

From Spatial Junk to Feral Junk Spaces

Exploring Visions of Terrain Vague

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The Planning view: Spatial Junk

When observing ancient views or frescoes of European cities — such as the famous *Pianta della Catena* (1471–1482) or the fresco cycle *Allegoria ed effetti del Buono e del Cattivo Governo* (1338–1339), which depict Florence and Siena respectively — several observations arise quite naturally. First, the boundary between the city and the countryside (and, even if only briefly suggested, the forest — that is, what is neither city nor countryside) appears clear and well-defined, often marked by the city walls. The city is portrayed primarily as a dense and homogeneous agglomeration of buildings, with the occasional standout public structure (monuments), and very few unbuilt spaces are visible aside from streets and public squares. Overall, the city was perceived as a unified and coherent entity, where the built space corresponded to a collective of citizens who identified with that specific area and were subject to a shared set of regulations.

Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, however, the intensity, scale, and pace of urbanization processes brought about radical transformations, not only in urban environments but across entire territories. These changes were not merely technological; they reflected a profound shift in the model and process of urbanization itself, observable in at least three interconnected dimensions: scale; the perception of land as an abstract support to be exploited for production and consumption; and the predominance and proliferation of rules, bureaucratic procedures, and planning instruments (Brenner & Schmid, 2011). The territory, including the city, ceased to be interpreted as the outcome of a complex evolutionary relationship between human activity and natural geography, shaped by local identity and values and embedded in a network of dependencies and connections. Instead, land came to be seen as an abstract space, a *tabula rasa* — an infinite, homogeneous support (even though it is a finite resource) for productive activity and profit-making, devoid of local identity or relational specificity. In this paradigm, space was divided, rationalized, and organized to maximize productivity (Lefebvre, 1991). It was segmented into ever smaller parcels, each assigned a particular productive function, with zones subsequently linked through planned infrastructure. This rationale led to urban planning based on criteria of efficiency and productivity, producing a vision of territory akin to a functional production line — so much so that the term “factory city” (*città fabbrica*) gained traction (Magnaghi, 2010). To support this vision, an increasing number of plans were drafted, and the process became more complex and bureaucratic, multiplying layers of projects, plans, and spheres of influence.

This mode of spatial organization, initially confined to urban contexts, expanded to the entire territory, pushing the boundaries of the city far beyond its historical limits and exporting this utilitarian vision to broader landscapes. The sprawling nature of urbanization, the new scales of expansion, the

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perception of territory as a sum of functional, productive parcels, and the proliferation of urban plans without adequate large-scale coordination, have all contributed to the emergence of a new category of spaces. As with any industrial or productive process, this model of spatial production has generated its own waste — its own spatial residues. *Vacant land, terrain vague* (Solà-Morales, 1995), *leftover spaces, urban voids* (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020), *wasteland* (Gandy, 2013), *drosscapes* (Berger, 2006): numerous terms have been coined to describe and interpret these emergent spaces. They include lands awaiting development, stalled by legal or economic uncertainty; peripheral areas near industrial zones; gaps left by demolitions; zones created by the overlapping of incompatible plans or jurisdictions; or tiny interstices between buildings and private plots. Despite their diversity, these spaces share a common feature: they are abandoned, forgotten, residual — urban waste, or spatial junk. The artist Gordon Matta-Clark, in his work *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1974), sought to represent small interstitial lots, uninhabitable and unusable, produced solely by bureaucratic procedures and the obsessive parcelling of space, without any possible use or function. Through a process of assemblage, he presented a photograph, a deed, and a cadastral map together, revealing the predominantly bureaucratic nature of these spaces (Caroline Goodden et al., 2016).

The observation view: Junk in the Space

This explanation of the causes linked to urban planning that have generated *terrain vague* spaces is, however, insufficient to encapsulate the complexity of the reality of these spaces. Reducing their vitality and reality to the mere by-products of planning processes tells us little about what these spaces are, the entities that inhabit them, or what takes place within them. In fact, limiting the understanding of such spaces to the realm of planning risks framing them through narrow and biased lenses, projecting onto them values and preconceptions that do not correspond to their lived realities.

Consider, for instance, the term “urban voids.” The word “void” here implicitly assumes the word “space,” forming the full expression “urban void spaces.” When “void” is used adjectivally, it typically signals a lack, an absence, a condition of incompleteness — an empty glass, an empty room. This terminology, when applied to urban vacant land, immediately reveals the dominant perspective of the planner or architect, for whom space is always seen as a latent potential for construction and development. Yet these spaces are far from empty. They are teeming — with life, matter, species, events, histories, uses, flows, air, subsoil, water, and more. For this reason, the author favours and adopts the term *terrain vague* (Solà-Morales, 1995), a concept that was among the first to frame these spaces not only in a non-pejorative light, but also to articulate their defining characteristics: (i) the ineffectiveness of traditional design interventions to preserve or enhance their potential; (ii) the necessity of understanding them through flows, rhythms, and material presences; and (iii) their vast imaginative and creative potential — their freedom as possibility. Observing *terrain vague* spaces fundamentally challenges the dichotomies and evaluative frameworks by which public space is typically judged, urging a broader and more inclusive vision (Careri, 2006).

