Doing Nothing in New York City

A case for a Terrain Vague in Manhattan

by

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I. Abstract

This thesis investigates a particular Terrain Vague as a spatial and phenomenological condition in New York City. Through a series of photographs and cast models, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of Terrain Vague in a global metropolis renowned for density. For the purpose of this study, Terrain Vague is investigated through the lens of the largest and most valuable privately-owned vacant piece of land in Manhattan, a 6.4-acre lot located between 38th and 41st streets in Midtown Manhattan. Formerly home to Con Edison's Waterside Power Station, this empty property acts as the antithesis to the polished and modernized wealthy city surrounding it. Currently its owner, established developer Sheldon H. Solow, has plans to develop the site with luxury residential condominiums, which would result in the complete erasure of its 'vague' condition. This proposal to do nothing in New York City challenges the norms of Manhattan's urban practices, and asks the question: "How can architecture productively engage a Terrain Vague?"

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01 / Context

Described as the city that never sleeps, New York City is a global symbol for ambition, progress, fame, congestion and development. In Hearts of the City, Herbert Muschamp describes New York as a city built upon fear; the fear of emptiness. He explains that

“Along with the commercial interests that exploit this fear, it is the major factor now shaping attitudes toward public spaces, urban centers and even suburban sprawl.” Indeed, every public space in New York City is congested and filled with distractions. This attitude towards the built environment encourages uniformity and monotony which often leads to confined ways of living.”

Fig. 1 : Photograph of Time Square during a New Years Eve celebration

Although redevelopment of empty sites is beneficial for a city's tax base and for the growth of its services and infrastructures, it often comes at the cost of openness towards new urban possibilities. As Manhattan continues to strive towards an overly strict and organized urban paradigm, it loses its potential in providing freedom that inspires users towards spatial personalization and a sense of belonging.

Despite their rarity, such spaces of total freedom exist in Manhattan. Yet when faced with these spaces, architects and urban planners are often unable to recognize their worth. In the last few decades, unlike most, architect Ignasi De Sola Morales became obsessed with these unique urban conditions. Often present in the form of vacant or left-over places in the city, Morales's research paved the way to a new concept, which he describes as a *Terrain Vague*. A *Terrain Vague* is understood to be a form of absence that offers a spatial alternative to a growing metropolis by offering users total freedom, opportunity and availability.¹

1 Lab, Shifting. "Books / RUI MENDES . Terrain Vague De Ignasi De Sola-Morales." Estudo Prévio. Accessed March 28, 2019. <http://www.estudoprevio.net/en/books/3/rui-mendes-.terrain-vague-de-ignasi-de-sola-morales>.

When further examined, the *Terrain Vague* is closely related to Muschamp's theory on emptiness in Manhattan. Both authors share the common ideology that a city benefits from these empty and contrasting moments. As Muschamp describes,

"A city that offers the alternative of unpopular spaces is more accessible than a city that only tolerates popular success." Perhaps emptiness may not be a quality to be feared. Perhaps New Yorkers, too, should learn to recognize the value of a Terrain Vague"

Unfortunately, as a result of being considered unimportant, these urban voids are often closed off to the public and therefore fail to offer users the chance to truly adopt them. This leads to a missed opportunity to provide spatial relief to the dense urban fabric that shapes Manhattan.

Neighbouring the UN Secretariat building and alongside the East River, resides a massive privately-owned vacant lot which perfectly showcases the concept of a *Terrain Vague*. Yet, like most developers, property owner, Sheldon H Solow has his eyes on capital gain and wishes to turn this empty property into profitable luxury condo units. Although elegant,

Solow's master plan for the redevelopment of this site would simply underline New York City's drive towards an increasingly finite and static urban condition.²

Considering Solow's project will undoubtedly see the light of day, this thesis seeks to honour and document, the potential that lies in the site's current state. To do so, both the proposition and the method investigated throughout this research manifest the temporality of this unique *Terrain Vague*.³

2 Bagli, Charles V. "Prime Lot, Empty for Years (Yes, This Is Manhattan)." The New York Times. August 20, 2013. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/nyregion/prime-lot-empty-for-years-yes-this-is-manhattan.html>.

