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Unintentional landscapes

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ABSTRACT

The presence of ‘unintentional landscapes’ invites reflection on the difficulties in defining marginal or interstitial spaces, or indeed the concept of landscape itself. In some cases, so-called wastelands or *terrain vague* have been appropriated as spaces of adventure, creativity or discovery. In other cases, these anomalous spaces have been the focus of anxiety or disdain, or simply erased on account of their putative ‘emptiness’ to make way for more lucrative forms of land use. In recent years, however, fragments of spontaneous nature have been incorporated into landscape design, or even mimicked through the adoption of a ‘wasteland aesthetic’. Marginal spaces appear to transcend existing Eurocentric circuits of landscape discourse by offering multiple meanings and manifestations. Indeed, the cultural and scientific interest in these spaces lies precisely in their complexity and uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

Landscape; wastelands;
terrain vague; urban ecology

What is there in these theoretically empty spaces? What phenomena have been judged too vague or complex for cartographic representation?

Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc*¹

In this article, I want to consider spaces that are not ordinarily regarded as landscapes. These alternative spaces might include a flower-rich vacant lot or an overgrown roadside verge. Or at a larger scale, we might encounter an abandoned industrial installation, the vivid green foliage contrasting with the deep red colouration of rusting metal structures. There has certainly been a tension in the pages of this journal concerning not just what landscape is but also what landscape is for: there is a recurring sense that landscape should be ‘useful’ or least perform some kind of identifiable cultural, social or even psychological role.² Yet on what terms are landscapes to be defined? And what analytical tools might enable us to open up the question of landscape to a wider range of voices and perspectives? Drawing on recent reflections over the meaning of urban nature—ranging from the botanical microcosmos of the sidewalk to the metabolic dynamics of urban space—I want to explore what we might characterise as the ‘constitutive outside’ to the conventional understanding of landscape.³ In other words, what are we to make of any putative distinction between landscape and ‘non-landscape’? And how is any space that is conceptually enframed as a landscape related to its constituent cultural, historical and material elements? I am especially interested in cultural and scientific discourses that appear to work against the grain in relation to more narrowly utilitarian approaches to marginal spaces. The idea of landscape is presented as a series of intersecting material and conceptual terrains that can promote wider reflection on the meaning of spatial ambiguity, complexity and multiplicity.

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An unintentional landscape can be defined as an aesthetic encounter with nature that has not been purposively created. It is a space that has nonetheless undergone some form of sensory enframement, perhaps only momentarily, as a focus of attention. It is not necessarily a space associated with visual delight or even disorientation, in a narrowly aesthetic sense, but something much less easy to categorise or define. In an urban context, this might include an array of spontaneous spaces of nature that hold cultural or scientific interest as part of an explicitly counter-utilitarian discourse even if such spaces can be designated a putative role in terms of 'ecological services' or as a vernacular form of public space. These sites seem to exemplify the *Zwischenstadt* phenomenon that the German architect Thomas Sieverts first used in the 1990s to describe a proliferation of spaces that lie outside conventional urban topologies and typologies (Sieverts, 2013 [1997]; see also Vicenzotti, 2011; Winter, 2015). In many cases, these are hitherto unnoticed or overlooked spaces that have nevertheless been transformed into a focus of interest. The presence of unintentional landscapes connects with a myriad of zones of neglect that have proliferated alongside human activities at a global scale. The unintentional landscape is not a primal landscape in the sense of 'wild nature' serving as an object of aesthetic contemplation, it is not an idealised landscape that conforms to some pre-existing conception of the innate relations between nature and culture, and it is not a designed landscape allied to particular social or political goals. It is a landscape in spite of itself; a focus of intrigue or pleasure that has emerged irrespective of its anomalous or redundant characteristics.

The Swiss sociologist and landscape theorist Lucius Burckhardt reminds us that to notice a landscape is 'a creative act brought forth by excluding and filtering certain elements' (Burckhardt, 2012 [1979], p. 133). Burckhardt's insistence that the experience of landscape is an encounter between preconceptions and material elements is useful in the context of marginal spaces since their appreciation or recognition involves an active process of 'unlearning' dominant perceptions of cultural worth. The idea of landscape is difficult to disentangle from European cultural traditions (although certain parallel developments towards idealised natures can be discerned within fields such as art or garden design in East Asia and elsewhere).⁴ The shift in the meaning of the word 'landscape' from a form of legal demarcation to an aesthetic tableau encompasses several interrelated sets of processes: the enhanced technical possibilities for the modification of erstwhile 'natural' environments; the emergence of new tastes for cultural artefacts or experiences; and changing attitudes towards nature itself as a focus of both control and pleasure (see, for example, Andrews, 1999; Ellison, 2013; Fechner, 1986; Schama, 1995).

