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WASTE LANDS

THE UNINTENDED CITY

Through the production process of the contemporary city, the left over spaces become, in opposition to the spaces of the formal city, a key aspect to understand our urban space. In its various forms urban waste space is inscribed in the cities as defining a fuzzy inner border. Its shape or lack of it equals to the negative of the city. It often marks the middle ground between urbanisation and the countryside, between infrastructures or between uses. As such, it is an intermediate space, a space that mediates between different spatial situations or a transition in time. In continuous transformation, its form and character are by definition imprecise. It shares qualities with the urban and the rural realms together with a very definite character on its own.

In the absence of a defined function, residual spaces are occupied by residues, playful, ephemeral or marginal uses.

Its universal use is that of the informal gathering of waste, as if fulfilling a spatial necessity of the urban context to expel out of its limits waste materials and activities unsuited for the formal city. In this way, they follow the logic of the excremental defined by Slavoj Žyžek for the Untouchables “Not only dealing with impure excrement, their own formal status within society is excremental” (Žyžek 2002). Gilles Clément designates as Third Landscape the space left over by man to be colonised by nature (Clément 2003) He makes a political comparison when he relates the Third Landscape to the Third State paraphrasing Abbé Siéyès’ famous question: *What is the Third State? Everything. What has it been until now? Nothing. What does it ask? To become something.* What is implied in this statement is that certain spaces of the city have been treated as a mere background. They have been taken for granted and either

ignored, perceived as a problem, or seen as potential space for urban development.

Urban waste space differs drastically from standard public space. The public space of the city is the main image from where the different intervening powers project certain civic values. It entails a promise of secure friendly urban leisure and gentrification. (Delgado and Malet 2007) The residual space on the other hand represents conflict and diversity versus uniformity and consensus. Such potential has raised interest towards this unintended city from various aspects that could be identified as form, nature, uses and memory.

The fascination for the form of vacant in-between spaces lays on its lack of defined limits or precise shape. Its blurred limits are not restricted to public or private borders and they cannot be properly mapped out. It also lacks a uniform scale, ranging from small vacant plots or buildings to the territorial scale of the periphery.

Unattended urban spaces are also object of study due to their biodiversity richness¹ and as the expression of a different relationship between city and nature. In this sense there is a current trend to substitute picturesque ideas of urban nature such as 19th century urban parks for a hybrid landscape.

Theorists such as Solá-Morales connect the expectant and the undefined with a sense of freedom from the oppression of the contemporary city or from urban planning (Solá-Morales 2002). Those are also qualities that allow for unexpected, spontaneous use or guerrilla urban activism.

As a by-product of urban transformations, unused waste spaces present themselves as contemporary ruins. As such they hold the memory of city evolution through banal vestiges and traces of other uses and times and question the notion of place (Marot 2010)

WASTE LAND DEFINITIONS

Urban left over spaces are a reference for the avant-garde from the 1960s and have been the subject of urban theories from different perspectives. By different names as Terrain vague, third landscape, *drosscape* or *zozzo*, it has become a contemporary topic of research.

Terrain Vague

Ignasi de Solà-Morales built around the term terrain vague a theory of individual experience of the contemporary city and a proposal for architectural intervention. For Solà-Morales the term vague implies on the one hand void, vacant, lack of compromise. On the other hand it conveys an uncertain, imprecise or blurred character. It is also linked to wave, movement and instability. He characterises the terrain vague as external and strange places: external due to their nature as edge, outside of the production structures. They are the waste that remains outside the urban dynamic. They are strange because they reflect the individual's relationship with the city in the contemporary sensibility. Strangers in our city, the inhabitants of the metropolis feel the spaces not dominated by architecture as a reflection of their own insecurity, their vague wandering through boundless spaces (...) they constitute both a physical expression of fear and insecurity but also an expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future. Solà-Morales establishes an opposition between the Enlightenment tradition of modern architecture and urbanism, aimed at the production of a comfortable and efficient city, and the fascination of film and contemporary photography for expectant and imprecise spaces. He questions the problematic role of architecture before such spaces of indeterminacy. The 19th century answered the problem of how to incorporate nature to the city in the

form of the urban park. In the same way the question now arises of how the contemporary city should answer this new utopia. The author suggests the architecture of the terrain vague will emerge from the attentive listening to flows, energies, rhythms that the passage of time and the loss of limits have established (...) The split individual of the contemporary city would look for forces instead of forms, (...) the haptic rather than the optical, the rhizomatic rather than the figurative. (Solá-Morales 2002)

