



TRASHED SPACE

Nina-Marie Lister photographs urban waste spaces and makes the case for their reinvention.

“Junkscape” is what the writer and anti-suburbanite James Howard Kunstler calls them. Urban activists and cynics call them “waste places”; academics call them “postindustrial space”; and the community planner Pamela Robinson has memorably named them “crudscape.” The abandoned or overlooked landscapes of the contemporary city are variously over-used, under-used, and abused. They are the forgotten planes of space in the metropolitan landscape that over 80 percent of Canadians now call home. What do these neglected areas mean for the people who live with or near them? Are they trash—mere litter, the flotsam and jetsam of the city, part of the cost of urban living, doomed to be unofficial dumps for consumer society’s detritus? Or are junkscapes potentially good, productive places, waiting for someone to reconsider, reclaim, and recreate them as a worthy part of the urban landscape?

The term *junkspace* is used here to mean space that is literally being wasted: space within the landscape that is no longer functional, or has never been productively used. Implicit in this idea is *potential*: spaces that now lie dormant can and should be seen as awaiting reactivation through some new creative reuse. In the contemporary urban domain this kind of space is, by definition, a human creation, brought into being deliberately or inadvertently by planners, industry, or other land users. Many waste spaces are direct products of extraction and use, postindustrial and often contaminated areas remaining after whatever resource they contained has been exploited; others, such as the massive roof spaces of big-box retail centers, are the indirect products of modern building or planning. Dolores Hayden has compiled an emerging vocabulary and nicknamed typologies for these spaces in her *Field Guide to Sprawl*. For example, “TOAD” is an acronym used by planners to refer to a temporary, obsolete, abandoned, or derelict site, which could include abandoned



JUNKSPACE

Two examples of junkspace that is no longer functional, ecologically or economically. In the urban domain this kind of space is, by definition, a human creation, brought into being deliberately or inadvertently by planners, industry, or other land users.





TWO TYPOLOGIES OF WASTE SPACE

The site above is referred to as a “TOAD,” an acronym used by planners to refer to a temporary, obsolete, abandoned, or derelict site. The site below is known as “mall glut,” large shopping malls with vast parking areas.



shopping malls, empty warehouses, or closed industrial sites. A TOAD might also be the site for “ground cover”—developers’ slang for cheap, easily bulldozed architecture (such as storage units, or a model-home sales center) that temporarily occupies a site until the owner finds a more profitable use for the land. Similarly, “mall glut” refers to the growing problem of unsustainable retail malls in the United States, which has twice the square footage of retail space per citizen than any other country. For example, an increasing number of US shopping malls, along with their vast parking areas, are simply being abandoned each year, as ever-bigger regional malls, more big-box discount stores, and online shopping draw hungrier consumers away (46, 66, 106).

Directly wasted spaces are the leftovers of our once-prosperous industries and retail endeavors. Abandoned railway lines, warehouses, docklands, manufacturing sites, factory yards, and empty shopping malls now lie exhausted, spent, and broken. Economically finished, socially forgotten and ecologically decaying, they are wasted remnants of what was, or what could have been, in a culture other than one defined by endless consumption and planned obsolescence. Today, the worst of these spaces are variously termed brownfields, postindustrial areas, extreme sites, or manufactured sites (Gans and Weisz; Kirkwood). These sites were indeed, in every sense, manufactured creations of a human economy that used them as long as they were workable and profitable, then simply walked away from them, leaving them physically, legally, and economically to become someone else’s problem.

