysis (Haraway 2015; Tsing 2015)



Urban natures, liminal landscapes and urban transformation

- PARKS: classical ideals of **controlled** urban nature, curatorship, formal design



Schonbrunn Palace Gardens Vienna

- LIMINAL URBAN LANDSCAPES: ecosystems which are not planned but **develop autonomously**, taking advantage of discontinuities and the lack of direct human intervention



Unintentional natures in Bucharest

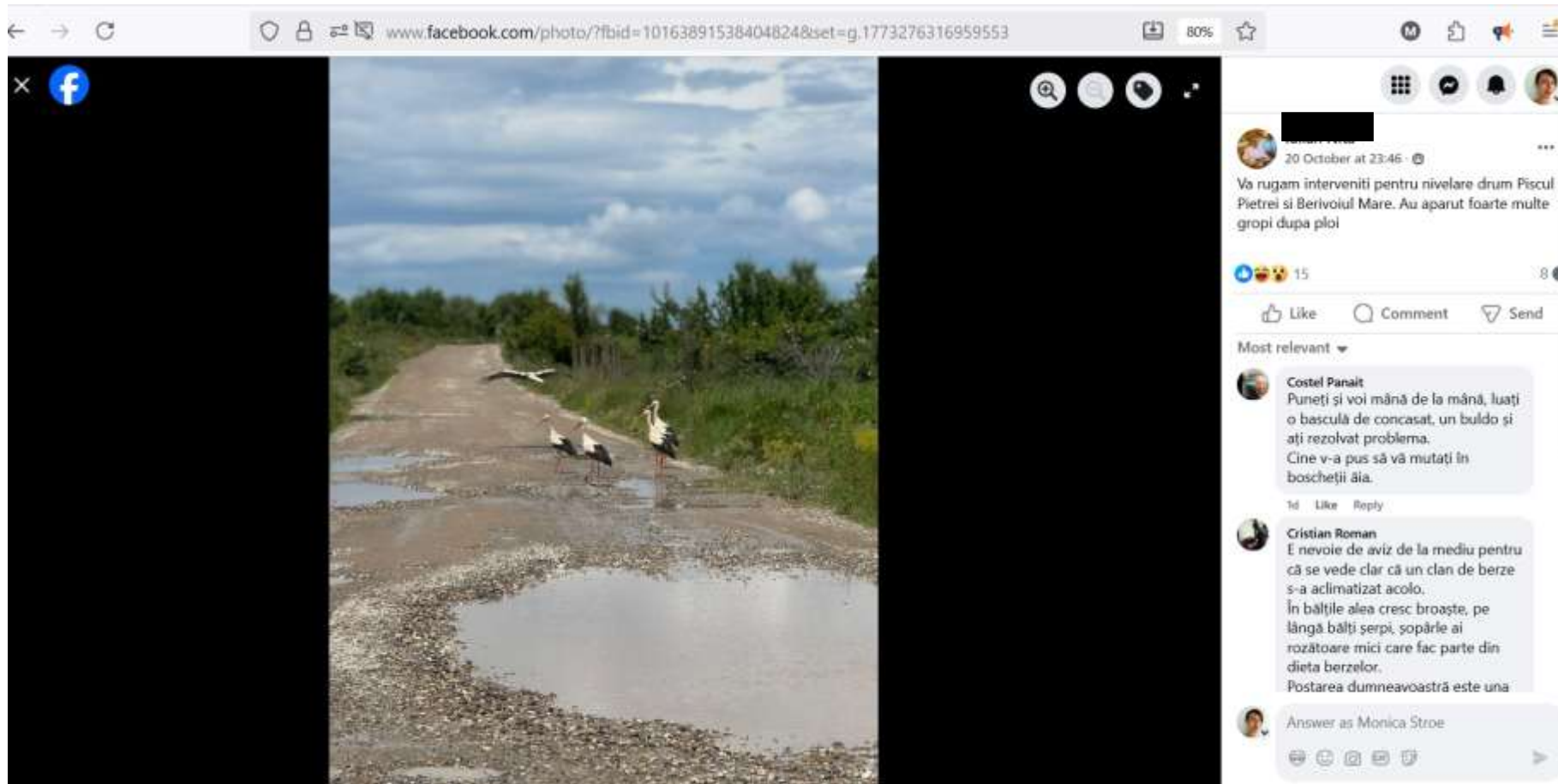
Liminal landscapes and urban transformation

- Often interpreted as indicators of the **economic and social transformations** of the city:
 - Transformations and ambiguities in property regimes (property restitution, shifts in land value etc.)
 - State disinvestment
 - Urban sprawl / sub-urbanisation / de-urbanisation / turbo-capitalism urban development (urban functions lagging behind development)
 - De-industrialisation
 - Destruction caused by armed conflict
- → can be read as “traces” of urban processes—**places where planning has failed or been suspended**



A 2006 photo of an unfinished hunger circus in the southwestern Rohava neighborhood that was later demolished to make way for a shopping mall.