3 Hylton, Ondel. "Richard Meier-Designed Tower Finally Begins Construction at Turtle Bay South Complex." 6sqft. March 30, 2016. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.6sqft.com/richard-meier-designed-tower-finally-begins-construction-at-turtle-bay-south-complex/>

Fig. 2 : Aerial photograph of NYC's density

Fig. 3 : Ariel photograph of Manhattan's density

Fig. 4 : Photograph of NYC's congested traffic

Fig. 5 : Photograph of traffic in Time Square

02 / Defining a Terrain Vague

Like many other cities, previous attempts at providing relief from the dense urban fabric in New York City have been explored in the form of public Parks and Squares. Despite the numerous efforts, such spaces, through their planned and constructed nature, are finite and occupied, and offer a limited and constrained palette of interpretations and uses. Building on Ignasi de Sola Morales's research, a *Terrain Vague* is defined as a form of absence in a metropolis. For the purpose of this thesis, the investigated *Terrain Vague* takes shape as a vacant and unprogrammed spatial alternative to the rigorously planned and organized Manhattan. It serves as an urban form of acceptance and accessibility which allows one to mediate the constant pressure that comes with living in NYC. Unlike parks and squares, it offers an urban rarity where true freedom, availability and opportunity exist in the eyes of its users.

Fig. 6 : Photograph of Solow's vacant lot

5.1 TERRAIN VAGUE

According to Morales, the meaning of a *Terrain Vague* as a direct translation, is impossible to capture in a single English word or phrase.

"The French term Terrain connotes a more urban quality than the English land; thus, terrain is an extension of the precisely limited ground for construction, for the city." In English the word "terrain" has acquired more agricultural or geological meanings. The French word also refers to greater and perhaps less precisely exploitable state but already possessing some definition to which we are external.

In French, "vague" has Latin and Germanic origins. The German Woge refers to a sea swell, significantly alluding to movement, oscillation, instability, and fluctuation. Two Latin roots come together in the French term "vague." "Vague" descends from *vacuus*, giving us "vacant" and "vacuum" in English, which is to say "empty, or unoccupied", yet also "free, available, or engaged". A second meaning superimposed on the French "vague" derives from the Latin *vagus*, giving "vague" in English, too, the sense of "indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, or uncertain."¹

Ignasi de Sola Morales speaks of the *Terrain Vague* as a form of absence in a city that presents itself as a spatial and social connection defined

¹ De Sola-Morales, Ignasi. *Terrain Vague*, Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1995, p. 119

by how a space is used. Described as “spaces as internal to the city yet external to its everyday use”,² these forms of absences emerge as vacant or unplanned and unprogrammed spaces in an urban context. Due to their marginalization, these urban voids become an external force to the order and security of the city and become fertile grounds offering new possibilities for different ecosystems and social statuses to co-exist. This ultimately results in a

“physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future”. “These vacant spaces transposed to the urban key, reflect strangeness in front of the world, in front of the city, before ourselves.” - (Morales)

2

De Sola-Morales, Ignasi. *Terrain Vague*, Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1995, p. 120

Fig. 7 : Drawing of a Terrain Vague by Ignasi de Sola Morales

5.1 - Terrain Vague

Indeed, through examining a *Terrain Vague*, one can understand the economical, geological, and political context that has led to its abandonment. In some cases, a *Terrain Vague* might even still holds ruins that reveal physical traces of the city's history. As professor and architect Carole Levesque mentions,

"a Terrain Vague is an essential tool in understanding the logic of how a city is built".

Fig. 8 : Drawing of a Terrain Vague in Montreal by Carole Levesque

5.2 RUINS IN A TERRAIN VAGUE

In an essay entitled "Preservation Without Restoration: The Case for Ruins", Sydney Schoof describes ruins as

"the visible remains of a building that has outlived its original usefulness yet stands as a physical reminder of the social conditions that have created it, as well as the change in society that led to their abandonment or demolition."

In other words, ruins act as a physical demonstration of important events that only happen when there is a significant change in society and in the way a community lives.

