URBAN VOIDS: THE HIDDEN DIMENSION OF TEMPORARY VACANT SPACES IN RAPIDLY GROWING CITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world with over 68.7% of its population living in cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The trend in rapid urbanization is predicted to continue over the next few decades, concentrating mainly on the capital cities where already around two-thirds of the population resides. As one of the most rapidly growing capital cities in 2009-2010, Melbourne recorded a population growth of 79,000 people, approximating a population increase of over 1,500 people a week. The predicted population growth Australian capital cities are expected to face over the next two decades has become a major focus in political, planning and design discussions as cities are facing immense challenges to the development of sustainable, healthy and livable urban environments in providing infrastructure, securing clean air, water and food resources, preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage as well as providing social balance and equality in publicly accessible spaces.

Open and green spaces have become increasingly contested grounds in the context of urban densification with a need for securing resources and providing basic infrastructure for sustainable urban development. Recent evaluation of public land and open space availability commissioned by the Victorian State Government shows that established municipalities, especially the inner municipalities "generally have less open space per capita than outer and growth municipalities". The report further argues that "public open space per capita in the City of Melbourne [is] projected to decrease significantly given its anticipated strong population growth". (VEAC, 2011, p. 39) Facing these challenges, it has been called for an urban agenda and open space framework that match and balance the pace and intensity of the urban transformation and infrastructural decline. These actions not only call for the protection of current infrastructure but also for the creation of new open spaces. In this, it has been taken into account that the acquisition of new land for open spaces in established inner suburbs proves to be more challenging: "Land for open space may not be readily available where it is most needed or local councils may not have budget funds set aside for land purchases when suitable land comes on the market." (VEAC, 2011, p. 42) As the report further identifies limited opportunities for transforming various available sites into new open spaces due to their smallness and fragmentation, it is apparent that one of the key issues here also lies in the open space classification, which commonly understands large and continuous spaces to be most appropriate sites for new open space.

Figure 1: Urban Void. Collins Street, Melbourne.

Strict programming of open space has, furthermore, created a condition where public activities are increasingly regulated and controlled. Many of Melbourne's redevelopment show in this regard parallels to international examples where urban redevelopments produce new public spaces for consumption and economic activities rather than for social activities, wellbeing and inclusion, leaving only limited scope for residents to take authorship in the creation of their living environments. (Stevens & Dovey, 2010)

Since in current discussions little attention has been paid to the availability of temporary vacant space, this paper aims to discuss the hidden dimension and potential of urban voids in the example of Melbourne. The particular angle in which we frame this investigation is based on the concept of *terrain vague* which understands vacant spaces as opportunity for creative and spontaneous interventions in contrast to (over)programed and predictable places in our cities (De Solà-Morales, 1995; Lévesque, 2002). In recent years, numerous publications mostly focussing on the European (Overmeyer, 2002, 2007: Selle, 2003) and North American contexts (Waldheim, 2006; Corner, 1999, 2006; Oswalt, 2005; Berger, 2006; Gissen, 2009) have dealt with terrain vague as both theoretical and practical proposition. However, these discourses are largely informed by conditions and consequences of shrinkage and urban decline in their specific cultural context and are thus only marginally transferable to the Australian context.

In this paper we aim to discuss the morphology and potential of temporary vacant spaces in the context of growth and transformation in dense and contested urban environments with specific focus on central Melbourne. First, we discuss the findings of mapping urban voids in a cross section in central Melbourne. Through this cross section that cuts through distinct areas in the process of transformation, spatial, morphological and temporal properties of vacant spaces are explored alongside issues of ownership and patronage. This cross section is a first investigation in a series and aims to establish a framework for understanding the conditions of urban voids in an inner urban context. Additional investigations will follow in sub and outer municipalities to draw conclusions from comparison of various conditions of growth, density and demographic.

