Is the *Terrain* Still *Vague*? Reconsidering Indeterminate Spaces

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Abstract:

Wastelands, urban voids, interstices: especially since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of terminologies projected on (supposedly) empty urban spaces by designers, scholars, and artists. These discussions emerged as responses to landscapes of deindustrialisation, increasing sensitivity to the impacts of infrastructures on the urban fabric, the declining currency of modernist planning, and a shift toward piecemeal regeneration and aestheticization of "left-over" spaces. A key text typifying this fixation, offering an umbrella term for these spaces, was the *Terrain Vague* by architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales. His theorization of spatial indeterminacy, borrowing concepts from photography, was driven by ambivalence toward designers' approaches to the urban residuum. We attempt to reterritorialize de Solà-Morales' critique within the context it responded to, the "Barcelona Model" of design-led regeneration. With *terrains vague* remaining focal points in urbanist discourse, there is increasing acknowledgment that urban spaces are rarely devoid of social activity, value, or meaning. Nevertheless, planners, architects, and policymakers continue to project voidness onto these spaces to justify their reconfiguration and revalorization. We argue that the discourse on emptiness has lost much of its novelty—especially when divorced from the political economic processes that create them—and suggest ways to move beyond this impasse.

Keywords: terrain vague; wastelands; urban voids; indeterminacy; Ignasi de Solà-Morales; Barcelona

I. Charting Theories of Indeterminate Space

Vacant, void, residual, ruined, derelict, disused, or underutilized. Varying in scale from leftover slivers of land to abandoned ports, indeterminate urban voids—byproducts of infrastructural modernization, deindustrialization, and the capitalist (re)production of space—are problematized in planning policy when opportunities arise for their and revalorization. Terms emphasizing lack, waste, vacancy, and temporariness dominate discourses of redevelopment initiatives toward such spaces and are instrumental in justifying their reconfiguration. Hitherto "blank spots on the map" (Doron, 2000), once made visible, become recast as impediments to efficient, profitable, and secure land use, and of aesthetically pleasing landscapes. Perceived underutilization and disorderliness are signalled through visual metaphors like "eyesore" and "urban decay". While supposedly empty, these spaces are rarely devoid of use value and are often appropriated informally.

There is no coincidence that, since the 1970s, "post-industrial wasteland" has entered the everyday English-language vernacular. Shifts in new communication and transport technologies, economic globalization, and subsequent deindustrialization and urban restructuring generated newfound concerns about urban decay, exacerbated by automobile-dominated modernist planning in North America and Europe and the "splintering" effect of urban infrastructures (Graham and Marvin, 2001). New terms such as obsolescence, itself emerging from real estate (Abramson, 2016), along with blight (McKean, 1977), dereliction (Jakle and Wilson, 1992), wastelands (Southworth, 2001), vacant land (Pearsall and Lucas, 2014), and dead space (Coleman, 1982), abounded in the late 20th century. These terms predominantly emphasized inefficiency, uselessness or underutilization, emptiness, and unsightliness, while architects and landscape architects began focusing attention on voids (Secchi, 1984) and "lost space" (Trancik, 1986) as sites of palliative urban design practice.

At the same time, there has been a less dominant, countervailing acknowledgment that urban vacancy embodies promising values. Within the design fields, fine art, and urban social theory, more ambivalent or celebratory ideals have been cast upon vacant lots, particularly through their social reappropriation: anything but empty, they are treated as unpredictable spaces of possibility (Franck & Stevens, 2006; Beveridge et al., 2022) and uncertainty (Cupers & Miessen, 2018), celebrated as heterotopias (De Cauter & Dehaene, 2008; Lang, 2008) or ecologically unique "third landscapes" (Gandy, 2012; Clément, 2015). Peaking in the early 2000s, these currents gradually influenced landscape design practices toward leftover urban spaces, along with the proliferation of infrastructural reuse projects associated with a landscape urbanism approach, in parallel with the socio-cultural theorization of marginal sites as "rediscovered commons" (Stavrides, 2013, 2016) that could be temporarily appropriated as, or converted to, public spaces (Brandt et al., 2008; Campo, 2013). While projections of emptiness remain common in the lexicon of planning and urban design, such ambivalent or celebratory ideals are central to the transdisciplinary discourse around contemporary urban space in the Global North.