Ruins differ from vacant or abandoned buildings. If abandoned buildings are considered repairable or reusable, ruins are remnants of buildings so deteriorated that they can no longer perform their function. Although typical methods of treatment for ruins consists of either a full restoration or complete demolition, Schoof's theory examines restoration as an inappropriate response that only detracts from the significance associated with the decline of the structure.³

3 "Preservation Without Restoration: The Case for Ruins." Accessed December 15, 2018. https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=hp_theses.

Much like Schoof's ideology of non-restoration, Morales explains that a

"Terrain Vague is a difficult concept – being essentially non-design – but is also powerful in its ability to theorize on the margins of the ordered world in which we reside."

A developer sees a *Terrain Vague* as a business opportunity, an architect sees a chance at designing a big project, an activist sees freedom and a citizen sees a chance to construct a stronger bond within society. As a result, although it is still unclear what to do with a *Terrain Vague*, it offers new learning opportunities by examining its ability to allow opportunity and availability as a valuable contrast to an otherwise rationalized and strictly defined city.

Fig. 10 : Photograph of ruins in Chichen Itza, Mexico

Fig. 11 : Photograph of Windor Plantation Ruins, USA

Fig. 12 : Photograph of Carbide Wilson Ruins in the Gatineau Park

03 / The Site

The *Terrain Vague* presented in this thesis is located on First Avenue between 38th and 41st Streets and is boarded by the FDR drive in Midtown Manhattan along the East River. This 6.4-acre lot has been sitting dormant since 2007.¹ Public access to the lot is banned and heavily controlled by security guards, security cameras and a black chain-link fence that surrounds the entire site. Although most of the existing Power Plant was demolished upon its acquisition in the early 2000's, there are still remnants of the station scattered along the perimeter of the site.

1 Bagli, Charles V. "Prime Lot, Empty for Years (Yes, This Is Manhattan)." The New York Times. August 20, 2013. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/nyregion/prime-lot-empty-for-years-yes-this-is-manhattan.html>.

Fig. 13 : Axo drawing showing Solow's vacant property

3.1 HISTORY OF THE SITE

Conceived in the late 1880s and first commissioned in 1901, the Waterside Generating Station, also known as Con Edison's Waterside Power Plant, was built to provide electricity and steam to the rapidly growing metropolis of Manhattan. Built on a massive 9.5 acres of prime Manhattan real estate, this Beaux-Arts style industrial structure was designed by C. Wellesley Smith. The station was decommissioned in 2005 but its 104 years of continued service left quite an impact on the city.²

"From studies of its elegant design to engineering experiments and innovations in electrical equipment, Waterside was a hot spot visited by such notables as Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and Queen Marie of Romania as well as countless unnamed visitors of all walks of life. Waterside left its mark on the city and it served it with honor and respect." (Robert David)

During the late 20th century, as the future of the Power Plant became increasingly uncertain, discussions about selling the property started to surface between Con Edison and the City Council. The conversations surrounding the future of the lot were mostly related to zoning regulations and the type of program and building that might be permitted on site.

² David, Robert. The History of the Waterside Generating Station 1901-2005. Consolidated Edison Company, 2007

3.1 - The History of the Site

After a long two-year process and a selection that started in 1998, the property was sold for US\$630 million to a partnership of Fisher Brothers, Solow Realty & Development, and Morgan Stanley. Regrettably, after a disagreement between the partners, Solow became the single land owner.³

3 Weiss, Lois. "CON ED WATERSIDE SALE – signs deal to turn over power plant site near U.N." New York Post. November 29, 2000. Accessed November 13, 2018.<https://nypost.com/2000/11/29/con-ed-waterside-sale-signs-deal-to-turn-over-power-plant-site-near-u-n/>.

Fig. 14 : Photograph taken during the demolition of Con Edison's power station

Fig. 15 : Photograph of Con Edison's Waterside Power Station

Fig. 16 : Photograph of the Power Station before its demolition

3.2 THE SITE'S CURRENT CONDITION

Today, the ground plane is covered with sand, water, weeds and grass slopping to the river and is interrupted only by a low ridge of broken bedrock.⁴ Although the property is completely empty, some remnants of the old power plant are still present. Along 1st Avenue and 38th Street, old decaying steel and masonry structures still seem to be holding the sidewalk and parts of the cityscape above it. These repetitive structures along with their decaying materials create perspectives and spatial arrangements that are unique to its surroundings and speak of living conditions of the past, the present and possibly for the future.

