

Amidst Things

A more-than-Human Garden for Nonhuman Species and their Human Companions

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Abstract

This visual essay explores the making of a new garden in a small secluded space deep within Danish housing estate Farum Midtpunkt. Through a series of digitally produced drawings the author unfolds origin and current material condition of the site in question, and speculates on the site's possible future as a new garden for humans and the landscape metropolis's unnoticed animals and plants. The design approach for the new garden is experimental, maintenance-based and open-ended, aiming to achieve a high level of biodiversity and to balance preservation and renewal attending to the site's legacy and pre-existing qualities.

Keywords

post-war social housing, transformation, more-than-human garden, things, nonhuman species

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Introduction

Nonhuman things, such as plants, soils, asphalt surfaces, animals, heavy construction equipment, maintenance plans and various technologies are profoundly and actively involved in the dynamic socio-material and -spatial processes of the landscape metropolis. However, despite the crucial role of nonhuman things in the continuous formation of the metropolitan landscape, their existence and agency are widely overlooked. Furthermore, in this age of the Anthropocene, we are witnessing an unprecedented human-caused mass extinction of non-human species (Ceballos, Ehrlich, & Dirzo, 2017; Grooten & Almond, 2018). While unnoticed by most humans, such nonhuman species can, and do, still reside among us, even in the most constructed and densely built areas.

How to encompass and become more attentive to the things and nonhuman species, amongst which we live, is a challenge. Gardens specifically for human and nonhuman encounters, where the landscape metropolis's unnoticed animals and plants can reside, could be one solution. Not only can small gardens help to compensate for the negative effects of urbanisation on biodiversity (Fontaine, Bergerot, Le Viol, & Julliard, 2016; Goddard, Dougill, & Benton, 2010), they also have the capacity to make hidden qualities in the metropolitan tissue perceivable (Wit, 2013). A vital approach to developing such gardens is to investigate how things, humans, and the many other species occupying the world, are dynamically involved in the continuous formation of sites within the metropolitan landscape.

This visual essay follows the steps of making a new secluded and experimental garden for animals, plants, and human beings deep within the brutalist development known as Farum Midtpunkt, built in the 1970s. A densely built housing estate in a thoroughly human-made and constructed landscape, Farum Midtpunkt comprises 1650 dwellings that house 4000 people, and is located in the town of Farum in the northwestern part of the metropolitan area of Copenhagen, Denmark.

I use digital collage-drawing to unpack the actors and processes that are involved with a small secluded space tucked away between two apartment buildings in Farum Midtpunkt. I examine the space's material origin, its initial design as a children's sand and water playground, as well as its current material state and use as a dog park for Farum Midtpunkt's smallest dogs. Local residents recently suggested that the space be thoroughly renewed with no attention paid to the site's legacy and pre-existing qualities. As an alternative, I reinterpret the space as a new experimental and secluded garden which simultaneously reveals the constructed origin as well as the autonomously emerging, but often unseen, organisms of a site in a densely built area. In this new garden, the smallest, and often unnoticed, nonhuman inhabitants of the landscape metropolis can freely reside and meet humans in a new human-nonhuman social situation.

The design approach for the new garden is experimental, maintenance-based and open-ended, in line with Gilles Clément's idea of "a garden in movement". The intent in a garden in movement is to achieve a high level of biodiversity, to respect how species settle autonomously and favour the living over form. The maintenance of such a garden is treated as a way to design it, and the gardener attempts to do as much as possible with minimal means (Clément, 2015; 2017; Rocca, 2008). Analogous to Clément is landscape architect Martí Franch, whose works, produced through direct engagement with the sites (Franch, 2017; Waterman, 2017), also serve as a valuable reference and reminder of how maintenance can be successfully used as a design approach. Accordingly, the implementation of a maintenance and management plan, which prescribes the gardener's work, signals the new beginning for the site in question as an experimental garden. The maintenance and management plan proposes to reuse the material factors already on site, to reintroduce some original design features as well as to enhance existing material and biological processes. Decaying leaves and deadwood collected in autumn in the Farum Midtpunkt housing estate are strategically placed to provide shelter for insects.

Existing self-sown plants are conserved while insect-friendly native seedmixes of annual and ruderal plants are spread in the first year to further encourage insects to find a home in the garden, and thus attracting birds to nest. Every year, central parts of the garden's surface are cleaned using a high-pressure washer to create a contrast with the moss-covered parts of the asphalt surface. The proposed maintenance and management plan creates a starting point for the new garden that should be renewed every 5th year, thereby attending to the still unknown future trajectory of the garden. Paying attention to the nonhuman things and species among us provides productive perspectives and points of attention for future transformation projects that balance preservation and renewal, as well as the needs of all living beings.