Of course, concerns regarding the use and exchange values of "vacant" or underutilized land are not new phenomena. The concept of the wasteland is intrinsic to concepts of waste and value going back centuries (Di Palma, 2014; Rosa, 2016); utilitarian approaches to rationalize "empty" spaces typically occur through the expropriation and enclosure of previous, common uses (Gandy, 2013b). As such, any projection of emptiness onto residual urban spaces requires looking away from or diminishing, their preexisting social values and ecologies: of their common uses as impromptu, informal public spaces and playgrounds, encampments, gardens, sites for artistic interventions, political mobilizations, along with their "shadowed spaces" where users take advantage of minimal surveillance for

transgressive activities (Wood, 1978). As such, "empty" spaces may be portrayed as temporary manifestations of commoning in cities undergoing physical and economic restructuring, under imminent threat of enclosure. Recast as ambivalent, liminal, celebratory, radically open, and even utopian, a new lexicon emerged, often building upon concepts such as the Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey, 1991), emphasizing freedom, transgression, prefigurative politics, and temporary reappropriation. New terms abounded, such as indeterminate spaces (Groth & Corijn, 2005), residual spaces (Wikström, 2005; [name deleted]), non-places (Augé, 1995), areas of impunity (Ábalos & Herreros, 1997), junkspace (Koolhaas, 2002), drossscapes (Berger, 2006), waiting lands (Beveridge et al., 2022), terra incognita (Bowman & Pagano, 2004), urban interstices (Brighenti, 2013), transgressive zones (Doron, 2000), wildscapes (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007), loose space (Franck & Stevens, 2006), interim spaces (Kamvasinou, 2006), superfluous landscapes (Nielsen, 2002), edgelands (Shoard, 2000), interim spaces (Colomb, 2017), unintentional landscapes (Gandy, 2016), third landscapes (Clément, 2003), among countless others. Dereliction and wastelands (Hudson, 2014) have also been recast in a celebratory light. "Void" remains a key terminology (López-Piñeiro, 2020; Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, 2020) alluding to presumed emptiness as an opportunity for reconfiguration, more recently framed as *vacíos expectantes* [expectant voids] (Solé-Gras and P. de Solà-Morales, 2023): sites to reimagine futures. While no one term perfectly encompasses all these positive and negative, adjectivized spaces, their proliferation complicates, reinforces, and divides ideologies toward (seemingly) left-over, temporarily residual spaces no longer serving their original purpose, or never having a designated use to begin with.

Here we focus on Catalan architect and theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales' (1942-2001) concept of the *terrain vague* (1995), developed in response to Barcelona's tabula rasa

approach to “empty” urban spaces driven by the city’s 1976 General Metropolitan Plan and a design-driven reimaging strategy. This loose term emphasizes ambiguity and ambivalence around so-called empty spaces, highlighting their underdetermined meanings while gesturing toward the spatio-temporal conditions that create them and architects’ attitudes toward them. The discourse surrounding what he described as “supposedly forgotten spaces” hidden in plain sight—in which he was a key figure—continues to play a key role in urban theory. What makes the terrain vague intriguing as a concept is its linkages with both urban studies and visual culture: an interplay between representative spaces and visually represented spaces, between visual culture and the materiality of the urban.

De Solà-Morales’ concept quickly gained currency across a variety of disciplines in design, the social sciences, and the humanities. In geography, the terrain vague has been explored concerning questions of the social-spatial dynamics of capitalist urbanization, along with interrelated themes of informality, marginality, abandonment, and vacancy: those spaces and spatial practices that are resistant to assimilation into the formal city (Shields, 1991). Edensor (2005) suggests that terrains vague, and the industrial ruins they often contain, promote unique social encounters and creativity practices outside of more sterile and controlled spaces of sociality, while he and DeSilvey explore the fascination with urban ruination as “latent space in which the absence of formal use can create a sense of possibility and freedom (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012, p. 11). They, like Garrett (2013), see dwelling in these spaces as an experience of openness, risk, freedom, and uncertainty that potentially challenges capitalist and state manifestations of power through the ordering of formal spaces of the city. Gandy (2011) and Rosa (2016) focus more acutely on the relationship between spaces of infrastructure, deindustrialization, and unique political ecologies emerging within terrains vague, critiquing neoliberal urban redevelopment and its tendencies to reinforce socio-ecological injustices. To Gandy, the terrain vague is “a key alternative vocabulary for

urban wastelands" linking geographical scholarship to "radical architectonic discourse" (Gandy, 2013b). However, with few exceptions (see Krivý 2024), what is missing from engagement with the terrain vague in anglophone geography has been its adoption as a catch-all (dare we say, vague), almost a-geographical, term. In what follows, we attempt to re-ground De Solà-Morales' work in the spatiotemporal concreteness of *a* city, not only *the* city.

II. The *Terrain Vague*

De Solà-Morales' essay *Terrain Vague* deserves special attention in the broader theoretical debates about the geographies of indeterminate urban spaces and their transformation over time. What we find compelling about the concept is that it emphasizes designers' ambivalence toward intervening in so-called "voids". To him, terrains vague were:

> …Apparently forgotten places, [in which] the memory of the past seems to predominate over the present. Here only a few residual values survive, despite the total disaffection from the activity of the city. These strange places exist outside the city's effective circuits and productive structures. From the economic point of view, industrial areas, railway stations, ports, unsafe residential neighborhoods, and contaminated places are where the city is no longer. Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply *un-inhabited*, *un-safe, un-productive*. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative" (1995, p. 120).

