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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/04q2778c>

### Journal

Architectural Theory Review, 19(2)

### ISSN

1326-4826

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### Publication Date

2014-05-04

### DOI

10.1080/13264826.2014.967330

Peer reviewed

# The Usefulness of Uselessness

Towards a landscape framework for un-activated urban public space

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2015, *Architectural Theory Review* 19 (2): 154–173

## Introduction: activating the landscape

The degree of usefulness in the designed landscape waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century. Up until the 1930s, the influence of the Beaux Arts lent landscape design a decorative *raison d'être*. In reaction, modern landscape designers championed the usability of the landscape, whereby the formal qualities of a space were determined more by its utility than by an imported aesthetic agenda. By the 1970s, a faction of landscape design became increasingly aligned with artistic practice.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, the designs for many postmodern urban spaces prioritised the representation of meaning over the articulation of function. Parks and plazas routinely referenced other places and landscape types, historical events, cosmic myths and land art.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, by the 1980s designed landscapes became increasingly viewed as settings for activation and programming. This shift can be attributed to several influences. First, the assimilation of knowledge from urban research and environmental psychology illuminated the contribution made by human activity to the vibrancy of places. Second, grass-roots organisations seeking to revive community spirit discovered event programming as a mechanism for re-appropriating blighted public space and instilling civic interaction and pride. Third, with neoliberal capitalism increasingly impacting the provision and maintenance of public space, programmatic amenity provided a



commercial base to ensure economic self-sufficiency. And fourth,

transformations within architectural theory and practice influenced the tendency for landscape to be discussed within an architectural framework. The increasing role of context, ground and surface in theory, the pragmatics of establishing new market opportunities to sustain practice, and rising environmental concerns, all contributed to the architectural embrace of landscape. Moreover, with the revival of the modern architectural concept of total-design, the typical mandate of buildings to facilitate programmatic usefulness flowed into the landscape.<sup>3</sup>

Following these influences, contemporary urban landscapes are obliged to appear continuously useful. Parks and plazas are routinely re-conceptualised and represented as being activated across their entire surfaces and around the clock. To be sure, elevating site programming above form-making partially recovers landscape from its lowly role as decorative veil with which to mask the industrialised world.<sup>4</sup> But has the preoccupation with program and usefulness pushed landscape too far in the opposite direction, smothering some of its more ephemeral qualities? Is the highly programmed landscape robust and adaptive? Does it open landscapes up, or close them off?

The article engages these questions by exploring the role of uselessness in the urban landscape. By comparing the characteristics of incidental vague spaces and designated public spaces, the article positions uselessness as a valid feature of open space within the contemporary accelerated urban milieu. The argument is structured into three sections: (1) an overview of definitions of landscape uselessness and comparison of existing conceptual frameworks; (2) discussion of the contradictory relationship between design and uselessness; and (3) cultivation of landscape mechanisms that nurture uselessness within the city.

## Concepts and definitions

Uselessness in the landscape is a more complex and nuanced concept than the straightforward absence of usefulness. In the following section, the scope of ambiguities inherent in landscape uselessness is discussed through historical, linguistic and urbanist lenses. The notion of potentiality is introduced to differentiate landscape-based uselessness from the object-derived bias towards usefulness. The second part of this section compares existing concepts that support a landscape-based conceptualisation of uselessness. Interpretation of the conceptual frameworks of Kevin Lynch, Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, and Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens establish context for the remainder of the article.

### *Defining uselessness: upholding potentiality*

The expectation that most of the floor space in a building be useful is a relatively stable assumption in architecture. However, this assumption does not transfer seamlessly out into the landscape; due to the fluid cultural construction of nature throughout history, landscape exhibits a more variable relationship with both usefulness and uselessness. For example, in pre-agrarian and medieval contexts, the sacredness and fear attributed to certain landscapes restricted their use. The exploration and de-sacralisation of the Earth beginning in the age of discovery are associated with the over-use of resources and later environmental degradation, while uselessness became equated with wastelands.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the metaphor of landscape as a garden continues to pervade perceptions of landscape, both in theory and practice.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, gardens are analogous to architecture's follies, and exist as emporiums of pleasure without orthodox usefulness. Conversely, gardens can also perform the highly useful role of food production. Following the complex intertwining of the role of gardens and wilderness since the eighteenth century, the garden's useless/useful ambiguity also came to be reflected in the larger landscape.<sup>7</sup>

In English, the word *landscape* describes settings that are both the by-product of productive use, and those that are constructed and consumed with a degree of distanced aesthetic intent. Efforts to clarify this aesthetic/functional ambiguity identify the less scenic connotations of landscape in other European languages, with the German *Landschaft*, Dutch *Landschap* and French *Paysage* all retaining greater emphasis on territory and the working landscape than their English equivalent.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as demarcations between town, countryside, and wilderness continue to dissolve, it is increasingly difficult to draw a neat partition between the implicitly idle, unproductive landscape of scenographic representation and the vernacular landscape of productive working land. The emergence of collective environmental consciousness since the 1960s particularly blurs this notion, with shifting perceptions attributing wider use-value to landscapes beyond raw productive potential. The realignment of the aesthetic and utilitarian norms of landscape is illustrated by the renaming of former badlands as wilderness, and conversely, exhausted agricultural land taking on the appearance of wastelands.<sup>9</sup>

The malleability of value and use is also evident in an urban context. This association is magnified in Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* project in Manhattan, in which a 25 x 40 ft (7.6 x 12.2m) plot of land has been fenced off since 1978 and allowed to grow wild. On the one hand, the site may be understood as useless since it is impossible to access in order to undertake productive acts such as labour and dwelling, or even passive activities such as viewing or contemplation. But on the other hand, the untouched and untilled status of *Time Landscape* exhibits use-value in its role as a counterweight that offsets the domination of real estate values.<sup>10</sup> The site may also be understood as implicitly useful on account of its existence-value that extends beyond the actual usefulness of its own contiguous ground; through media and memory, the site has the capacity to inspire and transform perceptions well beyond its borders.

