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Urban Safer Space

An intervention at the intersection of bio- and neurodiversity

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Urban Safe(r) Space

In a general sense, a safe space is a place or situation in which a person is protected from any harm or danger. Someone's own home may be their safe space. A place where people can openly discuss a subject without having to fear reprisal, can be considered a safer space. A space can never be safe for everyone, because every person's experience is different and they may still face discrimination, prejudice and violence in a space that has been declared safe by another person or group. For this reason the term 'safer space' has been adopted and preferred in popular discourse. The word 'safer' acknowledges that not everyone feels safe under the same conditions.¹ I will therefore refer to the project as a safer space from now on.

Together with Meda Retegan and Frida Stenbäck we developed an art installation and platform connecting Bio- and Neurodiversity, attempting to provide a safer space for different urban species, as well as discussions around neurodiversity in urban environments. Bio- and Neurodiversity may seem thematically apart at first. However, by fusing these topics together, we were able to find and make connections and overlaps, which opened a range of new possibilities for practical implementation and material exploration. The following text was written in collaboration with Frida Stenbäck and Meda Retegan and presents the conceptual framework of the project:

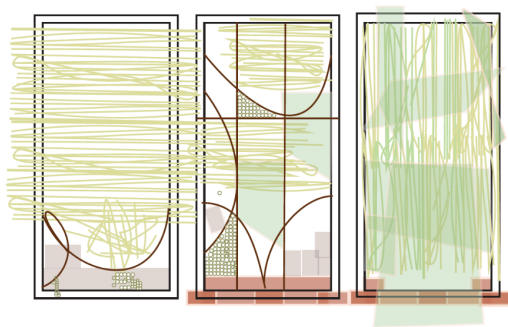
The project consists of a co-creation process and an art installation, designed with the aim of bringing neurodiverse and interspecies perspectives into shaping the city ecosystem and fostering pathways for a more just cohabitation.

The process-based work takes place in different public spaces around Vienna through the act of nesting. The focus is on fostering discourse on the livability of cities from

¹ Mental Health Commission Canada, n.d.

different perspectives, while increasing agency through non-consumerist and sustainable approaches to creativity.

With the aim of unfolding beyond the original human bound co-making, the final art installation invites spontaneous multispecies encounters, while its production process provides local and foraged nesting materials to be inhabited, transformed and metabolized by different species, organisms and natural forces.



common reed



reed stems (pipes)



willow / Salix Viminalis



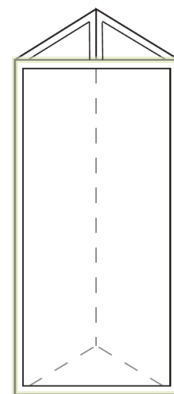
natural clay



handmade paper/pulp (either from plants or recycled newspapers)



bricks / weights



installed in the shape of periaktoi when standing without supporting infrastructure

Sketches by Frida Stenbäck



Weaving with reeds at Wienerberg

Through workshops we aim to collect accounts, opinions and views relating to sensory experiences and wellbeing in the city (of humans and more-than-human). The workshops are designed to be inclusive and considerate of neurodiversity. Design decisions are informed by the Neu project, a neuro-inclusion guide for event planning, and Robyn's rocket, a series of inclusive conscious music events, as outlined in the section 'Neuro-Inclusive Events'. Because inclusivity is a process, future decisions will be informed by feedback received from participants. The peculiarity and interactivity of the art installation, as well as the act of crafting, may create a soothing environment for participants and is in itself a topic of conversation, which may aid the overall ambience and therefore success of the workshops. In the future, Urban Nesting could be employed to aid design research efforts around the topic of restorative cities, which are inclusive and considerate of bio- and neurodiversity. Furthermore, the prototype of the art installation could

develop into more permanent forms that are positioned around the city. During the course of this semester, we have taken first steps in this direction.

The following chapters provide an outline of the research on neurodiversity and mental health in urban environments which informed this project. I will provide examples of neuro-inclusive architecture, urban design and event planning. While biodiversity and interspecies relationships are an important part of the conceptual and practical side of the project, I will focus on neurodiversity and design in this paper, as these are the areas of research I was most invested in over the course of this semester, while my colleagues Frida Stenbäck and Meda Retegan contributed their knowledge and experience concerning biodiversity, multi-species environments, ecology and crafting.