Despite being a vacant site for many years, countless municipal and financial forces have played a huge role in defining its characteristics. The wealth of the owner is at complete opposites to the subsistence of the site's current occupants. Even through its barricaded inaccessibility, the empty lot provides a home to the homeless in an atmosphere that is completely unique and free of typical Manhantanism. Indeed, unlike the rest of Manhattan, on this site, there is no need to conform. Things can simply be. Plants and weeds can grow as they please. Objects can be forgotten or left for dead and the less fortunate can find shelter and a place to call home.

4 Bagli, Charles V. "Prime Lot, Empty for Years (Yes, This Is Manhattan)." The New York Times. August 20, 2013. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/nyregion/prime-lot-empty-for-years-yes-this-is-manhattan.html>.

Fig. 17 : Photograph of the site taken from First Avenue

Fig. 18 : Photograph of decaying materials and vegetation on site

Fig. 19 : Photograph of vegetation and part B of the ruins

Fig. 20 : Photograph of a homeless's place to call home in part A of the ruins

3.2 - The Site's Current Condition

While the rest of Manhattan is rigorously maintained, this void is forgotten and neglected. As a result of that negligence, graffiti has become an essential part of the site's materiality. Thousands of random objects have accumulated over the years and have now become artifacts. From shoe racks, to mattresses, to empty wine bottles or soap, these objects are fundamental in crafting the site's uniqueness and strangeness.

Adding to its uniqueness is the site's interaction between elevated and depressed landscapes which make it difficult to freely wonder around. The elevated parts of the landscape are mostly situated along the perimeter of the site and connect to the surrounding sidewalks at street level. In addition, an abundance of bedrock forms the secondary elevated area which runs West to East through the middle of the site and separates two parts of the ruins. Although uneven, some parts of the site are as deep as six meters lower than the highest point of the Terrain. Due to the site's uneven ground plane, most of the depressed areas become flood planes in which grass, plants and weeds can grow. Additionally, along the FDR Drive and on the upper North East part of the site, the ground plane is covered in gravel and construction debris that were left after the Power Plant's demolition. Although the entire site is completely blocked off, this section is used as the entry for Solow's Staff and security guards.

3.2 - The Site's Current Condition

Consequently, temporary construction cabins and portable toilets are placed near that entrance to accommodate the staff; who's only job is to ensure there are no trespassing on site.

Fig. 21 : Photograph of flood planes and construction cabins on site

Fig. 22 : Photograph of an old plumbing pipe and a homeless's garbage bag on site

Fig. 23 : Photograph of construction debris and left over construction materials on site

Fig. 24 : Photograph of decaying steel and masonry structures in the ruins

Fig. 25 : Photograph of decaying steel and masonry structures in the ruins

Fig. 26 : Photographs of objects found on site

3.3 THE RUINS

The remnants of the Power Plant are located in 3 different areas along the perimeter of the site. For clarifying purposes, they shall be referred to as parts A, B and C. Parts A and B are located along and under first Ave whereas Part C is located along and under 38th Street. During the demolition process, all three parts of the ruins were reinforced with a new steel structure to maintain their structural integrity and to keep holding the sidewalk and parts the cityscape above them.

Fig. 27 : Photograph taken from staff entrance showing the location of Parts A, B & C of the ruins

Part A is divided by repetitive masonry arches delineating nine smaller spaces each further divided by a higher ledge creating raised habitable spaces. In addition to the brick arches, numerous floor-to-ceiling steel columns are attached together by cross-bracing with 90degree steel angles that are elevated at approximately 6' above grade. For added support, supplementary 90degree steel angles are placed perpendicular to grade and attached on one side to the columns and on the other side to the old masonry wall. Part A also clearly demonstrates the freedom in which this site occupied. Indeed, one of the raised habitable spaces is clearly occupied by a homeless individual that has transformed it into a pseudo-loft. From bed frame, to framed art, to multiples books and cosmetics, this well-maintained haven has all the basic necessities and more. Considering phase 1 of Solow's project is built directly on the opposite side on First Avenue the East elevation of Part A perfectly demonstrates the interplay between this disregarded site condition and the relentlessly modernized and standardized Manhattan.

