

Urban Voids
A Potential Journey
By Diana Artus

Emptiness and uncertainty are rather unpopular. When there is a gap, we have a tendency to fill it. When something is vague, we try to make it clear. And when we pass a fallow or seemingly dead spot in a city, we hurry to get back onto the shiny and bright side again. But it's worth pausing here for a moment. Let's take a deep look into the urban void and at its manifold shapes. Within the oversupply of products, services, information, and stimuli that make up the contemporary city, these little oases can relax our eyes, trigger our imagination and memory, amuse us with absurdity, or raise our awareness that everything is fugitive and a sudden change can always occur.



Surprise

A feeling of mild astonishment or shock caused by something unexpected.

For the most part, the public spaces of our cities are dedicated to economic purposes: consumption, representation, work, entertainment, transactions, profit. But there are some quirky corners that interrupt this regular rhythm of production, efficiency and optimization. All of the sudden, they open up like cracks in the close-knit urban fabric. Our gaze stumbles unexpectedly and falls into an imaginary hole: we start noticing something precisely because it's not there, not anymore, or not yet.



Exoticism

The quality of being attractive or striking through being colorful or unusual.

“The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city’s terrains vagues. Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation.” This is how architect and philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales relates in his essay *Terrain Vague* (1995) to undeveloped, functionless, or abandoned places within our cities. Emptied of any former use and meaning, they stand out from the utilitarian urban space continuum like exotic birds of paradise.



Progress

*Forward or onward movement toward a destination.
Development toward an improved or more advanced condition.*

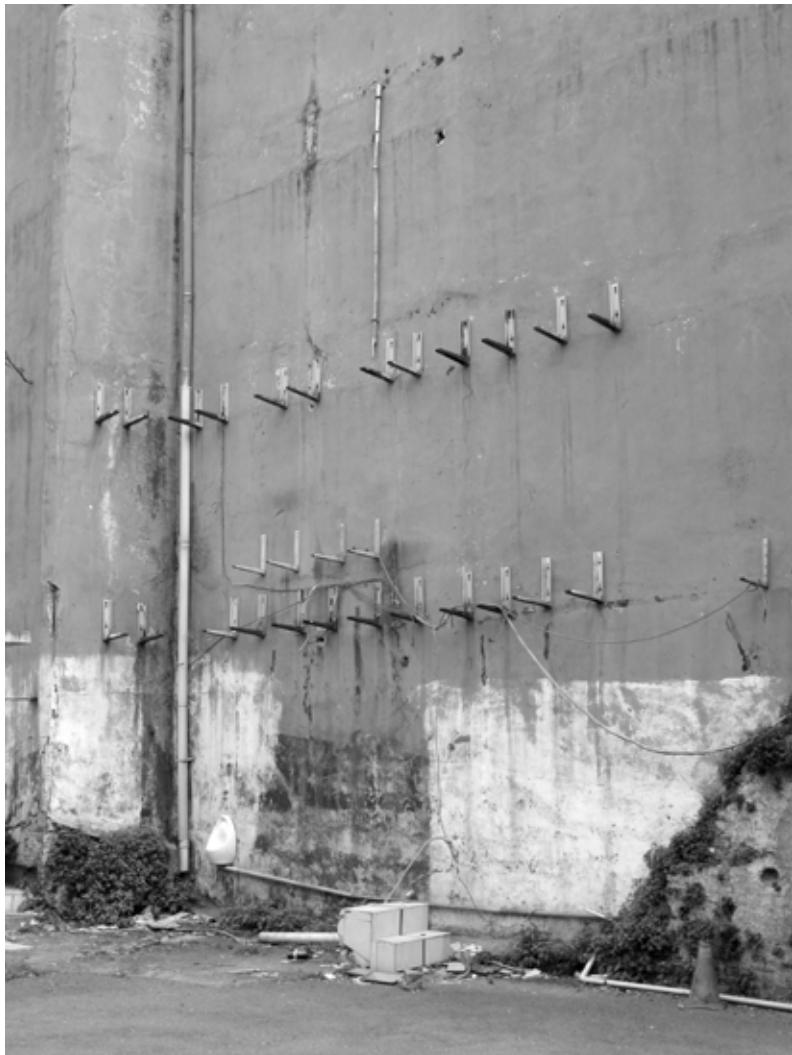
The idea of a *terrain vague* includes much more than just a terrain in the literal sense of the word, like a fallow area or an empty lot. If we take a close look at our urban surroundings, we can discover a piece of the void in certain objects, phenomena, or situations as well. The term *terrain vague* can actually refer to everything which is not categorized, which is ambivalent and open, difficult to interpret, marked by error or absence. It can also be that ephemeral moment, when the city uncovers itself. Or a path, leading inwards.



Hospitality

The friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.

An urban void can best be described *ex negativo*. It is unused, undefined, unpredictable, unproductive, unmaintained. We expect to find such spots rather on the outskirts and edges of a city, in any case in a marginal or secondary position. But the periphery keeps surprising us and pops up occasionally right in the middle of downtown. Located within the vibrant city center, but outside of its everyday routines, an urban void appears as a kind of no man's land, welcoming all those who have no goal, no intention, no other place. A refuge, a retreat, a habitat.



Absence

The non-existence or lack of.