De Solà-Morales considered vagueness a "double condition" of places: in terms of their seeming emptiness and obsolescence, but also their imprecise spatial limits and temporalities.

In his later work, he relates this indeterminacy to the "liquid architectures" of networked infrastructures and mass flows (Furtado C. Lopes, 2009), making many of the same links around spaces of infrastructure and deindustrialization picked up by geographers. Saskia Sassen saw the terrain vague concept as "problematizing architecture through absence, underutilization and abandonment" (2002: 16–17). His ambivalent, sometimes celebratory portrayal of vague spaces came from the position of a theorist with a background in philosophy, operating within the milieu of architects, whose role he saw as "inevitably problematic" because

> architecture's destiny has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, and form, the introduction into strange spaces the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal.
> In essence, architecture acts as an instrument of organization, of rationalization, and of productive efficiency capable of transforming the uncivilized into the cultivated, the fallow into the productive, the void into the built. When architecture and urban design project their desire onto a vacant space, a *terrain vague*, they seem incapable of doing anything other than introducing violent transformations, changing estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete into the realm of efficacy. (1995: 122–123).

His key provocation is that urban design in the 1990s seemed only capable of being an "aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason" (p.123), arguing that place cannot be produced by architects; rather it is conceived as the meeting point of energies, processes, and events unfolding over time (1997). Despite some of the abstractions typical of his

poststructuralist milieu, de Solà-Morales was undoubtedly alluding to the central role Barcelona played in design-driven urban regeneration strategies. Therefore, we seek here to fill a key gap that situates the seeming placelessness of terrains vague into concrete geographies.

III. Reterritorializing the *Terrain Vague* within Barcelona Urbanism

FIGURE 1 caption: Manolo Laguillo. "Nacimiento de la Diagonal, 1979" [Birth of the Diagonal, 1979], image courtesy of the artist.

De Solà-Morales first presented the *Terrain Vague* essay at a meeting of ANY (Architecture New York) at the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) in 1994, published a year later in the book *Anyplace*. Disappointed by the insular cultural milieu of architectural theory, de Solà-Morales looked to photography to argue that indeterminate, residual urban sites have value (Krivý, 2024). The term terrain vague itself is borrowed from French filmmaking. In its better-known form in English, the essay was published without photographic images that provide key framing of his arguments: these images appear in later Spanish and Catalan translations. However, this was not merely an exercise in the circulation of transnational urban theory: in 1995, he led a debate on "the changes that take place in residual areas or areas falling into disuse" entitled *Terrain Vague*, at the Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) as part of *Present and Futures: Architecture in the Cities, The Barcelona Debate*. In dialogue with key figures of international architecture as well as the city's former lead city planner Joan Busquets, this demonstrates that de Solà-Morales sought to develop the concept in response to the material realities of Barcelona. Like Busquets and nearly all the key figures of the physical overhaul of Barcelona in the 1980s and 1990s, de Solà-Morales

was a faculty member at the Superior Technical School of Architecture (ETSAB) at the Polytechnical University of Catalonia (UPC); his father and brother were influential, politically engaged architect-intellectuals based at the same faculty. Elsewhere he emphasized the importance of place, memory, and cultural heritage in architectural theory (Rodríguez & de Solà-Morales, 2019), and we read his writing in relation to social, geographical, and professional milieux in which he operated.

De Solà-Morales was responding to Barcelona's internationally renowned approach to design-driven urban regeneration from the late 1970s to the 1992 Summer Olympic Games, under Mayors Narcís Serra and Pasqual Maragall and their appointed team of urbanists. The 1976 General Metropolitan Plan, which earmarked former and existing industrial and infrastructural sites for transformation into public space and facilities, was implemented with the transition to democracy starting in 1979. Though some larger parks were created on former industrial sites in the early 1980s, the vision of the appointed Chief Architect, Oriol Bohigas was the rapid creation of more than 100 small plazas, each adorned with a "signifying element" such as contemporary sculptures or conserved smokestacks. The "Barcelona Model" (Balibrea, 2004, Montaner el. al. 2004) emerged from a strategy for wholesale, yet piecemeal, "reconstruction" of the city (Bohigas, 1985).

Barcelona became nicknamed the "city of architects" (Moix, 1994) due to its design-driven overhaul in the 1980s, which led to the creation of numerous, predominantly smaller-scale *places dures* [hard plazas] on demolition sites and unbuilt parcels in a process of *esponjament*" [urban acupuncture] (Busquets, 2005). The aim, in Bohigas' framing, was to "cleanse the center and monumentalize the periphery", reincorporating residual spaces and create a polycentric city, dignifying peripheral neighbourhoods and disfavored areas of the urban core. This approach, defined as the earlier, socialist stage of the "Barcelona Model" in the wake of the Franco dictatorship, received worldwide accolades. It was an integral part of

the city's re-branding as a postindustrial city driven by the tourist, service, creative, and knowledge economies.

