

# Lacunae in the Forest: A Phenomenological Approach in the Interior Design Studio

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**Abstract:** This brief case study presents the general framework, process, and results of a vertical design studio unit, titled Phenomenologies, at Istanbul Bilgi University's Interior Design Program, supported by student work samples. Centralizing the tensions between interiority and the natural environment, the studio explores the role that nature plays in interior design. The process begins with an experiential inquiry on windows; later to be expanded and complexified by other spatial elements such as doors, stairs, ramps, and bridges. In the end, the students develop proposals for a research, learning, and recreation center that aims at problematizing and restoring our relationship to nature in the context of a lake ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Spatial experience, spatial narratives, architectural phenomenology, nature, water, window

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## Introduction:

Interaction between man and nature has always been critical to the design and development of the built environment ever since the very first instances of human shelters. Today, however, natural elements usually find their way into architectural and interior design projects as a visual accessory and an ocular-centric object of affection: that is, in the form of decorative greenery, natural light, and various bodies of water (i.e. fountains, water canals, and reflective pools). These aestheticized approaches perhaps unintentionally but inevitably end up moving us further away from our inherent connection to nature by disregarding the abundant multiplicities and values that nature retains. It is our belief in this regard that the studio environment provides for an excellent opportunity for facilitating an explorative inquiry into the recent transformations in the ecological, socio-cultural, religious, political, and economic

significance of nature. We thus ask: In the cross-section of the relationship between the interior and the exterior, how can we genuinely contest deep-seated sensitivities about the natural environment through interior design and negotiate these multiplicities throughout various scales and concerns?

With these concerns in mind, in the Fall semester of 2019-2020 academic year, we focused on Gölcük Nature Park, Bolu (GNP) and its nearby surroundings as part of a vertical design studio unit, titled Phenomenologies, at Istanbul Bilgi University's Interior Design Program. The studio consisted of seventeen third- and fourth-year interior design students. In approaching the problem, we conceptualized GNP as a lacunary site. 'Lacunary' here referred both literally to the Gölcük Lake, which is an artificial lake itself, and metaphorically to the notion of *lacuna*, which means "a gap, emptiness, cavity, void" and "an

interval, spacing, aperture”. In responding to their problem, all students approached the Gölcük Lake as a negative space and a clearance for restoring our relationship to nature.

**Approach:**

Interior design is not only a cultural medium that reveals characteristics of a historically typical design attitude with a particular set of values but is also a mechanism of negotiating our relationship with nature. Within this framework, we approached GNP as a site that embodied various narratives of framing, accessing, and consuming nature. It was a conscious choice to invite interiority into nature, rather than vice versa. We deliberately approached natural environment as the existing ‘shell’ during the analysis phase and still tried to create a sense of interiority within an outdoor space during design phase. Our pedagogical approach was distinctly phenomenological: The students not only centralized multi-sensory experience of the natural and built environment as a design method but also formulated their design ideas and architectural programs via their own experiences of and engagements with the site. Another important factor was the iterative nature of the process: The students were exposed to a cyclical series of exercises that gradually grew more complex in nature and broader in context. All in all, these exercises helped foregrounding different aspects of the problem at each iteration, all the while allowing students to follow and refine a singular impulse that they developed at the very beginning of the process throughout the whole semester.

**Process:**

In Phase 1, titled “Window Narratives”, the students’ assignment was to develop a strategy and a series of tactics to experientially analyze a spatial situation at a given site. In formulating their strategy, each student first chose a painting within which windows take center stage as subject matter. They studied and interpreted their painting from several perspectives (i.e. meaning, atmospheric quality, and representational style as well as uses of color, pattern, texture, objects, and people). These

interpretations became the basis of their atmospheric narrative and vocabulary for a preliminary phenomenology of windows. Secondly, the students analyzed and documented an actual window from their own surroundings (i.e. their home, campus, or neighborhood) in order to abstract a particular spatial/experiential quality. It was important that the students established a correspondence between these two analyses in such a way that, even if their approaches were mostly intuitive, their findings in their painting and in an everyday situation demonstrated an atmospheric, semantic, or conceptual resonance.

Finally, each student was assigned a particular spot in the campus at which our relationship to nature was emphasized. They studied this site by means of the strategies and tactics developed in the previous two stages. They then installed “A Hole on a Surface” that not only characterized their personal experience of the site but also organized their bodily relationship with the natural element in question. The parameters to be considered by the students in developing their proposal included: materiality of the frame, surface, and the void; the depth, size, and shape of the window; the height and location of the opening on the surface; the students’ physical, bodily, and functional relationship to the window; the relationship of the natural element to the window.