To be sure, with space such a rare commodity in Manhattan, any idle site has been argued to be inherently useful; people will find some way to access and use it, no matter how off-limits or non-existent the design qualities of the space are. For instance, prior to its redevelopment as an elevated promenade, the derelict High Line functioned as a de facto wild park for urban explorers.<sup>11</sup> At the other extreme, the wide-open spaces that isolate the downtown areas of two low-density Australian cities generally appear useless. In Perth, a 150m wide grass buffer separates the city from the estuary, while Adelaide's 600m wide grassed and treed greenbelt separates the downtown from the first-ring suburbs. In addition to the present low use of these buffers, the impression of uselessness results from cultural, historical, and statutory norms that impede future transformation.

These contrasting examples may imply that degrees of usefulness and uselessness in the urban landscape are coupled to demand, which is determined by population density. However, the empty inner-city neighbourhoods of Detroit, which are largely abandoned of their former residential use, disrupt this distinction (Figure 1). Designers don't view this land as useless; although it may be presently unused, many creative fields are fascinated with its potential to be remade useful, whether that be in the form of a renewed city, an urban farm, or an artists' hamlet.<sup>12</sup> The temporal fuzziness between past, present and future use in Detroit highlights a key difference between landscape use and more orthodox object-based definitions. While the usefulness of an object (or a building) describes its functionality to those who use it, implicit in this contract is the assumption that the item has been fabricated by human activity that brought it forth from the inert resources of the world. This culture-from-nature action cannot be readily translated to the scale of the landscape, which exists both before and after it is designed and inescapably uses the same verdant and unruly materiality as the world that it is curated from.<sup>13</sup>





Figure 1: Remains of the Detroit inner neighbourhood of Islandview, Michigan.

Therefore, in the landscape, usefulness is less easily demarcated in the absolute terms of an objectified functionality that is applied to the environment, since that functionality is in effect always latent within the ground. Consequently, in the landscape, usefulness is tied to the fulfilment of *potentiality* dormant in a site; such potential is always inherent in the materiality of the earth itself.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore problematic to define uselessness in the landscape as the absence of usefulness. Nor is uselessness necessarily a lack of *potential* usefulness since every site inherently possesses this feature prior to its fulfilment. Instead, landscape uselessness may be defined as the *upholding of potentiality in a site* by it being constituted as something with open possibilities that are neither extinguished nor fulfilled.<sup>15</sup>

#### ***Conceptions of uselessness: open wasteland, terrain vague, loose space***

The notion of maintaining openness and potentiality in a site permeates postmodern urban theory. Lynch approaches the theme of uselessness in the landscape through commentary on wastelands and spatial openness. Lynch observes that while the genealogy of wasteland includes terms such as *unoccupied, desolate, deficient*, and

*huge*, a wasteland represents a resource that is not presently in use but is potentially useful at some uncertain future date. For Lynch, wastelands possess the curious advantage of being able to be “held unused without accounted cost” since “the holding state has value” despite the presumption of valuelessness. Lynch distinguishes this kind of space from derelict sites, which he defines as so damaged by development that they have had their potential extinguished prior to some major intervention.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Openness of Open Space*, Lynch integrates these definitions into an account of public open space that transcends reductive land use and planning codes.<sup>17</sup> Lynch defines *open space* as “open to the freely chosen and spontaneous actions of people”. Parks and meadows often facilitate this openness, but so do unfenced vacant lots and abandoned post-industrial wastelands. Less important than the designation of a site is the ability of the features of the site to facilitate openness; for Lynch this may be as simple as a sandbank, grassy slope, or open woods. Visual openness and a bias towards leisure type uses form an implicit component of most of the examples that Lynch provides. Lynch also inadvertently defines open space within the framework of the traditional park, noting that open space is typically less visually structured and facilitates lower intensity uses than the surrounding city. For Lynch, open space provides “stimulus release” that contrasts with “the intense and meaning-loaded communications encountered in the remainder of the city”.<sup>18</sup>

Lynch’s template for how designers should encourage openness includes the common park-like strategies of providing accessibility, complexity and a multiplicity of spaces and perceptual character. Most importantly, designers should “devise forms which are uncommitted and plastic” and can “adapt themselves easily to a great variety of behaviours”, so as to “provide neutral but suggestive material for spontaneous action”. Even with this programmatic flexibility, Lynch’s conception of open space is heavily biased towards accessibility and use, as evidenced by the anthropocentric statement that “spaces in

themselves are meaningless except in relation to their use, and to the characteristics and aspirations of their users”.<sup>19</sup> This reading disregards the innate phenomenological value of places that grant the qualities of space a dual role in generating meaning.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of *terrain vague*—as developed in post-war architectural photography and introduced to a design audience by Morales—complements many of the themes that emerge from Lynch’s work, but is more cognisant of the dilemmas of introducing criteria of usability and usefulness into wasteland sites.<sup>21</sup> Broader than the English word *wasteland*, the French term *terrain vague* encompasses the urban qualities of terrain and the multiple etymologies of vague as *empty* and *unoccupied* but also *free* and *unengaged*. For Morales, the suggestive potential of *terrain vague* sites lies with the interaction between the absence of current uses and activities, and the sense of freedom and expectancy of future possibility. Using language that recalls Michel Foucault’s heterotopias, *terrain vague* sites are described as inside the city, but “outside the city’s effective circuits and productive structures”.

Morales is candid about the difficulty in engaging *terrain vague*, observing that at the one extreme, art attempts to preserve such sites, while at the other, architecture typically colonises *terrain vague* with “limits, order and form”. Thus, the challenge becomes how to act in *terrain vague* sites without freezing them in time or “being an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason”.<sup>22</sup> Like Lynch, Morales is drawn to the similarities between *terrain vague* sites and parks, which as vaguely expressed ambiguous green spaces, often perform *terrain vague*-like roles within cities. Morales thus calls for a new conception of “landscaping” to extend the life of abandoned sites as free open spaces “filled with alternative, individual non-structured activities and connections”.<sup>23</sup> As per Lynch, here Morales also leans towards accessibility and use as suitable design strategies for *terrain vague* sites.