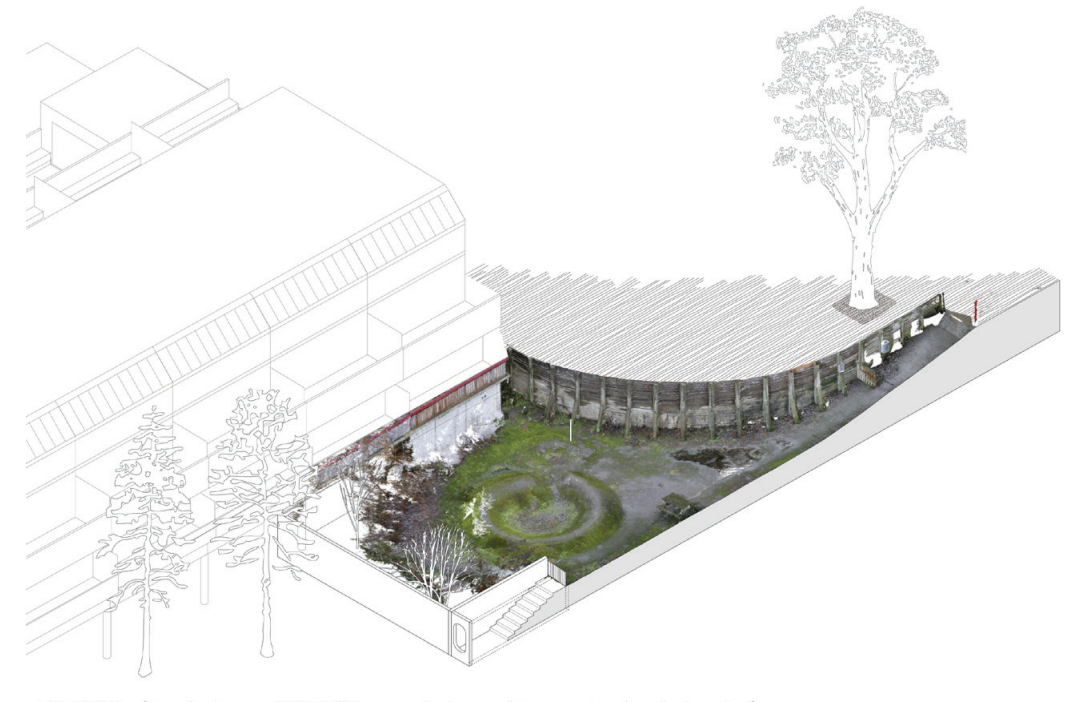


FIGURE 1 The site of today. Sunken between two apartment buildings and bounded by a wooden wall to the north, the site of the proposed new garden is largely hidden from any outside view. Today the site is a little-used dog park, but the weathered and moss-covered features of the original children's playground are still visible.



FIGURE 2 Interstitial open spaces in Farum Midtpunkt. The Farum Midtpunkt housing estate is a densely built and constructed landscape in which buildings are interwoven with open spaces in a complex topographic megastructure. The site for the proposed garden is one among many interstitial open spaces, initially conceived for various community purposes for the housing estate's residents (Aerial photo source: Danish Agency for Data Supply and Efficiency)