Liminal landscapes and urban transformation



- There is a tension between the tendency to preserve these spaces and **the pressure of urban development**. As cities expand, liminal lands are often integrated into new real estate projects, losing their spontaneous character. Thus, they are **by definition temporary and unstable**.

Liminality and non-compliant presences in the city

Liminality and non-compliant presences

- **Spatial liminality** = refuge for undesirable, marginalised or invisible presences
- **Temporal liminality** – blocked evolution
- **Non-compliant life forms:** outside the taxonomies of hygiene, public health, safety, beauty

→ category extended to human presences in exclusionary discourse: homeless persons, refugees, migrants, minorities



<https://www.instagram.com/p/DGc7Zgduvnct0Ll2agrFPdZVP9GXYOyfT6yOoo0/>



<https://bucurestiulmeudrag.ro/fotografii/5903393a-f8dc-485c-a351-15a2592b13d5>

“Cleaning” the city of liminal presences

- Crows, pigeons ← hostile architecture, bioacoustic devices
- Stray dogs ← population control / extermination
- Ruderal plants / invasive species / *weeds** (ragweed, the Tree of Heaven) ← herbicides
- *Cockroaches, ticks, rats** ← disinsection, pest control

* Co-opted as metaphors for human populations perceived as “invasive”, used to marginalise or dehumanise specific groups, framing them as threats or outsiders



“Cleaning” the city of liminal presences

- “Cleaning” **extends to other man-made nonhuman entities:**
- → ruination of infrastructure (roads, trains, water supplies, waste and sewage systems, electric grids) transforms it into unwanted presences: rubble, trash, scrap metal

Greening the city's rubble in Berlin

- Berlin's rubble hills
 - post WW2 East and West Berlin's municipal administrations hired thousands of workers—many of them women—to clear the streets from rubble and **erase the traces** of war and genocide.
 - Paving the way for economic growth, large amounts of rubble were recycled to rebuild roads or landscaped into so-called rubble mountains.
 - Today, **Berlin's rubble mountains**—fourteen of them altogether—**appear as a natural part of the urban landscape**.
 - The notion of new life emerging from ruins thus formed key elements in the national imaginary after the war ([Diefendorf 1993](#)): “Rising from Ruins” (“*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*”) became the title of East Germany's national anthem in 1949

(Stoetzer 2018)



Teufelsberg (Devil's Mountain) Berlin (above)

Volkspark Prenzlauer Berg Berlin (below)





- Teufelsberg is not a natural mountain. It was made from rubble—the broken bones of Berlin after the war. Beneath its slopes lies the unbuilt military college of the era, buried forever by allied hands.
- Later, during the Cold War, it became something darker—a CIA spy station hidden under fiberglass domes. Giant ears listening in silence, scanning across the Iron Curtain. For decades, the world turned while these silent watchers stood still.
- **Now, they crumble.** The radar domes are torn open by time and covered in street art. No more secrets are heard here, only the sound of the wind.
- **Teufelsberg was born from destruction, and now it slowly returns to it.** This is not just a hill. It is Berlin's grave of memory, built from ruins and turned into ruins again. History here doesn't repeat—it haunts.
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/301367872451498/posts/787181103870170/>

“Cleaning” the city of liminal presences

- These spaces are becoming increasingly relevant in **contemporary discourses on sustainability**. Instead of being **eliminated or “cleaned up,”** they are sometimes **revalued as ecological resources** — regeneration areas, green corridors, or laboratories of urban biodiversity.



Promenade Plantée: a long-abandoned mid-19th century viaduct was converted into the world's first elevated park walkway in 1993

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2017/jun/07/paris-promenade-plantee-free-elevated-park-walkway-bastille-bois-de-vincennes>

Analytical toolkit

Analytical toolkit

- **tertiary landscapes - Gilles Clément (2004)**

- neglected, unmanaged and marginal spaces that act as a reservoir for biodiversity and spontaneous life (including areas such as roadsides, undeveloped fields, abandoned lots and even wilderness areas such as deserts and mountaintops).
- “third” in contrast to “first” (primary wilderness) and “second” (human-controlled and managed landscapes).

- ***terrains vagues* – Ignaci de Sola-Morales Rubio (1993/1995):**

- urban areas in which “movement and oscillation combine with the absence of a clear function and with uncertainty”; “Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply uninhabited, un-safe, un-productive. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative.”

- **unintentional natures / unintentional landscapes – Matthew Gandy (2007)**

- an aesthetic encounter with nature that has not been purposively created. It is a space that has nonetheless undergone some form of sensory enframement, perhaps only momentarily, as a focus of attention. It is not necessarily a space associated with visual delight or even disorientation, in a narrowly aesthetic sense, but something much less easy to categorise or define.
- ruderal and post-industrial biotopes, unsettled ‘plant sociology’, distinctive species assemblage

- **ecological inversion – Calin Cotoi (2024):**

- wild nature is possible and can only be glimpsed and understood through ruined infrastructure. Infrastructure and ecology are mutually framed and mutually constituted through the material and political environment of failed projects and rubble.