Franck and Stevens’ concept of *loose space* expands Morales’ and Lynch’s focus on vague and open spaces to include the potential of the everyday urban fabric to provide undesigned and spontaneous space. Drawing on the extensive legacy of investigations into urban life, streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks, and vague wastelands are interpreted as the setting for “a rich variety of activities not originally intended for those locations”. As with Lynch and Morales, accessibility and freedom of choice form a critical component of loose spaces, as do the physical features of a space that can accommodate the widest range of uses. Franck and Stevens identify the tendency for walls, ledges, and stairs to be readily appropriated for unintended uses, as are expansive empty hard surfaces (such as car parks) that potentially facilitate a diversity of behavioural opportunities. At the same time, they observe that too much openness “limits activities to those that can be performed in a void” or may necessitate the introduction of extensive additional props.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Lynch and Morales both consider the role of design in facilitating this looseness, Franck and Stevens are more concerned with the appropriation of the found landscape. While Stevens does note that designers should create spaces that are a “little bit luxurious” and expand upon the widest range of uses possible in a site, space is ultimately made loose by people actively transforming their close-at-hand environment in real time.<sup>25</sup> Franck and Stevens cast an extremely wide net, so that nearly any space (in a democracy) appears potentially loose, contingent on the motivation and ingenuity of its users to adapt surfaces, create props, and subvert societal norms and governmental surveillance. Space is still programmed, but the responsibility for this programming shifts from formal institutions to cooperatives of like-minded individuals.

Moreover, self-activated space generally implies a higher degree of uncertainty than the permanence associated with top-down programming. For this reason, the activities that make space loose are typically temporary, whether that duration is measured in minutes (in

the case of an interactive street performance), or years (in the case of a caravan café on a vacant lot). Accordingly, the types of uses that Franck and Stevens prioritise tend to be active and mobile and include skating, cycling, parkour, performance, commerce, and civil resistance. Invoking the spirit of the Situationists, loose space implies a significant degree of appropriation, subversion, and confrontation, along with reverence for urban subcultures and the apparently disordered use of space in the developing world. These activities do not reflect the civil disobedience associated with a society enduring real suppression, but rather an opportunistic antidote to boredom and discontent with unimaginative modern cities. The loose city in effect becomes an all-ages playground, or *Hortus Ludus* (pleasure garden), as is elaborated in Stevens' parallel work that explores the role of play in enlivening the city.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, across the three concepts of open wastelands, *terrain vague* and loose spaces, several themes and nuances are evident. Both Lynch and Morales describe their conceptions as an antidote to the surrounding city, so that a space is either smooth or striated but not both. Franck and Stevens seek to reconcile this opposition by demonstrating that opportunities for freedom and spontaneity are not only found in large wastelands but also are interwoven into the vernacular urban fabric. From a physical perspective, complexity and variability of form is a consistent premise across all three concepts. Lynch is most prescriptive with regards to the way the physical characteristics of places might be configured to facilitate openness, while Franck and Stevens seek similar characteristics within the existing hard urban fabric. Morales, wary of the capacity of architects to overwhelm vague sites, is more circumspect, and beyond some deference to landscape strategies to be more sensitive, implies that *terrain vague* should be left more or less in its wildness. Nevertheless, like Lynch and Franck and Stevens, Morales also prioritises use and activation as the designer's primary mechanism, so that *terrain vague* might be "filled with alternative, individual non-structured activities". Temporary uses in flexible spaces thus emerge as common themes—

implicitly in the case of Lynch and Morales, and explicitly so in the case of Franck and Stevens.

### **Contradictions in practice**

Although vivid as frameworks for identifying open/vague/loose spaces, utilising design to intentionally influence or generate the themes drawn out by Lynch, Morales, and Franck and Stevens is more challenging.<sup>27</sup> The first part of this section discusses the reasons for design's continuing fascination with useless spaces, despite the agreed mandate of design to facilitate usefulness. While temporary interventions are a common strategy in these situations, their limited ability to neutralise threats to a site's uselessness are identified as a significant limitation. The second part examines the issue from an alternate angle, whereby public parks take on the attributes of vagueness through either neglect or physical openness. The longer-term sustainability of the tendency to fill vulnerable parks with programs and supporting apparatus is queried.

### ***Revering uselessness: activating vague spaces***

Since the 1990s, the spatial design fields have focussed extensively on vague spaces and their simultaneous uselessness and potentiality. This urge to capture vague space through design results from several converging factors. First, it represents a new opportunity facilitated by the increased supply of idle sites that result from offshoring Western manufacturing and the collapse of Soviet command economies. Second, the focus on vague space is enabled by the present digital cartographic revolution. Whereas locating vague sites once necessitated localised knowledge and reconnaissance, GIS-empowered designers are now able to mine global datasets for sites of potential in the matrix of land tenure. And third, it is a reaction to the widespread realisation that the designated public realms of many suburbanised cities failed to fulfil their mandate to act as stages for meaningful urban life. In this context, vague spaces offer opportunities to experiment with design tactics for alternative types of shared space.

While designers generally intend to respect the indeterminacy and uselessness of vague sites, two persuasive factors routinely influence their principal motivations. First, the functional underperformance of a site is vulnerable to general societal sensitivity to decline and narrow economic definitions of appropriate use.<sup>28</sup> Second, the designer's underlying obligation to create usefulness acts as a powerful *raison d'être* that differentiates design from art and whimsical creativity.<sup>29</sup> As a result, design propositions for useless spaces overwhelmingly tend to involve some degree of useful activation, even where no pre-existing need exists. Recurring design experiments and speculations that fit this pattern include parklets in streetside car-parking bays, urban agriculture on freeway shoulders, and performative infrastructures in demilitarised zones (Figure 2).