The following chapter provides an introduction to Neurodiversity - a glossary of terms and their history. In 'Neuro-Inclusive' design I will outline existing projects and initiatives related to Neurodiversity. In the section 'Design Research' I summarise conversations I had with Autistic and ADHD citizens about their experience of urban environments. As a neurodivergent person myself, an ADHDer and someone who experiences sensory processing differences, I will also describe personal experiences relevant to the subject matter.

Neurodiversity - A Definition of Terms

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes the diversity of human minds and the limitless variability of human nervous systems. The term Neurodiversity was shaped by the sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s. Although this term may refer to all beings with nervous systems, as Singer states on her website, she decided to limit it to

homo sapiens so that it could support a human rights advocacy purpose. According to Singer, the term **biodiversity** shall cover the rest.²

Neurodivergent

To be neurodivergent means to have a mind and nervous system that is neurologically different from ‘typical,’ meaning the dominant societal standard of how someone processes Information, learns, communicates, and behaves.

The terms ‘neurodivergent’ and ‘neurodivergence’ were coined by neurodiversity activist Kassiane Asasamu in the year 2000. Neurodivergent is a broad term and includes all people whose neurocognitive functions diverge from dominant societal norms. A neurodivergence can be innate, meaning it is genetic, or it can be acquired. Autism and dyslexia are examples of innate neurodivergence, while trauma and brain injury are examples of developed neurodivergence.³

Neurotypical

Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent and refers to the way of being from which neurodivergent people diverge. Neurotypicals are those whose neurocognitive functions are more closely aligned with what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ under dominant societal standards.⁴

The term neurotypical does not mean that all neurotypical brains are the same. It merely provides the necessary vocabulary for talking about neurodiversity. For example, two online groups I am part of frequently use terms associated with the neurodiversity movement. One of these groups exists mainly as a community for

² Singer, 2019

³ Walker, 2021

⁴ Walker, 2021

people with ADHD. The other group is more focused on Autism, albeit not limited to it. Members can ask questions and seek other members' advice. Problems addressed in these groups often concern interpersonal communication with people who are not neurodivergent. To have a term such as 'neurotypical' expedites this exchange.

Neurocognition

The science of neurocognition deals with the connection between processes happening in our nervous systems and the brain functions responsible for how we learn, retain, and recall information.

The nervous system processes sensory input - what we hear, see, and feel. The term "cognitive" (from the Latin word *cognoscere* - knowing, recognizing) describes functions related to perception, learning, remembering, thinking, and recognizing. Standard human cognitive functions are attention, creativity, planning, orientation, imagination, and willpower.⁵

Neurodiversity Movement

The Neurodiversity movement is a social justice and civil rights movement that seeks to achieve full social inclusion of neurodivergent people.

In the mid-90s, autism advocacy groups started to form that, for the first time in history, were led by Autistic people. Many of these organisations still exist today and fight for more awareness and against prejudices, mistreatment, and exclusion of Autistic people. Judy Singer predicted this movement would soon expand into

⁵ Gesundheitsportal, kognitiv

further alliances with other neurodivergent people and wanted to give this movement a name.⁶

Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm is a specific perspective on neurodiversity and provides a philosophical foundation for the efforts of the neurodiversity movement. The author of “Neuroqueer Heresies”, Nick Walker, lists the following principles as fundamental to the neurodiversity paradigm:

“1. Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.

2. The idea there is one ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ type of brain or mind, or one ‘right’ style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one ‘normal’ or ‘right’ ethnicity, gender, or culture.

3. The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential.”⁷

The Medical Model of Disability versus the Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability was initially coined by disabled academic Mike Oliver in the 1980s, who described disability as a political status constructed by society’s systems. The medical model of disability understands disability as existing mainly inside the body and mind of an individual and not about societal barriers. In this

⁶ Singer, 2019

⁷ Walker, 2021

context, disability is seen as something wrong with someone and needs to be treated or cured through personal changes.⁸

Most countries' systems and institutions approach disability using the medical model of disability. The Autistic social psychologist Dr. Devon Price states in his book "Unmasking Autism", that medical care and the medical lens are appropriate for many illnesses and disabilities. However, it fails to make sense of disabilities that come from social exclusion and oppression. He compares this exclusion to how being gay was once classed as a mental illness that needed to be cured. This ostracisation caused further psychological damage and contributed to depression, anxiety, substance use, and other psychological issues.