- **marginal, disturbed or abandoned urban spaces – Anna Tsing (2015)**

- barren lands, roadsides, construction sites, or interstitial spaces

Analytical toolkit - Ruderal ecologies

- Stoetzer 2022: research on Berlin urban nature: the ruderal as an analytic for ethnographic inquiry into contemporary urban life:
 - *Who is said to belong where? Who is racialized—and thus cast as less-than-human—with reference to nature or its ruination and thus rendered “out of place” in the city?*
 - *[H]ow **the governance of nature** in the city and its peripheries becomes **a key site in which racialized inequalities, borders, and the nation materialize**.*
 - *In the mid-2000s, the media frequently reported on the city’s diverse flora and fauna. Many **white Germans ventured out to explore urban nature** in Berlin. Meanwhile, the country was riddled with public dispute over the presence of refugees and migrants of color. As **parks became sites of debate over how migrant communities inhabit the urban environment**, many urban gardeners created so-called multicultural gardens to cultivate plants and alternative communities across class and ethnic difference, thus hoping to escape increasing social divisions.*

Stoetzer, B. (2022). *Ruderal city: Ecologies of migration, race, and urban nature in Berlin*. Duke University Press.

Ruderal plants

- *ruderal* ← *rudus* =(Lat.) rubble
- = *plant communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life: the cracks of sidewalks, the spaces alongside train tracks and roads, industrial sites, waste disposal areas, or rubble fields* ([Grime 1977](#)).
- = neither wild nor domesticated

(Stoetzer 2018)



<https://markinflowers.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/heres-to-the-ruderal/>

Ruderal plants

- = rubble flora
- *Their seeds had found their way into Berlin **via diverse transport routes***
 - *on the boots of soldiers or refugees during the war,*
 - *via packaging material from imported goods,*
 - *or hay transported on wagons by the Russian army for horses*
- *Following the dispersal and ecology of ruderal plants throughout the city, **a world of cosmopolitan connection and profound environmental change** unfolded in front of the botanists' eyes.*
- ***Increasing trade, migration, and urbanization** had created a diversification of habitats, and a new type of vegetation became visible*

(Stoetzer 2018)

The ruderal as analytic framework

- Drawing on my fieldwork and the history of urban ecology in Berlin, this essay develops **the notion of the ruderal as an analytical framework for rethinking the heterogeneity of urban life in the ruins of European nationalism and capitalism.**
- Attending to ruderal worlds, I argue, can redirect ethnographic attention toward **human–nonhuman relations that emerge spontaneously in inhospitable environments—and thus to often unnoticed, cosmopolitan yet precarious ways of remaking the urban fabric.**
- **an analytical lens that combines environmental perspectives with questions of migration, race, and social justice.**
- → to **juxtapose seemingly disparate stories and practices**
 - rubble plants growing in the ruins of war,
 - makeshift urban gardens that accommodate spontaneous vegetation in the shadow of the Berlin Wall,
 - the smoke emanating from Berlin’s racialized debates about barbecuing
- an analysis that examines **not only unruly nonhuman life** but also the broader, unintended ecologies of human-built structures and the multispecies worlds of which they become part. In short: **an ecology of unexpected neighbors in the city.**

(Stoetzer 2018)



<https://www.romatoday.it/politica/ventitre-milioni-campi-rom.html>

Nature – migration connections in urban settings: on “wild barbecuing” in German parks

- Berlin is turning into Saudi Arabia! 🧠💧 Chaotic scenes in Kreuzberg!
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3w05bWu7Fc>



- Viewers' comments:
- [@petraobermeier1549](#) *Camping and barbecuing in the park... but woe betide any German who exceeds their parking time, they get a ticket immediately!! It's enough to make you weep, what's going on in this country!! And far too many people see it as an enrichment!! It scares and angers me!!*
- [@marcelvos9322](#) *If I were to camp wild during a vacation, the police would tell me to leave, and I'd immediately receive a citation. It's strange and peculiar that they're allowed to do that.*
- [@lankwitzbear](#) *Another example of the discrimination against our own people or other native Europeans. They take what they want. No one asks. There are no consequences anyway. This has nothing to do with culture and diversity. Selfishness, cutthroat competition, ruthlessness. Primitive and crude.*

- Barbecuing in the park? City of Essen deploys security forces | RTL WEST, May 13, 2024
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yhxxh_1RmQ-8