As Morales suggests, the activation of vague sites through design risks smothering the uselessness that draws designers to such places in the first instance. Moreover, the introduction of usability may override someone else's pre-existing usefulness such as a homeless encampment, informal storage depot, or a novel urban ecology. Cognisant of this dilemma, design tactics emerged to avoid wholesale material and programmatic renewal. Set in contrast to the strong design of traditional urban form, "weak" design aims to remain sensitive to the subtle physical and social nuances of vague sites.<sup>30</sup> Nature Park Schöneberger Südgelände in Berlin is a notable example of this approach. Encompassing an overgrown railway-shunting yard, the site functioned as a *de facto* public space for several decades prior to its authentication as a park. In seeking to uphold the wild post-use character of the site, the design amplifies existing features and experiences by providing novel approaches and angles on existing infrastructure. Even here in weak form, design involves the imposition of some usefulness by facilitating safe access that is slightly inoculated from the roughness of the site, and providing way-finding and interpretation signage for visitors. As a consequence, the original openness of the site is somewhat diluted.



Figure 2: Proposal for urban agriculture on freeway berm, Los Angeles, California (courtesy of Fletcher Studio, 2009).

For this reason, designers are drawn to instances where urban citizens successfully introduce non-transformative usefulness into vague sites. The Hayes Valley Community Farm in San Francisco illustrates this approach. In 2010, self-organised residents established urban agriculture on a derelict city block containing remnant earth berms that once serviced the now demolished portion of the Central Freeway. Throughout its four-year history, most of the urban agricultural interventions on the site remained light and moveable (Figure 3). This general lack of interaction with the ground plane of the site is primarily due to (1) the variety of residual surfaces and slope aspects already on the site that are suitable for adaptation, (2) the predominantly hand-labour capabilities of the urban farmers, and (3) the impending redevelopment of the current site into apartments. Here, impermanent uses appear to enable engagement with a vague site without extinguishing the evocative site potentiality that both





Figure 3: Temporary orchard, Hayes Valley Farm, San Francisco, California (creative commons © Zoey Kroll, 2010).

Morales and Lynch found to be important. Temporary programs can react rapidly to indeterminate and flexible futures and avoid smothering promise, possibility and expectation in the manner of fixed, permanent constructions.

Conversely, temporary uses may remain too weak to embed into a site and significantly alter its future trajectory. Peter Connolly argues that persistent threats to the fragility of potentiality constitute a key characteristic of underperforming vague sites; therefore, the role of design is to uphold potentiality by “neutralising threat”.<sup>31</sup> However, the tendency for temporary activities and supporting installations and infrastructure to stay light and mobile often limits their capacity to function as mechanisms of resistance to existential risks against the sites they appropriate. The Hayes Valley Community Farm follows this pattern; new sites are being sought for colonisation so that the temporary programming may endure beyond the redevelopment of the current site. In this regard, the place-based nuances and predicaments of a particular locale become less important than the

universal opportunities to actively maintain a particular temporary use somewhere within the city. To be sure, the well-documented ability for temporary uses to shift locations pending eviction or evaporation of their “cool capital” makes for an energised and responsive city of surprises.<sup>32</sup> But it does not neutralise threats and is vulnerable to the process of gentrification eventually exhausting the supply of potential vague sites within a city.

### ***Negating uselessness: pressurised parks***

As is often the case on vacant private lots, failure to neutralise threat is most vividly expressed as the total redevelopment of a site into buildings. But threat can also be actualised in less absolute terms on sites that appear to remain open and inclusive. Parks are particularly vulnerable to this situation, and especially so where formerly vague sites are converted into official public space through the application of design. The 2009 development of the High Line promenade in Manhattan exemplifies this dilemma. While efforts to prevent the demolition of the abandoned elevated railway were galvanised by the allure of its wildness and openness, they also ultimately led to the elimination of those venerated characteristics. The provision of access, circulation, programming, and structural improvements necessitated removing the biotic layer that colonised the structure over several decades. Despite the designer’s overtures regarding “new emergent ecologies”, the constructed design enacts the total substitution of an urban wildness with its simulation. As Jacky Bowring argues, the result eradicates the melancholic qualities of the derelict site.<sup>33</sup>

In a reversal of the process of activation, there are also countless less prominent cases of existing gazetted public parks inadvertently taking on attributes of vagueness and openness. This deterioration often occurs in response to poor maintenance regimes, colonisation by marginalised sub-cultures, or deterioration of the adjacent urban fabric. Within this process—following a period that J.B. Jackson described as an “interval of neglect”—there appears a tipping point at which deteriorating parks become vulnerable to reprogramming and

reactivation.<sup>34</sup> This point of inflection is highly specific to the range of factors bearing on individual circumstances, which include community expectations, models of governance and budgetary constraints.

The dilapidated People's Park in Berkeley, California, illustrates the site specificity of this process. Covering three-quarters of a city block, approximately half the park comprises a worn grass area, with the remainder covered in hard-packed earth with a dense canopy of trees overhead. The park is presently colonised by a large itinerant population and consequently exhibits a very high resistance to renewal of its surfaces and facilities. In this instance, the act of displacing one demographic's usefulness (homeless encampment) with a broader usefulness is curtailed by the politics of the locale that stem from its role as a site of resistance in the 1960s. A park located in another community with a different set of circumstances may demonstrate a much lower tolerance for dereliction, and consequently a more rapid inflection towards re-activation.

In other situations where parks remain well maintained and uncolonised, it is the morphology of the park itself that contributes to its vulnerability to programmatic re-activation. For example, suburban parks tend to comprise large fields calibrated to sport-specific uses, despite only a small number of park users actually participating in the team sports applicable to those spaces.<sup>35</sup> To be certain, flat empty fields often double as storm-water detention basins, whilst also accommodating adapted uses such as dog walking, exercising and informal game sports. Nevertheless, increasing pressure to accommodate facilities that are calibrated more closely to currently popular uses has resulted in sports fields being downsized in many new suburban developments.<sup>36</sup> Into these reduced volumes, event spaces, age-specific playgrounds, fenced sports courts, exercise circuits, chessboards, and shelter structures fill the space that was once devoted to level expanses of grass. Consequently, even as the park boundaries contract, the programmatic contents increase. This double-action effectively compounds the programmatic intensity so

that the park becomes less like a vacuum of respite within the city fabric and more like a "pressurised plenum" that is packed with activities.<sup>37</sup>

Smothers Park in Owensboro, Kentucky is a high-profile example of this approach. Opened in 2012, the park renewed a functioning but neglected 500m long linear park and waterfront promenade. In the new design, the open spaces of the old park are filled from end to end with furnishings, contraptions, and facilities to service the wide array of dedicated uses. The parcelled elements and experiences offer something to satisfy each visitor, but conversely no one unifying experience for everyone.