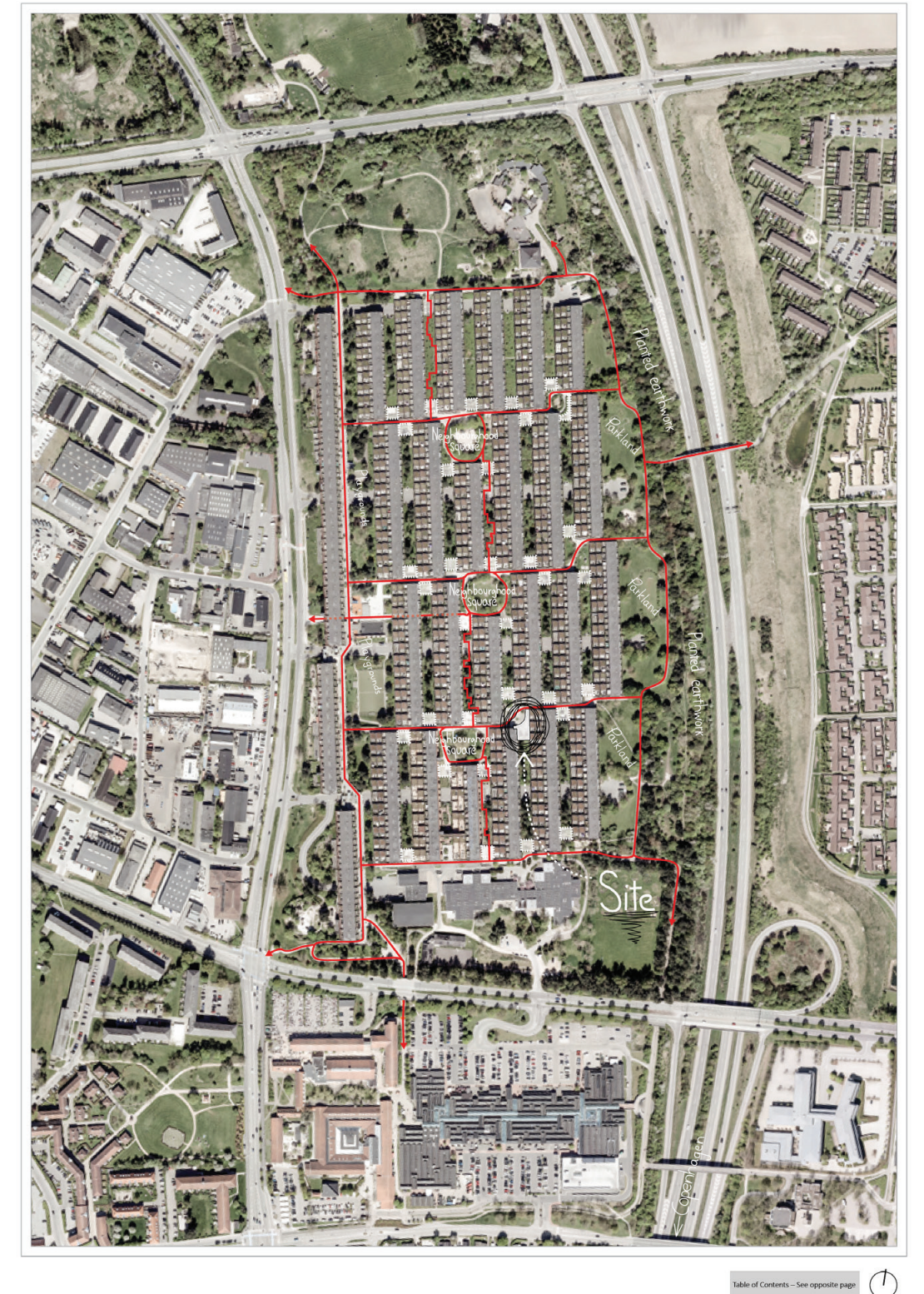


FIGURE 3 A new secluded garden in Farum Midtpunkt. From the air, in the context of the Farum Midtpunkt housing estate and the urban landscape northwest of Copenhagen, Denmark, the site for the new garden appears small and hidden. (Aerial photo source: Danish Agency for Data Supply and Efficiency).

Prologue

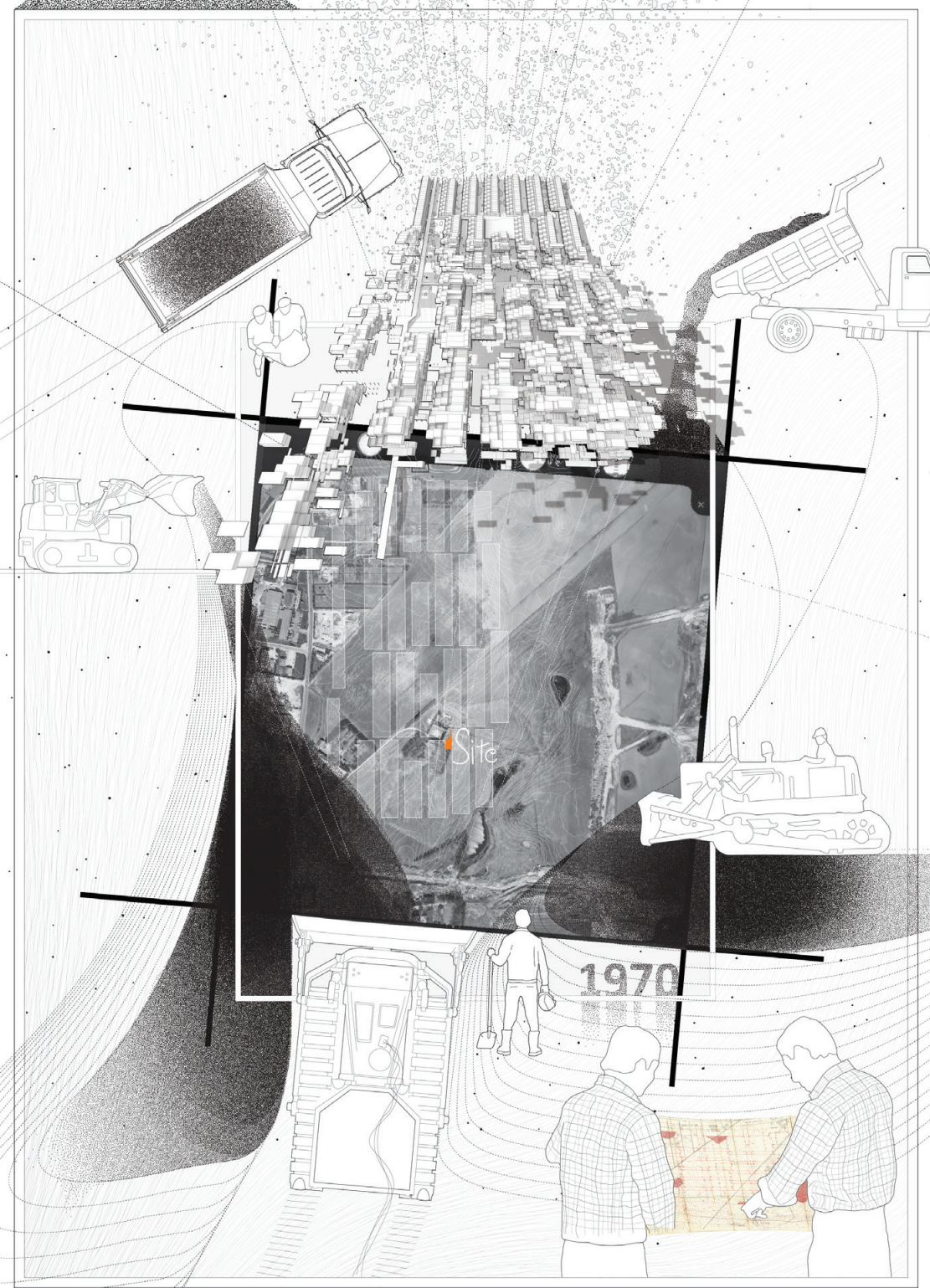
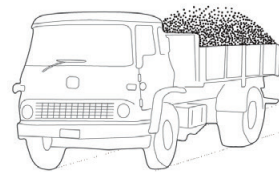


FIGURE 4 Levelling the Landscape, 1970. With the help of bulldozers, excavators, and dump trucks, the gently rolling hills north of Farum Town were flattened and the water ponds filled in, in preparation for the construction of the Farum Midtpunkt housing estate. The terrain was entirely remodelled, leaving very few traces of the past landscape.