- *When it comes to barbecuing in parks, there's often trouble. Litter, noise, smoke. Many residents are bothered by it. That's why the city has designated barbecue areas. To ensure all the rules are followed, a security service monitors the meadows. Juliana Jundi's family had settled down comfortably in the shade under a tree when the two security guards arrived. The problem: their grill was also under a tree – which is prohibited. So the family moved their barbecue a few meters away in Essen's city park. The warning didn't bother 19-year-old Juliana, however. "They were nice and told us we weren't allowed to barbecue under the tree. We understood – of course." Juliana Jundi is even glad that someone is taking care of things. After all, the park is very crowded. The two security guards are also responsible for enforcing other rules. For example, barbecuing is only allowed until 9 p.m., and disposable grills are prohibited. Parsam lives near the city park in Essen and prefers not to give his last name. Instead of relaxing in the park on sunny weekends, he avoids the city park like the plague. Residents often even keep their windows closed because otherwise a lot of barbecue smoke drifts into their apartments. But that's not the only problem. "Some of them actually stay here until midnight. It's very loud and very dirty. Even days later, there's still a lot of trash," Parsam says during a brief visit to the park. The city actually wants to prevent exactly this with its security service. A city spokesperson promises that the security service listens to residents' concerns and takes action when necessary. However, the city considers the concept to be sound overall and intends to stick with the idea of public barbecue areas with law enforcement.*

www.visitberlin.de/en/barbecuing-berlin

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Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain and Tempelhof



One of the hottest places for summer in Berlin is the **Tempelhofer Feld**. If you don't bring your own barbecue, you don't have to miss out on burgers and sausages. In addition to drinks and snacks, both beer gardens on the field also offer delicious barbecue specialities.

Designated barbecue areas are:

- ✓ Near the Columbiadamm sports grounds (main entrance Columbiadamm)

<https://www.visitberlin.de/en/barbecuing-berlin> Resilience and cityscapes

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[2w](#) 🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼🐼 S should be in the Sewers, not in public parks... 😏

[jackeechevalier8](#)

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That's the way to treat those invaders

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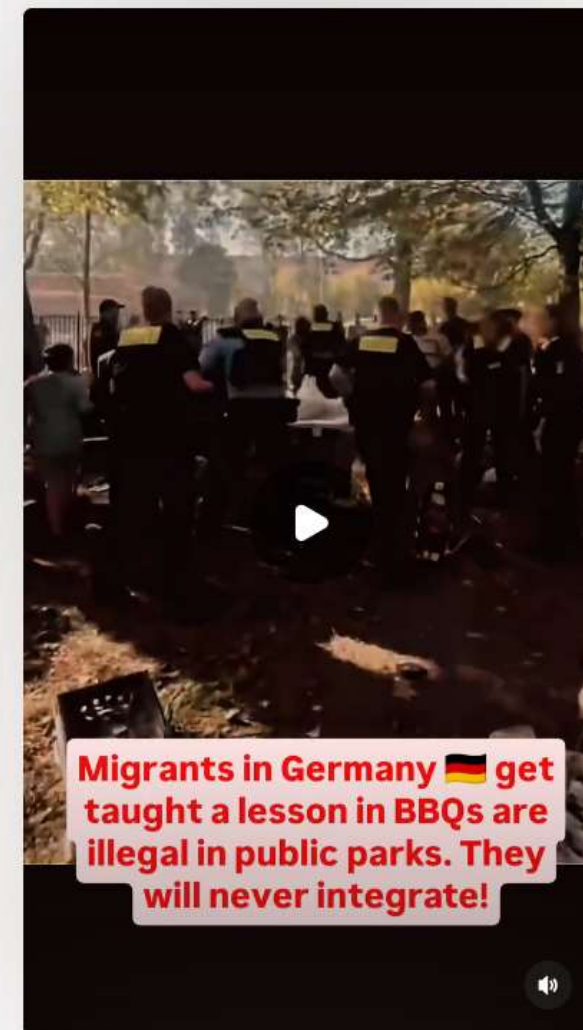
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Migrants in Germany 🇩🇪 get taught a lesson in BBQs are illegal in public parks. They will never integrate!...



https://www.instagram.com/reels/DX12jI5M_se/

“Domesticating” and “civilising” populations

- These debates echo **ideas about what it means to be German**: the notion of Heimat (home or homeland) conveys the idea that Germanness is rooted in the land and that **racialized bodies are foreign and threaten the natural world**. In recent years, local and national media have painted a gloomy picture of the capital’s migrant problem. They depict **scenes of unruly gangsters wreaking havoc on the tranquility of green space**, or of unemployed, **wild barbecuers**—pursuing a pastime popular among many of the city’s Middle Eastern residents—filling Berlin’s green lungs with smoke and littering its parks with garbage. Both the bodies of migrants and the environments they inhabit, as well as the smoke, meat, and litter they produce, figure as **polluting “matter out of place”** (Douglas 2002). Meanwhile, **migrants are rendered almost animal-like**, in need of containment (Stoetzer 2014c). **Tropes of undomesticated wilderness** also inform public policies—for example, in the form of EU-based integration projects aiming to undo racial segregation, poverty, and urban decay. **Attempts to integrate migrants** into German society through language classes, education, and neighborhood beautification projects follow **the colonial logic of civilizing populations**—cast as spatially and racially other—by forcing people to conform to national political, social, and economic norms.