Further, we discuss the morphology and specific potential of urban voids through ideas of imperfection, the unfinished, uses and design responses. Through closely examining the qualitative aspects of urban voids in both active and passive terms, we aim to provide insight to what we view as potential. We argue that substantial increase of open space by utilizing existing and available vacant land offers the possibility to create a flexible network of small and large open spaces that accommodates to a range of diverse uses and functions. The paper concludes that temporary vacant spaces also have the capacity to offer counter perspectives to homogenized urban landscapes and to contribute to sustainable development in rapidly growing cities as connective tissue and mediator of transformation processes in social, cultural and ecological capacities.

MAPPING URBAN VOIDS IN CENTRAL MELBOURNE

In considering urban void spaces, their fleeting notion suggests a level of spatial fluctuation in dynamic urban transformation processes. Transformation processes include economic growth or decline as well as demographic fluctuations and interrelated processes with effects on urban infrastructure. Taking into consideration that Melbourne's CBD is still exposed to drastic transformation due to the predicted population growth, a cross-section is laid diagonally through Melbourne's CBD to map the availability of vacant spaces in this area. The selection of this cross section does not follow preconceived parameter or pre-identified vacant sites, but rather concentrates on the possibility to cover districts of various urban morphologies, including economic and social parameter, levels of density and planning schemes. The cross section spans a 200 meters wide corridor along which all vacant spaces are mapped.
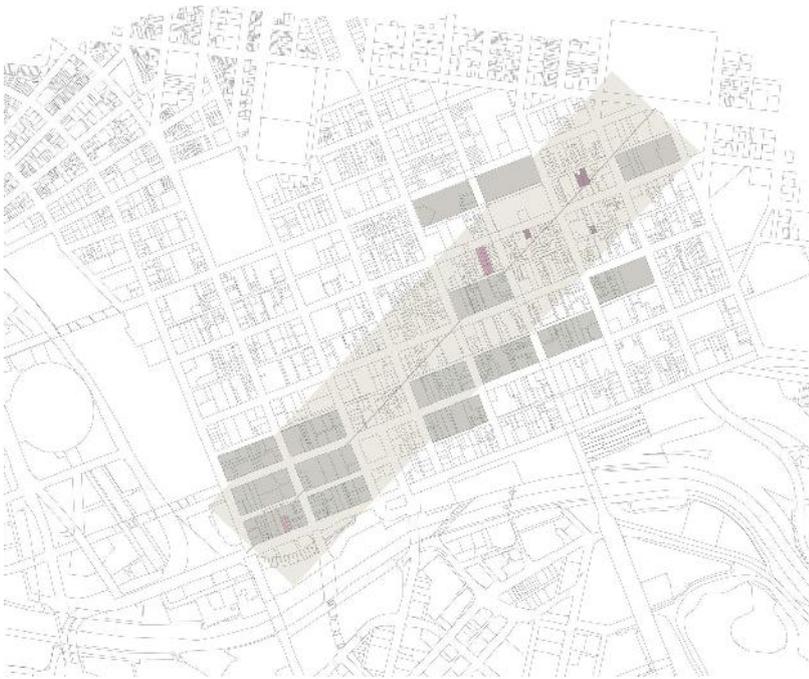
Figure 2: Diagonal cross section through Melbourne's CBD (light gray). Drawing also includes city blocks with no/limited 24hour through-block public access (dark gray), urban voids (purple).

Parameters considered in the mapping include quantitative information such as size, location, land use, exposure, distribution, accessibility, as well as qualitative information on availability (e.g. ownership, time access, restriction), current activities and uses in light of socio-cultural contexts. The mapping thereby generates a comprehensive typology of temporary vacant spaces, which is later evaluated against general criteria for activation strategies and potentials. All sites were identified through a series of walks along the cross section. The relevant data was collected through site observations, photographs and land use maps which were then compared with a series of areal photographs (through NEARMAP) that recorded the spaces over a period of 29 months (Jan 2009 - June 2011).