Advocates of the social model of disability do not reject the medical establishment nor consensual attempts to cure certain illnesses and disabilities but urge for a more balanced view of disability and a more accessible world with less human suffering.⁹ Dr. Devon Price says that such a world is also more welcoming to people with mental illnesses, immigrants, diasporic people, and anyone who has suffered because "they don't conform to current ideals of the 'perfect, cookie-cutter' worker bee". Price gives the following examples to better illustrate the social model of disability:

"Most educational institutions exclude Deaf students. There are entire school systems and communities run by Deaf people, for Deaf people, where everyone uses sign language and access to audio captioning and other resources are provided as a matter of course. In this context, being Deaf is not a disability. In fact, a hearing person who doesn't know sign language is the one who would be marginalized, if they were living in a Deaf-centered world. [...] A world where everyone uses sign language is possible, but because hearing people have greater numbers and more social power than Deaf people do, spoken language gets prioritised. Similarly, a world

⁸ Price, 2022

⁹ Price, 2022

where eye contact is not required is entirely possible (and in fact, there are many cultures where avoiding eye contact is considered polite). However, in cultures where eye contact is expected, the Autistic people who find it painful are dis-abled both socially and professionally. And it isn't just Autistics who are penalized by this norm: people who find eye contact difficult because of social anxiety, trauma, or because their home culture discourages it are also harmed by this social norm.”¹⁰

Numerous studies provide evidence for higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, OCD, and other mental health issues, co-curing with certain neurodivergence such as Autism and ADHD. Although comorbidities can be attributed to genetic factors, they are often caused by external factors such as social exclusion. Many neurodivergent people camouflage their traits and use compensatory behavior to avoid being identified as having a disability. Someone with sensory sensitivities might sit through the pain of uncomfortable noise without complaining about it or rely on earbuds and noise-cancelling headphones to avoid sensory overload. In the Autistic community camouflaging your traits and behavior is often referred to as masking.¹¹

Neuro-Inclusive Design

As outlined earlier, current social systems and environments can be disabling for many neurodivergent people who may otherwise thrive under the right conditions. This problem is slowly getting picked up by designers worldwide, who seek to rethink how we design spaces and systems. Many of them believe that design, which is more accommodating to the needs of neurodivergent individuals, extends its benefits to the well-being of neurotypicals. As outlined by Dr. Devon Price in “Unmasking Autism”, many people, neurodivergent or not, struggle with long

¹⁰ Price, 2022

¹¹ Price, 2022

workdays, lengthy commutes, outdated school systems, unclear signage, traffic noise, a lack of recreational space, and other designed realities. Such realities can reduce the quality of life and even lead to various mental health problems, as I will demonstrate in the following sections.

The following design examples focus on projects created by people who agree that design inclusive of neurodiversity also benefits the general population. I believe that the interest in neurodiversity will keep growing and will soon reveal further benefits, leading to better cities, buildings and systems.

ASPECTSS* Design Index

The ASPECTSS* design index is a design framework based on a decade-long research effort. It was published in 2013 and has since gained global attention from students, architects, autism service providers, policymakers, and consultancies. It was developed by Progressive Architects, an architectural consultancy based in Cairo, Egypt, led by architect and designer Magda Mostafa.

The ASPECTSS* design index was developed to address the gap of autism being underrepresented in inclusion literature and research concerning the built environment. In a research paper by Magda Mostafa from 2015, Mostafa admits the development of an autism design code to be debatable, given the vast scope and diversity of people on the spectrum. The ASPECTSS* Design Index may however be a tool for providing guidance.¹²

The ASPECTSS* design index consists of seven criteria proposed to facilitate architecture for autism:

¹² Mostafa, 2015

- Acoustic
Relating to a controlled acoustical environment
- Spatial Sequencing
Relating to predictability and routine of a space
- Escape Space
Providing a break from over-stimulation
- Compartmentalisation
Organizing a room or a building into compartments with clearly defined functions and sensory quality. It provides cues as to what is expected of the user in each space, with minimal ambiguity.
- Transitions
Transition zones help users recalibrate their senses as they move between rooms.
- Sensory zoning
This criterion proposes to organize spaces in accordance with their sensory quality.
- Safety
This point is relevant when designing for children. Safety measures in this context can look like hot water safety fittings and avoid sharp edges and corners.¹³