(Stoetzer 2022)

Heritagisation of urban nature:
Văcărești area in Bucharest – from
wasteland to wild delta to natural park

Vacaresti as postsocialist heterotopia

- *Vacarești became part of the 1990s and 2000s postsocialist projects in the form of a planned car race ring or entertainment complex (and new reservoir)—a site for real estate projects, with the state, investors and former inhabitants, evacuated in the 1980s, vying for money, influence, memories, and imagined futures. These **quickly changing post-socialist projects**, and their ghostly resemblance with former socialist development plans (Chelcea and Druța 2016), was punctuated by the less coherent, wilder practices of millennial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:2).*
- *Amid legislation flaws, **garbage** from the nearby areas and **rubble** from new buildings or renovations flowed in the empty lake. In the mid-1990s, a shepherd from a village nearby and his **flock of sheep** occupied part of the space. At Easter, it would turn into an apocalyptic landscape, as it became a slaughter site [...]. During the weekends, neighbourhood teens drifted their cars on the concrete slab walls of the Pit. **Informal scrappers** mined the ruins for iron bars. Using makeshift traps of tree branches and glue, young kids, and the odd drug addict, caught singing birds and sold them at the nearby market. From time to time some young ecologists would fight the **bird catchers** inside and outside the Pit. The reeds would sometimes be set on fire, smoke billowing above the whole area.*

(Cotoi 2021)

National Geographic photoreport as founding moment

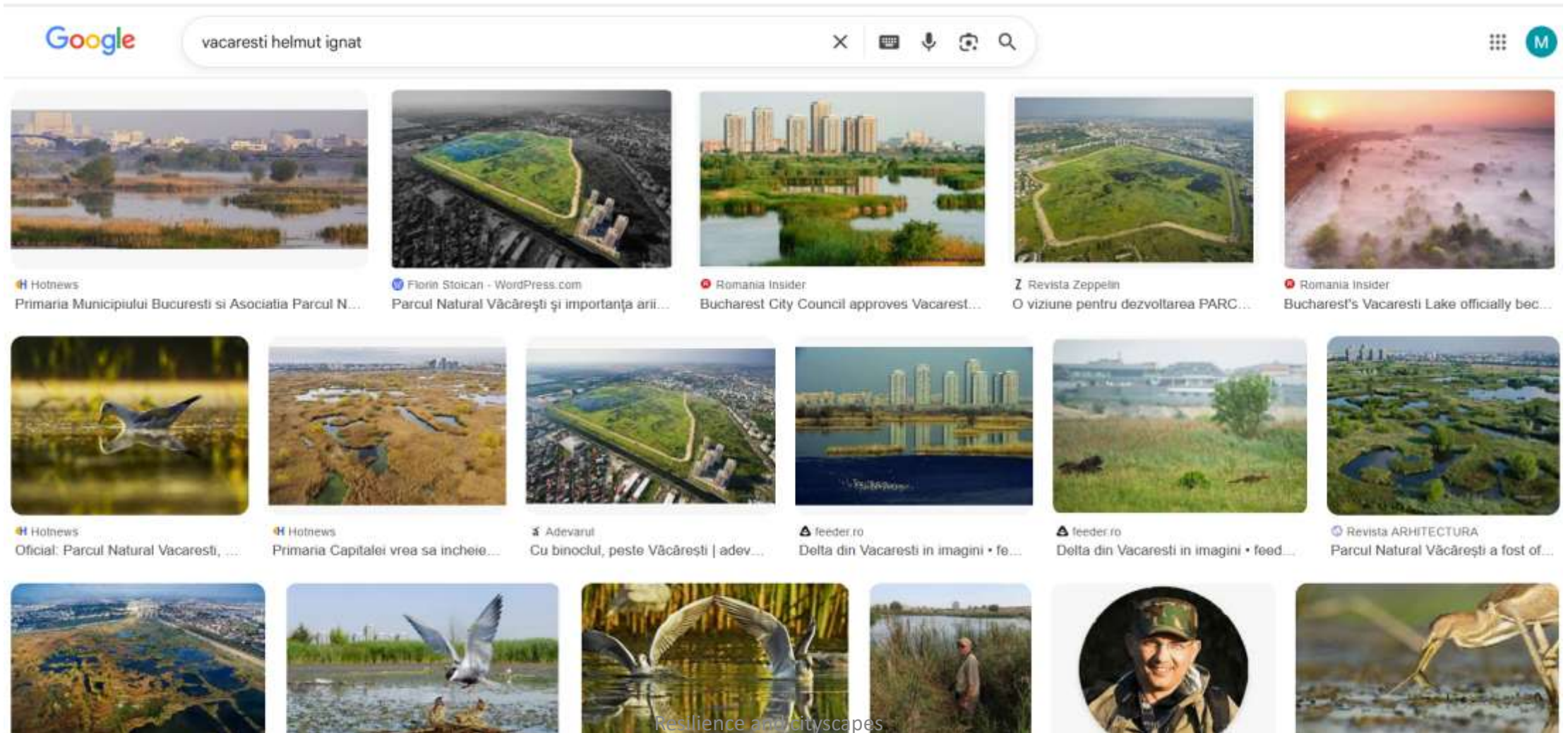
- A 190-hectare area in the center of Bucharest has become a small delta. **A labyrinth of canals, gullies, lakes, and reed thickets host a rich fauna, including many species protected at European level. Nature has gifted Bucharesters with a wetland with a vigorous and rich ecosystem,** is the opinion of the biologists who studied it, of the photographers who brought us excellent hunting trophies with their telephoto lenses. More than just writing an article, National Geographic Romania magazine is joining an initiative to establish an urban reservation in Groapa Văcărești, a place for recreation, education, and nature culture, and also a tourist attraction.