Such was Barcelona held up as a model of enlightened urbanism that it was the first city (as opposed to an individual) to receive a Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1999. However, de Solà-Morales was one of the detractors from within the ETSAB, where nearly all the architect and planner-intellectuals of the Barcelona Model were based, and *Terrain Vague* was perceived as an explicit critique of the city hall's urbanistic approach. In his acceptance speech, Bohigas singled out de Solà-Morales' critique: "Many voices have spoken out in defense of the diffuse, informal city of peripheries as the desirable and foreseeable future of the modern city. …. Urbanists who uphold the model of the periphery seem not to realize that all they are doing is putting themselves on the side of the market speculators" (1999). However, through ambivalence toward erasure and expulsion, de Solà-Morales also made an ethical argument, asking designers to pause and reconsider indeterminate, undervalued spaces in their complexity and existing uses. Rather, He was responding to what he considered to be the creation of overdetermined, sterile spaces through thoughtless erasure (Chinchilla, 2020). Both Bohigas and de Solà-Morales saw the physical form of the city as a manifestation of democratic values; in a densely-built city, and indeterminate sites became—and remain—central to debates around overdetermination and technocratic urbanization in densely-built Barcelona.

Especially in the aftermath of the Olympic Games preparation (1986-1992), the reconfiguration of the city's interstices became more controversial, as resulting landscapes were increasingly dedicated to private use and gentrified ([name deleted]). The most emblematic site of the 1992 Games, the Olympic Village, was built atop the ruins of the industrial waterfront, a site subject to speculative redevelopment since the Franco dictatorship, of which he (see Muñoz, 2008) and his brother Manuel (M. de Solà-Morales et

al., 1974), had long been critical. Many of the informally appropriated and light industrial sites closest to the urban core were razed to reimagine Barcelona as a post-industrial cultural and tourist capital. With the increasingly successful rebranding of the Catalan capital as a destination attractive to international tourists and businesses, increasing real estate pressure, and fiscal crises, the previous emphasis on converting terrains vague into public uses shifted to increasingly contested, neoliberal approaches to redevelopment and identity production (McNeill, 1999). We can see, though, how de Solà-Morales' and others' critiques of previous top-down, sanitizing models of eradicating urban voids were incorporated into the city's planning policies, albeit retaining the language of emptiness. Since the 2012 aftermath of the international mortgage crisis, through the Pla BUITS [Urban Voids with Social and Territorial Involvement plan, or VOIDS], the city hall began offering municipally-owned vacant parcels of land to be co-managed with neighbourhood organizations, intending to reverse environmental degradation and to create temporary social infrastructures such as community gardens (Baiges Camprubí, 2016). Intended as "meanwhile spaces," the city ceded the use of these sites for activities proposed over one to three years. However, these spaces have become sites of confrontation and claims-making; some sites remain active as of 2024 and are at risk of displacement. For example, ConnectHort, a 1 km2 community garden and green refuge, is threatened by a plan designating its site for the construction of an office building. With elements of grassroots management in the reuse of terrains vague, organized by the local state under this plan, we see the tension between formality and informality, temporariness and permanence.

The mayoralty of Ada Colau and the leftist municipalist platform En Comú Podem (2015-2023), attempted to usher in a "post-Barcelona Model" by incorporating longstanding critics of the model to create a "redistributive urbanism… planning for the common good and defending public interests over private ones" (Montaner 2015). The city´s plans shifted to

street pacification, greening, and the promotion of active mobilities, creating "superblocks" and "green axes" which again placed Barcelona in the international spotlight for vanguardist urban design. This "post-model" represented a shift in emphasis from site-specific "projects" toward a focus on climate adaptation and greening. However, under the current Catalan Socialist Party mayor of Barcelona Jaume Collboni, the city has sought to distance itself from Colau's approach and unveiled a strategy reminiscent of the Barcelona Model of old. Halting the planned extension of the model of pedestrianization and greening of city streets, Collboni has instead promoted the greening of 71 vacant lots and leftover plots. An updated model of "hard plazas"—now embellished with green—revives the language of urbanism as an instrument of environmental improvement and dignification through the filling of voids.

IV. Considering the Inherent Visuality of the Terrain Vague

FIGURE 2 caption: Manolo Laguillo. "Frente a la Sagrada Familia, 1979" [In Front of the Sagrada Familia, 1979], image courtesy of the artist.

Visuality—and its relation to perceptions of urban change—played a key role in de Solà-Morales' thought, warranting some reflection on how terrains vague have been depicted visually, which helps to unravel the interrelationship between their conceptualization and representation. Photographic depictions not only document urban spaces but play pivotal roles in cultivating public curiosity and justifying their maintenance or eradication through the act of making them visible and directing the gaze toward them.