Zonzo

Through the experience of wandering and aimlessly walking, Francisco Careri discovers empty space as the protagonist of urban landscape. He describes the archipelago of interconnected voids as a parallel city that he denominates Zonzo (from the Italian expression *andare a zonzo*: to wander aimlessly) (Careri 2002) He belongs to the architects team Stalker who describe themselves as a collective that deals with research and action on the landscape with particular attention to the areas on the edges of the city and forgotten urban spaces, abandoned areas or regions in transformation. Those territories constitute the negative of the city, the interstitial and the marginal (...) the spaces of confrontation and contamination between the organic and the inorganic, between nature and artifice.²

Descampado

The artist Lara Almarcegui, in her works around the empty lots (*descampados*) emphasises the open, unfinished, free status of such spaces in the city. Her work provokes a reflection on the city and the relationship with the individual. Some of her works, as the guide to the empty lots of the city strive to give visibility to this parallel city that remains unfinished and undesigned and therefore full of possibilities.

Vague Parks

Krystallia Kamvasinou suggests that involuntary qualities if the terrain vague can be inscribed within the urban design of certain public spaces. These vague parks include the principles of void, indetermination and uncontrolled occupation. Kamvasinou studies a number of interventions on various public spaces: The design of New York High Line by landscape architects James Corner/Field Operations together with architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and planting designer Piet Oudolf, the reforestation of the riverbanks in Bordeaux by landscape architect Michel Desvigne, the proposal for Fresh Kills Parkland in Staten Island, New York, by James Corner/Field Operations and Peter Latz's work in the design of Duisburg-Nord between 1990 and 2001 (Kamvasinou 2010) These examples are urban space interventions that incorporate spontaneous natural landscape, respect local ecosystems, undefined uses or continuity of pre-existent elements.

MADRID: ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PERIPHERY

Every moment in the development of the city produces its own residual spaces. The demographic growth of Madrid in the 1960s due to the migration from rural areas to the city produced a characteristic peripheral landscape formed by expectant unurbanised areas between the countryside and the city, illegal settlements and new housing developments. The small towns and neighbourhoods around the city suffered a sudden growth, mixing rural village architecture with free standing collective housing. The city border was an element in continuous change, where livestock and agriculture had still a presence next to the road infrastructure and the construction activity. The empty land (*los descampados*) became the landscape

of childhood memories for a whole generation. This urban landscape was reflected in movies, photography and painting.

Currently, the city of Madrid has suffered an intense growth of very different nature. The new waste space is the result of the vigorous forms of recent urban developments and abundant road infrastructure and also the deserted spaces produced by the crisis of the productive model.

Manolo Laguillo has photographed for years the periphery of Madrid and Barcelona. As he puts it “the periphery has the interest of a symptom. It is as taking the pulse of a city. The different components a city needs for its metabolism to enter and exit through it. The energy, the goods, the people...” Speaking of his work he quotes Nabokov: The future is but the obsolete in reverse. His photographs of Madrid and Barcelona’s periphery in the 1990s show a superimposition of layers, the rural, the infrastructures, the obsolete industry and the new city in the background. (...) Above all, ruins. Old ruins but also new ones: ruins that have had no time to become older, instant-ruins that suppress any resource to archaeology (Laguillo 2013)

Madrid: urban residual spaces in the post-speculative city

The urban territory of Madrid presents a number of cases where planning has been unable to give a solution to conflicts generated by economic growth. Inside the municipal limits, vast areas of land such as the East Developments are now paralysed at an intermediate state of urbanisation. Planning envisages an unprecedented growth in those areas, but the burst of the economy makes such development very unlikely. Meanwhile the landscape, partially modified, becomes a ruin before its development.