The mapping identified in total six exiting vacant spaces and three additional expected void spaces with distinctive characteristics. Two sites can be described as vacant space in its very definition: these sites are unoccupied, open spaces with unsealed surfaces that are exposed to the elements and. In this state the sites form microhabitats, prone to small-scale erosion and sedimentation, which attracts resilient flora and fauna. The buildings once occupying the sites have been demolished and the debris is removed except for minor remnants forming the only visible topography within the sites. These sites await their future fate behind semi transparent construction fences which neither shield views completely nor completely prevent access to the sites. It is evident from both the contextual situation with recent, large-scale developments as well as from their relative size and clear-cut layout that these spaces will be transformed into medium to high-rise buildings. Yet, the time frame for these major developments remains unclear: 567 Collins Street rests in its vacant state for almost 30 years.

Heritage Sites
City Blocks with no/limited 24h through-block public access
Public Gardens
Civic and other Public Space
Existing VOIDS
Existing VOIDS with Temporary Use
Existing VOIDS with car park
Expectant VOID resulting from demolition

Figure 3: Urban Voids in Melbourne's CBD.

Centrally located in the eastern precinct of the CBD, three further void spaces leave gaps in the urban fabric due to demolition of previous buildings. However, rather than representing conditions of emptiness or neglect, these spaces operate as 24 hours rental car parks and thus follow the ubiquitous practice of vacant space occupation world wide (Lévesque, 2002). While in one case the site's surface has been cleared and provisionally been sealed, only exposing the edges to the elements, the two other sites are covered in gravel and set a clear contrast to the surrounding asphalt and bitumen streetscapes. A little further into the hidden laneways of Chinatown lies yet another vacant site, the only void space with a temporary use other than parking. This tiny site operates as an outdoor bar and music venue and lends its use as much from its sizes as from its surrounding context in the central entertainment zone.

Further to these open spaces, three spaces have been identified, which we like to describe as expected voids as buildings are currently in the process of demolition. Two of these sites are located in Capital New Civic Core area that Melbourne City Council identified in its Central City (Hoddle Grid) Built Form Review May 2011 (City of Melbourne, 2011) and can be expected to be redeveloped before they eventually enter the state of terrain vague.

Accessibility/ time/ ownership/ restriction
All spaces are clearly identified private property, which are either marked as off-limits or have restricted access through some degree of purchase or consumption. Due to fluid boundaries in the latter cases these sites are visually more present in the urban fabric and pre-se accessible for pedestrians. Site that are marked off-limits seem visually excluded and hidden behind solid construction fences. Transparent fences, however, allow for more interaction with the sites and people consequently penetrate and informally appropriate the sites more often. Considering that all identified voids existed already over a period of at least

2.5 years we suggest that the longer a site remains vacant the more likely people will seek to explore and appropriate the site for their individual purposes.

Distribution/ exposure
The potential to be appropriated in ways that set a meaningful counter perspective to existing programmed public open space requires considering spatial qualities within the site. Inaccessible spaces, hidden in the urban fabric with uncomfortable micro-climatic conditions are least likely to attract attention by those people discussions about terrain vague identify as potential (positive) user. Inner urban areas with high density and building height pose in this relation challenges to voids despite their good distribution and accessibility. In the context of Melbourne's CBD the amount of heritage sites gives an indication on the structural and temporal stability of a neighbourhood, suggesting that a higher amount of heritage listed sites prevents drastic and rapid changes to the urban fabric. Consequently, the amount of vacant spaces as result of (re)construction processes is expected to be low.

URBAN VOIDS: MORPHOLOGY AND POTENTIAL

Through closely examining morphology and context, we aim to establish a framework of ideas for flexible and efficient re-integration of urban voids into the urban realm. Ideas around the *imperfect* and *appropriated* are keys that determine our understanding of urban voids. For us, urban *void* is an ephemeral object, a site - yet not only a space - but also a possible future and a counter-perspective for a predictable and well structured city that faces the loss of unconditioned urban wilderness. We view voids as possibilities*,* which are flexible in time and space.