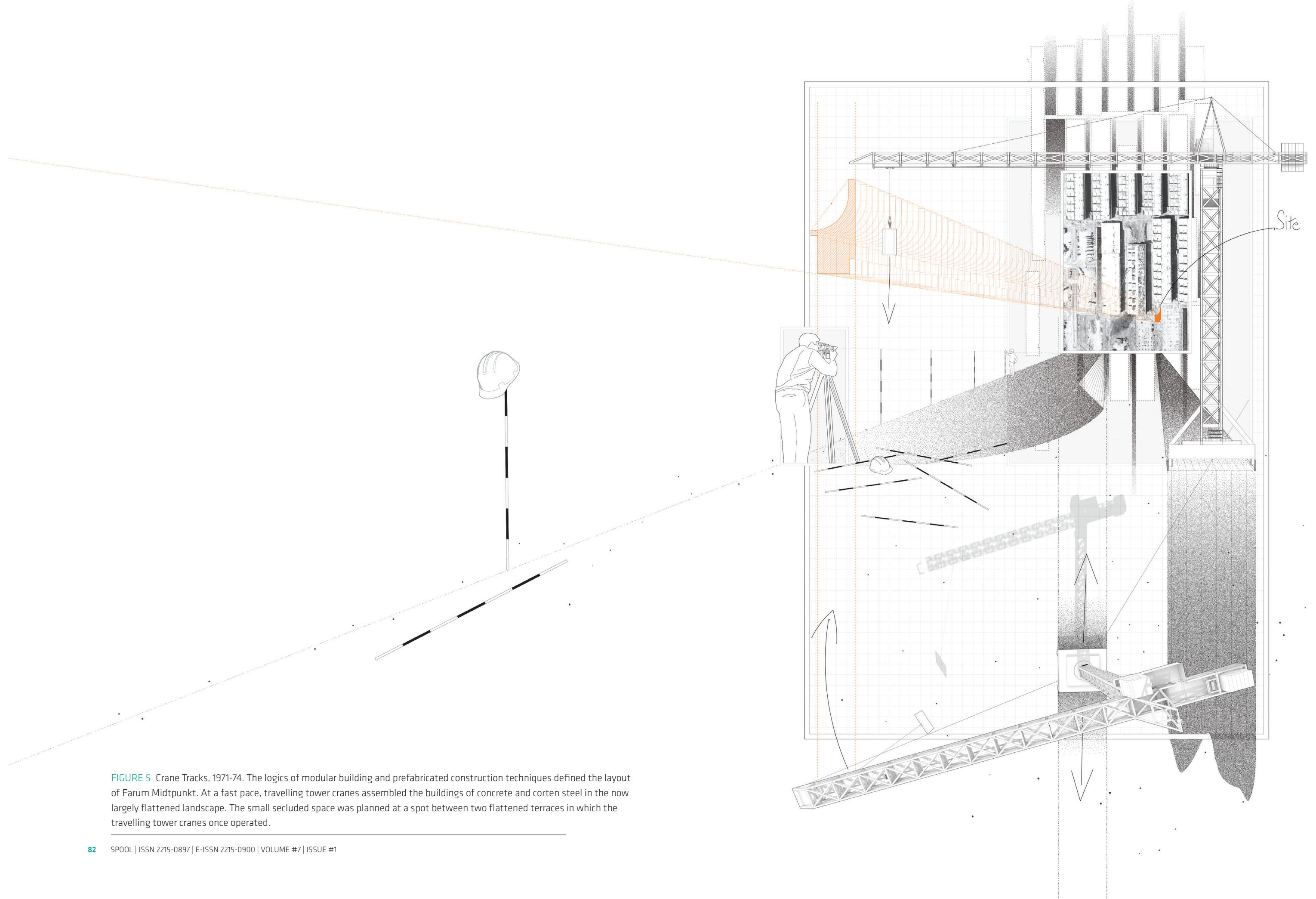


FIGURE 5 Crane Tracks, 1971-74. The logics of modular building and prefabricated construction techniques defined the layout of Farum Midtpunkt. At a fast pace, travelling tower cranes assembled the buildings of concrete and corten steel in the now largely flattened landscape. The small secluded space was planned at a spot between two flattened terraces in which the travelling tower cranes once operated.