Smothers Park is, in effect, a contemporary theme park, albeit without any fences or gates to contain and pressurise its programmatic overload.<sup>38</sup> Although an essential element of private theme parks, such enclosure and control contradicts a core tenet of public space; ever since the gates of the great European hunting parks were thrown open in the mid nineteenth century, we expect truly public spaces to be freely accessible day and night. Therefore, contemporary activated parks must maintain a high degree of theme park-like programmatic intensity without the benefit of a traditional perimeter fence.<sup>39</sup> Akin to running air-conditioning with the windows wide open, the strategy applied to this challenge involves the continual insertion of novelty and renewal of the supporting specialised infrastructure.

By depending on highly use-specific props, pressurised parks such as Smothers Park are less likely to be able to adapt to accommodate shifting trends and expectations from park users. In this regard, perpetual novelty and renewal may not represent a sustainable and durable model for public open spaces. If a site burns out, and its activation evaporates, it may have little else upon which to neutralise threat and may become vulnerable to the cycle of dereliction and activation starting over.

## Landscape mechanisms

Temporary programmatic activation and associated apparatus are likely to be limited in their capacity to neutralise existential threats to parks and vague sites. In response, this section conceptualises alternate mechanisms for upholding openness that are sourced from the traditional landscape palette. The first part discusses reciprocal relationships between topography, use and uselessness, and the capacity for landform to nurture uselessness and resist erasure. The second cultivates the longstanding landscape concept of the semi-permeable threshold as a potential filter between useless spaces and the city.

### *Grounding uselessness: topographic stages*

Activation—whether in the form of subtle temporary uses in vague sites, or prolifically programmed uses in pressurised parks—has a limited capacity to neutralise threat. To remain flexible, the physical props that facilitate these activations typically remain loose and unrooted into the site, and as a consequence are readily superseded and cast aside (Figure 4). The visceral, rooted, heavy nature of the traditional landscape material palette represents a more potent mechanism for neutralising threats to a site. For this reason, landowners and future developers are often reluctant to allow trees to be planted on vague sites. For example, during the 1969 citizens' rebellion in Berkeley, extensive tree planting formed a key component of the protesters' strategy at the vague site that was ultimately "saved" from redevelopment and became People's Park.

In addition to vegetation, landform is an active agent in neutralising threat and maintaining openness. In the landscape, use and landform are closely interrelated. Existing topography influences programmatic choices on its surface; for instance, a sunny grass slope attracts sitting and lying in summer and sledding in winter. Conversely, new topographies are formed in response to programmatic pre-determinates; for example, a flat sports field carved into a hillside.



Figure 4: Discarded temporary prop found in vacant lot, Berlin-Mitte, Germany (Author, 2003).

Moreover, while activity programming and its supporting infrastructure tend to come and go, topography often remains significantly intact over time. This quality is illustrated by the tendency for earth-mounds to endure as the expression of ancient ruins long after other elements have disintegrated. It follows that the enduring nature of topography may exert substantial resistance to pressures to clear out and re-activate sites within a narrow band of active programming.<sup>40</sup>

Countering this potential role is the traditionally peripheral position of landform in the programming of public open space. Usefulness is implicitly associated with activeness, and the prerequisite for accommodating "active" activity has typically been flat and level land. Conversely, rough out-of-level land has historically been considered useless—in so far as it is the traditional domain for passive pursuits such as contemplation and spiritual enlightenment—until such time as particularly determined people engineer its slopes into useful terraces (Figure 5).<sup>41</sup> The Cartesian plane is presented as permitting the



greatest possibility of uses on its flat surface; as Bernard Cache notes, in a modern sense the choreography of daily life is only considered probable on a smooth stage.<sup>42</sup> The highest degree of usefulness and flexibility is therefore attributed to space with the lowest morphological complexity. In typological terms, the European piazza, the American parking lot, and the Australian grass sports field all have proven multifunctional potential by virtue of their level, contiguous and durable surfaces.

The apparently limitless programmatic options available to the flat open space also represent a disadvantage. As Franck and Stevens observe, a smooth, level surface does not necessarily imply greater potential for looseness than an irregular sloped surface.<sup>43</sup> The ability to make use of a large flat space beyond its primary program—such as the food market on the European piazza, car parking on the American parking lot, or cricket on the Australian sports field—

requires an organisational critical mass and is less responsive to user-generated initiatives (Figure 6). To be sure, mobile social media is visibly transforming how urban actors self-organise and congregate in space, but for the time being, remains more an instrument of political activism and social spectacle (flash-mobbing) than an everyday mechanism for programming space. For individuals or small groups, an expansive, flat empty space may appear unapproachable and unusable. From a phenomenological perspective, this sensation results from a reduction in “friction” between the smoothness of the ground-plane and the body that moves across it. This loss of friction between urban actors and their environment has been widely critiqued in the larger urban context; Cache blames the proliferation of rarefied urban surfaces for the “exhaustion of the potentialities of sites”, and Paul Carter decries an urban environment that has become “flat, droning, and listless”.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 5: Agricultural terracing, Dragon’s Backbone Rice Terraces, Dazhai China (Author, 2008).



Figure 6: Various permutations of event layouts on sports field, Claremont, Australia (2005–2012).