In particular, we focus on de Solà-Morales' reference to the work of Barcelona photographer Manolo Laguillo, whose work we reproduce in this article. Laguillo is sometimes considered the Spanish inheritor of the currents of "straight" photography of quotidian landscapes associated with the *New Topographics* (Ribalta, 2007, 2009), which

interpenetrated architectural criticism as the city underwent rapid deindustrialization. Through exhibitions and curatorial texts, Laguillo, whose work signalled for de Solà-Morales the condition of spaces "internal to the city yet external to its everyday use" (1995, p. 120), became closely related to the terrain vague (Lahuerta, 2022; Ribalta, 2007). To Ribalta, the terrain vague concept provided photography with "a theoretical framework for… new poetics of the periphery, symptomatic of an ambivalent attraction and repulsion towards what is perceived as the possibility of a different, diffuse urban model" (2007, p. 198). The rising interest in residual urban spaces and visuality—and the power of creative practice to "make visible"—is indispensable for understanding de Solà-Morales' impact on visual studies. De Solà-Morales and Laguillo both conceived their fixation on these landscapes to do more over time than the transformation of space. De Solà-Morales later developed the terrain vague concept through relation to historical time (1996), emphasizing landscape designs incorporated "vague park" (Kamvasinou, 2006) aesthetics, leaving fragments of past uses within architectures of absence.

Through international exhibitions and translations, the terrain vague switched circuits from architectural theory to broader realms of visual culture and urban design theory. Spanish architects Ábalos and Herreros' *Areas of Impunity* (1997) took a similar position while proactively incorporating into designs "places of ambiguous condition", comparing the ideal role of designers to gardeners, "as if architecture were not involved". In 2007, the terrain vague was the theme of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale, while a retrospective of Laguillo's work further situated it in relation to de Solà-Morales and Sassen's theories of global cities (2007). As Mariani and Barron point out (2013), the terrain vague has contemporary currency as a concept because scholars and designers have "increasingly turned their attention to overlooked, seeming vacant areas at the edges of the city" that have become ever more relevant as they "make up a significant part of our everyday surroundings" (xi). However,

these spaces were, by that point, anything but overlooked: they were becoming the key sites through which urban space unfolds. There remains little novelty in the claim that these sites are unseen or ignored, but the claim remains it remains persistent.

V. Framing Urban Voids and Wastelands

FIGURE 3 caption: Manolo Laguillo. “Zona Franca, el Llobregat, 1979” [Free Zone, Llobregat River, 1979], image courtesy of the artist.

Building on the previous discussions of the tensions between planning strategies, urban design, and democracy, we now explore how the terrain vague concept engages with urban rights. We refer here to formal legal rights to use, explore, and exclude in space, as well as the more abstract “right to the city”, adopted from Lefebvre (1996) as a slogan of urban social movements to refer to the social rights of inhabitants to mutually occupy, use, inhabit, and transform their environment as an intrinsic and redistributive element of democracy.

The vantage point of the subject—or viewer—is inherent to the condition of the ‘vague’, whether it be a user, a passer-by, a policy maker, or a researcher or artist engaged in representing and transforming these spaces. The terrain vague functions as an all-encompassing term used to describe the affordances of indeterminate—or, understood negatively—underutilized spaces, where authorities and investors marginalize and neglect certain areas, later focusing on their revitalization when an opportunity arises. Behind any pejorative label (‘urban voids,’ 'wasted spaces,' 'dead spaces') there is a negative assertion of their reality as irregular, abandoned, and uncared-for, obscuring the unseen processes that occur behind the scenes.

One reason that the literature to date has tended to highlight terrains vague as voids, empty, or negative is that they are problematized as degraded and marginalized landscape components. Dereliction and seeming abandonment remain the predominant spatial features engraved in the imaginaries of citizens and policymakers, as much as artists and theorists might celebrate vagueness. The conditions of these marginal spaces are understood to invite marginal activities. In Athens, Greece, Panayotopoulos-Tsiros (2020) found that at the edge of derelict industrial areas, large infrastructures, buildings, and inaccessible open spaces work as landmarks signalling the end of the formal city and the beginning of "chaos," "the rest," "the underworld," and "the unknown." In Manchester, England, Rosa (2014) observed that overlapping transportation infrastructures can divide not only administrative boundaries but also heavily influence the perception of surrounding areas. As embankments, viaducts, canals, and hoardings create the boundaries and edges of terrains vague—accentuating an inside-outside dynamic—they become perceived as disfigured, marginalized, and highly fragmented spaces having a degrading effect on society (Foo et al., 2014; Secchi and Vigano, 2011).