These spaces may be considered “junk” not only because they are spatial residues — junk left behind by planning — but also because they contain junk, they are junk. If one of the essential qualities of junk is an uncontrolled and disordered accumulation without end (Koolhaas, 2002), then these spaces embody it fully. Owing to the lack of productive function and the absence of human control, everything that is not allowed or accepted elsewhere in the increasingly regulated and institutionalized urban public realm tends to accumulate here — both materially and immaterially. These are dumping grounds in both a literal and metaphorical sense, spaces where discarded materials and marginalized practices converge. Junk, however, overflows these definitional boundaries. For instance, it is not only that which accumulates uncontrollably and chaotically, as William Burroughs suggested, but also displaced matter that resists repeated attempts to organize and control its proliferation, by imposing

its own logic of addiction and compulsive accumulation. Junk, similarly to decay or blight, is not merely the product of a binary dialectic, a negative construct that requires deconstruction. It is also, in fact, a living matter with its own agency and expressive capacity in its own right (Pavoni & D'Alba 2024). Likewise, junk spaces possess a creative and imaginative potential, emerging from the chaotic accumulation of objects and the endless possibilities for juxtaposition, recombination, and the unique landscapes they generate, together with the walking exploration and experiences they trigger (Careri, 2006). A powerful example of this can be found in the solitary run of a character through a junk-filled landscape in *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), directed by Akira Kurosawa, which unfolds into the imaginary journey of a truck driver.

Physically, these areas often serve as informal dumping sites. They are characterized by chaotic stratifications of debris — some brought deliberately, others left as remnants: one might encounter an abandoned boat among tall weeds, alongside garbage, broken televisions, car wrecks, ruined dwellings, or makeshift football fields. These objects, observed beyond their original utility or function, can assume new life, new uses, new meanings. A ruined building may become a shelter; a car carcass, a chicken coop; a discarded door, a canopy. Concepts such as “function” and “useful life” thus become obsolete, subverted (Iannizzotto, 2023). On another level, these are places where people engage in practices prohibited in other public spaces. Activities observed range widely, often coexisting in overlapping ways depending on time of day or season: informal agriculture and housing, dog walking, grazing, sexual encounters, parties and concerts, drug use, clandestine meetings. These spaces host a multitude of informal and often transgressive uses, offering freedom in a way that conventional public spaces rarely do. Equally significant in these areas are the non-human entities. Due to the lack of human oversight and maintenance, spontaneous vegetation proliferates—often including invasive or prohibited species, or plants that exist nowhere else. These qualities make *terrain vagues* rich sites of urban biodiversity, where novel encounters occur and where one can observe and learn from interspecies relationships (Clément, 2022; Gandy, 2013, 2022). The collective Krater was drawn to the ecological potential of an urban vacant space in Ljubljana and approached it through a non-conventional framework, defining it as *feral* (Solomon & Kaika, 2024; Sretenović & Osolo, 2022). The term *feral* is used to describe “situations in which an entity, nurtured and transformed by a human-made infrastructural project, assumes a trajectory beyond human control” (Tsing et al., 2020). This perspective, grounded in more-than-human theory, aims to overcome the human/non-human binary and to develop an approach to space that recognizes the complex web of relations, narratives, contributions, and perspectives of all non-human entities involved. It fosters a relational, interactive, and contaminative way of thinking about urban space (Bennett, 2010; Caracciolo, 2021; Caracciolo et al., 2022).

A Feral Junk?

Terrains vagues invite us to envision a new perspective and underscore the significance of accommodating novel types of urban environments. Through their mere existence they offer insights for reimagining future urban planning. At least three of their salient characteristics point toward this potential: catalysis, coexistence, and indeterminacy. By collecting and accumulating the remnants and refuse of other urban spaces — everything that is not permitted elsewhere — these spaces act as a kind of *catalyst* within the urban fabric. They absorb what is rejected, forgotten, or excluded by more regulated environments. These sites may also be approached through an archaeological lens: random objects may be unearthed, their stories deciphered, and their meanings reconstructed. Yet these objects are not only historical traces — they can be continually reinterpreted and repurposed in new and unexpected ways.

A defining feature of these spaces is their indeterminacy. They embody the value of the unplanned,

the vague, the undefined, the unpredictable. They thrive in their refusal to be reduced to function or governed by rigid order. Finally, coexistence is a fundamental aspect of these environments. Within them, functions, forms, objects, and uses exist side by side without explicit relationships or hierarchies. Humans, plants, animals, soil, geology, water, air, flows, and a multitude of non-human entities share the same space – not through regulation, but simply through coexistence. This mode of being radically exceeds conventional urban design frameworks and invites a more inclusive, relational, and ecological perspective.

Altogether, these elements point toward a compelling proposition for the urbanism of the future. Could we begin to imagine, preserve, and even design future feral junk spaces as integral components of tomorrow's city?

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