The other kind of waste space that occurs in our cities is an inadvertent byproduct of “progress” and development. To this category of space we are effectively blind; we do not see it, and it does not register as anything other than a non-functional by-product of the

urban condition. Specifically, these are the vast and monotonous roofscapes of our urban and suburban retail and commercial buildings. Yet if we consider that our already scarce prime agricultural land is being lost to urbanization in Canada at an unprecedented rate, void rooftops become palettes for possibility. For example, Germany has the world's largest number of residential, municipal, and corporate rooftop gardens, used for everything from more efficient insulation to recreation to food production (Dunnett and Kingsbury). Urban poverty should compel us to legislate the conversion of standard roof ballast to rooftop gardens as a measure of increasing food security—a notion that is attracting interest in many cities, including Toronto. In other global cities and city-states—including Hong Kong, Singapore, and Monaco—high urban density, inflated land prices, and the extreme scarcity of usable space within city limits have resulted in the passage of laws stipulating that roofscapes must be accessible and functional. In arid regions, or those where fresh water is in short supply, rooftops are routinely used to gather, store, and conserve water.

Whether rejected because of postindustrial contamination or ignored because of rooftop isolation, these waste spaces are never truly dead. Roofscapes gather water, like it or not, and winds bring in soil particles and seeds of every description. These constructed planes are not barren, but full of fertile potential. On the ground, even in the most toxic sites, life exists and persists, often with amazing tenacity and resilience in the face of total contamination: in Sudbury, Ontario, for example, heavy-metal-tolerant grasses have evolved in the polluted shadow of INCO's enormous nickel mines and smelters. Yet despite the adaptive species that can and do survive in these waste spaces and others that may eventually colonize them, they are places that appear to us to be dead or—to the optimists among us—peopled by ghosts; they evoke ambiguous memories of what they once were.



ROOFSCAPES

are the non-functional byproduct of the urban condition. Two aerial views of the vast and monotonous roofscapes of our suburban industrial and commercial buildings.



Indeed, these apparently desolate spaces are much more than they appear on the surface. The late architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió found rich meanings in the French term *terrain vague* which he borrowed to describe, in exquisite detail, the paradox that emerges from the abandoned, residual spaces of modern urbanity: “void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation” (120). In contemplating the wastelands of post-Ford Detroit, Daskalakis and Perez also invoke the notion of *terrain vague* to articulate the “illuminated erasure” of place that suggests at once the presence of an absence, and the absence of a presence. What appears initially to be waste space is not a mere *tabula rasa* for an ecological revival, but rather a palimpsest, awaiting its next reinvention. These are perhaps better seen as places-in-waiting.

In this sense, the postindustrial waste places of the urban landscape have already captured the imagination of urbanists, artists, and landscape architects. For example, Julie Bargmann’s D.I.R.T. Studio celebrates “Toxic Beauty” in reinterpreting some of the worst of the United States’s Environmental Protection Agency’s Superfund sites, that is, postindustrial sites, such as mines and refineries, that qualify for federal clean-up funding on the basis of extreme contamination. Bargmann is a staunch advocate of celebrating a site’s history through landscape architecture that remakes the site using elements of the former industry, either real or symbolic. Similarly, Peter Latz & Partners, landscape architects, are renowned for having reincarnated industrial Germany’s heartland by giving new life and meaning to the postindustrial Duisburg Park in the Emscher region. Here, Latz has integrated culture and nature in a way that speaks to both past and present activities, fading and emerging ecologies. Storage tanks have been cleaned and filled with fresh water for scuba diving, while gasification plants and their smokestacks are used as platforms

for scaling and rappelling by rock-climbing enthusiasts. By using the decaying brown coal bunkers as the infrastructure for a formal botanical garden, surrounded by a naturalized perimeter, Latz pays homage to the industry that sustained generations of miners and their families, while offering new opportunities for recreation, regeneration, and reflection.

RECLAMATION OR REINVENTION?