Beyond their social and spatial implications, terrains vague play a crucial role in fostering urban biodiversity, often offering ecological benefits overlooked in conventional urban planning. We can observe, in Barcelona and elsewhere, that the main shift in the celebration or incorporation of vagueness into urban design in recent years has largely been the acknowledgment of the importance of urban metabolisms and green space in the adaptation and mitigation of climate change (Cooke et. al. 2019). Urban ecological thought has long pointed toward the potential alternative uses that these places could accommodate and the benefits they could offer for the urban dweller and the urban ecosystem (Mabey, 1973). Gandy (2013b, 2016) and Rosa (2016) reflect on the cultural and aesthetic attractiveness of wastelands, ruins, and unintentional landscapes—often through the medium

of photography—with ambivalence about how this is coopted by market logics. Increasingly, the unregulated, and sometimes unruly, activities and natures that fill urban voids are seen as worth preserving (Pearsall and Lucas, 2014). The notion that terrains vague can be accepted as public amenities is growing (Jasper, 2021). Kamvasinou (2011) emphasizes the social and environmental value of such landscapes as the Gillespie Park Local Nature Reserve in London. On the other hand, projects like New York's The High Line reveal the tension between romanticizing and recuperating terrains vague as public and the severe socio-spatial consequences of green gentrification. As these spaces are transformed, they often become exclusionary, displacing the very communities that once informally utilized them (Millington, 2015; Lindner and Rosa, 2017).

The conceptualization of terrains vague may shift depending on the scale of investigation, and this can have a significant impact on planning and design strategies, recalling Bohigas' and de Solà-Morales' philosophical tussles around technocratic urbanism, democracy, and temporality in Barcelona's "reconstruction". Clearly, linguistic and visual framing are powerful tools in influencing debates, sparking decision-making, or providing justification for specific actions that have profound spatial, social, and economic consequences. In the case of terrains vague, the pejorative connotations linked to these labels enforce a view of such spaces as deficient and unsightly, which influences planning approaches rooted in elimination and redevelopment rather than engagement with, or incorporation of, their existing social and ecological values. Otherwise, "wild" or ruined elements of sites may be strategically recuperated and aestheticized, with the understanding that the affordances and practices defining these spaces will be designed out.

Neoliberal redevelopment in the wake of deindustrialization has generated policy debates about whether, and when, urban residues should be viewed as failures or opportunities (Bowman & Pagano, 2004). These spaces may be socially and economically

marginalized, attracting criminality and informality (not unlike the "loose" characteristics of formal public spaces). In Barcelona as elsewhere, they are celebrated as prime locations for urban renewal – tacitly or explicitly as a way to displace or shield from view the encampments of unhoused people. Neoliberal planning has made it easier to shift between these perspectives, as these spaces are routinely targeted for redevelopment (Loures and Panagopoulos, 2007a, 2007b) as developers and investors seek new redevelopment frontiers, often with public subsidy and through the language of sanitization and regeneration.

Designing out terrains vague is, discursively, waste removal. Under capitalism, waste becomes "a result of changing patterns and scales of circulation" (Rosa, 2016: 182) as much as a burden inflicted upon the landscape. This ontological reframing requires seeing supposedly empty spaces not as problems (i.e., the producer of waste) nor in naively celebrating them (the aestheticization of wasting and romanticization of transgressive reappropriation), but reading them as moments in larger processes of capital accumulation. Seen this way, the terrain vague switches from being the problem within itself (i.e. the producer of waste) to becoming the spatially and temporally contingent outcome of the "see-saw" movement of capital flows, of valuation and devaluation (Smith, 1984). Their ephemerality and imminent erasure—visualized through maps and architectural rendering—lends them to visual representation, which freezes space at one moment from a particular vantage point. As framed landscapes capture moments of space, de Solà-Morales used photography—both instrumentally and metaphorically—to confront architects' projections of nothingness onto living landscapes.

Crawford argues that planning tends to point only to "knowable futures" in the sense of assured, "previously approved narratives" providing certainty in the post-industrial city (2018: 22). Under neoliberalism and post-industrialism, these narratives refer primarily to market-driven growth imperatives over notions of collective value. Thus, to preserve,

embrace, or make inhabitable terrains vague inevitably requires economic justification (Hall, 2013), and often, privatization, is legitimized predominantly through market logics.

While economic tools and actions may attempt to mitigate some of the social and spatial problems, these mechanisms are rarely able to achieve the broad aims defined in large-scale strategic plans, and even less to alleviate preexisting socio-economic inequalities. Plans for terrains vague do not tend to be developed based on their social potential and spatial context so much as financial opportunism. In this regard, de Solà-Morales' emphasis on temporality is important: the imperative of Barcelona's wholesale reconstruction was the urgency of reimaging the city for the Olympic Games from the top down, convincing citizens that such swift, wholesale reconfiguration of the city was a collective expression of local social democracy while simultaneously attempting to make the city legible and penetrable to the "tourist gaze" (Urry and Larsen, 2011) and international finance.