Ruptures in the surface are abundant in any city, where growth, restructuring and decline produce urban voids: spaces in transition from one stage of development to another. Some are overgrown in thickets of plants, most well-hidden away from urban life behind fences and tall white walls. In the complex, multi-layered and urban environment, voids are inconspicuous, subtle breaks in the ever-continuous urban tissue. Some of the vague spaces are rooted in mechanisms of reconstruction and developments, and others exist outside the city's "effective circuits and productive structures". (De Solà-Morales, 1995, p. 110). Yet, their morphology is distinct and can be discussed through aspects of time, ownership, legislation and their specific contextual situations. In cities like Detroit, Berlin, Manchester or Ivanovo, vacant spaces became synonymous with deindustrialization, peripherization, suburbanization or post-socialism (Oswalt, 2005).

The particularity of urban voids is rooted in their specific context and culture. De Solà-Morales (1995) employs the expression of "strangeness" in uncovering the *terrain vague* in the European context in the mid 1990s. These vague spaces are vacant, unkempt, unused with no defined function, between stages of formal development, sometimes indefinitely waiting for future use. Even though the non-places that have been eroded or closed down and are caught in a state of uncertainty, may possess potential, the vagueness of the spaces' availability and function limits their attractiveness for formal planning, design and development processes. The traditional identification of urban space by status - legal, economical and functional - becomes questioned by their complex ambiguity.

The otherness in the vague spaces might lay in the way we seek to see them. Here detail is offering strangeness. Remnant broken floor tiles on otherwise vacant plots relate back to the previous function of a space like faded building silhouettes on adjacent walls. Intertwined with buildings in the urban structure, ubiquitous voids form an integral part of a landscape of constant renewal. Urban voids are inseparably connected to the organic structure of becoming, maturation and decay. Urban voids can be read as transmitters of the ephemeral. Bleak illogical emptiness colonized by patches of spontaneous vegetation, rainwater collecting on an abandoned pavement, reflecting the humming air-conditioning units. The transient spaces serve no productive purpose. They offer the possibility of accidental discoveries and non-productive activities, experiences, which are unplanned and momentary. They offer, maybe, just a glimpse of the unfinished.

Voids can be seen as recorders of time, as Nitschke offers: "The size of experiential space is not so much determined by its physical dimensions, but by our concrete experience of the quantity and quality of the events contained in it". (Nitschke, 1993, p. 35) The experience that these spaces offer reflects a rich legacy, through remnants on site and the contextual discrepancies of scale and material. How intensely the site is experienced becomes a matter of time and scale. Where new developments sprout close to long-term voids, the contrast of void and new matter creates a striking memento.

The paradox, which lies between the large potential and the marginalization of these mundane environments, is viewed as a key problem. How is it possible to give meaning to something which is not part

of modern developments or contemporary discussion, yet something that is part of a cycle, a "natural component of every dynamically evolving city" (Berger, 2006), a reaction to a particular development strategy, something which is not permanent, something which is not wanted - but still encompasses large potential to enhance urban space by understanding its reality?

How is it possible to engage with the potential of this waste(d)land? "What's so good with a wasteland", Cassegard suggests, "is precisely that they're unregulated and neglected by the authorities, thus creating a breathing space where users themselves can reshape space according to their needs, desires and whims." (Cassegard, 2010). Informal uses and appropriation of urban void spaces is a widespread phenomenon, if not their main use. The spaces allow for unobstructed activities outside the norm. Often these activities are involving direct manipulation of the spaces such as graffiti, guerilla gardening or occupation. A creative re-appropriation of space and the use of extended rights to express ones own persona, generally confined to private spaces, becomes possible in the unregulated realm of urban voids. In lesser terms, urban voids function as informal adventure playgrounds that do not prescribe uses and program but leave space for creative imagination and invention. Overmeyer (2002) describes these creative re-appropriation tactics in Urban Catalyst as motor for development. In form of a succession, marginalized urban spaces attract uses by marginalized groups, artists, who establish a first patina of spontaneous programmatic explorations, which in turn attract others who inform secondary uses and program. This process eventually fully integrates these sites into the known urban context; increasingly in accelerated form as spaces of rapid gentrification. However, these catalytic processes have been subject to research in specific conditions of larger and connected areas in the context of economic decline.