A recurring theme for the study of landscape is the relationship between aesthetic experience, the modification of nature and the exercise of power. The geographer Denis Cosgrove, for example, sought to uncover the ideological significance of landscape in order to trace the interrelationships between aesthetic representations of nature and the social production of space. In the preface to the second edition of his influential book *Social formation and symbolic landscape*, however, Cosgrove acknowledged the implicit universality of the human subject lurking within his earlier neo-Marxian analysis. The initial wave of critical writing on landscape had yet to engage with the challenge of feminist or post-colonial insights.⁵ The question of subalterity, for example, posed challenges for cultural Marxism à la Raymond Williams, whilst the feminist critique of ocularcentrism extended our understanding of the embodied experience of space, and its cultural and historical specificity, beyond the existing phenomenological literature.⁶ The Marxist challenge to formalism in art history and other fields would in turn develop into a more polyvalent theoretical terrain within which the ontological status of the human subject could no longer be taken for granted.

In a parallel line of critical reflection, the architectural historian Antoine Picon has sought to de-centre the idea of landscape from narrow conceptions of aesthetic pleasure through his response to 'anxious landscapes' based on observations of the transitional zone between New York City and its sprawling post-industrial hinterland. Picon's interest in contemporary ruins traces a cultural lineage to the unsettling aesthetic of the sublime and its extension into the technological landscapes of modernity: these are spaces in which the scale of human artifice—whether active or moribund—supplants that of geological and meteorological phenomena or other facets of 'nature' in a conventional sense of the term (notwithstanding the ever closer entanglement of nature and culture under modernity). It is a troubling

landscape where ‘wild grass exists only between strips of asphalt, where abandoned warehouses and rusty carcasses replace Poussinesque ruins’ (Picon, 2000, p. 68). In a similar vein, the British writer James Lasdun, in his tale of fractured identity in the *Horned Man* (2002), recounts the academic protagonist’s journey between Manhattan and the upstate liberal arts college where he works:

I sat by myself in one of the reversible plastic seats, crouched down and gazing out of the window at the poisoned creek oozing along past the crumbling habitations that lined the track. I wondered what it was that so fascinated me about this spent landscape. Ugly as it was, it had something compelling about it — a strange, fallen beauty that held one’s gaze in spite of one’s horror. (p. 185)

For these spent landscapes, there is a distinctive chromatic dimension that is reflected in cinematic encounters such as the industrial wastelands of Ravenna in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert* (1964) or the outskirts of Tallinn in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1978) (see Gandy, 2003). The aesthetics of toxicity range from iridescent puddles of oily water and vivid fragments of plastic to clumps of rust-coloured vegetation that can withstand high levels of soil contamination. For some commentators, such reviled spaces can be refashioned, recycled and rehabilitated (see Bargmann, 2006; Storm, 2014), whilst for ecologists exploring former industrial sites these toxic spaces produce unique botanical assemblages that can serve as a focus for scientific research (in a similar fashion to earlier interest in ruderal biotopes produced by wartime destruction) (see Khan, Kuek, Chaudhry, Khoo, & Hayes, 2000).

These devalorised spaces clearly unsettle the organisational telos of modernity. The jumble of dilapidated structures and rank vegetation appears to represent a late modern reprise of the romanticist ruin aesthetic. Yet as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, there is something particularly unsettling about contemporary ruins as a kind of ‘utopia in reverse’ (Huyssen, 2006, p. 7) where connections between memory and authenticity appear to have been broken. The idea of the wasteland or unintentional landscape can be defined as much by its emotional or psychological effects as any recourse to material distinctions: though situated in the present it is connected nonetheless to the eighteenth-century emergence of the ‘anti-picturesque’ in relation to art and landscape design (see Di Palma, 2014). Given the close association of the word ‘wasteland’ with desolate, remote or uninhabited places, there is something especially poignant about reflecting on forms of spatial abandonment or neglect within the context of modernity. There is a distinction to be made here between ruins as cultural artefacts, including the effects of time in allowing technological structures to be absorbed or reconciled with their physical setting, and the process of ‘ruination’ under which places experience dislocation, disinvestment or even violent destruction. The question of how these spaces came into being connects with the etymological ambiguities of the word ‘waste’ that incorporates both the Latin *Vastus* meaning ‘unoccupied’ or ‘uncultivated’ but also the old French verb *wasten* and the action of ‘laying waste’ as well as later meanings derived from ‘excess’, ‘loss’ or ‘wastage’. In John Barr’s book *Derelict Britain* (1969), for example, it is not merely the aesthetic characteristics of destroyed or abandoned places that concern him but also the political interests and forms of land ownership that lie behind the despoliation of the landscape and the devastation of communities.

