

(In)visible soil

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The current ecological crisis calls for a rethinking of our relation to natural resources, particularly the soil—which architecture has long regarded as merely a volume to be excavated or a surface to be built upon. Nevertheless, today, ordinance for inward densification, recent European directive on “zero net land take”, refusal to construct new buildings in favor of renovating existing building stock and moratoriums on demolitions, all point toward limiting excessive land consumption. Yet these initiatives say nothing about the purpose of those open spaces, that are soil resources. What value, what project, what ecosystem should be promoted? The assumption of this proposal is that understanding and giving meaning to open spaces reinforce the renunciation of building and the preservation of natural environment. Without solid soil, there are no foundations, literally and figuratively. But if architecture is grounded in its relationship to the soil, this relationship cannot be reduced to a mechanical observation; it must incorporate the complexity of living systems. Without living soil, there is no life. Education appears to be a key driver in initiating this transformation. A seminar was developed for master’s students in architecture in Fribourg. The goal: to shift the perspective of future architects from an anthropocentric approach to a multi-species vision. Through the herbarium—a representational tool borrowed from the natural sciences—and architectural drawing, the students observed, analyzed, and depicted fragments of Fribourg’s urban soils, their ecosystem dynamics, and the impacts of disruptive elements. This work, situated at the intersection of scientific, fictional, and architectural approaches, challenges the conventions of representation within the discipline. It poses a simple yet radical question: before building a piece of land, shouldn’t we first identify the quality of the soil, its inhabitants and assess the damage we will inflict upon them?