In stark contrast to informal, user-led appropriation stands the formalized development of vacant sites in the form of architectural, landscape architectural or urban design interventions. In responding to terrain vague, formalized design approaches are challenged by those forces that initially produced these spaces (Lévesque, 2002). The challenge lies in the fundamentally different nature, on one hand, of destructive forces and, on the other hand, growth characterized as the intention for new development. While Solà-Morales and Lévesque argue for the need for a dualistic architectural response to terrain vague, we point to yet another challenge: the underlying memories of a derelict site. Reminiscence of the past, both tangible and intangible, will not necessarily be what we commonly describe as beautiful. Although various design theories have pointed to a necessary shift in perspective when thinking about aesthetic values and expressions (Jackson, 1986; Meyer, 2008) the design profession still has to find its way in approaching these challenges meaningfully.

As many authors claim, it seems particularly difficult for the discipline of architecture to find a meaningful approach to void spaces without falling back into common practice and focus on form generation, aesthetics and productivity. (De Solà-Morales, 1995; Lévesque, 2002; Gissen, 2009). The same might be true for other spatial design disciplines such as urban design or landscape architecture. Although these disciplines might not focus on form generation and aesthetics as much as architecture, they still rely inherently on economic forces and commercial outputs. This reliance provokes a question: is a designerly response to terrain vague in fact at all possible, or will economic and commercial imperatives inevitably mean that a designerly response finds itself in opportunistic domains?

While the concept of embracing roughness, incompletion and subversive natural qualities in designs is relatively new to architecture (Gissen 2009), there are some promising landscape architectural examples for the transformation of derelict, abandoned spaces. Richard Haag's Gas Work Park in Seattle, dating from the 1970s, could be regarded as one of the first projects to actively engage discussion about the qualities of derelict industrial sites and design interventions. More recent examples, such as the New York High Line (2009) and Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord, Germany (1994), increasingly expand their design explorations. In embracing the distinct character of roughness, ugliness and otherness, these formally designed projects challenge conventional notions of the aesthetics and functionality of parks, industrial sites and vacant land in metropolitan cities. The particular quality in these projects lies in the sensitive balance between space and time. The design only sets the spatial framework in which natural processes occur, while the site is in constant transformation, unpredictable and unfinished, providing the possibility for a different kind of environmental and spatial experience.

The common characteristics of these projects are the orientation towards large-scale territories: the reclamation of abandoned, often polluted, post-industrial sites, transformed into recreational public spaces that incorporate in the initial development stage an iconic status. In consequence, these projects become substantial drivers for tourism for both local and international travelers. Here, the interstitial reflects more than a mere site - a small, hidden unit in the urban fabric. Although still part of a larger urban context, these places transcend into independent landscapes, which inhabit their very own spatial, functional, ecological systems.

DISCUSSION: UNCOVERING POTENTIAL

Active

Considering the contextual and cultural dimensions of the urban void spaces, how can we define potential alternative scenarios of critical spatial practice for both a large urban scale and an immediate small-scale context?

The contextual situation, such as adjacent high-rise buildings, oppress sites, emphasizing smallness and creating dark, narrow and damp niches which do not support the growth of otherwise durable weeds and grasses or foster any other quality associated with the potential of *terrain vague*. If we would like to include these spaces in our compendium of sites, there might be an argument that there is a need to search for a new paradigm of functions, occupation and activity. There might even be the potential for these small spaces to induce their very own typology of activities.

One aspect under which we might consider the potential of urban void spaces is residing in a fragmented notion of smallness, proximity and fluctuating appearance and disappearance of void spaces. Small spaces offer the clear advantage of multiplicity. Where conventional parks and open spaces are fulfilling capacities for open space and associated activities, often their centralized locations form an obstacle to integrating these spaces into daily urban lives. Further the pressure of a large population on the few large open spaces creates heavily regulated spaces, where behavior and access are regimented.