The recognition of unintentional landscapes can be contrasted with the utilitarian import of the term ‘brownfield’ or the pejorative deployment of ‘wasteland’ as a prelude to the erasure of ostensibly empty sites (see Gandy, 2013b; Harms, 2014). The term ‘open mosaic habitat’, for instance, has been recently introduced by urban ecologists, especially in the UK, in order to counter perceptions that ‘previously developed land’ has no scientific value (see, for example, Macadam & Bairner, 2012; Maddock, 2008). The German word *Brache*, which roughly translates as waste or fallow land, has seen its meaning evolve into something more interesting in relation to post-industrial landscapes, tinged with a diversity of cultural and ecological connotations (see, for example, Genske & Hauser, 2003). In the English language alone, there are many different words we might use to refer to non-designed elements of urban nature ranging from ‘edgelands’ and ‘interstitial spaces’ to the increasingly frequent adoption of the French term *terrain vague*.

The origins of the term *terrain vague* are somewhat uncertain. It is used to describe uncultivable ground in the Ardennes in the late 1860s, it appears in Isabelle Eberhardt’s novel *Yasmina* (1902) to describe the location of a mosque on the outskirts of an Algerian city, and it also serves as the title

of Marcel Carné's film from 1960 depicting disaffected youth culture on the edge of Paris. In the mid-1970s, the term is adopted by the French writer Jean-Michel Palmier for his *Berliner Requiem* (1976), in order to evoke anomalous elements within the urban landscape and his listless search for traces of the Weimar era. More recently, the expression *terrain vague* has gained prominence through its elaboration by the Spanish architect de Solà-Morales Rubió (1993), who locates the idea within the history of urban photography:

Empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place seems to subjugate the eye of the urban photographer. Such urban space, which I will denote by the French expression *terrain vague*, assumes the status of fascination, the most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience of them is.

The word *vague* is deployed on account of its 'triple signification' as 'wave', 'vacant' and 'vague':

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.

And then a few paragraphs later we find the crucial sentence that seems to capture the essence of *terrain vague* as a riposte to utilitarianism:

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 in the realism of efficacy.

In this sense, aesthetic judgements are inseparable from the political dynamics of urban space where the term 'empty' is often juxtaposed with 'unsightly' to denote those spaces that are perceived to be threatening or lacking in any cultural or economic value. An unintentional landscape implies an unsettling of the association between landscape and specific vantage points. There is a degree of detachment from pre-existing aesthetic or cultural expectations. Urban and industrial wastelands can be spaces of aesthetic discovery including acoustic, olfactory and tactile dimensions that are routinely overlooked by a narrow sense of landscape as a purely visual experience. These spaces can also serve as surrogate forms of public space, especially where there is limited provision of parks, constituting an element of the 'urban commons' as set out in the classic exposition by the Sheffield based ecologist and lichenologist Oliver Gilbert (see Gilbert, 1992). The re-enchantment of urban space as a focus of 'play' in its broadest sense is a profound challenge to an increasingly commodified, controlled and denuded public realm (see Larsen, 2014).

Being in a landscape as opposed to regarding it at a distance also has methodological implications. In his cultural history of concrete, the architectural historian Adrian Forty notes how he avoids writing about places or spaces that he hasn't seen or directly experienced in a methodological lineage to Reyner Banham:

Yet this strict attention to the observation of the physical need not limit us to the earthbound world of pure matter that the medium's French name, *béton*, might lead us to suppose is the extent of its existence (*béton*, like *bitumen*, comes from the Old French *betum*, a mass of rubbish in the ground). On the contrary, cursory inspection of even the most debased lump of concrete rapidly takes us into a fugacious world of beliefs and counter-beliefs, hopes and fears, longings and loathings. (Forty, 2012, p. 11)

Forty's focus on the material characteristics of space can be extended to the effects of weathering, along with the presence of lichens, mould and other living elements. These observations underscore the blurring of the distinction between organic and inorganic realms, so that marginal spaces and their accumulated material clutter can take on the character of impromptu sculpture parks or other kinds of field installations.

As we move from architectonic to ecological encounters, the emphasis on direct contact becomes more systematic. The practice of urban botany, for example, brings the city to life through the elucidation of ecological patterns and surface complexities. The slightest differences in substrate or micro-climate can produce a bewildering range of ecological possibilities. The study of urban nature, often involving multiple sources of amateur and professional expertise, provides detailed insights into the distinctiveness and heterogeneity of urban environments ranging from phenomena such as the 'urban heat island effect' to new combinations of fauna and flora drawn from multiple origins.