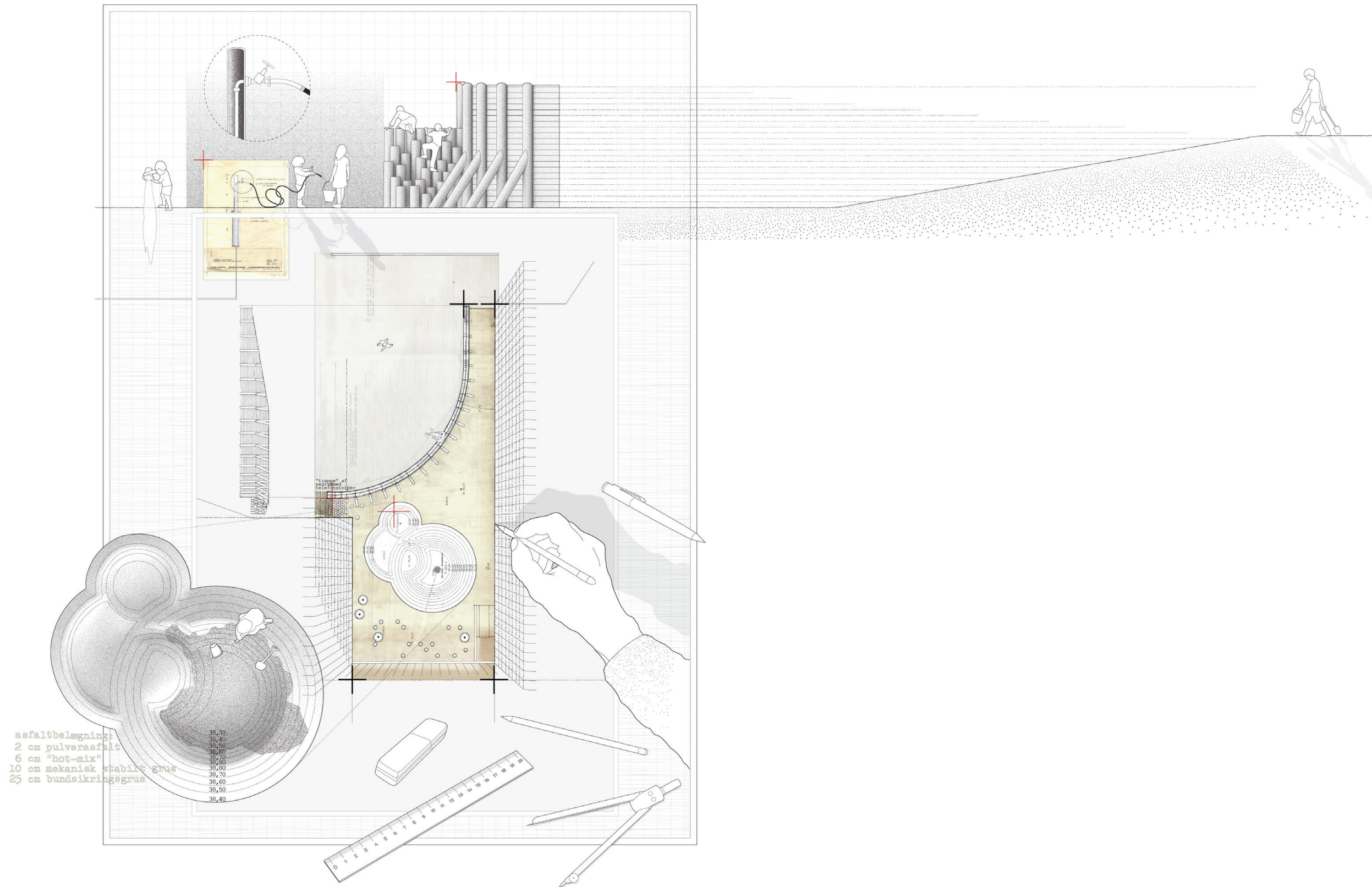


FIGURE 6 The sand and water playground, 1971-73. Ideas about child welfare informed the original design of the secluded space. A contoured asphalt surface was equipped with a water tap as well as seating and a climbing wall made from discarded wooden telephone poles. The landscape architect drew the design for the area by hand using a range of tools.