In 2004 the Madrid Municipal Housing Company (EMVS) launched a restricted competition for young architects for a Bioclimatic

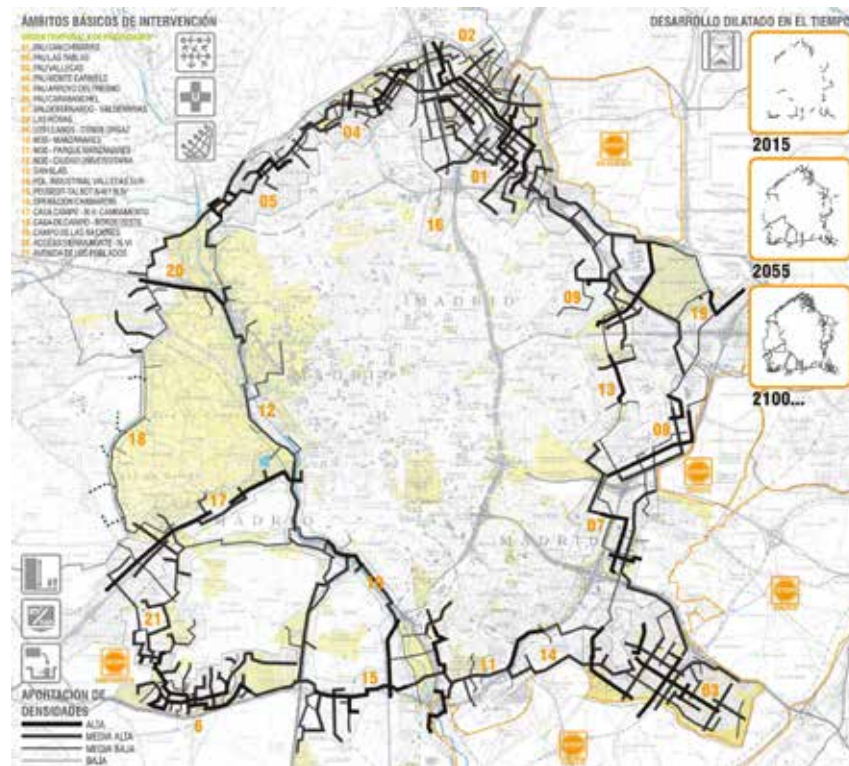
Boulevard in the new neighbourhood of Ensanche de Vallecas. The project was developed within the framework of the European Union Life programme. The competition brief presented the project as a harmless and politically correct urban design, but it had ideological connotations. It was sited on one of the very controversial new developments (PAUs) that had been criticised not only for poor quality design but more importantly for the model of urban growth. The new developments were a means to put rapidly on the market large amounts of available land. They were driven by a continuous growth of house prices and a highly speculative housing market.

One of the invited teams, Equipo Bloque Arquitectos (Rogelio Ruiz, Álvaro Moreno, Luis Perea and the author) submitted the proposal Urban Suture as a response to the new Madrid developments that were becoming a landmark of blatant unsustainability. The proposal was presented in the form of manifesto and included a strong critique of new urban developments in contemporary Madrid, designated as “urban desert”. The memory of the project points out the necessity to protect the land and paralyse upcoming developments (significantly the East Developments). Instead of strictly limiting the project to the designated boulevard in the recent development, the team took the urban scale as necessary starting point. The team proposed to locate the wounds inflicted on the city by speculative planning and implement through citizen participation policies that would supplement new neighbourhood necessities, emphasise diversity and search for a continuity of urban space. The Urban Suture strategy inserts itself in the existing city through its public spaces, infrastructures and in between spaces of the city. The diagrammatic urban plan for “intervention areas” shows a continuous alien occupation of Madrid from

its periphery, with different degrees of intensity depending on the severity of the wounds, higher in those territories of the new developments (Empresa Municipal de la Vivienda y Suelo, Área de Gobierno de Urbanismo, Vivienda e Infraestructura 2005). In this approach, the fragmented periphery and the residual public spaces generated by the recent urban growth, become significantly the privileged areas from which to heal the city.

1. Urban Suture, Intervention areas

Source: EquipoBloqueArquitectos 2004



In a text published by Madrid Council in 2002, one of the mentioned objectives of the 1997 Master Plan is the control of housing prices through the overabundance of available land (Gerencia Municipal de Urbanismo 2002). In spite of the amount of new housing built during that period, the prices were never accessible

to large sectors of the Madrid population. The massive construction rates and the optimism displayed by the administration, together with the complicity of technicians came altogether to an abrupt end with the economic crisis and the burst of the real estate bubble in 2008. Paradoxically, this situation came to fulfil the objectives of the Master Plan by causing the sharp fall of prices due to overabundance.