Abandoned or unoccupied places are like thresholds, highlighting a diffuse transition between different layers of time and characterized by a mysterious vacuum of identity and a lack of economic value. They are often kind of stuck between a past use and future possibilities. These sites contain many different layers, they are like spatial palimpsests. Here we can get a deeper understanding of the concept of *absent presence*: there are a bunch of leftover fragments, but we can't make sense of them – a puzzle, which can't be solved.



Doubt

A feeling of uncertainty or lack of conviction.

The contemporary urban machinery usually runs smoothly, like clockwork, but sometimes the engine suddenly stutters. In such moments, we are not sure anymore about the interpretation of our surroundings. Performance problems or signs of decline can sway our ideas of steady, positive growth and feasibility. Strangeness, fragility, and negativity abruptly intrude into the picture, which reflects our very personal insecurities and doubts, like a strange mirror. Questions of meaning and purpose emerge. While facing “the other,” we become philosophical.

Crisis Tourism

Crisis: A time of intense difficulty or danger.

Tourism: The organization and operation of visits to places of interest.



Passing a vacant urban zone may evoke a certain uneasiness. A place left to itself quickly becomes suspect. We suddenly find ourselves on the negative side of development, efficiency, and optimization where nothing seems to be safe anymore and everything smells like broken windows theory. This is not the city as a modern comfort zone, it's the urban desert of the real. Irritating, maybe dangerous, somehow uncanny. A place like a ghost. But who doesn't like to get scared once in a while?



Anxiety

A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. Strong desire or concern to do something or for something to happen.

“Urban voids expose the fragility of the built environment better than any other urban space. The experience of an urban void reveals the ease with which the urban environment can collapse,” writes architect Sergio López-Piñeiro in his *Glossary of Urban Voids* (2020). “Urban voids white out the illusion of solidity, stability, security, and reliability that cities project and upon which they are constructed. And, therefore, the experience of an urban void is that of fear and anxiety. However, it is also an experience of insight due to the understanding that is gained from it.”

Disappointment

Sadness or displeasure caused by the non-fulfillment of one's hopes or expectations.



A certain spatial disappointment or failure seems to be a precondition for the emergence of a *terrain vague*. It is mostly preceded by the economic devaluation of an urbanized area. Once a promising location – now a dead end of hopes. What happened in between is a comprehensive loss: of content or context, of connection, relevance, attraction. Something didn't work out as planned or fell short of expectations. Which comes to mind first, the burden of failure or the relief of no longer being governed by illusions?



Melancholy

A feeling of pensive sadness, typically with no obvious cause.

A run-down space subtly breaks the context in which it is settled. Almost imperceptible, the mood slightly shifts and we sense an atmosphere of ambiguity, interesting and melancholic at the same time: a place without meaning and purpose, just existing for itself. Preserving the residues of what has become obsolete and superfluous, the urban void has the potential to confront us with a common dread of our time: to drop out from the value chain and the relevant streams of attention. No longer needed – but doesn't that also mean being freed from obligations and demands?



Euphoria

A feeling or state of intense excitement and happiness.

A forgotten dirty corner and non-space for some people – a promised land of freedom, adventure, and opportunities for others: Artists especially are fascinated and stimulated by unoccupied or unfinished urban settings. They identify with the openness and unconventionality of the place and turn it enthusiastically into a creative playground and projection screen for their projects. Exploring potentiality! Rethinking the city! Inventing a new type of public realm and spatial practice! Moving off the beaten track may somehow feel vanguard, too.



Investment

An act of devoting time, effort, or energy to a particular undertaking with the expectation of a worthwhile result.

Not only artists feel attracted to urban voids and the surplus of space they offer. Also investors, real estate developers, and smart businesses quickly start to realize their desires on brownfields. These players understand “potential” in terms of performance and value enhancement and want to turn vacancies as fast as possible into exclusive properties, aligned with the rest of the city in structure and appearance. What they subsequently sell as tremendous success of urban renewal and increase of comfort is, at times, just the beginning of another type of desertification.



Idealization

The action of regarding or representing something as perfect or better than in reality.

It is tempting to appropriate an empty space and float it with creative projects and activity. In so doing, possibilities are sometimes overestimated and actual needs misjudged. The urban void isn't necessarily designed or decorated to be beautiful and valuable. It already is. In being nothing but empty, it offers us something very simple but hard to find in our commercialized cities, which are filled-up with goods and buildings: a free space of non-representation, open for astonishment, contemplation, imagination, and introspection. To preserve this potential, it is important to respect and appreciate the idle nature of the urban void instead of gentrifying it too fast through something "new."



Change

*Become different; be altered or modified.
Replace something with something else.*

Some urban voids and breaks are so marginal and meaningless at first glance, that we usually don't pay attention in our daily routine of moving through a city. But if we stroll around without intention or destination, disruptive elements and places in a state of suspension may cause a strange echo within us. Different levels of time and reality condense and permeate in a poetic, almost surreal way. This is the significance of this seemingly so insignificant area: we get the idea that meaning and value are not stable attributions and can always change.



Optimism

Hopefulness and confidence about the future or the success of something.

In his novel, *Invisible Cities* (1972), Italo Calvino points out that “you take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours or to the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.” In this regard, the vacancies, gaps, and forgotten corners of a city certainly offer the best conditions. And, in case you have no questions or answers yet, don’t worry: just engage in the urban void and it will make you an offer that you probably cannot refuse.

All images and text: © Diana Artus

Graphic design: Sebastian Fessel

Proofreading: Elizabeth Gerdeman

This work has been created in the context of the project *post documenta*,
a cooperation between the Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA) and
the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig (HGB).