As Found Today

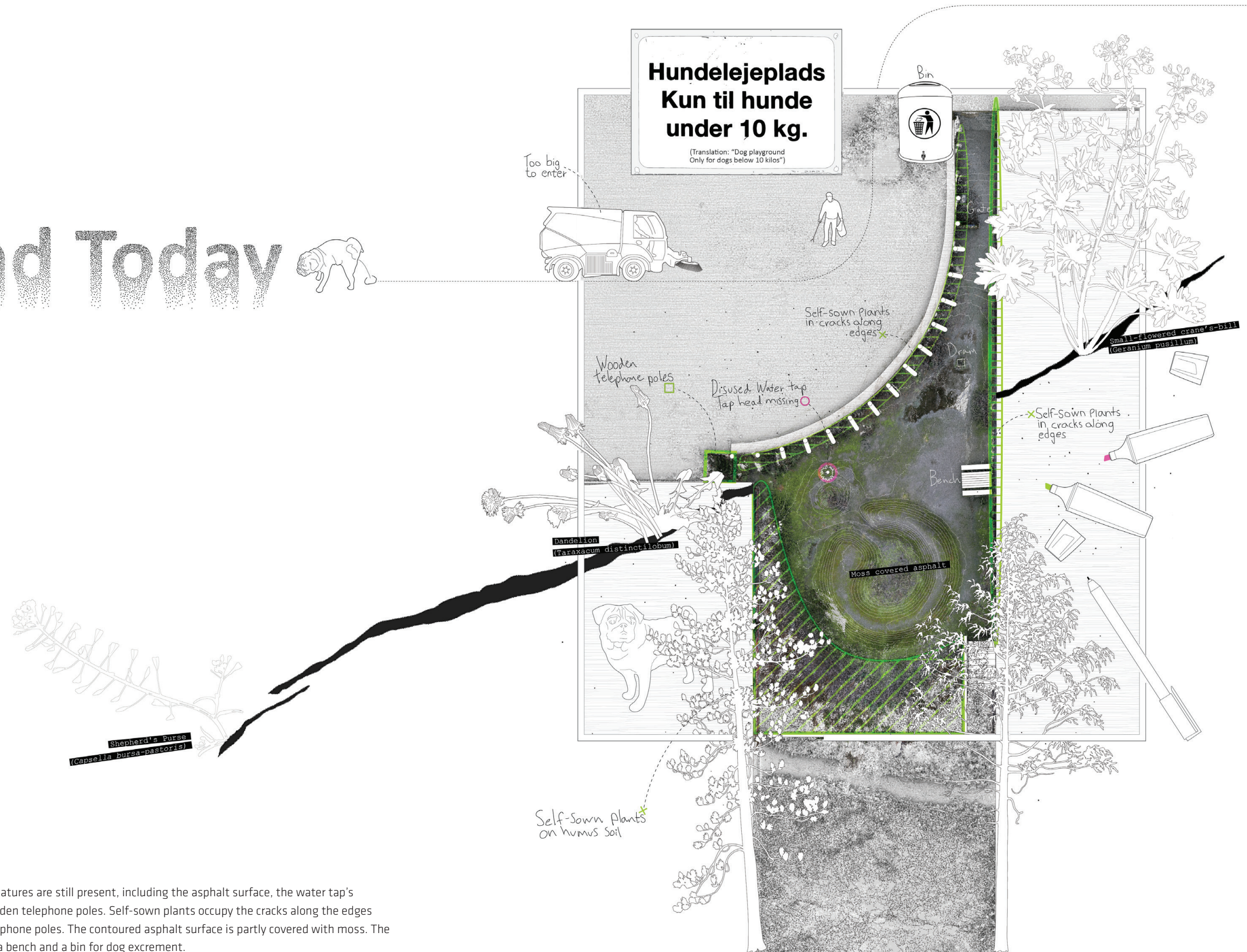
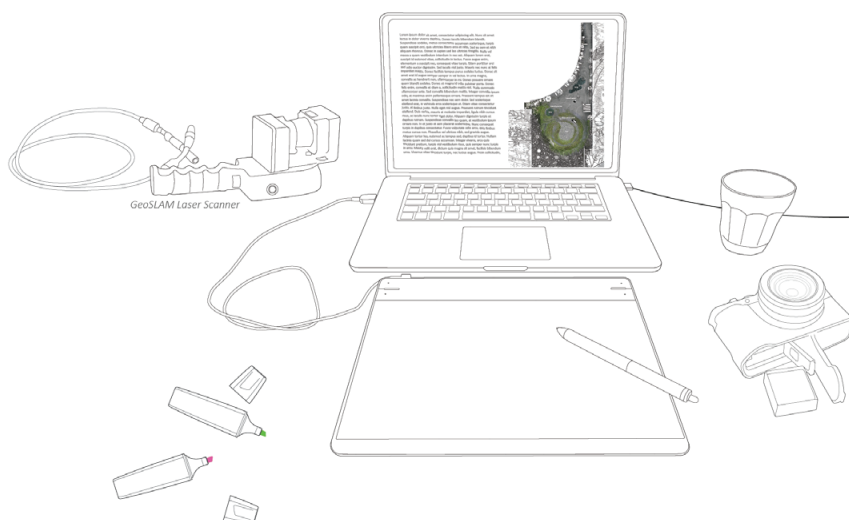


FIGURE 7 The state of the site today. Original features are still present, including the asphalt surface, the water tap's foundation and some rotten remains of the wooden telephone poles. Self-sown plants occupy the cracks along the edges and grow well in the remains of the wooden telephone poles. The contoured asphalt surface is partly covered with moss. The elements added for the dog playground include a bench and a bin for dog excrement.