(Cristian Lascu, National Geographic 2012)

- Full article: <https://parculnaturalbucuresti.ro/2014-09-10-delta-dintre-blocuri/>



The visual politics of representation: the visual coding of Văcărești as a natural area





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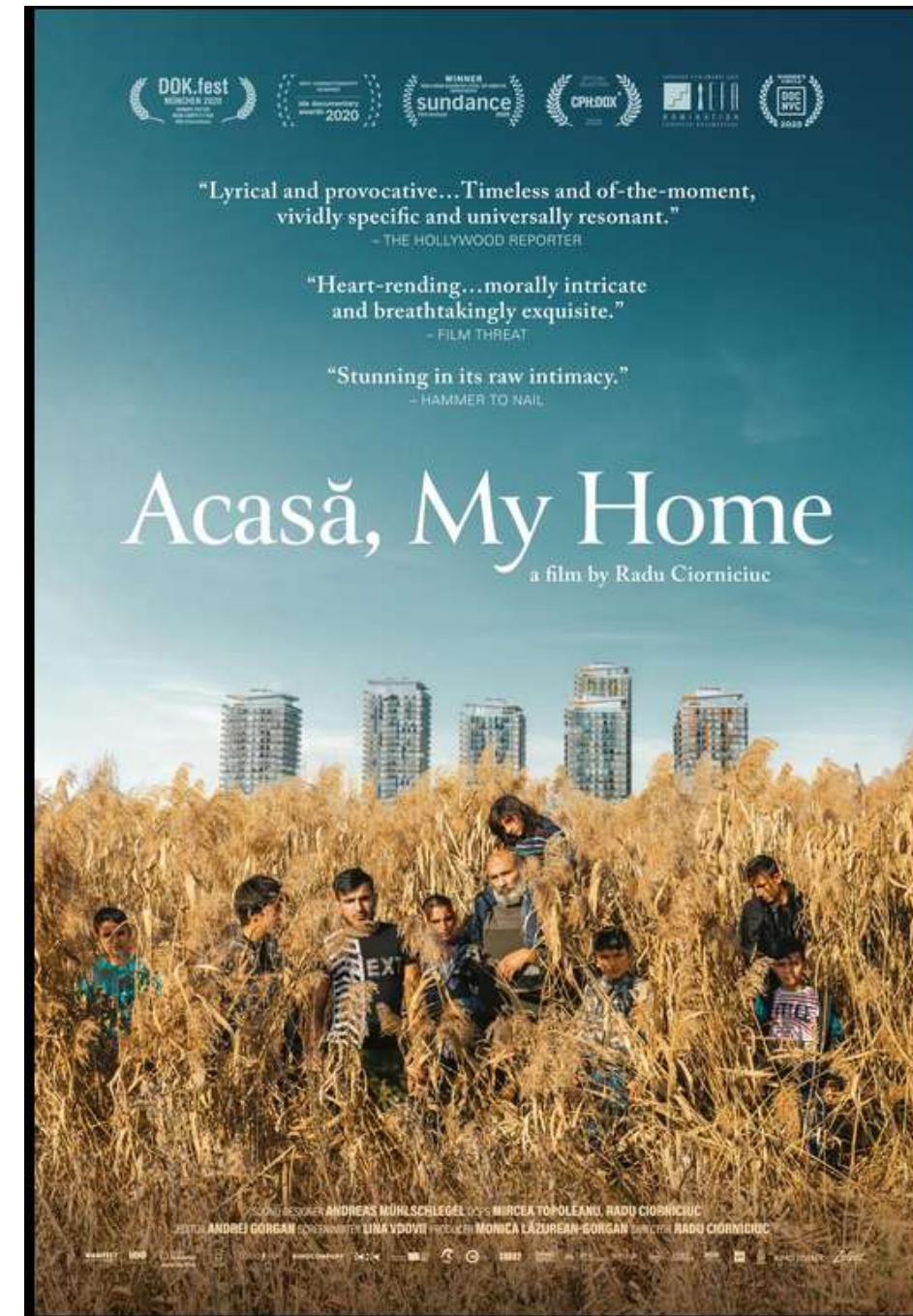
Vacărești Natural Park - protected natural area status