Conversely, rough, variable landform exhibits an abundance of “friction” onto which compatible programs are more likely to adhere. To be certain, a rough topographic surface can ensconce fewer superimposed programs within its folds and niches than a flat open space such as a sports field or a fully pre-programmed space such as an urban park. Nevertheless, a variable topographic surface can also encourage the invention of new site-specific uses or games without necessitating the introduction of props or organised events. A playful illustration of this concept is found at Volkspark Potsdam, Germany. Established in 2001 for a national garden show, the “wild” section of the park contains a “topographical” basketball court (Figure 7). The variable surface disturbs the assumption of requiring a level playing field for a “fair” game. Players have been observed readapting a site-specific version of basketball, in which topographic variations are used to offset height differences amongst players in mixed teams.<sup>45</sup>

The influence that topography has overuse is further illustrated in the Esplanade park in Fremantle, Western Australia. Here, a 40m-diameter horseshoe shaped mound is the only topographic feature on the otherwise flat, grassy foreshore reserve. The earthwork was formed serendipitously by the need to deposit surplus fill on-site during public realm improvements in the mid-1980s. Despite this inauspicious origin, the mound acts as a magnet that attracts both passive and active park users from the adjacent flat spaces. Sitting, lying, rolling, and circulating are common activities on the slopes, while the concaved internal space creates useful social facility as a meeting and performing place that is sheltered from the prevailing wind. This range of unintended activities at the mound amply demonstrates Lynch’s observation that “uncommitted and plastic” forms created by “artificial topography” can “provide neutral but suggestive material for spontaneous action”.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the mound has repeatedly resisted proposals to level the area to accommodate an open expanse suitable for large-scale event programming.



Figure 7: Amorphous basketball court, BUGA Park, Potsdam, Germany (Author, 2014).

Variable topographic spaces potentially reconcile the indeterminacy of the large flat empty space with the determinacy of the smaller fully programmed space. The former can affectively accommodate its primary use and some other temporary organised events but is likely to be un-used and listless at other times. Conversely, the latter can accommodate a plethora of set activities but has limited flexibility beyond these functions once their novelty fades. These readings dilute any neat opposition in which certain simple Euclidean forms are seen to enable legitimate uses while other more complex morphologies repel usefulness. That is, the potentiality of landscape lies not with form following function or vice versa, but rather in the interrelationship between the formal qualities of the vessel and the programs it catches, creates, and cradles.

#### ***Reframing uselessness: semi-permeable thresholds***

Because of the unbounded, open-air nature of the landscape, a vessel cannot contain uses with the same firmness as with architecture. Consequently, the landscape is more likely to leak its programmatic



activation. While this programmatic seepage implies a degree of inherent cross-contamination between uses in the landscape, it also raises the issue of the nature of the threshold between the “otherness” of a park or vague site and the everyday usefulness of its urban context.

The upholding of the potentiality of a site is most potent and fragile at the edges, where maximum leakage, openness and exchange occur between a park or vague site and its urban setting. Lynch touches on the vital role that edges play in open space, noting that while a sense of depth and ability to penetrate to the centre of a site are important, careful manipulation of the edge and access points are vital to the design of open spaces. Stevens also notes the significance of thresholds in loose space, observing that looseness tends to be amplified near the edges of spaces and transitions between spaces. Thresholds represent a thirdspace that is physically distinct from inside and outside the site; here, the distortion of efficient temporal and spatial rhythms of the city tends to slow people down and amplify the potential for interaction.<sup>47</sup>

At a mothballed post-industrial site, for example, the threshold may take the form of a partially ruined and overgrown fence, through which gaps facilitate clandestine access for curious urban explorers. In an urban wasteland—in addition to fractured physical barriers—acceptance into a particular subculture may also contribute to the formation of a socially forged threshold that must be transcended to access the site. In gazetted public parks, two diametrically opposed strategies negotiate this transition. By tradition, the park relies on a fence or wall to reinforce its perimeter and uphold its role as a passive counterweight to the busy metropolis. Conversely, contemporary highly programmed but unbounded urban spaces rely on perpetual novelty to maintain activation in the absence of any physical separation between the park and the city.

While a traditional walled boundary enables maximum physical control with which to insulate a space from its context, this isolation also nullifies healthy exchange between both sides of the partition. As Ingersoll identifies, reconstituting the wall risks perpetuating the escalating disjunction between the accelerating fabric of contemporary cities and the traditionally anchoring role of parks.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, whereas Sonfist’s *Timescape* is compact, visible, and infamous enough to transcend its exclusionary boundary fence, this is unlikely in the case of more marginalised sites. Conversely, the absence of a wall leaves such sites exposed to inundation by the often observed accelerating pace of urbanism.<sup>49</sup>

Given how vulnerable vague sites and parks are to being either smothered by the usefulness of their surroundings, or rendered invisible and forgotten, upholding the potentiality necessitates a form of containment that simultaneously avoids constricting and isolating a site. A semi-permeable membrane that is neither fully open nor closed fulfils this apparently contradictory challenge.<sup>50</sup> Although vivid at the theoretical level—and approached at the experimental level by the “open containment” perceptual projects of artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins—semi-permeability is more elusive at the material level of real places.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, despite the historical bias towards conceiving a park edge as a physical barrier, the frame is inherently already a more complex threshold than a simple binary frontier that separates cultural representation from wildness, and quiet respite from noisy city life. When the frame is reconceived in its purest sense, it is less an absolute barrier than a membrane filtering combinations of physical movement, visual connectivity, aural information, olfactory experience, and land tenure. Historically, these filtrating properties have enabled a select group of parks and gardens to absorb the external physical or social landscape while simultaneously maintaining a degree of separation from this surrounding territory.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast with the absolute wall that encloses a traditional park with clear visual, physical, and legal jurisdiction, a selectively permeable

threshold implies an incomplete overlay of some of these conditions. This articulation of the semi-permeable threshold is also applicable to vague space. For instance, in Detroit a dynamic ambiguity exists between the open expanses of grass, the templates of the empty city blocks, and the legal status of the residual lots, which are still traced out by clusters of remnant garden planting. Similarly, in San Francisco, street easements that proved too steep for road building have frequently endured as vague spaces, despite the extensive gentrification of the city. Designated as ‘unaccepted streets’ in city terminology, the steep terrain creates a partial threshold that visibly disrupts the city grid, whilst simultaneously camouflaging the physical extents of an unaccepted space.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, unaccepted streets remain invisible, despite being in plain sight.