Into The Future

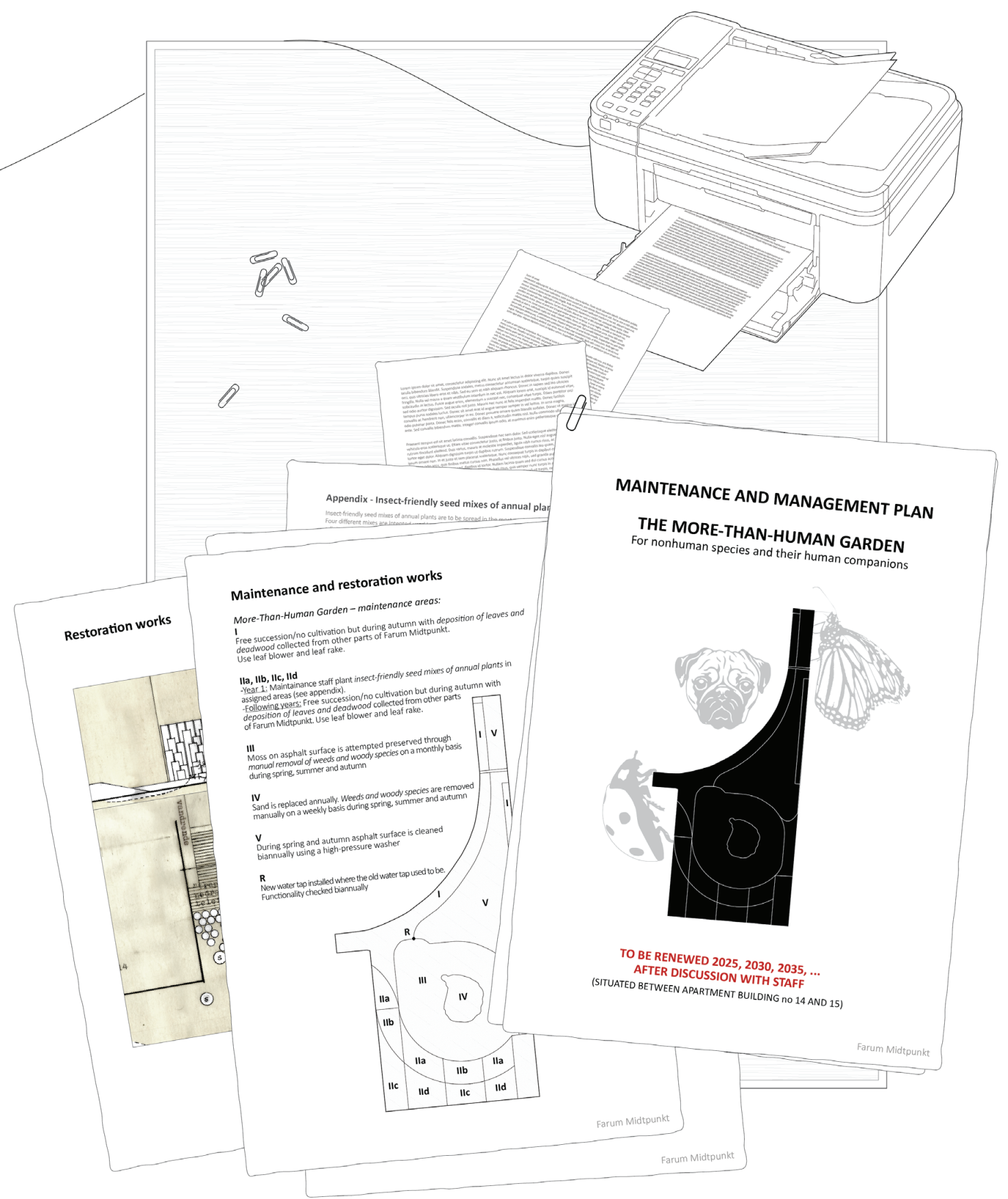


FIGURE 8 Making a garden through maintenance. Maintenance plans are powerful instruments. The new maintenance and management plan should be renewed every 5 years. The new plan seeks to preserve the qualities already at hand by protecting self-sown plants, and encouraging other nonhuman species like insects to find a home in the garden by enhancing ongoing material and biological processes.

