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Vague parks: the politics of late twentieth-century urban landscapes.

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Exploring park projects celebrating Ignasi de Solà-Morales' idea of the *terrain vague*: 'as found', spontaneous urban landscapes raising questions about relations between politics and design.

Vague parks: the politics of late twentieth-century urban landscapes

Krystallia Kamvasinou

The term *terrain vague*, made famous in contemporary architectural culture by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, refers to a place in the city that is empty and unoccupied, vague or uncertain, imprecise or unbounded. It carries both negative and positive connotations: unused but also free to be occupied spontaneously. Interstitial spaces, brownfield sites, disused industrial estates, railway lines and stations, abandoned ports and plots in ruins, are unproductive areas within the economic structure of the city. Perceived as empty, they are often the focus of architecture's and urban design's desire for productivity, control and order. This instrumental view disregards the richness and special atmosphere of the *terrain vague* as a place colonised by nature and people in a more uncontrolled manner, 'the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete',[1] the charm of the formless and indeterminate.

Terrain vague landscapes incorporate freedom and critique. Abandoned by design, they assume 'ownership of past places of action, or current places with no formal identity assigned',[2] producing strange places that exist within the physical context of the city yet 'outside the city's effective circuits and productive structures'.[3] Urban voids can be read at the large scale as cracks in the mirror that testify to an uneasy process of change within a seemingly stable urban context. As pockets of self-sustained vegetation, they act as nature reserves, connecting with other green spaces to establish ecological corridors and contribute to a much larger urban ecosystem. At the small, intimate scale their apparent emptiness can be questioned: children play here, dogs walk, homeless reside, photographers and film makers capture poetic nuances, and nature makes its way back into the city, no matter how tiny its appearance (evidenced by the way in which humble vegetation types colonise vacant lots). It is crucial then to understand the *terrain vague* not as an empty, neutral territory, but as a rich field of invisible social and natural operations. This paper argues that *terrain vague* landscapes are representations of urban politics. Such representations are explored here, with photographic images and stills from a short

documentary film made by the author acting as visual references. Much can be learned from the *terrain vague* condition to formulate principles for the design of public spaces in the city. Three principles are explored: emptiness, indeterminacy and occupation. It is proposed that a new type of urban public space is emerging based on these principles. Self-organised and self-sustained, the '*vague* park' manifests itself in ways that will be demonstrated through case studies of contemporary landscape design projects.

Terrain vague as a model for public space in the city
Far from empty, the *terrain vague*, with its spontaneous car parks, makeshift athletic grounds and occasional illegal, temporary architecture becomes a multi-sensory domain for the inscription of landscapes of the imagination and simultaneous landscapes of events [1]. Occurrences of such inscription have been captured in contemporary urban photography, for instance in the work of John Davies, Thomas Struth and others.[4] In Davies' 'Goats and sheep, Barcelona, Spain, 1990'[5] [2] we are confronted with a *terrain vague* on the outskirts of Barcelona. In the background there are rows of high-rise housing blocks regularly spaced on what seems like a planning grid. The city is represented as order, regularity, and dominance. In the foreground however, which occupies more than two thirds of the image vertically, there is an abandoned land dotted with makeshift fences and huts, rocks and weeds, across which passes a flock of sheep and goats. On the left, near a hut, we can barely see someone who could be the shepherd. The spontaneous occupation of the *terrain vague* by what appears effectively to be a rural scene (the lower two thirds of the image) is in stark juxtaposition with the towering city in the background (the upper third of the image). The camera frames the landscape in an almost surrealistic manner, representing thus the multi-faceted politics of the production of space, space as generated through regulated political decisions: the tower blocks in the background; and space emerging and spreading through unregulated appropriation: the 'grazing field' of the shepherd with his flock.