What drew me to Progressive Architects and ASPECTSS* initially was their currently shown exhibition, “A sense for Autistic decolonisation - Autistic Escape”, at the

¹³ ASPECTSS* Architecture for Autism, 2023

Venice Biennale 2023 in the Palazzo Mora, European Cultural Center, curated by Magda Mostafa. In the exhibition, Progressive Architects reflect on ASPECTSS in a broader societal sense, placing it in the context of sensory colonization of humans in general and emphasizing on the value of looking at built environments through an Autistic lens. This approach signalizes an affirmative attitude toward the value neurodiversity brings to society and could be seen as aligning with the neurodiversity paradigm. The description of the project states,

“Our built world today is increasingly a victim of capitalistic proliferation. Our spaces, surfaces, experiences, and cognition have become a commodity, and our cities have become canvases for sensory media, competing for our attention. Our sensory perception has become commodified, and our sensory world has been colonized. No more so is this a challenge than through the autistic experience.

As a unique but equally valid way of seeing the world, the autistic experience affords us a litmus test for sensory taxation. It can expose the impact of this sensory commodification on our cognition, mental bandwidth, and ability to access space equitably.”¹⁴

The exhibition is made up of two sensory experiences. One is a collage documenting experiences of sensory overload from Autistic individuals around the world. It uses audio, photography, digital collage, and film to capture the impact of sensory colonization of cities on Autistic citizens. The second experience provides a space to escape the multi-sensory noise of the first exhibition experience. It demonstrates the value of sensory refuge and invites citizens to speculate on the cost of this sensory imposition.

“Our goal is to highlight the need for a spatial infrastructure that allows the full spectrum of sensory experiences- escape, retreat, and refuge from sensory

¹⁴ ASPECTSS* Architecture for Autism, 2023

over-stimulation while allowing for sensory seeking. We hope that with these steps, we can create cities, spaces, and places that are more available for all experiences.”¹⁵



A video photocomposite capturing the sensory experiences along a less busy path out of the DCU campus”, copyright: Stuart Neilsen

Snoezelen Room

Another design that deals with sensory seeking and sensory refuge is Snoezelen. Snoezelen are relaxation spaces designed to reduce agitation and anxiety. The name is based on the Dutch verbs “snuffelen” (to seek and explore) and “doezelen” (to relax). Snoezelen was developed in the 1970s by Dutch therapists Jan Hulsege and Ad Verheul. Snoezelen provides:

- A multi-sensory environment makes use of light installations
- Objects for touching and fidgeting
- Comfortable places to sit or lie down
- Video projections
- Auditory and olfactory experiences

¹⁵ ASPECTSS* Architecture for Autism, 2023

Today Snoezelen is used in schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, dementia care units, mental health facilities, churches, community centers and pools, rehabilitation facilities, and in people's homes.



snoezelen room, copyright: Snoezelen

Through my experience, online forums, and interviews with people with various sensory needs, I realized the lack of space to decompress from overwhelm. Outside of one's home, the possibilities of finding a place to decompress are unfortunately limited. Normalizing sensory escapes and opportunities for sensory seeking would improve many people's lives while at the same time creating more understanding of different sensory needs.

Design Research

In the book "Restorative Cities" by Jenny Roe and Layla McCay, the authors set a framework that addresses how urban design can support psychological well-being.

It is especially relevant considering the growth of cities and increasing rates of stress and mental illness in urban areas globally. Roe and McCay make a case for how to tackle these challenges in a model they call 'restorative urbanism.' This model is made up of seven pillars: The Green City, The Blue City, The Sensory City, The Neighbourhood City, The Active City, The Playable City, and The Inclusive City.