Artists and designers are fascinated with waste spaces, using them in constructive and ingenious ways. Yet in conventional planning and landscape architectural practice we still treat these sites as hopeless. We see them as desperate candidates for salvation, which we offer through a standard and simplistic “clean-and-green” approach, erasing any trace of the site’s offensive past and replacing it with virtually anything living and green. This off-the-shelf remedy is routinely disparaged by Kunstler as a “nature Band-Aid,” where plant materials are unceremoniously plunked around a site or building as haphazard decoration, with no discernible site function or legible connection to place. Worse yet, regreened sites such as capped landfills, closed dumpsites, or exhausted mines are often only superficially altered. Despite our best intentions, contamination is usually invisible, lurking underground and never truly contained, emerging later or migrating elsewhere through groundwater flows. Regreened sites are usually used primarily for recreation purposes, as generic playing fields or unprogrammed “parks” composed of ordinary, ubiquitous plants that tell the passerby nothing about the site’s architectural, ecological, or cultural history. The result is little more than green-wash. While perhaps pretty in a pastoral sense, paving our past with sod is both dangerous and meaningless; it is a fitting companion to

urban sprawl, a homogeneous landscape that is as uninteresting as it is vapid.

Increasingly though, there is one way of greening waste spaces that can serve an important ecological function, with potential cultural benefits as well. Witness the hundreds of local environmental groups across North America that are striving to “bring nature back to the city.” These groups are dedicated to ecological restoration, naturalization techniques, and other generic “greening” initiatives to increase local biological diversity in urban areas: Toronto’s accomplished Evergreen Foundation, for example, has been very successful. Many cities’ parks and recreation departments now have policies like Toronto’s in place, encouraging the use of native plants rather than more environmentally costly exotic or ornamental species that would displace and disrupt the local ecology. Such initiatives are effective in restoring some of the native biodiversity to otherwise denuded urban areas, and they may also improve our collective ecological literacy through increasing citizens’ engagement in the reuse of waste space.

Despite these benefits, an ecological approach to greening waste space is not a panacea, nor is it always good planning or the most appropriate design. In the worst cases, usually led by well-intentioned environmental groups, ecological restoration is applied with religious zeal (and virtually no design) to every and any waste site, with no regard for history, context, or culture, let alone emergent and new ecologies that might be worth considering. Whether horticulturally or ecologically, to greenwash indiscriminately and uncritically every empty lot or pocket of unused space is paradoxically a form of what Meyer calls “erasure and amnesia.” In doing so, we engage in what amounts to little more than a revisionist fantasy. Any truly meaningful reinterpretation and reinvention of a site’s

history must take its context and future into account; it must be woven thoughtfully into the contemporary urban fabric, and animated by its inhabitants.

Why the obsession with greening versus reinvention of these spaces? The contemporary metropolis is vibrant with change; it is characterized by diversity, complexity, new ideas, and dynamism. Perhaps, in the face of such change, we crave the illusion of permanence. Disturbed by the loss of “natural” landscapes to cavalier urbanism, we seek, by enlisting “nature,” to remake the pristine pre-colonial landscape—a dream akin to recapturing virginity. Ironically, we try to do so most desperately in our waste spaces, where “nature” in any real sense is long gone—erased, and now replaced, by humankind.

Perhaps, instead of blindly applying a one-size-fits-all nature Band-Aid—simple, mindless greening—we ought to challenge, contest, and even celebrate previously wasted space. Increasingly, there is hope: contemporary landscape architecture has been revitalized in recent years, and we have seen a new breed of master plans emerge. This trend is particularly evident in postindustrial parks like Duisburg Nord, Germany, and more recently in Fresh Kills in Staten Island, New York, and Downsview Park and Lake Ontario Park in Toronto, all of which feature complex, layered, contextual, and brave approaches to waste space. These projects are reinterpreting and remaking what was once waste space as meaningful, productive place. Through designs like these, which implement a thoughtful and respectful weaving of culture and nature with history and context, there is rich potential to create resonant, useful spaces that speak to the diversity of the contemporary city. The results exude creative tension—between past and present timelines, native and exotic species, cultural and ecological complexity, and most starkly, in their

expressions of beauty. In reconsidering our junkscapes, we ought to resist the impulse to sweep away the past: when we eradicate such places' often rich history we also throw away our own, triumphs and folly alike. Surely, in the postindustrial, postmodern metropolis, there is space to repent, and place to reinvent.

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