1 Still frames from the author's documentary *Terrain Vague*. Original footage recorded on location in Lagos, South Portugal, and Keratsini, south- west Athens, Greece. From left to right, and from top to bottom: walker; stork's nest on derelict industrial chimney; stork's nest close-up; fishing in the void; illegal and legal architecture; nature in the void; council ownership; pockets of nature as part of larger ecological corridors connecting to the mountains; spontaneous car parks; vegetation types/prickly pear; a piece of spontaneous meadow amid the city; openness; dumping site for cars; colonisers; car park in the void; kids play here

2 Goats and sheep, Barcelona, Spain, 1990

Seen under this prism, the *terrain vague* can be thought of as an alternative public space. Such a public space falls outside the legislative or politically defined borders of the city, carries a history of change on the ground, and happens at present as an interchange of occupations in its local use, ranging from the legislatively legal to the marginally outlawed. Nevertheless this type of public encounter has also characteristics of traditional public space: people from different backgrounds gather together, participating in a range of activities. This type of space, it seems, is gradually disappearing in the quest for development and economic efficiency. It is important to ask what remains relevant and valuable in these types of spaces and how their qualities can be preserved in designed environments. Is the *terrain vague* something we should avoid, or can we learn from its existence?

Principles of the *terrain vague* include emptiness, indeterminacy, and uncontrolled occupation, both by people and by nature. The power of the *terrain vague* lies in its freedom and openness in contrast to other public spaces in the city which tend to be heavily monitored and commercialised. It is a space where people can still access a strange slowness away from the pace of the contemporary city. In terms of urban politics then, the *terrain vague* includes in it freedom and critique. If the lack of formalised identity, so evident in the experience of the *terrain vague,* is a trademark of our contemporary condition, then to assign these 'empty' landscapes a 'place' – literally, by acknowledging them in physical space, and metaphorically, in our mental framework – would mean the possibility of an alternative to dominant thinking about the city.

Mohsen Mostafavi has suggested that 'temporary uses of such sites already contain clues to the potential diversity of future activities they might contain' and such considerations have been discussed simultaneously in various fields.[6] In 'Urban Political Ecology', as Roger Keil suggests, the question of nature 'as a constructed rather than a pre-given concept' – and therefore one 'subject to political re-definition and re-articulation' – is crucial. Indeed, scientists such as German ecologist Herbert Sukopp and landscape ecologists such as Michael Hough, have shown the complexity and importance of urban habitats. For example, writing about the bombed-out inner-city sites of Berlin, Roger Keil suggests that the sites' 'biological richness and diversity [...] led to the rejection of the common assumption that urbanization equalled the destruction of habitat and the degradation of first nature'.[7] Recently, the Landscape Urbanism movement has supported the suggestion that urban and natural landscapes come together in a process of merging the qualities of each into a bigger system. Vacant lots, ruins and abandoned infrastructure are strategically reconsidered beyond their individual scale, viewed as parts of a much larger urban ecosystem, extending both in space and in time.[8] As, more often than ever, landscape design has to deal with the management of derelict areas, the rehabilitation of urban voids and industrial wastelands, and the establishment of parks in

landfills, characteristic features of the *terrain vague* have found their way into recent landscape projects. Ideas such as recycling landscapes and landscapes able to accommodate transformation, change and even erasure have been slowly but steadily gaining ground over more formal or deterministic approaches.[9]

The '*vague* park' emerges through the least-formed design: setting the rules for occupation to take place but not the actual 'form' that this will take. In these designed landscapes the void remains void within the urban fabric; it retains the illusion of the horizon for modern urbanites. The void extends in time: agricultural techniques, a focus on water management through irrigation and drainage, and successional planting strategies with a view to establishing pioneering species that require little maintenance, recreate an atmosphere, if not of an idyllic countryside, for sure at least of a working rural landscape. Could this be a new pastoral?

The *vague* park: a new pastoral?
This *vague* park, with its completely different starting point, could not copy the urban pastoral ideal of the nineteenth century. Urban parks were once conceived as a reminder of a rural wilderness, a nostalgic attempt to bring the countryside into the industrial city for the enjoyment of the emerging urbanites. Central Park in New York began in this way. M. Elen Deming argues that, although the construction of the park provided jobs for thousands of unskilled immigrants, at the political level 'the park itself erased all traces of the former conditions and occupants of the site', such as for instance the makeshift communities of immigrants.[10] The completed park is therefore evidence of a specific political destination for the *terrain vague*, controlled by the interests of politicians and businessmen rather than the 'park-dwellers'.[11] The contemporary *terrain vague* instead suggests different priorities: indeterminacy, less control, layers of memory of previous activities. Actions and atmospheres inscribed in the previously leftover or undeveloped *terrain vague* take on a more formal character and become design acts, no matter how subtle their presence. It is this subtlety that distinguishes these urban landscapes from the picturesque, highly controlled experiences of nineteenth-century parks.