The authors quote several studies to demonstrate how exposure to natural environments can improve mental health and help manage the symptoms of ADHD, schizophrenia, dementia, and anxiety disorders. It is hereby relevant what type of green space is provided, the richness of biodiversity, patterns of use, views of nature, and accessibility of that green space from home. Urban green space can mean anything from community gardens, public parks, urban woodlands, sports fields, and children's play areas to streetscapes with trees, green walls, and green roofs. McCay and Roe emphasize the importance of further research into the relationship between urban green space and mental health, as it is unclear precisely what characteristics of green space benefit mental health and how exactly contextual factors play into it, as we cannot assume that the mental health benefits will be equal for all citizens.

The authors also outline the impact of the urban environment on our senses and how our senses can be harnessed to improve wellbeing. Noise is classified as a pollutant by the World Health Organisation and has been linked to several health problems and increased states of stress, anxiety and anger.¹⁶ Pleasant soundscapes on the other hand, such as the sound of a stream, waves or happy people in a park, can decrease stress levels.

A lesser known sensory influence on health is sight. Streets have become more monotonous over the years, which activates processes that can be harmful to mental health. A visually monotonous street view can lead to lower levels of interest and pleasures and rumination on negative thoughts. This in turn increases the risk

¹⁶ World Health Organisation, 2010

of depression and anxiety. Similarly, monotonous streets can cause boredom, which is associated with stress and risky behaviours. It can also reduce people's interest in interacting with the environment and thus reducing opportunities to interact socially. Monotonous streets also lack visual navigation cues and landmarks and can pose a challenge for people with dementia. Natural features can contribute to more personality and diversity in the streets. A good balance and harmony seems equally important, as visually discordant objects and clutter can cause more confusion.¹⁷

Learning about myself as someone with sensory and information processing differences, I have been thinking more deeply about the effects of streets on well-being. Often when I reach the end of a noisy, busy street, I feel entirely drained. Sometimes I even need to sit down and rest. I always felt this way, but couldn't pin down the reason. Through exchanging and sharing experiences with neurodivergent people I identified sensory overwhelm as the culprit. First, I tried to follow people's advice and wear noise-cancelling headphones. This advice, however, poses a danger to my safety, as I don't hear bicycles and cars approaching. More recently, I started to avoid such streets whenever possible and find alternative, less busy routes, even though they may be longer. I found myself able to retain more energy this way. Unfortunately there sometimes is no alternative route or even a possibility to rest. Contrary to overstimulation, I also experience understimulation. I sometimes watch videos on my phone while walking on the street or listen to music or a podcast with my headphones on.

People with sensory and information processing differences can experience extreme emotional states when exposed to upsetting sensory information for too long. This sensory overload can result in confusion, anger, crying, feeling irritable or difficulties concentrating. To avoid such states we adopt tools and strategies to calm and shield ourselves from overwhelming situations. One of the people I

¹⁷ Roe & McCay, 2021

interviewed for my research is my friend Alex¹⁸, an Autistic ADHDer. Alex often avoids busy streets and environments and wears earplugs or fiddles with a stim toy in their pocket. A stim toy refers to 'stimming', short for self-stimulatory behavior. Focusing on the toy, rather than on people helps Alex navigate through stressful environments. A snack or favourite drink can also help. Alex likes social rules, such as having to stand on the right side of the escalator. Social rules make environments more predictable and reduce stress. Alex appreciates trees, because they provide shade, block noise and accommodate animals they like to observe. Sometimes they walk through a park, rather than taking the most efficient route. Although this happens rarely, Alex has been in situations, where these tools and strategies don't help enough, in which case they have to take more drastic measures, such as taking a taxi instead of public transport. Some of the change Alex would like to see in urban environments includes a reduction in traffic, planting more trees, and creating more quiet zones and sensory experiences, such as sensory rooms.

Lana¹⁹, a person with ADHD and sensory sensitivities, also wishes for quiet zones and more green space. She relies on headphones, earplugs, stim toys and sunglasses. Lana always wears sunglasses to the supermarket and on the subway. She can cope with the subway, as long as she wears sunglasses and headphones. However, it is impossible for Lana to have a conversation with someone while riding the subway, because the noise is simply too much. She prefers to avoid certain places like bars, shops and shopping centres.