Fig. 28 : Photo montage of the ruins in Part A

Fig. 29 : Axo drawing of the ruins in part A

Fig. 30 : A collection of photographs of different moments in part A

3.3 - The Ruins - PART B

Part B, like part A, is supported by the same floor to ceiling steel columns and their respective attachments but is mainly characterized by its numerous additional cross-bracings positioned approximately 2' apart in the centre of the ruins. Consequently, its harder to conveniently circulate through part B which justifies why it is less occupied than parts A and C. Nonetheless, two additional smaller rooms that are located closer to 38th street clearly reveal traces of human activity.

Fig. 31 : Photo montage of the ruins in Part B

Fig. 32 : Axo drawing of the ruins in part B

Fig. 33 : A collection of photographs of different moments in part B

3.3 - The Ruins - PART C

Finally, Part C uncovers the same columns as parts A & B with the exception that the columns are further apart from each other. Seeing how the same steel structure is used to hold a much longer span, one can assume that the left-over structure of the power plant in this section is much stronger than in the other two sections of the ruins. Furthermore, Part C is easily distinguishable as its ceiling is much lower than in parts A and B. For this reason, it is much more difficult to identify, from a distance, any form of activity or life that may occur within these ruins. Other than the three clearly defined rooms that are only accessible through a door opening, this section holds most of the concealed objects such as syringes and empty liquor bottles. Hence, part C is an ideal place for the homeless to find shelter and the most intimidating parts to walk through and explore.

Fig. 34 : Photo montage of the ruins in Part C

Fig. 35 : Axo drawing of the ruins in part C

Fig. 36 : A collection of photographs of different moments in part C

3.4 THE FUTURE OF THE SITE

In 2007, new property owner Sheldon H. Solow invested nearly 100\$ million to demolish the existing water plant and clean out the land of toxic materials. A year later, he had won the cities approval for a \$4 billion project designed by architect Richard Meier who was chosen as part of an ambitious 40 firm competition.⁵

Sadly, for Solow, a combination of lawsuits, bad timing, and financial difficulties forced the project to go on hold. Despite being able to build phase one of the project on the opposite side of the street, this lot has remained vacant. To this day, Solow's continuous efforts in moving forward with this project results in the site's unlikely continued vacancy.

5 Bagli, Charles V. "Prime Lot, Empty for Years (Yes, This Is Manhattan)." The New York Times. August 20, 2013. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/nyregion/prime-lot-empty-for-years-yes-this-is-manhattan.html>.

Fig. 37 : Richard Meier's design for the master plan of Solow's site

Recent advancements suggest that the construction of Meier's master plan is scheduled to start in the coming years. His proposition comprises a total floor area ratio of 10, resulting in the planned buildings ranging in height from 487 feet to 607 feet. Meier's intention is to build approximately 4.75 million square feet with an estimated 2,500 new residences. Public and accessory parking will be provided underground. New prime retail space will be created to face First Avenue, and a restaurant pavilion will be sited adjacent to the promenade with views to the East River.⁶

Although thoughtful, Meier's proposition doesn't interact with the site's current condition and is rather in sync with Manhattan's desire for everything to be filled. As a result of Meier's proposition and the site currently being closed off to the public, this *Terrain Vague* will never be recognized and utilized to its full potential. Considering the temporariness of this site's existence as a *Terrain Vague*, how can its current state be captured to educate the public about its value as an alternative to urban congestions and make a case for why public access should be aloud while it still exists?

6 "Richard Meier & Partners Architects LLP." Richard Meier Partners Architects East River Master Plan Comments. Accessed January 27, 2019. <https://www.richardmeier.com/?projects=east-river-master-plan-2>.