Contemporary urban voids, as pockets of uncontrolled nature and activities, require new strategies of becoming. Instead of defining nature as embellishment within the context of the city, the new generation of *vague* parks exposes the urban politics that generated spaces in need of remediation, the way these spaces were formed and produced, and subsequently occupied. If the nineteenth-century park's picturesque principles were in stark contrast with the ideological and political reality of a society that had rejected those values, today's *vague* park seems to be a representation of current urban politics of a society coming to terms with its industrial past; one struggling for reconciliation with pollution, contamination, waste management, the need for future sustainability, and the advent of an industrial aesthetic.

Design and the *terrain vague*

A number of designers have been developing strategies to deal with the *terrain vague*. Following are four indicative projects each pursuing particular strategies.

Agri-tecture

Since 2004, landscape architects James Corner/Field Operations with architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and planting designer Piet Oudolf have been involved in the redesign of the High Line, a derelict viaduct in Manhattan up to 9m above street level, 2.4km long and up to 18m wide, as a sequential public open space [3a & b]. The project is based on the principle of what they call 'agri-tecture': nature becomes architecture as it is inserted between the buildings at an architectural scale, at once wild and cultivated. The choice of planting is influenced by the existing vegetation that colonised the rail tracks during the many years of dereliction; similarly, the design aims at blurring the edge between soft and hard landscape: 'So-called "planking" meshes planted areas and paved routes like planks, thus creating fluid transitions [...] The choice of plants is oriented on succession vegetation with indigenous grasses, meadows and trees'.[12] As a piece of derelict infrastructure, the High Line however hovers

3a

3b

between being a historic building to be conserved and a public amenity, a functional space to be used by people and the city. To resolve this tension, the proposal designs people's access while retaining 'the area's characteristic distance from familiar public spaces'.[13] The designers' slogan 'Keep it simple. Keep it wild. Keep it quiet. Keep it slow' sums up the existing *terrain vague* characteristics.

Intermediate landscapes

Landscape architect Michel Desvigne has coined the term 'intermediate landscapes' to describe the temporal and physical scale of his proposals.[14] His 2004 proposal for the reforestation of the Riverbanks in Bordeaux is based on the integration of vacant lots, ex-industrial landscape and river *[4]*. A six kilometre stretch of the right bank of the river Garonne in Bordeaux, mainly in industrial use, is to be occupied by an alluvial forest. Desvigne proposes that 'lots becoming vacant are first to be planted with a tight grid of trees and thinned out later',[15] a process not very different from what would naturally happen if these lots were left to their own devices. Vacancy is filled but not built. Emptiness is retained as open space for the city, given back to the people, providing unity along the riverbank, while taking advantage of the river's natural affording of 'virtual retreats' and 'panoramic views'. 'While it is quite absurd to imagine a facade of one built unit eight kilometres long, a forest with the same dimensions is aesthetically and ecologically coherent.' [16] This forest, made of many empty lots of minuscule scale joined together, falls in the tradition of large, geographical scale green structures that form the frameworks of

3   *a* High Line, New York. Existing situation

b View, High Line landscape, Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

4   'Bordeaux Rive Droite', Michel Desvigne

4

cities. As Desvigne argues, it 'suggests nineteenth century America more than contemporary Europe' and implies a new version of the pastoral ideal.

The transformation will take place over decades and in an unpredictable manner. The principle of indeterminacy is retained. Desvigne suggests that 'the municipality will acquire the land for the park, but the release of the lots and the withdrawal of certain uses are mechanisms with a random and unpredictable order'.[17] However, although some of the land will be used, there will always be some part of it lying derelict; this strategy suggests that it is possible 'to use parts of lots to start planting the park' and that perhaps the park as a whole will always be in an incomplete or intermediate state. It will be 'a mosaic of afforested areas' as the forests' textures, sizes and density, as well as open clearings, will depend on the time they were established, 'inserted between the existing buildings and among those that will gradually be built'.[18] This is not difficult to envision if one thinks of *terrain vague* spaces existing in the city and the way they are populated by nature.