We can see how unintentional landscapes, as represented by ruderal and post-industrial biotopes, have unsettled 'plant sociology'—the study of distinctive species assemblages—through the need to create new appellations and explore different ways of incorporating the human impact into ecological analysis (see Lachmund, 2013). The scientific use of the ecosystem concept as a spatially identifiable assemblage of biophysical relationships is challenged by the complexity of urban biotopes and their multiple socio-ecological entanglements. In particular, the concept of an urban ecosystem lies in tension with a more diffuse understanding of urban space that is not contained within clearly defined administrative or material boundaries. Furthermore, there is an evident tension between the use of terms such as 'urban ecology' or 'urban ecosystem' as loose metaphors, exemplified by the recent remodelling of 'landscape ecology' as an adjunct to earlier design formulations such as 'landscape urbanism', and the systematic application of such concepts within the biological sciences. In some cases, for instance, the term 'ecological design' is invoked as little more than an adjunct to the exigencies of real estate speculation or is attached to an intellectual project that lacks any critical relation to the historical dynamics of capitalist urbanisation.

There is a reflexive relationship between scientific methodologies and modes of urban exploration. The 'urban transect', for example, provides a connection between botanical survey techniques and a variety of ways to engage with transitional elements of the urban environment. A closer engagement with 'in-between' spaces revealed by journeys through Berlin, Paris and other European cities reveals many distinctive ecological features such as extensive stands of the tree-of-heaven, *Ailanthus altissima*, a species which originated from China and northern Vietnam and has gone through several different stages in its use and interpretation. Originally planted as an ornamental curiosity, with a tolerance for dry conditions, and then used as a versatile street tree, the species had slipped into relative obscurity by the 1960s, only to resurface as a ruderal species ideally adapted to urban environments (see Shah, 1997). Various characterisations as an invasive weed or symbol of 'cosmopolitan ecology', the tree-of-heaven illustrates the ideological ambiguity of 'invasiveness' in an urban context since the environmental characteristics of cities, and their flora and fauna, are often very different to that of other types of cultural landscapes (see Kowarik & Säumel, 2007; Patrick, 2014; Pyšek, 1998).

Processes of urban and industrial restructuring, along with geopolitical factors, have generated a huge variety of marginal or redundant spaces. In some cases, the aesthetic and ecological characteristics of 'wild urban nature', or *Stadtwildnis* to use the German expression, have been directly incorporated into landscape design (see Gilbert, 1981; Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007; Kühn, 2006; Le Roy, 1973). The concept of the 'park' has shifted from the labour intensive municipal landscapes of the past towards a different kind of cultural synthesis with urban nature. We can find examples of marginal spaces being transformed into parks, especially from the 1980s onwards, as ecological arguments became more prominent within land use planning. In the case of Berlin, there are several instances where parks have been partly or completely modelled around scientific insights from urban ecology. The Südgelände, for example, which opened in 2000, is constructed on the site of abandoned railway yards and has been preserved in the form of a nature park with statutory protection for its biodiversity after a long political campaign won partly in recompense for environmental damage elsewhere. More recently, the prize-winning Park am Nordbahnhof, completed in 2009 along a former 'death strip' adjacent to the Berlin Wall, and the Park am Gleisdreieck, completed in 2013, have also incorporated elements of spontaneous urban nature as well as various forms of biotope mimicry that can foster a wasteland aesthetic. An earlier plan from the 1980s, however, to allow an interconnected space of urban nature within the former West Berlin, the so-called grüne Mitte ('green middle'), based on scientific recognition of the unique ecological characteristics of many so-called *Brachen*, was never realised as the post-unification emphasis on redevelopment took precedence over other social or environmental goals (see Lachmund, 2013). Elsewhere, examples of parks that incorporate elements of abandoned landscapes include Toronto's Downsview Park, emerging from a former industrial and military site, and New York's proposed reclamation of the vast Fresh Kills landfill site scheduled for completion in the year 2036. Yet in these and many other cases, the relationship between urban design and the material characteristics

of existing sites remains uncertain, even if selective fragments of the original landscape persist in a modified form.