Fig. 38 : Render of Richard Meier's proposal

Fig. 39 : Render of Richard Meier's proposal

04 / The Method

Casts and photographs are two common architectural methods of construction and/or representation of the built environment. Both methods allow us to further understand, discuss and communicate the process of erecting buildings and cities. Seeing how these methods are typically used to represent built entities or built propositions, they must be further challenged and developed to successfully communicate the value of the non-built. Its value is not simply a result of the methods being challenged but rather, a new yet familiar and valuable representation of a site condition that is otherwise overlooked and considered non-valuable.

This thesis investigates the passing of knowledge through photography and casting and serves as a platform to illustrate and re-define the value of a *Terrain Vague* within the confines of New York City. To do so, the representation of the *Terrain vague* is done in two segments; first looking at the site as a valuable empty space that highly contrasts Manhattan, and secondly as an entity of its own that is actually quite full.

Fig. 40 : Photographs taken while casting the 1:500 site plan

Fig. 41 : Photographs of molds and the process of casting

Fig. 42 : Photographs of molds and the process of casting

4.1 CASTING

Although in typical construction casting is known for its ability to build structural components of buildings, casting is also used to remember. As Piper Bernbaum mentions,

"Casting as a process, allows to preserve, imprint, fabricate and duplicate in an effort to illustrate and remember what is and what has occurred".

We cast to never lose the details of what was so important to us. We cast to remember an existing condition. We cast to create a physical evidence of something that is valuable or something that is and might no longer be or might be transformed over time. In this sense, casting not only becomes an index of an object or condition during a specific moment in time but also an object of its own that begins to transform and deteriorate the moment it is casted.

Although space is more easily defined and characterized by the physical envelope or constraints within which it is delineated, all built environments consist of a combination of two types of spaces. One being positive or constructed and the other being negative or unbuilt. As humans, we are usually drawn to positive spaces because we understand and see them as

valuable.¹ Yet we tend to forget that positive spaces cannot exist without their complimentary negative surroundings.

"The space occupied by an object, or within a built form, is not defined solely by the physical configuration of the physical envelope, but also by the unbound space around it." - (Anupriya Saraswat)

Inherently, mold making is an essential part of casting which consists of playing with negative and positive spaces. In order to create positives, one must first create negatives. This interplay in itself becomes a process from which one can understand how negative spaces are just as important in defining how the built environment is occupied.

Artist Rachel Whiteread has built her career on studying ways to bring to the foreground this concept of negative spaces. Through the use of casts and sculptures, she aims to turn negative spaces into a tangible reality.²

1 "Anupriya Saraswat | Aayojan School of Architecture." Academia.edu. Accessed February 28, 2019. <http://aayojan.academia.edu/AnupriyaSaraswat>.

2 Chadason, Kathryn. "Negative Space with Rachel Whiteread." Trendland Online Magazine Curating the Web since 2006. November 08, 2015. Accessed January 18, 2019. <https://trendland.com/negative-space-with-rachel-whiteread/>.

"Whiteread uses her sculptures in order to physically define what surrounds objects. Through these sculptures, Whiteread explores ideas of absence, memory, and architecture, revealing the space we cannot define." - (Kathryn Chadason)

In a similar approach to Whiteread's work, this thesis investigates the *Terrain Vague* as that of a negative space and utilizes casting as a method of illustrating its current condition. By capturing, interpreting and exaggerating spatial and material conditions on site, these casts provide new ways of communicating the spatial implications and the importance of such void in the metropolis. From the site's urban context to its grimy landscapes, forgotten ruins and the countless random objects it holds, these casts embody the anomaly that is a *Terrain Vague* in New York City.