San Francisco’s unaccepted streets suggest the additional potential of topography in the creation of semi-permeable thresholds. While other landscape materials also inherently possess filtrating properties, these tend to be visually permeable at the expense of physical restrictiveness. Vegetation, for example, was historically used to enframe hidden clearings, by impeding physical passage while providing fragmentary sight lines through the foliage. Although many post-industrial vague spaces continue to be primed by a dense vegetal perimeter, the physical impediment associated with such a threshold does severely edit who is willing and able to enter the site. Moreover, physically enclosing thresholds risk crossing the fine line that Franck and Stevens observe between spaces that offer the potential for free expression, and spaces that create real justified fear.<sup>54</sup>

A semi-permeable threshold that inverts the vision–mobility relationship is potentially more conducive to balancing the goals of fluidity and otherness in the public realm. When formed as an edge condition, even subtly articulated topography can deflect visual and aural penetration from the surrounding urban fabric, while enabling physical egress into and out of the space. For example, in addition to its attraction as a space in itself, the horseshoe mound at the

Esplanade, Fremantle, also acts as a topographically formed semi-permeable threshold. At 2m high, the mound crests just above average eye-height, which is sufficient to visually obscure the interior hollow space from the outside. This subtle visual enclosure is offset by physical transparency; due to the gently rounded profile of the mound, immediate access and egress is enabled in all directions. The openness that results is illustrated in the tendency for people crossing the Esplanade parklands to deviate to the mound, crest the threshold, loiter, and then depart in a different direction.

### **Conclusion: the value of uselessness**

The value of programming urban landscapes is now so widely accepted that ‘site activation’ has become synonymous with design. Legitimate community expectations, economic pressures, and theoretical influences drove this shift away from viewing landscape within a passive, reactive framework. To be certain, making the fullest use of public space is not an adverse condition in itself. Urban plazas, for example, can accommodate a high degree of programmatic activation within their clear frames and durable level surfaces. However, the nuances and openness often inherent in urban parks and vague sites are at greater risk of being smothered by programmatically heavy design strategies. The apparatus that is typically required to support highly programmed spaces may lack the ability to adapt to evolving expectations of public space.

Although their status within a city’s planning codes are distinctly different, urban parks and vague sites share key characteristics. To varying degrees, both parks and vague spaces embody some uselessness when compared with the usefulness of the surrounding urban fabric. When defined in opposition to nearby usefulness, uselessness is inherently vulnerable, since it can never adequately confront the strategic hegemony of usefulness within the terms of its own logic.<sup>55</sup> While this is true of tools, props and buildings, uselessness in the landscape also embodies an additional dimension. Independent of use or lack of use, uselessness in the landscape expresses the

potentiality of a site as something with open possibilities. Maintaining potentiality therefore requires neutralising existential threats that most often take the form of redevelopment.

In the process of maintaining potentiality, a site is unlikely to remain static. Through fluctuating processes of neglect and renewal, parks and vague spaces also possess the capacity to seamlessly transmute into each other. Both Lynch and Morales imply these connections; Lynch through park-like descriptions of spaces with open characteristics, and Morales through discussion of the need for a new type of landscaping with which to embrace—but not smother—vague sites. Although compelling as observational theories, the relationship between design and uselessness has proven more fraught. Temporary uses emerged as the preferred design solution for minimising impact to the found uselessness of a site whilst simultaneously fulfilling the design mandate for delivering usefulness. However, while facilitating lighter impact and improved adaptability, temporary uses are likely to exhibit lower capacity for neutralising threats to a site's openness.

In this article I have argued that the new landscaping that Morales refers to is grounded in the re-composition of traditional landscape practices. Whereas intense programming is difficult to sustain beyond a short time frame, manipulating the physicality of the site itself represents a more durable mechanism of resistance to threat. Landform and frames are two elements primed for this role through the enabling of a landscape-specific uselessness. Topography exhibits particular potential for creating Lynch's plastic forms that do not dictate specific uses but are suggestive of an inexhaustible supply of possible spontaneous behaviours. Semi-permeable framing that permits access without being completely open to the city provides the resistance to inundation through over-use that Morales identified as problematic. Moreover, plastic forms and frames imply the landscape-scaled insertion of Stevens' concept of luxuriousness into smooth urban landscapes. In an open landscape, luxuriousness is less Beaux Arts ornamentation than a provocation for adaption and invention.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: Catherine Howett, "Landscape Architecture: Making a Place for Art", *Places*, 2, no. 4 (1985), 52–60.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Treib, "Must Landscapes Mean?", *Landscape Journal*, 14, no. 1 (1995), 46–62.

<sup>3</sup> See: Liane Lefaivre, "Everything is Architecture", *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 18 (2003), 64–68.

<sup>4</sup> James Corner, "Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice", in James Corner (ed.), *Recovering Landscape*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, 1–26.

<sup>5</sup> See: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness", in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69–90.

<sup>6</sup> See: Randolph T. Hester Jr., "Garden as metaphor for landscape architecture", in Mark Francis and Hester (eds), *Meanings of the Garden*, Davis CA: Center for Design Research, 1987, 264–272.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Riley, "From Sacred Grove to Disney World", *Landscape Journal*, 7, no. 2 (1988), 136–47.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Cosgrove, "Landscape and Landschaft", Lecture delivered at the Spatial Turn in History Symposium, German Historical Institute, February 19, 2004.

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Kenneth R. Olwig, "This Is Not a Landscape", in Hannes Palang, Helen Sooväli, Marcantrop and Gunhild Setten (eds), *European Rural Landscapes*, Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004, 41–65.