The Helen Hamlyn Centre of Design has recently started looking into people's experiences with sensory and information processing differences. In collaboration with the Royal College of Art and the IMDC College of Art, they aim to reimagine streets that are more inclusive and considerate of neurodiversity. In an online survey shared via social media, individuals with sensory and information processing

¹⁸ *Name changed for confidentiality

¹⁹ *Name changed for confidentiality

differences or their carers/supporters are invited to share their opinions, ideas, and experiences of the streets. As participants, we are asked questions such as what our sensory and information differences are, feelings of the body and mind when navigating the roads, valuable objects (e.g.: noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses), effect on mental well-being, and more. Rather than working mainly with organizations, experts or parents of neurodivergent people, the Helen Hamlyn Centre of Design chooses to address people with lived experience. This methodology is aligned with the participatory and citizen-led- approach that neurodiversity, critical disability studies, and critical autism studies movements are advocating for, as adopted in the motto "Nothing About Us Without Us", widely used by disability rights movements.²⁰

For in-person research efforts involving neurodivergent citizens, it may be useful to adopt best practice guidance, such as provided by the Neu Project - An Event Professional's Guide to neuro-inclusion, created by Google. Some of the suggestions outlined in this guide concern visual design, language, prediction and predictability, representation, senses, social interaction, recovery spaces and possibilities for feedback from participants/visitors. To reduce stress from social interaction, the Neu project recommends communication badges, which state the wearer's communication preference. The wearer can choose between 'I'll be your friend' and 'I'm not interested in talking right now'. Robyn's Rocket, a series of Inclusive Conscious music events, uses a similar strategy to ease the pressure of communication and reduce stress from sensory overwhelm. At Robyn's rocket, visitors receive a rocket- badge. Wearing the rocket facing upwards means the wearer is happy to talk, someone with a sideways rocket only wants to talk to someone they know and a rocket facing down means 'I don't want to talk to anyone'. Robyn's rocket also provides ear defenders and sunglasses for visitors who need them.

²⁰ Roe & McCay, 2021

Final Thoughts

Although awareness around Neurodiversity is growing, stereotypes and prejudice still dominate society and lead to social exclusion, contributing to a range of mental health problems in neurodivergent individuals. Contributing to awareness of Neurodiversity through art and design will create more understanding and acceptance.

By providing insight into neurodiversity and neuro-inclusive design, I demonstrated the relevance and potential of viewing the world through a neurodiverse lens and thinking with neurodiversity in mind. To quote Dr. Devon Price,

“A world that is accepting of difference is a safer and more nourishing place for everyone.”

The Urban Safe Space/Urban Nesting project creates space for reflecting and sharing experiences of the city, and thus contributes to raising awareness for neurodiversity in urban environments. Mapping overlaps and connections between bio- and neurodiversity opens an intriguing perspective on urban life and allows for interdisciplinary rumination and exploration.

For better readability this thesis uses the Readex Pro font and 1.5 line-spacing.

Credits in Alphabetical Order

Haas, Sabrina:

- Design of concept: neuro-inclusivity
- Master thesis text on neurodiversity, neuro-inclusive design and a brief summary of the practical part of the Urban Nesting project
- Introduction of neurodiversity as a project topic
- Contribution of research on neurodiversity, neuro-inclusive design, stimulating, mental health in the city (noise pollution and health effects) and safe spaces (in the context of neurodiversity)
- Construction of wooden frames for Urban Nesting Structure and objects for wooden frame structure
- Concept and creation of communication tags to be used in workshops
- Project documentation and video edit
- Written organisation/coordination of project (calendar, To-Do list, summary of weekly meetings, coordination of meetings with tutor, finances)

Retegan, Meda

- Design of concept: interspecies approach
- Contribution of intersectional and crafting approach
- Contribution of research, knowledge and experience surrounding biodiversity, multi-species environments and objects
- Contribution of research concerning animals, how they play and their behaviour in urban environments
- Design and construction of wooden frame structure and objects for the wooden frame structure
- Project documentation

Stenbäck, Frida:

- Design of concept: social/public crafting approach
- Contribution of intersectional and crafting approach
- Research contribution surrounding Guattari's three ecologies (mental ecology, environmental ecology/biodiversity and social ecology/social diversity - or what connects the two)
- Introduction of willow, reed and clay as building materials/contribution of knowledge and experience with these materials
- Design of the Urban Nesting Structure
- Construction/creation of and with objects for wooden frame structure
- Project documentation

Construction support: Antal, István & Bonnici, Keit

Project supported by: Vasof, Anna

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