We can speculate that small urban voids offer the potential of forming networks of interconnected spaces, which have the capacity to offer sequential, simultaneous and diverse types of uses or levels of interaction. Their often decentralized and dispersed situation offers close proximity and variability. We can further speculate on the possibility of a network of spaces that combine the practice of informal uses, widely in place in Australian cities, with the necessity to address the lack of open and green space and a perspective of the incomplete. Melbourne possesses number of sites, which form examples of how an alliance between owners and a creative form of use is framing the potential of an active use.

Section 8 has been operating as an open-air café and nighttime container bar for a number of years in the Melbourne CBD on a vacant lot, previously operating as a parking space. The bar is built on a temporary permit, which has been extended over a number of years as the business grew to a successful part of Melbourne's nighttime inventory of unique spaces. Section 8 is situated in a small laneway in the North Eastern part of Melbourne's CBD sandwiched between Little Bourke Street, China Town and the RMIT University precinct, attracting students, locals and tourists alike, roaming the laneways in search for the quintessential Melbourne. Its temporary appeal helped to represent Melbourne at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006. (Stappmanns et. al 2009) Section 8's building material consists of scaffolding and mobile plant containers, pallets as café furniture and two shipping containers: one container housing the bar, the other housing the toilets. These materials underline the specific quality of an unfinished or temporary installation and give the café its valued atmosphere of 'quirky' otherness. Over the years, materials have been replaced and some parts of the original temporary café became more and more permanent. A wire fence however remains as clear indicator of the café origins. The café's combination of an unfinished outfit, slight grittiness and its somewhat hidden location make Section 8 an icon of the Melbourne of laneways, graffiti and cafes. A number of cafés utilizing the notions of the unfinished and postindustrial chic for marketing purposes can be found in Melbourne's Northern suburbs of Carlton, Brunswick yet their link to urban voids remains subject to further research investigation.

MoreArt forms another distinct example of a temporary activation of urban voids. The public art show run by Moreland city council works with a pool of urban vacant sites, to initiate creative responses to Moreland's unique urban landscape and character in temporary interventions and installations (Moreland City Council, 2011). The public art show invites artists and designers to work with the both indoor and outdoor sites along an urban railway precinct to formulate specific responses to the ephemeral and temporary in a month long show. The MoreArt public art show was established in 2010 and runs in 2011 with a pool of 18 sites along the Upfield train line corridor. The outdoor sites are between 200 and 50 square meters, fenced in and remain unused through out the remaining time of the year. The artist responses are largely sculptural and installation-based as the sites remain closed to public access and no direct interaction with the site is possible. The MoreArt public art show transforms urban void spaces temporarily into open gallery spaces and invites both the artists and the public to redefine the spaces for a set period.

567 Collins Street, a long time urban void of 30 years, is a relict from a period of urban restructuring following the decline of Melbourne's manufacturing industry in the mid 1970s. This site, some 50m wide and 70m long,

is located in Melbourne's Southern CBD in a commercial district adjacent to a parking garage and office buildings. Separated from Collins Street by a 6m drop in height and tall advertising walls. This site forms an example for types of informal activities and uses that can be observed in a number of cases in Melbourne's CBD. Graffiti artists, office workers enjoying their cigarette breaks and homeless persons on occasion use the site, adjacent to a multistory car park. Milk crates and empty bottles are scattered throughout the site render the possibility of other nighttime uses where the crates function as flexible seating elements.

567 Collins Street is presently (2011) managed by APN Property Group and Colliers International, two real estate development corporations. A real estate developers' interest clearly lies in developing *sites* –not urban voids- and re-integrating them into the urban fabric as profitable entities as effectively as possible. In cases of long-term vacancy the developer's interest lies mainly in securing the property to prevent dilapidation and value loss, clearing and fencing the property is standard practice.
APN Property group has offered the site in 567 Collins Street this research team who is currently investigating possibilities for temporary uses of the site and works with students on the site as part of the ongoing research on urban voids.