- Designation as Natural Park by Government Decision (2016) → the first urban natural park in Romania and the first protected natural area in the municipality of Bucharest
 - = “cleaning” the area of uncontrolled presence, risk factors (residents and makeshift dwellings and fishermen – fire risk)
 - = management (unclogging ponds, extinguishing vegetation fires, trimming trees)
- Natural value:
 - Gaining consensus also due to the monumental representations (drone-view), but also the assimilation with the landscapes of the Danube Delta, which meet consensus (wetland species)
- Development / infrastructures → Visual, aesthetic, recreational consumption
 - Birdwatching tower, paths, bike paths, access road, information panels



<https://www.taradacilor.ro/2019/12/30/vizitati-delta-dintre-blocuri-delta-vacaresti-sau-parcul-natural-vacaresti/>

- Acasa [My Home] (dir. Radu Ciorniciuc 2020):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOdUY_sL-ok



How does the resilience of ruderal presences manifest itself? How is it visible in the field?

- The ecological perspective:
 - these environments are characterised by surprisingly **high biodiversity**. Ruderal species are adapted to unstable conditions, poor soils and frequent interventions. They are **resilient, opportunistic and able to quickly colonize new spaces**, which makes them relevant in the context of **climate change and urban adaptation**.
- The social perspective:
 - these spaces are often **ambivalent**
 - perceived as **unkempt, dangerous or “out of order”**
 - can become spaces for **exploration, play, informal practices or even alternative forms of city use**. They offer a freedom that regulated spaces do not allow.

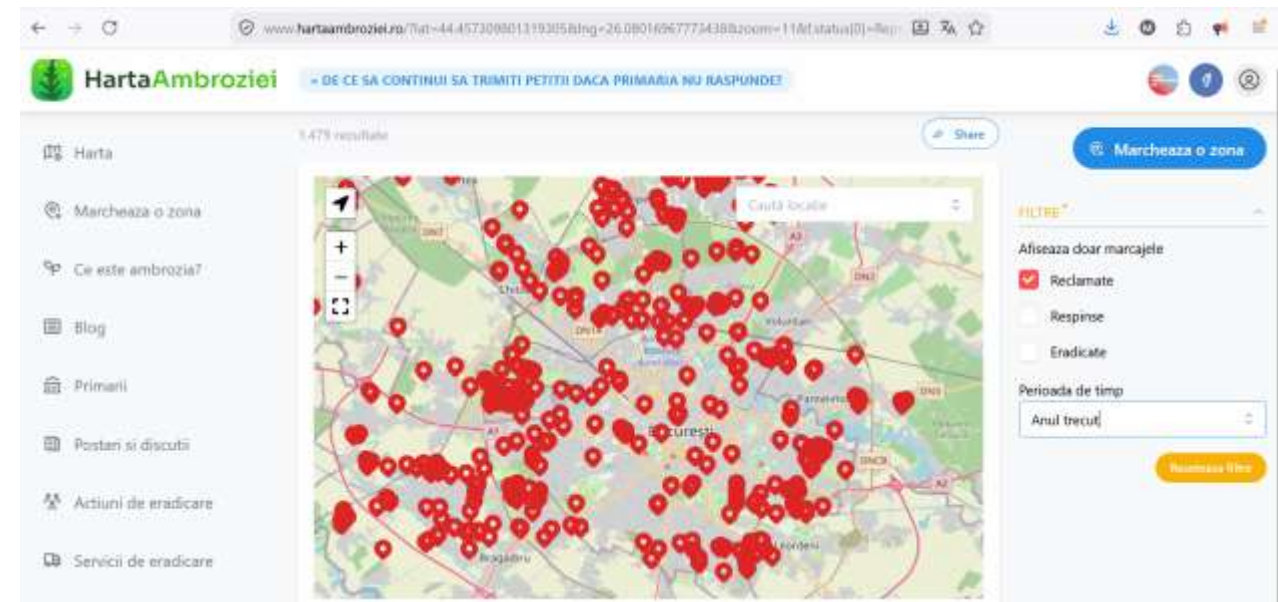
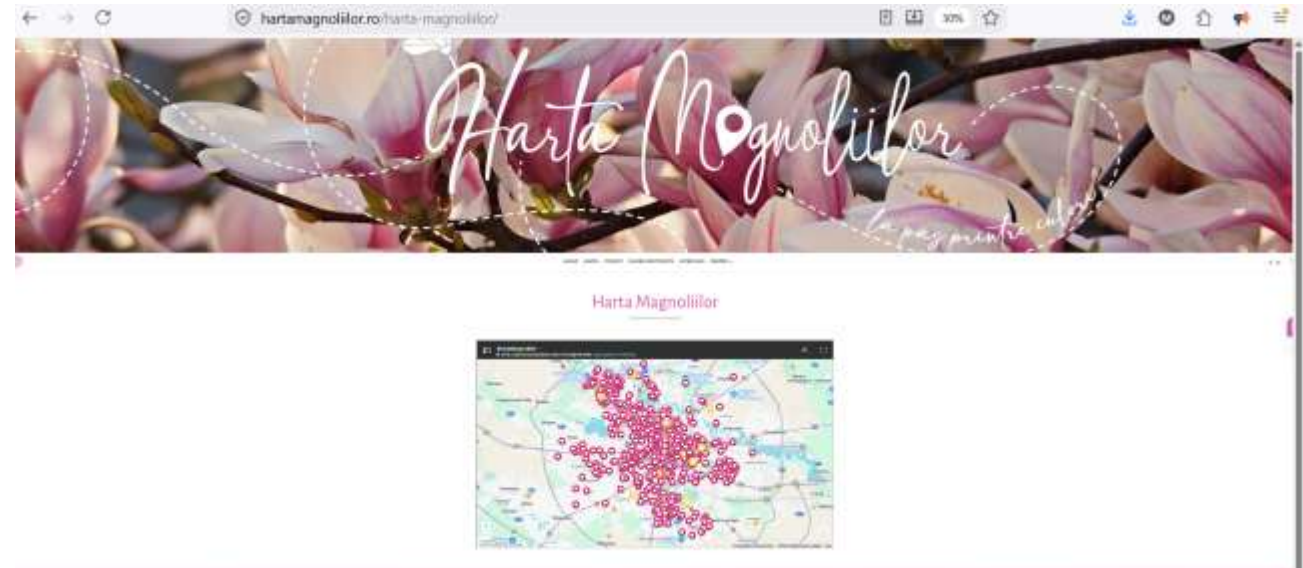