It seems that the left-over spaces become more and more the battle ground for a different informal urbanism that confronts the deficiencies of standard planning with political activist proposals. Currently, a number of teams formed by young architects, planners and others, work in Madrid on projects related to participation and public space from a guerrilla approach. The Basurama collective is one of them with projects such as 6,000 km³, a critical reflexion on the metabolism of the city and the left over urban spaces. Other projects like Autobarríos San Cristobal create events and ephemeral interventions on residual urban spaces.⁴ The project Inceasis by the team Todopor la Praxis intends to work with the ruins of uncontrolled growth system. It includes a recollection of spaces and experiences and maps voids and residual spaces left behind in the process of transformation of the city to postulate them as opportunities for occupation and transformation through active citizen participation.⁵

Los Ahijones. Strolling through the Waste Land

A stroll around the vast territories of the proposed New East Developments of Madrid reveals an unexpected landscape of the city.

Preparing the EUSS 2013 workshop we took the chance to walk aimlessly (a zozno) through the area of Los Ahijones. This development expects 15,400 dwellings to be built, a small part of the total 125,000 dwellings foreseen for

all the new developments (excluding Ensanche de Vallecas). The Master Plan conceived this territory as the larger scale continuation of the PAU, as Sanchinarro or Ensanche de Vallecas. In a text by the Council Planning Department in 2001 the nature of this land is described as residual, environmentally deteriorated and holding scarcely any agricultural use. The East Development Strategy was bound to confront the housing demand of the Madrid population.⁶ It may now seem only too easy to qualify such statements as short sighted. 12 years after those words, the land is currently clearly residual and has been environmentally very much deteriorated by the paralysed development in infrastructure works. It would be very complex to make assumptions on the future of the developments as they are planned, as the administrative processes continue and new building permits are issued every year.

Other areas of the East Developments as Valdecarros are still untouched, but in Los Ahijones the development infrastructure works are at a state of 5% progress according to the municipal web page,⁶ although they are hardly noticeable at first sight. A series of geometrical embankments are visible from the aerial view that resemble a buried ancient city at pedestrian level. There are hardly any trees on sight, but low vegetation covers the land, changing colours in the depressions of the landscape, where the water gathers. The up to two meters high carduus acquire a surreal presence in this context. A deep hole in the ground, signalled through fallen security plastic fences, marks an archaeological exploration spot. Such sight brings to memory Lara Almarazgui's early work dig (1998) in which she excavated a two meter deep hole in an empty plot of Amsterdam until the construction company came to level the grounds; an action that evokes the search through forgotten layers of the urban realm.

The city seems very remote from here. The skyline is fragmented and surrounds the walker from a long distance. The urban presence is perceived through the power lines, the train and the distant on-going infrastructure works. On the other side of the railway the area of Los Berrocales presents a 25% state of development infrastructure works. The vegetation layer has been removed, leaving behind a flat moon-like landscape.

Towards the east, Los Ahijones ends with the illegal settlement of La Cañada Real Galiana. Over the last 25 years, this protected livestock trail has become a 15km long lineal city housing 8,628 inhabitants⁷. It becomes a paradox that such a focus of urban activity waiting for regularisation or dismantlement should be located next to deserted land, such as Los Ahijones, expected to become an improbable city.

2,3,4. Stroll through Los Ahijones

Photo: Juan Arana 2013



A commitment with uncertainty

The above mentioned urban theorists postulate the unused, left over space, as a utopian territory to be understood and grasped through intervention, action, study, leisure or leaving it



untouched. Solá-Morales starts by pointing out the aesthetic values of such landscape, to turn it into a revulsive for contemporary architecture and urbanism. More technical approaches (Hough 1989) deal with the landscaping and natural characteristics within the wider context of questioning the relationships of city and nature. Meanwhile it becomes the ground for political spatial activism in the city and the scenario for spontaneous events and citizen participation.

What we are confronted with in Madrid are large expectant territories that are in the transition process between a future city that never will be and their being reclaimed by nature. They are what Languillo would call instant ruins or the ruins of the future. But their unfinished nature could also mean open possibilities. After the years of the real estate boom, the city finds

again its limits. In the aftermath of the crisis, for the first time after 25 years there is no pressure to build a new city. We can take the chance and leave it to nature, the regeneration of such spaces providing some room for indefinición and uncertainty for future generations.

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1. Clément, op. Cit.
 2. <http://www.osservatorionomade.net>
 3. <http://www.6000km.org/>
 4. <http://basurama.org/>
 5. <http://increasis.org/>
 6. <http://www.madrid.es/>
 7. El País 12 mar. 2012.

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