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Bodies in the void: Addressing socioecological challenges through temporary practices in *Terrain Vague* sites

Key Words

Terrain Vague, Temporary Urbanism, Community engagement, Artistic practices, Experimental placemaking

Terrain Vague: an introduction

We live in an era of cities or planetary urbanisation [Brenner 2014]. With the world's urban population continuously growing and moving to cities, urban development affects ecosystems, biodiversity and natural resources on a planetary scale.

Rapid and uncontrolled urbanization coupled with economic restructuring generates Terrain Vague spaces [de Sola Morales 1995]: also known as Urban Voids or Vacant Lots. These are either undeveloped, leftover spaces or abandoned, derelict, post-development spaces that lie in a state of suspension, without any official function, the by-products of the process of urban space production [Lefebvre, 1991].

The definition of Terrain Vague [de Sola Morales 1995] does not center on the physical, morphological, legal, economic, or aesthetic aspects of these spaces. On the contrary, it focuses on: i) the passing of events and what happens in these spaces ("empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place", 119); ii) on those who inhabit or use these spaces, i.e. the people who care about and fight to preserve these spaces ("filmmakers, sculptors of instantaneous performances, and photographers seek refuge in the margins of the city", 122); iii) the sense of freedom, hope and possibility that these spaces evoke, a state of indeterminacy in which anything is still possible ("void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation", 122). In fact, these spaces, due to their lack of control, their immediate availability and their flexibility and openness to any kind of activity, have been the privileged place for corporal artistic experiments and performances. A recent example is the DOM- collective [2013-, Rome]: "DOM- investigates the language of performing arts, contaminating it with the Environmental Humanities' militant approach and the issues and imaginaries of feminist and queer ecologies. Its practice revolves around the relation between bodies and landscapes, questioning the tangle of permeability, and observing how power,

nature and marginality interact in the public space" [Pirri, 2019]. Temporarily cut off from the city's economic production circuit and in a fragile and uncertain condition, subject to change, the Terrain Vague has historically been the place of artistic practices of resistance related to walking, from the walks of the Surrealists to the urban drifts of the Situationists, to the nomadic transurbance of Stalker collective [Careri, 2006]. Moreover, their uncertain future makes these spaces available for temporary uses not permitted or tolerated elsewhere, for spontaneous, artistic, self-managed, experimental design or alternative economic practices stimulating creativity [Zetti & Rossi, 2018]. LaFond (2010) and Kamvasinou & Roberts (2014) highlight that experimental approaches to urban spaces can breed opportunities for cultural, sustainable planning and transform vacant land into valued community spaces, serving as catalysts for revitalizing neglected areas. In conclusion, because of its characteristics and status, the Terrain Vague is a container that foregrounds and allows the emergence of bodies, both through movement and the act of walking, and through the temporary events and activities that can contribute to the strengthening of the community.

Temporary Urbanism

"Temporary Urbanism," as explored in "The Temporary City" (2012) by Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams, is a concept that revolves around the temporary use of urban spaces. Bishop and Williams (2012) highlight how vacant lots or underused buildings, can be temporarily repurposed for a variety of uses, ranging from pop-up shops and art installations to community gardens and event spaces, allowing diverse stakeholders, including artists, entrepreneurs, and community groups to contribute to the urban fabric. Some of the actions involved in temporary urbanism come under 'tactical urbanism' defined as 'an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies' [Lydon and Garcia 2015, 2]. However not all temporary urbanism is tactical, so it is a broader umbrella term that can include larger scale interventions, characterized by its transient nature, often seen as a response to economic downturns, urban decay, the lengthy process of formal urban redevelopment, or providing interim solutions pending long-term development [Bishop and Williams 2012; Kamvasinou and Roberts 2014]. It represents a shift in urban planning, focusing on adaptation of urban spaces to meet changing community needs and desires, contributing to placemaking. While digital online platforms may be used to self-organise and bring groups together, the actual placemaking takes place in person, through strongly embodied practices of making, moving, training or events.

While adapting, reusing and repurposing urban spaces minimises waste and environmental impact, a 'light touch' intervention practice as advocated by temporary urbanism is more likely to preserve local site biodiversity and ecology. In that sense, temporary urbanism is not just a stopgap measure; it's a strategic approach shaping the way cities evolve over time [Bishop and Williams 2012].

Methodology: temporary practices in terrain vague sites

This paper aims to explore the potential of temporary urbanism practices and strategies in the Terrain Vague, demonstrating how this approach can preserve and enhance existing corporeal appropriations (human and non-human) and enable new ones, increasing socioecological benefits. We present indicative examples of a certain type of project in terrain vague sites, realized by applying temporary urbanism, which we call Vague Catalyst. This concept refers to projects addressing uncertain and fragile site prospects by avoiding permanent buildings or functions. Instead, they focus on temporary activities, using minimal and light interventions like impermanent structures, installations, artistic works, or sometimes no physical changes at all, rather allowing the everyday occupation of space and the movement of bodies, emphasizing their presence.

Methodologically, while our analysis is broad covering a wide range of such projects, we focus in more detail on two case studies from London, UK and Lisbon, Portugal, selected as indicative of North and South European regions, as well as for their experimental, community/artist-led approach, and longevity, and LABIC (2022).

Cody Dock, a community-led regeneration, river revitalisation and social enterprise project (2009-) located in a socioeconomically deprived yet diverse area within the London Royal Docks regeneration zone, has a rich history from pre-industrial times to post-industrial decline and recent regeneration. Since 2009, the Gasworks Dock Partnership (GDP), led by Simon Myers, has been transforming it into a community marina for live-in boats and arts hub. This transformation includes environmental restoration, history and ecology education, and diverse temporary community activities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted its value as a communal space supporting health and wellbeing, affirming GDP's slow, organic, and collaborative approach to placemaking.

LABIC (2022), a laboratory of community innovation, operates in Barreiro Velho, a city part of the Great Metropolitan Area of Lisbon that has undergone a recent shrinking process due to de-industrialization, partial abandonment and neglect. In this area, they identified and photographed 25 urban voids, totaling 4250 m², equivalent to a football pitch. This was part of their 'map and identify' initiative, involving a collaborative effort with students, an architecture office, and local residents. Proposals were developed for regenerating these spaces, and the owners of the abandoned plots were contacted. The owner of "void number 12" temporarily entrusted their lot to LABIC, leading to its cleanup and community discussions about its future. This culminated in the "Festival a Rua é Nossa" in April 2022, featuring cultural and sporting events for the city and community. Created as a project of a temporary nature, the idea of LABIC is to activate long-term and lasting processes, leading to a stronger community that can take care of the spaces. Even a small, abandoned space can be a pretext and catalyst for larger, long-term changes.

By bringing side-by-side different time periods, practices and dimensions of placemaking projects through the case studies, we reveal how urban voids can operate as experimental sites/vessels of corporeity to creatively address current socioecological challenges in cities.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1 - K. Kamvasinou, Cody Dock: Transformation Over Time, 2013/2022, Digital Photographs, Cody Dock, London. This composite image shows Cody Dock in 2013 with a temporary geodesic dome floating stage, and the same viewpoint in 2022 featuring newly installed artists' workspaces. Author's own.