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From problem to opportunity: revalue terrain vague for sustainable development of cities

Lorenzo Stefano Iannizzotto*, Alexandra Paio**

Abstract

Terrain Vague are undeveloped spaces within urban areas, at different scales, where emptiness prevails over fullness and naturalness prevails over built, with unclear boundaries or thresholds. Despite representing a residual and problematic part of the contemporary city, Terrain Vague are simultaneously precious spaces with great potential. In fact, as referred by Solà Morales, these spaces allow any future possibility and are bearers of hope and freedom. Terrain Vague can play an important role in promoting an inclusive, sustainable, resilient urban regeneration, by integrating the environmental approach, through the nature-based solutions, and the social approach, through the co-creation process. There is a correlation between green spaces accessibility and social equality. A new vision for cities and Terrain Vague is urgent, which puts together bottom-up design, including citizens in decision-making processes, with top-down design. This paper presents a new approach to Terrain Vague: a more flexible, dynamic, and reversible approach.

Introduction

This paper presents a new approach to *Terrain Vague* spaces. In fact, because of their characteristics these spaces offer an opportunity to find solutions to the unresolved problems of the contemporary city. Specifically, because of their special *In-between* condition, these spaces can be the field of union between top-down and bottom-up policies, with new experiments in participatory urban design. Two examples are chosen, and a comparative analysis is presented, in order to understand what the contribution of new approaches to these spaces for the future of cities is.

Background

The urban voids (Pineiro 2020) or *Terrain Vague* (Solà-Morales 1995) seem to be the protagonists of most studies and

interventions in the contemporary city. They have been defined in many ways, such as *terrain vague* (Solà Morales 1995), *territori attuali* (Careri 2004), *spazi interclusi* (Rossi & Zetti, 2018), *nuove terre* (Marini 2010), *spaces in-between* (Spirito, 2015), *third landscape* (Clément 2005) or *urban interstices* (Brighenti 2013). To summarize their common characteristics, we can say that these spaces are waiting, abandoned, marginal, underused, ambiguous spaces, at the limit of the city and result of the process of regional urbanization. Furthermore, and they are “often occupied by everyday activities and reclaimed by nature” (Kamvasinou and Roberts 2014), and they also “can accommodate a range of activities not easily permitted or tolerated in officially designated public spaces” (Kamvasinou 2011). Despite representing a

residual, often problematic and sometimes invisible part of the contemporary city, the urban interstices are simultaneously precious spaces with great potential, and they can play an important role in a sustainable, resilient, inclusive development of cities in the future. In fact, As referred by Solà Morales (1995: 75), emptiness can be thought as both negatively and positively: “emptiness, therefore, as an absence but also as a promise, as a contrast, as a place of possible and hopeful waiting”. These spaces allow any possibility and are bearers of hope and freedom (Solà Morales 1995). They have a great environmental, social and economic value (Clément 2005; Nermeen and Saeed 2019); they can be integrated with traditional public spaces, or being linked each other, creating a network of in-between spaces of transition, cooperation, threshold (Kamvasinou and Roberts 2014; Cavaco, Santos and Brito-Henriques 2018; Lokman 2017; Stavrides 2014; Young and Keil 2010).

A New Approach

In order to evaluate the potential of urban voids for the contemporary city, two examples were chosen, in London and Lisbon, and a comparative analysis is proposed on the basis of three criteria. The three comparison criteria were defined on the basis of both nature-based solutions and sustainable development objectives (UN 2018), and are: i) *Nature and the city*, according to which “we think of cities as socio-ecological systems, with its different human and non-human components interacting and influencing each other” (Rok 2012), with the aim of strengthening this link in order to address the challenges of climate, resources and natural disasters (SDG 13); ii) *Nature and Community*, according to which “Nature and natural resources understood as urban commons help to reinvent urban governance” (Rok 2012), i.e. ensuring accessible and inclusive green public spaces that provide social relations and strengthen the sense of community (Sendra and Sennett 2020), (SDG 11); iii) *Nature and Food*, according to which “activities that previously took place outside city limits, such as food or energy production, are being brought back into the city-redefining the relationship between the city and its hinterland” (Rok 2012), i.e. contributing to local and sustainable urban food production (SDG 12).

