

EMPTY, UNBUILT, LEFTOVER, IDLE, WORTHLESS, HIDDEN:

ON INVISIBLE AND VESTIGIAL PLACES AND LANDSCAPES

Joe NASR

Independent scholar. Lecturer and Associate, Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. jnasr@ryerson.ca

Histories of architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and allied fields tend to concentrate on built objects, crafted landscapes, planned zones, etc. Yet such material phenomena, while they are most noticed by those who inhabit metropolitan spheres, encapsulate countless spaces and objects that tend to be left out of such histories. This publication tackles a subject that is often neglected in the history of the professions that deal with the environment in which we live, particularly in and near cities: those parts of this environment that are invisible, left behind, ignored, or otherwise absent from the discourse on its creation.

SOURCES FOR THIS ARGUMENT

To illustrate this statement, I will rely on various episodes of my own eclectic research history over the past three decades, both locally in Lebanon as well as internationally. I will group these into two distinct clusters.

I will draw on my work around postwar reconstruction processes, illustrated in three episodes:



Figure 1

1. I will discuss various relevant aspects taken from my dissertation, which examined postwar reconstruction in France, West Germany and East Germany after World War II (Nasr 1997), including the assessment of destruction as well as the fate of different structural (street patterns, parcel division patterns...) and infrastructural systems.

2. In follow-up research conducted on British reconstruction (Larkham and Nasr, 2012; Larkham and Nasr, 2004), the case study of how vestiges of London's churches were assessed and consequently how their survival was impacted by this assessment and other factors can offer some useful lessons.

3. In the case of Lebanon, a comparison between the transformations in Beirut's central area and those in Berlin (Nasr, 1996) provides a good illustration of the impact of assumptions and representations of pre-existing conditions, from street patterns to property ownership.

I will also extract some lessons from a very different, major area of my research during the past decades: urban agriculture – and beyond that, on what is starting to be referred to as city-region food systems. Across this particular research as well as in my experience elsewhere, a number of observations have recurred, around idle land, marginal activity, invisible property, insignificant actors and temporary usage. I have been working in this field for a quarter century on different scales and in different regions:

1. My involvement in this topic started internationally, through a global survey of urban agriculture back in the early 1990s, leading to an early book on this subject (Smit, Ratta and Nasr, 1996).

2. Later, I organized a research program that considered the interface between agriculture and urbanization in coastal Lebanon, ultimately resulting in a book that examined this relationship across the Middle East and North Africa (Nasr and Padilla, 2005).

3. In the past decade, I was one of the coordinators of an initiative called "Carrot City" that examined how design can shape and support urban agriculture (Gorgolewski, Komisar and Nasr, 2011; www.carrotcity.org).

This paper will draw primarily on these two clusters of issues that I have worked on in the past three decades. I now realize that my seemingly highly disparate research topics have in common an interest in areas within the urban sphere that can be seen (and are often represented) as blank.

FORMS OF ABSENCE

Behind the perception of the blank slate lies an assumption of an absence – or rather, of a number of absences. These absences may take different forms. I suggest that it can be useful to distinguish these different forms, which can be found in different situations, in

different urban landscapes – though they are certainly interlocking absences. I will briefly analyze six forms of absence here, including some examples that illustrate these different forms.

- Urban landscapes may contain vast areas that are empty – their existence may not capture attention, they come to be understood as containing nothing. Indeed, the principle of the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) is commonly found in reference to vast areas within and around urban areas. Vast stretches of agricultural or biodiversity-rich land have often been shown on maps as simply empty spaces awaiting future development – commonly marked in white on land-use plans, as illustrated by a broad linear area of prime agriculture between the Greater Toronto Area and Ontario's Greenbelt that has come to be referred to as the "white belt", meant for the expansion of the metropolis. Often, the availability of land is discussed in terms of "opportunity" (a recurring word I encountered in much of my research). This ranges from cases of war destruction inside the city (illustrated by Europe after World War II and Beirut and many other cities in the Middle East in recent years) to agricultural landscape (as seen dramatically in the creation of the Fair grounds in Tripoli, sliced out of orange groves adjacent to the city).

- Voids between built-up areas often tend to be ignored – their unbuilt nature making them appear as gaps between the solidity of built objects. This is most commonly seen with urban open spaces like parks,



Figure 2

racecourses, river valleys, etc. While these voids are commonly regarded as green lungs, breathing spaces, and other similar metaphors, they are also frequently seen as prime development opportunities for mega-projects that can make fuller use of underused, consolidated urban land. Such spaces range from extensive monoliths like fairgrounds, older airports and golf courses, to more fragmented spaces such as abandoned industrial districts, to much smaller gaps in the urban fabric such as older houses with large gardens and surviving farms surrounded by built fabric.

- In both built-up areas and "open spaces", a range of remnants from past buildings, activities, or other

presences are leftover, vestiges that may or may not evoke memories of what came before. In contrast to the open spaces mentioned above, these remnants have a physical built presence. These are inherently isolated in some way—they may have particular value if they have historical value or serve as a monument or memorial, but typically they are simply surviving remnants without a particular value assigned to them.

- Voids and vestiges – and even built forms that are low-density or otherwise considered to be below their full-use potential – tend to be regarded as idle, as existing in space on a temporary basis until a project of some sort makes fuller use of such a site. The concept of “use” is central in this regard – terms such as “unused” or “underused” are the most obvious indicators of such judgment, but other, less obvious ones can be flagged, such as “fallow lands” (part of what I focused on in the study I undertook within the above-mentioned research program on coastal Lebanon), or “total destruction” (which was very commonly, yet loosely used in all reconstruction writings that I came across during and after my dissertation). The earliest article I co-wrote on urban agriculture (Smit and Nasr, 1992) also focused on how the concept of “waste” can be converted into that of “resource” in multiple ways through the lens of urban agriculture.