<sup>9</sup> See: Dieter Rink and Harriet Herbst, "From Wasteland to Wilderness", in Matthias Richter and Ulrike Weiland (eds), *Applied Urban Ecology: A Global Framework*, Blackwell Publishing, 2012, 82–92.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Ingersoll, "Landscapegoat," in Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, 259.

<sup>11</sup> See: Witold Rybczynski, "Bringing the High Line Back to Earth", *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages* (14 May 2011).

<sup>12</sup> See: Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young (eds), *Stalking Detroit*, New York: Actar 2001. Dan Pitera, "Detroit: Syncopating an Urban Landscape", *Places*, 2010, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/detroit-syncopating-an-urban-landscape/14288/> (accessed 5 April 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See: Allen S. Weiss, *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1998. Christophe Giro, "Towards a General Theory of Landscape", *Topos*, no. 28 (1999), 33–41.

<sup>14</sup> From: Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 121.

<sup>15</sup> I draw on Jean-François Lyotard's emphasis on the transformational potentiality of open systems. In Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992, 97–98, 145–147, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Lynch, "The Openness of Open Space", in György Kepes (ed.), *The Arts of Environment*, New York: Braziller, 1972, 108–24.

<sup>18</sup> Lynch, "The Openness of Open Space".

<sup>19</sup> Lynch, "The Openness of Open Space".

<sup>20</sup> See: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, "Terrain Vague", in Cynthia Davidson (ed.), *Anyplace*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995, 118–23.

<sup>22</sup> Morales, "Terrain Vague".

<sup>23</sup> "An interview with Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió", interviewed by Peter Connolly, Tim Nicholas and Julian Raxworthy, *Kerb*, no. 3 (1996), 13–15.

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<sup>24</sup> Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens, "Introduction", in Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (eds.), *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, London: Routledge, 2006, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Quentin Stevens, *The Ludic City: Exploring the potential of public spaces*, London: Routledge, 2007, 198.

<sup>26</sup> Stevens, *The Ludic City*.

<sup>27</sup> Henceforth, "vague" space refers generally to open/wasteland/vague/loose spaces as defined in the previous section.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Birrell argues that designers need to "shake the intellectual hegemony of the ideology of growth." Robert Birrell, *From Growth to Sustainability*, Canberra: ANU Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, 1990, 10.

<sup>29</sup> As Jean Baudrillard notes, "to turn reality itself into an art object, you just need to make a useless function out of it", hence art's "predilection for trash, which is also useless". Jean Baudrillard, "Integral Reality", in *Jean Baudrillard = Baudrillardiana*, open source, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> See: Philipp Misselwitz, Philipp Oswalt and Klaus Overmeyer, *Urban Catalyst Research Report*, 2003, [http://www.template.com/think-pool/one786f.html?think\\_id=4272](http://www.template.com/think-pool/one786f.html?think_id=4272) (accessed 17 December 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Connolly, "T.V. Guide: Some footnotes to Morales' notion of Terrain Vague", *Kerb*, no. 3 (1996), 16–26.

<sup>32</sup> See: Klaus Overmeyer (ed.), *Urban Pioneers: Temporary use and urban development in Berlin*, Berlin: Jovis, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> See: Jacky Bowring, "Lament for a Lost Landscape", *Landscape Architecture*, October (2009), 127–28.

<sup>34</sup> John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins: and other topics*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, 102.

<sup>35</sup> It has been demonstrated that in Perth, Western Australia, only 5% of park users participate in the two sports (cricket and football) that the majority of suburban parks are structured to accommodate. Billie Giles-Corti, et al., "Increasing Walking: How Important Is Distance To, Attractiveness, and Size of Public Open Space?" *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28, no. 22 (2005), 169–76.

<sup>36</sup> See: Hazel Conway, "Everyday Landscapes: Public Parks from 1930 to 2000", *Garden History*, 28, no. 1 (2000), 117–34.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Martin, "Empty Form (Six Observations)", *Log*, no. 11 (2008), 15–21.

<sup>38</sup> See: John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*, New York: Routledge, 1998.

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- <sup>39</sup> The enclosing fence is so seminal to the park/garden that their etymologies are interrelated in several languages. See: Bernard St-Denis, "Just what is a Garden?" *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 27, no. 1 (2007), 61–76.
- <sup>40</sup> See: Rayner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 85.
- <sup>41</sup> David Leatherbarrow, "Leveling the Land", in Corner (ed.), *Recovering Landscape*, 171–84.
- <sup>42</sup> Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995, 26.
- <sup>43</sup> Franck and Stevens, "Introduction", 8–10.
- <sup>44</sup> Cache, *Earth Moves*, 152. Paul Carter, "Flat Sounds, Mountainous Echoes", *Transition*, no. 40 (1993), 86–95.
- <sup>45</sup> Observed by the author in June 2002.
- <sup>46</sup> Lynch, "The Openness of Open Space", 108–24.
- <sup>47</sup> Stevens, *The Ludic City*, 163 & 200.
- <sup>48</sup> See: Ingersoll, "Landscapegoat", 255.
- <sup>49</sup> As described by: Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, New York: Verso, 1997. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984), 53–92.
- <sup>50</sup> As used by: Manfredo Tafuri, "Peter Eisenman: The Meditations of Icarus", in *House of Cards*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- <sup>51</sup> See: Arakawa and Gins, "The Tentative Constructed Plan as Intervening Device (for a Reversible Destiny)", *Architecture and Urbanism*. no. 255 (1991), 48-53.
- <sup>52</sup> See: John Dixon Hunt, "Introduction: The Immediate Garden and the Larger Landscape", *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 19, no. 1 (1999), 3–6.
- <sup>53</sup> Sarah Moos, "Unaccepted Streets: From Paper to Reality", *Ground Up*, no. 1, 18–21.
- <sup>54</sup> Franck and Stevens, "Introduction", 26.
- <sup>55</sup> As Theodor Adorno reflects, "the useless is [...] helplessly exposed to the criticism waged by its opposite, the useful", despite "the useful [being] closed off to its possibilities". Theodor Adorno, "Functionalism Today", *Oppositions*, 17 (1979), 31–41.