The upheaval in 1980s Barcelona inevitably created a mismatch between the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces of the city. On the one hand the complex, evolving condition of the terrain vague and, on the other, the gradual shift from the socialist "Barcelona Model" to the "Barcelona Brand" (Mansilla, 2016). In earlier years of the "reconstruction" of Barcelona (1979-1986, roughly), regardless of debates around the aesthetics of "hard plazas" or lack of participatory design, the recuperation of terrains vague was typically dedicated to new public spaces and facilities, the result of neighbourhood movement demands. As the city took on a model of municipal entrepreneurialism, narratives shifted from the dignification of working-class districts to the growth-oriented promotion of post-industrial transformation. An emphasis on public use largely shifted to the private redevelopment of former industrial areas like Poblenou. We consider this approach misguided: whether terrains vague are reconfigured or left alone, the focus must be shifted to forms of recuperation for collective purpose and social reproduction.

To say that terrains vague are merely forgotten is, at this point, indefensible. It is widely acknowledged that they are refuges of meaning, social activity, and biodiversity. Yet, despite the turn in scholarly perception, this seems to remain absent from the typical preoccupations of planners, politicians, and developers, resulting in the continuing exclusion of people from networks, socio-economic processes, and productive structures of the city (Kamvasinou and Roberts, 2013). At the same time, their aestheticization and incorporation into new design vocabularies also present the problem of the "green paradox" (Anguelovski et al 2018): that those who have lived through environmental degradation and marginalization will be displaced by environmental improvements through the formalization of terrains vague and subsequent revalorization of surrounding land. Without robust anti-displacement policies, interventions in terrains vague can end up excluding the very people who once occupied or lived near them, even as they would, in theory, benefit from their renewal.

VI. Is the Terrain still Vague?

Thinking of residual spaces as either bastions of freedom and experimentation or empty, developable land falls short of encapsulating their complex natures. This compels us to transcend categorizations that limit our comprehension of these multifaceted landscapes, which in turn influence design interventions within them. By examining the evolving character of terrains vague, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of their place in the ever-shifting tapestry of the urban environment.

What might be understood as the most marked shift in the understanding of urbanity since de Solà-Morales' writing has been the development of ecological thought: whether the measurement and provision of "ecosystem services" or more critical understandings of urban political ecologies. They are also key examples of more-than-human geographies: terrains vague are not limited to human appropriation, but also "urban wildscapes" (Jorgensen &

Keenan, 2012). Neglected landscapes have been discovered as biodiversity hotspots, contributing to ecological resilience and providing unique habitats (Meffert & Dziock, 2012; Saltzman, 2006). Design initiatives around the green transition employ the language of nature-based solutions to adapt to, and mitigate, climate change, and this has become central to the creation and modification of public spaces, including Barcelona's "hard squares."

Terrains vague contain a peculiar life and influence both the activities within them and their surroundings. The alternative appropriations and occurrences that de Solà-Morales observed take various forms depending on historical, social, and economic contexts, yet, they possess a common essence. Regardless of their nature, terrains vague function as refuges from everyday life, as observatories from which one can step outside the dominant circuits of the city. They present a condition "internal to the city yet external to its everyday use" (I. de Solà-Morales, 1995: 26), seen in relation to the fits and starts of urban landscape transformation. They represent a pause in the face of change.

It is crucial to delve into, and politicize, the origins of residual urban spaces and identify those who stand to gain from maintaining—or erasing—them. This uncovers the underlying motivations and power structures that contribute to their perpetuation. By questioning neo-colonial narratives of emptiness and redevelopment frontiers, we can open new avenues of exploration and foster more inclusive, just approaches to understanding urban spaces.

It is crucial to recognize that spaces hold different meanings for different individuals—of exchange value but also of use value—and these subjective perceptions significantly influence governance strategies and urban transformation. The manifestation of these perceptions often depends on power structures. When there is a lack of contextual understanding, vulnerable communities are excluded from urban networks and decision-making processes. This, exacerbated by poor coordination among public actors, perpetuates

frustration for policymakers and marginalizes affected communities. By reframing the terrain vague within a more integrated framework, we can move beyond stigmatization and explore their potential as catalysts for positive change. This could mean simply leaving them alone.

The perception of terrains vague as potential assets for development derives not only from their physical attributes but also the complex interplay of ownership, benefits distribution, and accessibility. Moving beyond a simplistic view of development, it is crucial to adopt a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the diverse roles and values these spaces embody. The historical stigmatization of terrains vague stems from their failure to conform to dominant notions of urban productivity and efficiency. These perceptions are shaped by cultural expectations that prioritize order, development, and profitability over the informal, unpredictable, and non-conforming nature of these spaces.

Terrains vague are laden with perpetual failures and endings. They exist not *despite* the city but *because* of the city and to avoid them would mean avoiding the city itself. They can be used as a lens through which we can better navigate urban networks and understand these spaces not just as places of rejection and abandonment, but also of becoming and change.

VII. Conclusion

In its anglophone reception, de Solà-Morales' notion of the terrain vague has lacked grounding in specific geographies. This perceived universality has undoubtedly encouraged the fruitful application of the concept to wildly disparate geographies, but this also leads to decontextualization and overgeneralization. We return to the key question at hand: does the discourse on emptiness and indeterminacy concerning "left-over" urban spaces still have currency? These spaces continue to be the subject of stigmatization and (temporary) devaluation, but they have also become revalorized as the central sites of contemporary

landscape design practice. This can, in part, be explained by the celebration of such sites as the subject of wonder and romanticization among artists, academics, and designers.