For 130 RMIT University first year landscape architecture students, the site has become an urban laboratory. Through site mappings, interventions and 1:1 design experiments, students investigate microclimatic and vegetative conditions and work with design interventions that capture the ephemeral nature of the site conditions. The educational design research project is currently ongoing and has so far provided students with a unique opportunity to actively work in a dynamic urban context.

Passive
The transient ideal of imperfection can inform a principle of aesthetic appreciation in contemporary urban design and landscape architecture. In this, the idea of imperfect nourishes the thought that nothing is finished, all is ephemeral and fading - and in fading, the most beautiful.
Can this ideal affect the way transient spaces are understood? Would this view enable the appreciation of beauty in the unfinished and ever-changing city, in its gaps and holes which have no function or purpose other than the silent waiting for development behind fences and immaculate white walls?

Urban void spaces surrounding infrastructure such as Bolte Bridge in Melbourne form examples for the ever-changing city and a potential urban wilderness. These spaces are not gaps in urban contexts, but rather left over buffer zones without clearly defined functions or boundaries. Their form and location - distant, unattractive and unsuitable for further development- leaves them even further outside any consideration for uses than urban vacant lots. Used as garbage dumps and for other undesirable [and criminal] uses, these left over spaces are viewed unsafe and are neglected by most.

Yet the notion of distance and unformulated existence that attracts the unwanted uses can also be viewed as indicator for a potential as a counter perspective on systematic, clean and productive spaces.

> *The forest that at one time surrounded cities and villages, where bears and wolves, but also the nightmares would hide, where the fantasies and the very idea of liberty itself were shoved far from the city, put into the corners, restricted and in an unbelievable act of clemency, protected. And here it is now that that same forest rises again, exactly there in the cities where the territory's systems of appropriation and control are most ancient and crumbling.*
> (Stalker Collective, 2011)

The metaphor of the forest captures the quality of the urban voids, which are seemingly formed through cracks in the urban surface: unplanned vegetated remnants that grow and develop habitats as an urban wilderness. The artist collective Stalker defines these spaces as territories. In their words these territories constitute: the built city's negative, the interstitial and the marginal, spaces abandoned or in the process of transformation. (Stalker Collective, 2011) Ultimately the urban wilderness becomes a place for cohabitation of humans and other non-human species. Vegetative successions of plants (that we describe as weeds), an unplanned and unpredictable wilderness on small scale, form a potentially dangerous field of the *other* yet offer possibility for discovery and escapes from the known.

The French landscape architect Gilles Clement frames these urban ecologies as *the third landscape* (Clement, 2002). The third landscape encompasses transitional or unused spaces, undeveloped land and officially designated natural places as fragments which all form the potential to ensure the future of earth's biodiversity. Clement describes the third landscape as an unpredictable biological time capsule and a valuable asset for the future in an irreversibly altered environment. He proposes to retain certain spaces and return them to nature rather than allowing them to become developed. The choice for the spaces to be retained is based on vegetation potential and has been key part of the practice of Clement's work in forming

approaches to co-existence with nature in urban contexts. Clement demonstrates how urban ecology can be integrated as a passive entity that still contributes significantly to a rich and multilayered urban environment.

Through vegetation, urban void spaces offer the capacity to substantially contribute to sustainable urban regeneration through their potential for ecosystem functions. The spaces potentially can function as microhabitats, buffers for urban heat islands and mitigation of other extreme climate events. Considering the effects of urban vegetation on CO_2 absorption and air quality, water filter capacity – all well-known facts – current practice of clearing sites from vegetation is to be questioned. In the Australian context a progressive dealing with urban wilderness is still missing.

Figure 4: Urban Void. Russell Street Melbourne. Left: December 2010, right: April 2011, fully cleared.