Fig. 43 : Photograph of Rachel Whiteread's "Untitled (one Hundred Spaces)" sculptures

Fig. 44 : Photographs of molds and casts of a sample of the 1:2000 site model

Fig. 45 : Photograph of the silicone mold used to cast the 1:2000 site model

Fig. 46 : Photograph of the positive cast of the site model - Scale 1:2000

Fig. 47 : Photographs of molds and process casts of the 1:500 site model

Fig. 48 : Photograph of negative mold used to cast the 1:500 site model

Fig. 49 : Photograph of the positive cast of the site model - Scale 1:500

Fig. 50 : Photographs of the molds and negative casts of sections of the ruins

Fig. 51 : Photograph of the mold used to casts a section of the ruins in Part A - Scale 1:20

Fig. 52 : Photograph of a negative cast of a section in Part A of the ruins - Scale 1:20

Fig. 53 : Photograph of the mold used to casts a section of the ruins in Part - Scale 1:20

Fig. 54 : Photograph of a negative cast of a section in Part B of the ruins - Scale 1:20

Fig. 55 : Photograph of the mold used to casts a section of the ruins in Part - Scale 1:20

Fig. 56 : P Photograph of a negative cast of a section in Part C of the ruins - Scale 1:20

Fig. 57 : Photographs of the negative mold and the positive cast of a material condition on site

Fig. 58 : Photograph of the mold used to cast a material condition on site

Fig. 59 : Photograph of a cast abstracting a material condition on site

4.2 PHOTOGRAPHS

In typical architectural practice, photographs are commonly used as rules and guides to represent how something should be built or to sell an idea, to convince or to clarify. Yet, much like casts, photographs are also used to record, to demonstrate, to investigate and to understand.

This thesis utilizes photographs as a method of demonstrating and extracting textures, material conditions, spatial qualities and living conditions that act as territorial indications of strangeness itself, and the aesthetics and ethical problems they pose in contemporary social life.³ As Rosalind Krauss explains,

“by way of the photographic image, we receive signals, physical impulses that steer in a particular direction the construction of an imaginary that we establish as that of a specific place.”

Considering photographs have been the most essential element in analyzing and understanding the site’s specificities, how can these photos, like casts, also become, not only visual, but also physical indexes of the singularity of the site? Although photographs can be made visible and permanent by chemical treatment with printers or stored digitally, a photograph in itself isn’t tangible. A picture on the other hand is.

3 De Sola-Morales, Ignasi. *Terrain Vague*, Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1995, p. 122

Unlike photographs which, by definition, are always taken by a camera, a picture, is the most general term used for any representation of a person, an object or a landscape. A picture is palpable and can be a photo, a painting or a drawing.⁴ Seeing how most original paintings and hand drawings naturally reveal physical traces of how they were made, how can photos likewise further expand on the physical properties of a picture?

"The word Picture originated after the evolution of the word "pictura". Which is a Latin word for painted. A picture basically means it is tangible. Something you can hold and is perceptible by touch." (Rishabh Gupta - Quora)

By combining both modes of representation through transferring photographs onto a cast piece of plaster, the photo naturally becomes a physical expression of the decaying properties on site. The photograph is no longer just a visual cue but a physical object that transforms, fades, and deteriorates over time. Additionally, the combination of both mediums challenges their familiar uses in architecture and offer new ways of illustrating the *Terrain Vague*. In doing so, not only does it further expand on the concepts of casts and pictures, but also provides users with different ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the *Terrain Vague*.

⁴ Staff, Editorial. "Difference between Picture, Image and Photo." Difference. March 02, 2018. Accessed February 12, 2019. <https://difference.guru/difference-between-picture-image-and-photo/>.

Fig. 60 : A collection of photographs showing different material conditions on site

Fig. 61 : Photographs of casts abstracting the material conditions shown on the photographs of Fig. 52

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Fig. 63 : Photograph showing a mold used for the first iteration of the descriptive panels

Fig. 64 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 65 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 66 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 67 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 68 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 69 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

Fig. 70 : Photograph showing one of the seven descriptive panels

05 / The Exhibition

Exhibitions have always been used as a means of presenting new ideas and challenging the limits of the architectural practice. An exhibition is a perfect platform to engage in discussions and theorize on new possibilities. For Mies Van Der Rohe, exhibitions were “Instruments of economic and cultural exchange”.¹ When he first introduced the concept of the “free plan” and the “floating roof” for the Barcelona Pavilion during the 1929 International Exposition, it was heavily criticized. Considering how new and unfamiliar it was in comparison to the architectural aesthetics and practice of the era, it spawned important debates and controversies. Yet over time, Mies’s Pavilion became a pioneer for new construction forms, new spatial understandings and a critical building in the history of modern architecture.