<https://theconversation.com/the-amazing-flowers-growing-in-pavement-cracks-and-why-you-shouldnt-pass-them-by-236953>

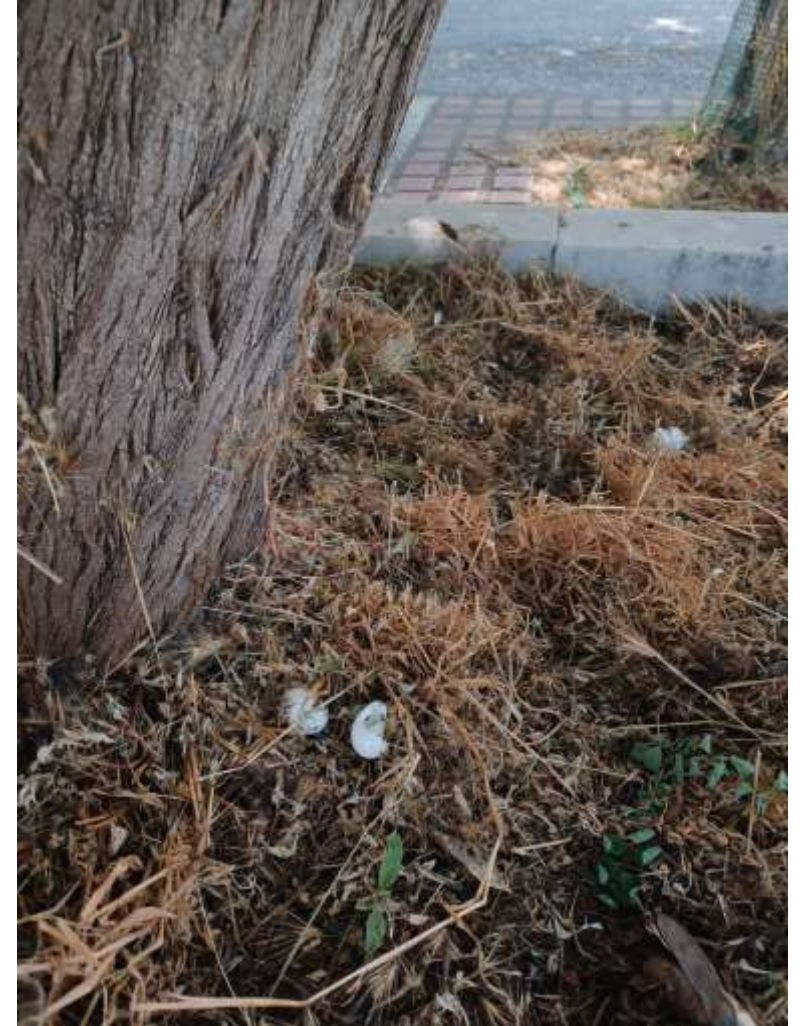
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- Ruderal ecologies challenge the idea of control over nature in the city. They show that **nature is not completely domesticated and that there are autonomous processes that escape planning** → a reconfiguration of the relationship between the urban and the natural → a more **complex and less hierarchical coexistence**.
- → Heritagisation of urban nature: magnolias vs ragweed



Entanglements, (in)visibility, negotiation



Infrastructures of care



Resilience and cityscapes

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