In addition to these attempts to incorporate pre-existing spaces of spontaneous urban nature into park design, we can also find an increasing range of ecological simulacra ranging from examples such as Manhattan's High Line, which mimics aspects of the original vegetation on the abandoned elevated railway, to various types of green roofs that provide flower-rich micro-environments suitable for bees and other thermophilous insects. The use of a 'wasteland aesthetic' lies in tension, however, with discourses of 'ecological restoration' and 're-wilding' where these are rooted in nativist conceptions of ecology that differ from the cosmopolitan characteristics of actually existing urban nature (see, for example, Del Tredici, 2010; Gandy, 2013a). The interest in 'ecological restoration' has been especially focused on the re-engineering of river systems as part of a changing relationship between water, urban design and metropolitan nature. In the case of the Los Angeles River, we could argue that one kind of cultural landscape—the concrete network of levees and spillways with their adventive vegetation—is being replaced by another equally artificial cultural landscape as part of an ecologically oriented process of urban redevelopment (see Gandy, 2014). In other cases, the historic associations between wastelands and the use of fallow land in agriculture have been revived in an urban context to promote the production of food as an alternative utilitarian ethic emerging alongside other land uses (see Hauser, 2011).

The tensions between meaning and materiality become even more acute in the cities of the global South. In India, for example, fast-growing metropolitan regions incorporate several different types of non-designed urban nature: cities are typically intersected by interstitial spaces produced by railway lines, water pipes and other technological networks; fragments of 'old urban nature' may persist as private gardens held by institutions or individuals within the fabric of the city; and larger areas, especially on the urban fringe, have occasionally been set aside as nature reserves such as the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai dating from 1974. Severe pressures on space combined with extreme poverty mean that many so-called 'wastelands', including even the most precarious sites alongside poisoned creeks, busy roads or railway lines, are zones of human habitation. Parks or more conventional forms of public space, where they exist at all, are often the focus of intense conflict over different patterns of human use or entitlement. In many cities of the global South, we encounter virulent forms of 'bourgeois environmentalism', to use Amita Baviskar's term, where the ideals of urban beautification are used to underpin land speculation and the forcible eviction of human and non-human nature alike (see Baviskar, 2002). A similar dynamic has been observed at the metropolitan fringe of Ho Chi Minh City, for example, by the anthropologist Erik Harms, who introduces the expression 'knowing into oblivion' to describe how systematic data collection presages the elimination of marginal spaces (Harms, 2014). The unintentional, the spontaneous and the makeshift are often the rule rather than the exception, and political conflict over rights and definitions has tangible and frequently violent consequences.

The presence of unintentional landscapes unsettles existing spatial categorisations and even the idea of 'landscape' itself. By re-examining the question of landscape, and the complex historiographies of its different meanings and manifestations, we can move from narrowly ideological constructs of the 'cultural landscape' towards a different set of conceptual vantage points. Marginal spaces of urban nature have engendered a variety of responses ranging from delight or indifference to various forms of fear and hostility. If we consider the scientific dimensions of unconventional landscapes, the city can serve as a laboratory in a material rather than metaphorical sense, which can help to elucidate the distinctiveness of urban space. The different forms of urban vegetation glimpsed from a moving train, for example, comprise a rich tapestry of cultural and ecological history. But these are never landscapes without human presence or meaning: just as the wilderness ethic has tended to erase cultural or historical dimensions to 'wild nature' so we find that some of the more romanticist or rarefied responses to 'urban wilderness', or the abandoned spaces of modernity, tend to overlook the full complexity of their human interactions, both in the past and the present. If our analytical starting point for marginal spaces is reframed in relation to a closer engagement with spontaneous traces of nature, and their social and cultural significance, this can serve as a basis from which to develop a wider terrain of critical reflection over the concept of landscape itself.

Notes

1. 'Qu'y a-t-il dans ces lieux théoriquement vides? Quels phénomènes ont été jugés trop vagues ou trop complexes pour être représentés sur une carte?' Vasset (2007) p. 10. Author's translation.
2. Recent articles in *Landscape Research* that explore the significance of wastelands or interstitial spaces as a focus for analysis or critical interventions include Kirchhoff, Trepl, and Vicenzotti (2013), Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007), Thompson (2012) and Unt, Travlou, and Bell (2014).
3. The notion of a 'constitutive outside' is first articulated by Jacques Derrida and has subsequently been adopted across a range of disciplinary contexts where prima facie ontological categories or etymological assumptions are held under critical scrutiny. See, for example, Roskamm (2015) and Sten (1984).
4. See, for example, Ikegami (1991), Ito (1972) and Yang and Kaplan (1990).
5. See Cosgrove (1998). This initial wave of neo-Marxian scholarship, especially in relation to eighteenth-century English culture, also includes works by John Barrell, Ann Bermingham and Stephen Daniels.
6. On developments within phenomenology see, for example, Martin Alcoff (2000), Ströker (1987) and Waldenfels (1985). On subalterity and the limits to cultural Marxism see Prakash (1994).

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