Recovering landscape

According to Carla I. Corbin, this strategy advocated by James Corner and Sébastien Marot seeks to broaden the field of vision so that the site expands into the larger geography.[19] The site, its perceptions and concealed facts – as well as regional, cultural and natural processes – come to the fore to drive design decisions and acts, and to create meaning for communities and local identity. James Corner and Field Operations have developed this thinking in their proposal 'Lifescape', begun in 2002, for the Fresh Kills Parkland in Staten Island, New York; a site 2200 acres in size and once the world's largest sanitary waste landfill. *[5]* Their design involves a set of long-term strategies 'based on natural processes, agricultural practice and plant life cycles' to 'rehabilitate the severely degraded land over the next 30 years, and transform the site into a huge public park'.[20] By 'public', Corner refers to the park's openness, not only to nature but also to people's engagement.

The 30-year timescale of the project suggests that politics may change, but the process of 'recovery' will ensure the lasting effects of the proposed strategy. According to Corner, 'lifescape is both a place and a process' and as such open-ended and flexible enough to accommodate change. Access to the park is afforded while the park is continually evolving, and not, as usually happens, once the park is completed. Experiences of the park will vary over time as the project evolves: the open decontaminated lands, previously inaccessible wastelands; the plant communities and reforested edges, in 10-20 years' time; the circulation paths and avenues; and finally the additional building programmes that will sit within this framework.

As a place, the park will be 'vast in scale, spatially open and rugged in character, affording dramatic vistas, exposure to the elements, and huge open spaces unlike any other in the New York

metropolitan region'.[21] The condition of physical emptiness (as openness) is clearly present here. Where the nineteenth-century park was recreating an atmosphere of peace, pastoral beauty and controlled wilderness, today's citizen wants more extreme experiences. Nature at its most idyllic is not enough, it seems; one longs for the exposure to the elements, the erasure of known densities, the open horizon, all rarely experienced in today's cities. At the same time, you need to reflect on, not necessarily to escape from, city life and memory.

As a process, the park represents an ecological strategy of environmental reclamation at both natural and social level. It suggests 'dynamic staging' of nature and people, in other words it is open to indeterminacy and uncontrolled occupation, 'for a site of this scale and complexity cannot be "designed" in total, nor constructed overnight'.[22] Three primary large-scale landscape architectural techniques (soil making, successional planting and landform manipulation) will help produce the framework, or 'matrix' of the park.

Protecting destruction

The work of landscape architect Peter Latz in Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park, 1990–2001, has introduced a new type of intervention which has been described by Carla I. Corbin as 'protecting destruction'.[23] His project aims to create a new public place without erasing the 'complex and partly toxic' former character of the site.[24] As such, it has set a model for reclaiming *terrain vague* landscapes [6]. The park is on the site of a blast furnace plant, part of the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park (IBA) in the Ruhr District, an organisation which was attempting to set quality building and planning standards for the environmental, economic and social transformation of an ex-industrial region.[25] The politics of acquisition and design involved a number of parties: the IBA organisation that had the overview; the land development association which, with the aid of a real estate fund, purchased large part of the grounds from the industrial owner and the railway; the city of Duisburg council, which had to designate the grounds as open space in a rezoning of the area; and the miners' organisation, which

5 Fresh Kills Lifescape, James Corner - Field Operations. Rendering of September 11 Earthwork monument looking northeast, redrawn by the author (charcoal on paper)

6 Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park, Peter Latz and Partners

obtained economic restructuring aid and therefore the funds for the design of the open spaces.[26] It is interesting to note thus that '*vague* parks' seem to require more flexible and open-ended processes not only of implementation but also of design.

The proposed strategy of reclamation is carefully limited to allow calculated access to the *vague* territory turned into park. Little has been done to fulfil expectations of what an urban park should look like: the park has retained the atmosphere of abandoned industrial territory, but has provided

access to more people than ever. It seems that such a strategy is made possible by changes in society.[27] Industrial ruins are now appreciated and that has led to a new aesthetic and cultural receptivity. Duisburg-Nord is thus a park which is a direct representation of a change in urban politics and ideals. The park's openness happens also in social terms, as its realisation involved numerous citizen groups, associations and employment programmes for people out-of-work.[28]

The stated idea was 'to integrate, shape, develop and interlink the existing patterns' that were formed first by the site's previous industrial use, and then by its decay and invasion by pioneering plants, and 'to find a new interpretation with a new syntax'.[29] After the area was abandoned by industry, not only nature but also people gradually reclaimed it:

'Conservationists listed the steel chunk as an industrial monument. Citizens' organisations organised tours on history and botany. The Duisburg Alpine Club discovered the iron ore bunkers as a climber's paradise. The diving club gave the water-filled underground bunkers new uses as practice pools'.[30]

Latz looked at what was there in order to develop existing situations further into several individual systems that operate independently and in calculated conjunction: the deep level water park that uses an existing system of canals, treatment pools and reservoirs where diving courses are available; the single fields and clumps of vegetation; the promenades at street level which connect parts of the town having been separated for decades; and the railway park with its high level promenades and the 'rail harp', based on the existing rail tracks.[31]

The scale of spaces reflects opportunities inherent in the emptiness of the *terrain vague,* which has the flexibility to accommodate different sizes of crowds and types of occupation: 'during festivities up to 50 000 people gather in these places',[32] proving the need for huge voids where people can spontaneously congregate. But people can also go to the park alone. There are 'many different parks that the terrain in Duisburg offers different people',[33] the diver, the climber, the cyclist, reflecting a change towards a society of individuals.

Necessary accommodation

It can be argued that public spaces in the city are increasingly characterised by excessive control, so it is perhaps in vaguely defined territories that there is potential for spontaneous and anonymous engagement. Notably the qualities of the *terrain vague* have been acknowledged in recent work of landscape architects who are seeking to promote principles of indeterminacy, emptiness and open-ended occupation in projects related to large-scale public, decommissioned and marginalised lands within or at the edge of cities. We have looked at examples from landfill, industrial, inner-city infrastructural, and waterfront projects.

In these projects landscape is seen as a process of dynamic staging of people and nature. I suggest that these new *vague* landscape parks are the contemporary equivalent of the urban pastoral of the nineteenth century. Although this paper has focused on design principles to be derived from the *terrain vague*, an important aspect of such places is their relation to the economic and social structures of the city. The precarious situation of the *terrain vague* as undefined politically and logistically requires and proposes new models of land acquisition, ownership and management. The examples considered here reaffirm the urgent need to recognise and preserve *terrain vague* spaces in urban environments. Rarely designated public, they make room for some of the most important public values. They accommodate indeterminate and collective occupation. They offer access to emptiness, as openness to non-controlled public events and to nature, as slowness and access to the horizon line. Their role is deeply necessary in a densely filled urban life. The *vague* park suggests an important model for the public space of the twenty-first century.

Notes
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3. De Solà-Morales Rubio, 'Terrain Vague', p. 120.
4. See photographic work by Thomas Hoepker under the title *Trás-os-Montes, Portugal, 1992,* in Tania Gallenmüller, 'Universal Language', *Topos The International Review of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design,* 55 (March 2006): 50, reprinted from *'Magnum' Soccer* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005). See also Stefano Boeri, 'Milan: Urban

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6. *Landscape Urbanism: a manual for the machinic landscape,* ed. by Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: AA Publications, 2003), p. 7.
7. Roger Keil, 'Urban Political Ecology', *Urban Geography,* 24, 8 (November 2003): 723-38 (pp. 726-27).
8. James Corner, 'Landscape

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11. Deming, 'The Country and the City', p. 124.
12. Peter Stegner, 'High Line in the Museum of Modern Art', *Topos The International Review of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design*, 51 (June 2005): 6. See also Friends of the High Line, *Planting Design by Piet Oudolf*, <http://www.thehighline.org/design/plantingdesign.html> [accessed 20 January 2007].
13. Stegner, 'High Line in the Museum of Modern Art', p. 6
14. Gilles Davoine, 'In conversation with Michel Desvigne: Intermediate Landscapes', trans. by Philip Gumuchdjian in *Landscape Urbanism: a manual for the machinic landscape,* ed. by Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: AA Publications, 2003), pp. 82-89.
15. Michel Desvigne, 'Riverbanks in Bordeaux', *Topos The International Review of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design,* 51 (June 2005): 22-26 (p. 23).
16. Desvigne, 'Riverbanks in Bordeaux', p. 25.
17. Desvigne, 'Riverbanks in Bordeaux', p. 26.
18. *Ibid.*
19. James Corner, 'Introduction: Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice', in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, ed. by James Corner (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), pp. 1-28; Sébastien Marot, 'The Reclaiming of Sites', in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape*

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32. Latz, *Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord.*
33. Latz, quoted in Dietrich, 'No Politics, no Park', p. 74.

Illustration credits

Biography

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