- Associated with such an emphasis on “use” is the importance given to “value” – thus, in the metropolitan sphere countless mechanisms exist to define what is valuable, and conversely, to identify the worthless, or at least undervalued and unproductive. It is easiest to deem a building worthless when it is “totally destroyed”, as just mentioned, but when this label cannot be assigned, then efforts to undertake damage assessment in a professional way are usually needed in order to estimate the worth of remnants – however, my research on what to do with churches in London, as well as my examination of varying techniques for mapping destruction during and after World War II, has shown me how laden with judgment such assessments are, and what the consequences of the determination of worthy or worthless are in relation to any vestige.

Landscapes, both intra-urban and peri-urban, are crisscrossed by numerous systems that structure them. While some of them are highly visible, such as highways and riverbeds, many of them are less noticeable, if not totally invisible (especially when belowground). Hidden systems thus structure landscapes, not only within cities, but even in more remote areas that are under the influence of cities. There is a great variety of such more or less hidden structures and infrastructures, ranging from agricultural parceling and water and other facilities to zoning and property ownership patterns. The presence of belowground infrastructure in cities has been shown to survive war destruction, even where much of the aboveground built fabric is damaged or destroyed. My dissertation research also showed that the morphology underlying urban patterns significantly

impacted reconstruction in some places, and much less so in others, seen most clearly when comparing West Germany to East Germany.

COUNTERING THE IMAGE OF URBAN VOIDS AND BLANK SLATES

The discussion in this paper has focused on the range of ways in which spaces inside and outside cities are commonly represented as unproductive voids. This does not mean that there are no other representations for the parts of cities and their regions that are not built, dense, active, expensive, etc. There are indeed many other ways for plots of land and structures to be “productive”. I proffer a far broader interpretation of the term “productivity” here to designate the many ways in which a function, a service, a use can be provided – whether through food production, ecosystem service, slow mobility, memory activation, mental reflection, physical exercise, or more. In this short section, I will share a few thoughts on how the image of urban voids and blank slates outlined above has been countered by other representations and realities.

- What is suggested here is nothing new; there has been a very long history of the productive use of land in and around cities, in fact as long as cities have existed.

- While current built-environment practitioners often approach such spaces in the terms mentioned in the previous section, not all the foundational thinkers of these professions approached them in this way. In fact, a number of key theoreticians from the history of planning, design and landscape – from Ebenezer Howard to Patrick Geddes to Frank Lloyd Wright and even Le Corbusier (to

some extent) – have made a number of proposals that use spaces in and around urban settlements “productively”.

- By changing the lens from “empty” or “leftover” to a broader meaning of “productive”, large parts of cities can be seen as core functions in the urban landscape. Moreover, given the pressures that exist on open spaces that are formally maintained by public authorities such as parks, other forms of open spaces such as urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) can be regarded as the new urban landscape, where individuals and groups are performing a service by productively maintaining some unbuilt areas.

- At the same time, the temporality of forms of open space such as UPA is necessarily different from that of more static spaces such as parks – UPA is inherently a more dynamic landscape.

- While private stakeholders tend to dominate such alternative forms of productive open spaces, these often require support from different actors – from municipalities and civil society organizations to research and training bodies – who can offer a variety of support forms to make leftover, open spaces productive.

- While many productive urban landscapes are fragmentary in nature, productivity is much greater if such spaces are scaled up or connected to each other. For this reason, concepts such as continuous productive urban landscapes (CPULs) and pollination corridors have recently emerged, building on older concepts like greenbelts and green wedges.



Figure 3

SOME CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

The absences mentioned in this paper can be seen in both space and time. They can be summarized in terms of invisibility (no presence in space) and vestigiality (remnant from an earlier time, awaiting a fuller use by an activity and materiality with higher value). Moreover, the centrality of the idea of “productive use” (or perhaps the narrow productivist ideology) hovers over the recognition, and ultimately the fate, of any “place that remains” within a metropolitan sphere.

I will conclude by considering three fundamental questions. First, why are so many places and landscapes seen as empty, unbuilt, leftover, idle, worthless? Second, what are the consequences of such a view, in terms of power, appropriation, neglect? Third, what are the implications of such different ways of seeing for professionals of the built (and unbuilt) environment? The places that remain can gain visibility and be seen as multifunctional contributors to the metropolitan realm.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Farms at the mouth of the Awwali River near Saidas

Figure 2. St Mary Aldermanbury memorial garden, London

Figure 3. Tripoli Fair, now surrounded by the expansion of a neighborhood of the city

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AUTHOR

Joe NASR is an independent scholar, lecturer and consultant based in Toronto, who has been exploring urban agriculture and food security issues, as well as planning history and urban morphology, for over a quarter century. His work has covered the global, regional (Middle East, Europe, and North America), as well as local scales (particularly Toronto and Beirut). He holds a doctorate in urban and regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania and has received several fellowships over the years. He is an associate of Ryerson University's Center for Studies in Food Security, and co-curator of the traveling exhibition, book, and website “Carrot City: Designing for Urban Agriculture.” Joe is co-founder of Toronto Urban Growers and member of the Toronto Food Policy Council. He is co-author or co-editor of four books and dozens of articles, including the seminal book “Urban Agriculture”; he is also co-editor of the Springer Urban.