If we consider a fluctuating network of small, dispersed, yet interconnected spaces which could help to fulfill all eco-functions of green spaces, such as the provision of open soil in an otherwise fully sealed urban context, rain water runoff collection, biodiversity, dust absorption, and improvement of microclimate as well as CO_2 depositors it would be possible to approach urban wilderness as passive existence for its own sake. Considering the example of the interstitial spaces of Melbourne's Bolte Bridge, a rich habitat for avifauna, the wild and remnant vegetation can be viewed as indicator for potential urban vegetation. In this we can see spontaneous vegetation and successions that colonize the existing infrastructure around the bridge and form site-specific microhabitats. A detailed investigation of the urban wilderness flora and fauna, to assess their precise capacity to form urban ecosystems, is viewed as a main task for following research.

In the context of dense urban conditions, this urban wilderness on micro scale truly renders the perspective of the other.

CONCLUSION

If we consider the inclusion of urban voids in a repertoire of urban spaces, we are potentially faced with the consequential loss of the unpredictable and imperfect that constitute some of the key qualities of these other spaces. However, the condition of growing urban density and an increased contestation for open green spaces might require us to think about a gradient between architectural uses, the re-integration of imperfect sites in the formative context of a cityscape. Urban void spaces clearly possess the potential to form counter perspectives for urban open spaces: active non-commercial uses, creative uses and temporary uses, passive ecosystem functions. They form distinct spaces outside a programmed urban norm. We should consider the leftover as spaces to offer an alternative to the predictable spaces of consumption and to hold true potential for urban wilderness and biodiversity, especially in fluctuating, dynamic, ever-changing networks.

While understanding their morphology and capacity to contribute to urban systems it remains to be asked whether people are ready to accept the strange and unfinished spaces as part of a repertoire of urban spaces? We argue that both potential users and providers have to start to consider the urban voids as part of the urban context. In Melbourne, informal uses are widespread as traces of inhabitation show. (Figure. XX) Also the possibility for creative temporal uses can be observed as shown in the example of 567 Collins Street where a developer is cooperating with University research and opens a site for student design interventions. The example of MoreArt illustrates a creative collaboration initiated by a local council who seeks to regenerate marginalized spaces through an art festival. While activating the spaces through these actions might enable a shift in perception that is necessary to view the spaces as potential. However, the question of how we utilize public open space and what demands we place on urban spaces to become

successful in fulfilling open space functions, is tied in with the larger question of whether we are able to creatively imagine and invent spaces and uses outside of the programmed norm.

Figure 5: Urban Void. Collins Street Melbourne. Informal use, generated milk crate patterns, documented with satellite images and reproduced through googlemaps and NEARMAP.

The ability to recognize urban voids as an integral part of the urban fabric is providing a framework for a layered approach of urban re-development. Under the pressure of urban growth and densification, the urban voids can function as a mediator between existing and new. The voids can provide the tissue of the familiar and unfinished under conditions of renewal and replacement. The spaces can function as generators and canvass for creative expression that enables recognition of a human scale. We further suggest that these spaces provide the opportunity to rethink existing notions of open space distribution and classification. In acknowledging their full potential the small and fragmented character of the spaces within the urban fabric can rather be regarded as an opportunity than a constraint. The fragmentation enables the consideration of a network of spaces tied to urban patterns and legacy.

The layer of urban voids can form a flexible approach in areas of development where urban voids can function as connecting element, which retains and builds a local pattern of open space. Small spaces retain scale of previous development structures can inform new forms and consideration of density, ownership and authorship models. Speculating about the network of urban voids establishes a possibility for a paradigm shift in understanding truly flexible urban spaces: the individual voids might appear and disappear in cycles of development - yet as a whole, these spaces form a constant part of the city.

While this paper discussed aspects of imperfection, morphology, uses and potential strategic reconsideration of urban voids in an Australian context of growth and transformation it raised questions for further investigation. The capacity for social, cultural and ecological reconsideration of urban voids will be substantially deepened through further and ongoing research. Specifically the task of communicating tangible research outcomes that underline benefits of the creative understanding of the potential resource urban void in the urban framework to stakeholders in planning and development is viewed a major challenge for future research.

What might be considered *void* is the full neglect of potential, not the spaces themselves.

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