London

London has a long history of using empty spaces for agriculture, starting from the

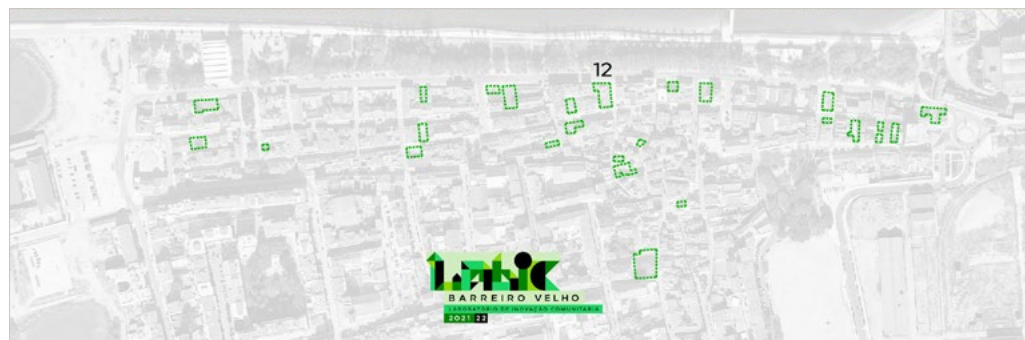


Fig. 1. Mapping the voids. Void number 12 (source: Homero Silva, Clube de Fotógrafos do Barreiro).

Second World War. The “Dig for Victory” campaign, promoted by the British Ministry of Agriculture, encouraged all citizens to grow food for their own sustenance. As reported by Kamvasinou and Roberts (2014), between the years 2009 and 2010, a series of top-down initiatives promoted by the municipality took place in London. These spaces, in fact, are usually used for informal, bottom-up, unrecognized, sometimes illegal initiatives, whereas in this case, politics played the role of triggering a series of virtuous processes for these spaces. On the one hand, to cope with the sudden multiplication of empty lots due to the economic crisis of 2008; on the other hand, to stimulate urban cultivation as part of a more complex plan of initiatives. In March 2010, the “Urban Gardens” initiative incentivized landowners to entrust abandoned plots to gardeners with a “Meanwhile License”. Shortly afterwards, the Mayor of London launched the “Capital Growth” scheme with the aim of transforming more than two thousand plots of land into growing and community gardening spaces. The Edible Estates competitions, launched in 2010, aimed to transform derelict plots in the city into community gardens, focusing on abandoned spaces near social housing developments. In other cases, these spaces were used as temporary sports fields or even as pop-up exhibition spaces. As Kamvasinou and Roberts state (2014): “The benefits of food growing are seen as wide ranging, from contributing to the regeneration of local communities and improving the quality of open spaces, to solving antisocial behaviour

issues, counteracting obesity with fitness and healthy eating, and promoting intergenerational collaboration and social cohesion, as well as aiding better space management.”

Barreiro Velho

As a second example, *Labic* (2022), a laboratory of community innovation, based in Barreiro Velho, a city part of the Great Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, was chosen. Labic is one of the projects funded by the Portuguese public program *Bairros Saudáveis*. The program is a public project, with a participative nature, with the objective of implementing small interventions within the city, financing projects presented by associations, collectives, civic movements, and resident organizations. The Labic laboratory deals with the territory of Barreiro Velho, that was in a state of partial degradation and abandonment. Labic’s objectives are to carry out surveys to map and identify places and people in the area; to create and strengthen relationships and a sense of community; to design and implement projects with the participation of citizens; and to strengthen links between the community and institutions. During the first phase “map and identify”, an activity called “mapping the voids” was carried out on 20 March 2021. During a photo walk, 25 urban voids were identified, mapped, and photographed, all of which were abandoned and unused. At the end of the day, 450 m² of empty spaces, equivalent to a football pitch, were calculated. At a later stage, hypotheses were made about the possible future of these voids, together with the

inhabitants and architecture students. During this process, the owner of ‘void number 12’ temporarily handed over the land to the Labic association, which immediately started with cleaning and maintenance activities to make the space usable. Subsequently, the space was used as a meeting space with the community to discuss its future use. As a result of these meetings, several proposals were discussed, planned and implemented, and on 30 April 2022 the “Festival a Rua é Nossa” was realised, a day full of cultural and sporting events open to the city and the public.

Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of this comparison, we can recognize in the two examples the important role of the Terrain Vague in sustainable and inclusive urban regeneration, in the direction suggested by the Sustainable Development Goals. The London initiatives, promoted by top-down processes, are realized on a large scale and cover a large total area of intervention. For these reasons, these spaces together can begin to provide an interesting solution for sustainable food production in large metropolises. *Labic Barreiro Velho* project, considering the smaller scale of the intervention and the size of the mapped voids, does not aim at food production or ecological functions, but focuses on how these spaces manage to activate positive and virtuous processes in the population, strengthening the sense of community, creating links with public institutions and incentivizing local inhabitants to take care of their city spaces.



Fig. 2-3. Mapping the voids. Void number 12 (source: Homero Silva, Clube de Fotógrafos do Barreiro); Festival a Rua é Nossa (source: LABIC).

Because of their potential, these spaces can suggest solutions for the unsolved problems of the contemporary city. But it is necessary to develop a new approach to these spaces: no longer an approach based on land consumption, mono functionalism, zoning, and top-down design; these spaces ask for a more flexible, dynamic, temporary and reversible approach focused on urban relations systems (Rossi & Zetti, 2018; Solá-Morales 1995) and also based on the local needs of the citizens. ■

Footnotes

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