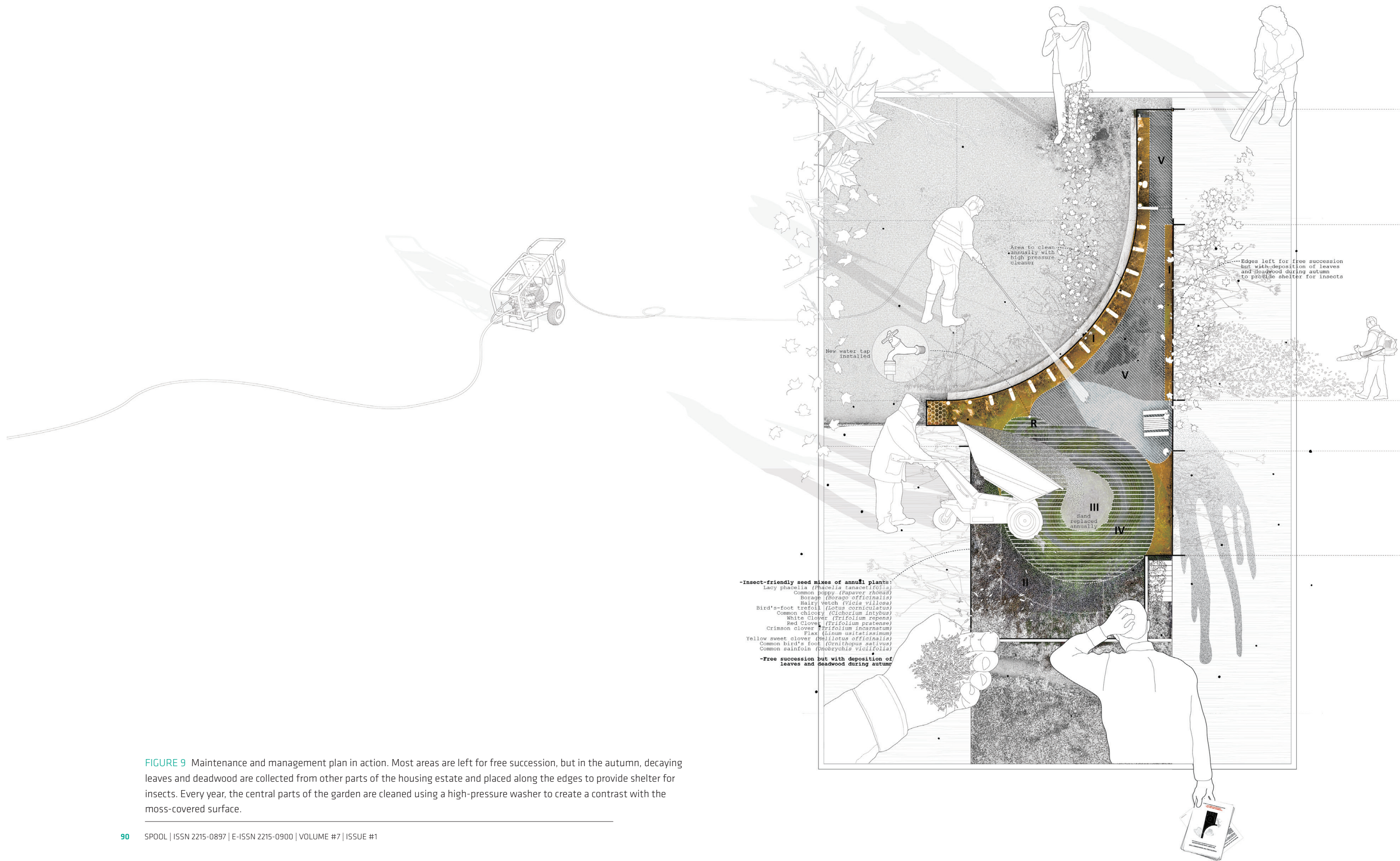


FIGURE 9 Maintenance and management plan in action. Most areas are left for free succession, but in the autumn, decaying leaves and deadwood are collected from other parts of the housing estate and placed along the edges to provide shelter for insects. Every year, the central parts of the garden are cleaned using a high-pressure washer to create a contrast with the moss-covered surface.

THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN GARDEN
 For nonhuman species and their human companions

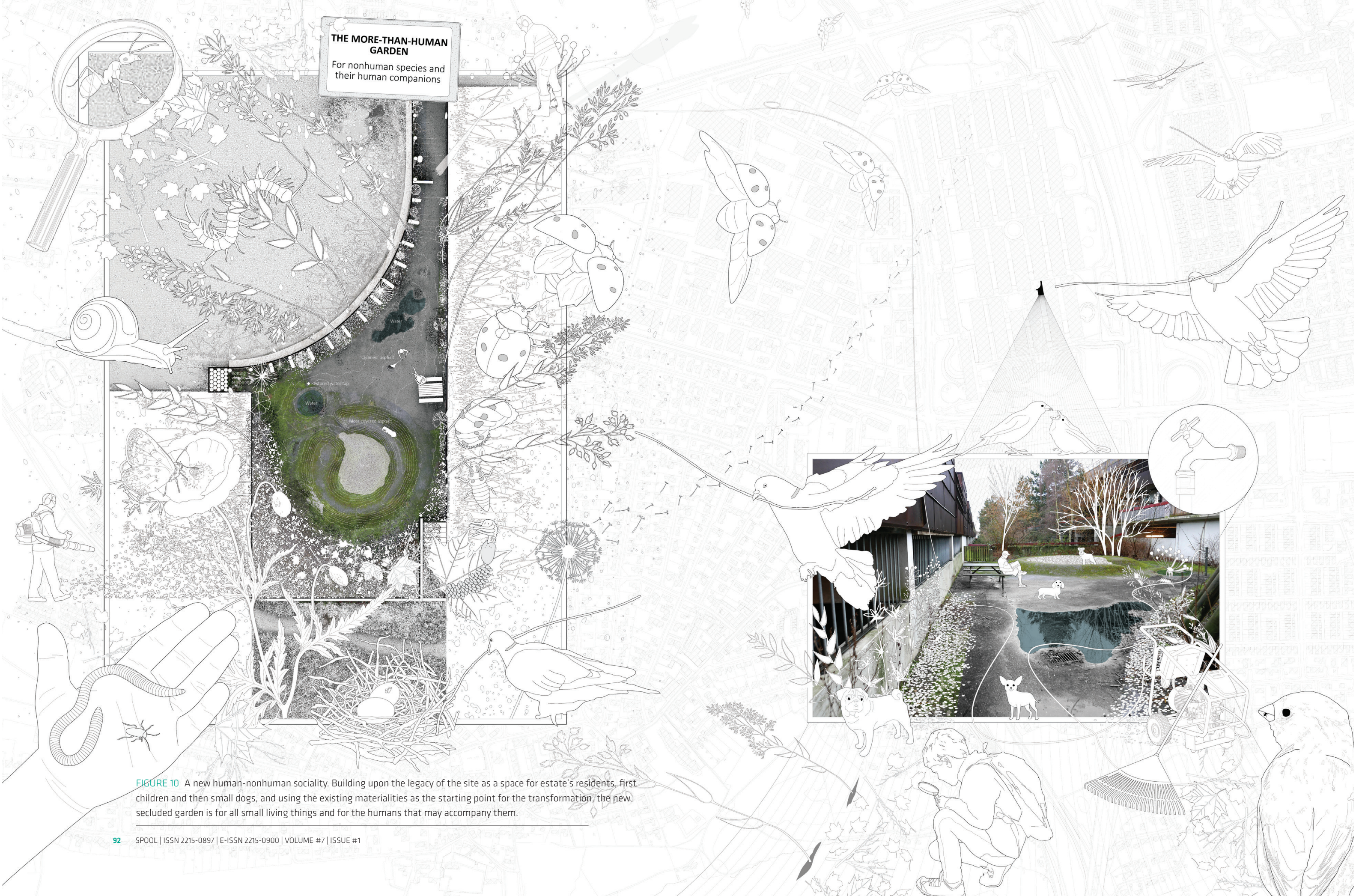


FIGURE 10 A new human-nonhuman sociality. Building upon the legacy of the site as a space for estate's residents, first children and then small dogs, and using the existing materialities as the starting point for the transformation, the new secluded garden is for all small living things and for the humans that may accompany them.

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