In Phase 2, titled “Interiors Without Exteriors”, students first formed groups to inquire, question, and criticize how our relationship to nature has been changing over the centuries. These inquiries were conducted within the contexts of heritage, industrialization, pollution, privatization, religion, climate change, and tourism so as to establish a preliminary position regarding how to approach nature (Tvedt, 2016). The students then visited Gölcük and developed a macro-analysis of the site in order to arrive at a close reading of its programmatic and experiential functioning through the lens of their own design strategy.

Following this analysis, they problematized the existing configuration of GNP and formulated a project brief prescribing their reaction to the site. This reaction was not to entail a fully enclosed volume, but rather consisted of a series of disparate spatial elements (i.e. window, door, stairs, tower, bridge, ramp, etc.). These elements were to be loosely put together as “A Collection of Architectural Objects” which nevertheless defined a sense of inside without an outside (i.e. a non-exclusive, non-perspectival relation to nature). Each of these spatial elements was taken into consideration in relation to: 1) metaphors with which they were associated (i.e. window as perspective, frame, screen, space, etc.); 2) functions they assumed (i.e. the window as aperture, ventilation shaft, viewer, etc.); and 3) as multi-sensory mechanisms that allowed or prevented our exposure to various natural elements (i.e. window as means of accessing or blocking view, light, sound, smell, wind, air, temperature, etc.) (Koolhaas, 2018). At this stage, the individual components of this collection were not yet assigned a particular function other than the kind of bodily experience they provided for.

Finally, in Phase 3, titled “Lacunae in the Forest”, students refined, multiplied, extended, and varied their architectural collection by introducing various surfaces (i.e. floors, walls,

façades, roofs, etc.). Throughout this expansion, their aim was to spatially re-configure a particular corner of GNP by means of specific inter-related, semi-open, and semi-closed interior systems and elements. At this point, the students proposed an architectural program for a Lakefront Center incorporating several forms and opportunities of research, learning, and recreation. It was important that the students themselves chose at exactly which point in and around the lake their collection/center was to be located. It was also important that the program was developed completely in response to the site rather than being pre-given. In this regard, each project was to be formulated at a scale appropriate for the operation and legibility of the student’s own design approach (defined in principle all the way back in Phase 1) and design problem (defined in principle in Phase 2).

#### Student work samples:

In the project *Window in the Ground*, Gözde Ergül was inspired by the uncanny atmosphere in her painting, caused by the excessively revealing qualities of the large window-frame pictured. She approached the window as a 3-dimensional framing tool that highlighted layers of the look (i.e. exaggerated by the use of glasses, magnifiers, and lenses of differing thickness and size) (Fig. 1). Her project capitalized different bodily orientations (i.e.

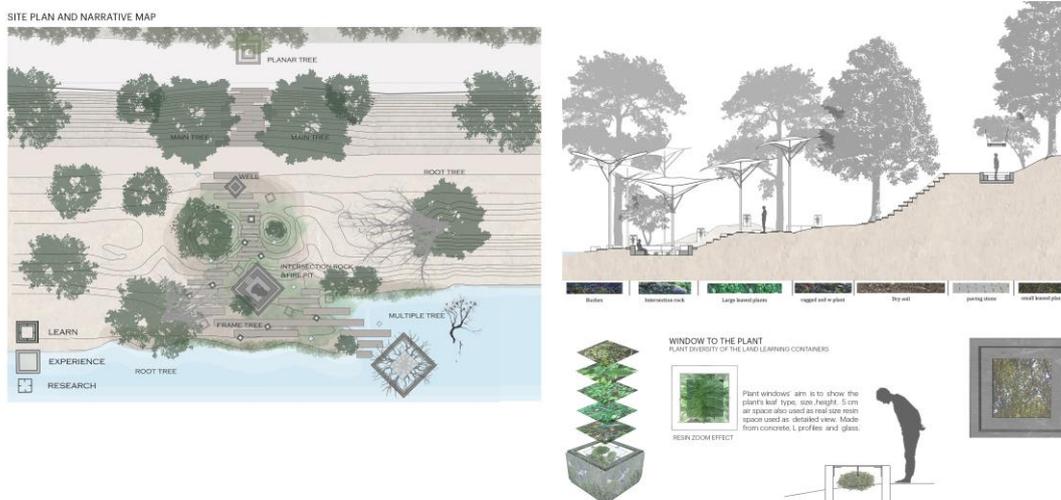


Figure 1. Site plan and narrative map, site section, and window detail; by G. Ergül, 2019.

horizontal windows that allowed looking down and being on top of or under a window while directing our attention to the ground and the sky) (Fig. 2). She also invited the users into uncanny encounters with the site (i.e. getting wet when climbing on a window) as well as into a direct experience of the constructive properties of her windows (i.e. size, shape, thickness, joinery, transparency, materiality, reflection, and light). In general, she aimed at cultivating our awareness of the natural environment by revealing invisible layers and micro-elements/qualities of natural elements that were otherwise sealed from our experience (i.e. tree roots, branches, and foliage; different layers and qualities of the earth; paths traversing

the ground and the lake basin; shoreline changes; reflections of the earth and sky; degrees of moisture; hidden creeks and cascades) (Fig. 3).