De Solà-Morales wrote of "apparently forgotten places", referring to self-serving imaginations of emptiness. However, in urban fringes throughout advanced capitalist cities, seemingly abandoned spaces are precisely the sites of property speculation and redevelopment strategies. Their indeterminacy and their disorderly, uncanny presence attract intrigue because they are "where the city is no longer", but also because their presence is ephemeral: they used to be something, and will one day be something else.

The terrain vague evokes ambiguous meaning(s) and uncertain future(s) of abandoned industrial and infrastructural landscapes, architectural absences, spaces that signify the exhaustion of intended purpose, and retreat of capital. The increased interest in this socio-spatial vagueness and ephemerality by emerging aesthetics of "non-design" and "vague parks", "tactical urbanism," infrastructural reuse, and temporary reappropriation suggests interest in socio-spatial indeterminacy and temporariness. In this, de Solà-Morales' warnings remain relevant. The example of Barcelona highlights that, even in more democratic scenarios, the retention of terrains vague as public spaces led to them being more tightly regulated and becoming deeply intertwined in exclusionary property revalorization.

As an umbrella term, *vagueness* speaks to an increasing appreciation for the informal uses and disorderly aesthetics of "leftover" urban spaces at various scales. As Carney and Miller (2009) point out, in vague spaces, the state and capital exert control by defining how these spaces should be used and what they represent. It reflects the embrace of ambiguity, subversion, transgression, and heterotopia, while also capturing designers' ambivalence towards erasing, formalizing, or reprogramming these gap spaces. These terrains vague, contrary to perceptions of being "empty," have always held social significance. This is, perhaps, de Solà-Morales' key contribution. However, we must push past a simple

appreciation of these urban interstices. His poststructuralist approach tended to avoid directly addressing the political economic underpinnings that drive urban redevelopment. For better or worse, the terrain vague is ultimately a representational concept: the difficulties of representing space and time outside the imagined rationality of the cityscape. It sparks imagination about present pasts and possible futures in the urban landscape. The paradox that de Solà-Morales identified in 1995 still looms over the contemporary city. Beyond aestheticization, can we retain the unique social character of these spaces? Is there a role for designers to facilitate this, and if so, under what political economic conditions could this occur? Can we only hope to erase the otherworldly "magic" that these spaces contain? As Beveridge et. al. (2022) argue, wastelands are indeed "waiting lands" with contested futures, as if the production of urban space were on pause. De Solà-Morales' son, Pau, (Solé-Gras and P. de Solà-Morales, 2023), building on this legacy, writes of "expectant voids", suggesting reconsideration of possible collective futures.

Theorists and practitioners do not need more keywords for urban "emptiness". We contend that the imperative should be to collectively focus on how these spaces might be used, reprogrammed, or simply left alone. One of the key challenges of dealing with the conceptualization of leftover urban spaces is that they haven't been thoroughly studied as part of a shared, organized effort to theorize them. Instrumentally, urban design theory often justifies or post-rationalizes the relevancy and novelty of a proposed intervention. Terrains vague are, after all, a frontier for professional practice. Theories of the transformation of urban space must go beyond practical concerns and should not be divorced from the social processes that drive their reconfiguration. Neither do theoretical discussions emphasizing contingency and failing to imagine alternative futures for terrains vague contribute to a needed praxis.

Concurring with the recent work of Amato (2021), and Krivý (2024), we are concerned that an uncritical adoption and celebration of the terrain vague risks reproducing the frontier imagery of gentrification. How can they be appreciated by the greatest number of people, redistributing access to shared spaces of sociality, providing safety, and integrate those people and activities who occupied them previously? This is not an easy task. The use of terrains vague as public spaces, for example—whether de facto or official—will have different outcomes in different places, depending on redevelopment pressure. Regardless of how innovatively designers may approach these sites, attention needs to be shifted to the land use and housing policy realm to ensure the appropriate anti-gentrification measures are put into place.

The terrain may still be vague, but increasingly less so. Urban voids should not be considered failures but instead active components of, and moments in, urban socio-spatial transformation, as they are inseparably interwoven with the emergence and transformation of urban society. This does not necessarily imply their reconfiguration or non-intervention, but they have clearly become a focal point in contemporary urbanism. Engagement with indeterminate spaces in cities only can be self-reflexive, theoretically productive, and politically relevant if we move on from constant claims of novelty. Beyond this, we must continue to echo de Solà-Morales' emphasis that urban spaces are hardly ever "empty" and pay careful attention to the displacement risks not only of existing activities within these spaces but also of the impact that reconfiguring these spaces will have on surrounding inhabitants.

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