In the project *Peribolos*, Burcu Özgen was inspired by the idea of an abandoned building looking onto itself while at the same time being re-introduced life by the apparently recent arrival of a bird in her painting. She approached the window as a multi-layered and multi-directional opening that framed our exchange with the outside through various layers (i.e. curtains, joineries, eaves, fringes, shades, awnings). Her project played on the directionality of the window experience, which



Figure 2. General view, bodily orientations, and model; by G. Ergül, 2019.



Figure 3. General panorama of the site; by G. Ergül, 2019.

framed the look in many directions (i.e. windows opening in and out, objects looking in and out, buildings looking at each other and themselves). She was inspired by the domestic aura implied by the existing objects at the site (i.e. a bench partly buried in the lake) and several instances where nature and built environment folded and reflected upon itself (i.e. a tree dropping its apples back to the lake; another tree leaning into the water and extending its branches like roots; a hornbeam tree and a guest house reflected upon water). With these inspirations in mind, she re-

interpreted windows as an instrument of self-reflection so as to criticize the domestication of the natural environment (Fig. 4). The project revolved around a central, elevated walkway, directing visitors through various learning/research areas and spatial sequences. It framed these experiences by means of a series of artificial domestic ruins that gave the impression of an abandoned archaeological site and a series of sound experiences that augmented the findings from scientific inquiries carried out at each corner of the site (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Site plan and domestic instances; by B. Özgen, 2019.



Figure 5. Spatial Sequences; by B. Özgen, 2019.

In the project *Di-Aura*, Işinsu Kaya was inspired by the anxiety, unease, and sense of curiosity characterizing her painting. She found these affective states to be supported by various contrasts and dualities between real-surreal, natural-artificial, masculine-feminine, animate-inanimate, human-animal elements (Fig. 6). She interpreted the window as an intermediary between the inner and outer worlds, the self and the other, which offered insights into the hybridities between natural and man-made worlds. These insights were to be guided by a series of massive, tumulus-like constructs, each housing a different instance of a research process about how trees learn and procreate (i.e. tree barks turned inside out, graft samples, a

hole in a tree stump forming a miniature lake, an open green-house functioning like a plant hostel) (Fig. 7). The steps of this process were informed by a bifurcating network of pedestrian paths, made up of a warm liquid poured and frozen over the earth. Each junction on this network of paths was marked by another tumulus stimulating our curiosity (i.e. crevices into the ground on the main road, the experience of coming face-to-face with one's own image in the miniature lake, a pier with some missing pieces floating in and at the same level as the lake water, inclined steps that rest on the slope, a horizontal door frame opening into the lake) (Fig. 8).



Figure 6. Hybrid situations and site plan; by I. Kaya, 2019.



Figure 7. Site section, research instances, and model; by I. Kaya, 2019.



Figure 8. Experiential path; by I. Kaya, 2019.

### Conclusion:

As summarized above, our starting point for the “Lacunae in the Forest” project was to look at the long history of visual arts where nature is conventionally and conveniently represented as revealing itself through doors and windows alike. It was our observation that this long-standing convention found its most emblematic basis in the Cartesian *cogito*’s depiction of the way in which a human figure was positioned inside a *camera obscura* (i.e. an interior) and looked at the outside (i.e. nature). In this historical relationship, we realized that it was always nature that was excluded but then grounded and interiorized by the *interieur* in an act of self-reflection (Haverkamp, 2016). We thus were interested in interiorities and interiors that opened out, onto, or into nature without transforming it into ‘landscape’. Students, therefore, were expected to construct a scenario that problematized what we understood from research, learning, and recreation. They at the same time engaged with GNP in such a way to suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that were designated, reflected, or represented by the given site. All in all, they tried to uncover and speculate the ways in which designs of the built environment (i.e.

systems, processes, places, objects, and details) challenged or perpetuated our various attributions to nature, all the while asking “What kind of a ‘universe’ at large does my proposed collection belong to?” at every stage of the process.

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