¹ Gu, L. Martínez De, and L. Martínez De Gu. “Mies, Bauhaus and Barcelona: The Pavilion as Anteroom of 16,000m2 to the Exposition (Mies Van Der Rohe - Barcelona 1929. Barcelona: Tenov Books/ Fundació Mies Van Der Rohe, 2017).” Academia.edu - Share Research. Accessed March 28, 2019.

Fig. 71 : Photographs of students looking at large printed photographs of the ruins

5.1 EXHIBITING THE TERRAIN VAGUE

Seeing how the term *Terrain Vague* is still quite new and unfamiliar to our discipline, its relevance in architecture is still debatable. Nonetheless, over the last few years, the concept of the *Terrain Vague* has grown in popularity due to the many architects and urban planners that have investigated it. One of these investigations was presented as an exhibition during the 2018 Venice Biennale. Titled “The Place that Remains”, the exhibition showcased the characteristics and prospects of unbuilt Lebanese territories, and how these lands can improve the built environment and its living conditions.²

During my research I was fortunate to meet and discuss this topic with architect and professor Carole Levesque. Carole played a small role in putting together the exhibition at the Venice Biennale and has written a book titled “Finding places in Beirut” that discusses the phenomenon of the *Terrain Vague* in Beirut. Carole has also recently presented a highly commended exhibition in Montreal in hopes of encouraging a new positive outlook on the *Terrain Vague*. Her exhibition consisted of drawings, photo collages and a collection of objects that reflected the value and uniqueness of these forgotten places in Montreal.

² Arch Daily, “The Place that remains”: The Lebanese Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.archdaily.com/896209/the-place-that-remains-the-lebanese-pavilion-at-the-2018-venice-biennale>.

Fig. 72 : Photograph of "The Place that Remains" at the 2018 Venice Biennale

Fig. 73 : Photograph of Carole Levesque's drawings presented as part of her exhibition "La precision du vague"

5.2 THE PROPOSED EXHIBITION

This thesis, much like the previous attempts, seeks to further investigate ways of illustrating and documenting the *Terrain Vague* in hopes of further shining light on the importance of these vacant lots in a global metropolis.

When faced with something unfamiliar, we often chose to ignore it. We ignore it until it becomes familiar and so our perception of it changes. Seeing how the concept of a *Terrain Vague* is fairly new and has yet to be accepted as a valuable architectural response, there is still a need for it to become familiar.³ To do so, the exhibition is designed to mimic the experience of being on site. Panels are placed to delimit a smaller enclosed room, in a much larger open room. From the outside, the exhibition is no more than a closed off area that contrasts the larger room in which it is placed. Yet from the inside it's a unique contrasting space that is set as a temporary entity of its own. Filled with an overwhelming number of casts, molds and pictures, visitors are forced to repeatedly see Solow's site from different perspectives until, eventually, it becomes familiar.

3 De Sola-Morales, Ignasi. *Terrain Vague*, Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1995

Fig. 74 : A collection of photographs of the work presented in Colloquium 2 and 3

Fig. 75 : Photograph of an overview of the work of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 76 : Photograph of a visitor looking at the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 78 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 79 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 80 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 81 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 82 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

Fig. 83 : Photograph of the Final Defense Exhibition

06 / Conclusion

In no way is this thesis suggesting that our practice as architects is in jeopardy and that all vacant properties should remain untouched. Rather, it is simply a platform to showcase how a *Terrain Vague* is essential in crafting different dynamics within a city. Through the lens of Solow's property, this thesis presents a framework to encourage architects and urban planners to further question the value of a *Terrain Vague* in New York City. By interpreting and illustrating its anomaly, its beauty and its strangeness, through means of casts and photographs, it serves as a platform to challenge the common belief that unplanned and unprogrammed spaces are unimportant. In fact, it demonstrates that it is quite the opposite. Not only does a *Terrain Vague* offer true freedom as a valuable contrast to Manhattan, but it's also a mechanism, through its availability, for architects and urban planners to project their desires and to imagine the city for what it could be.¹

Most often in the form of temporary and adaptable empty urban conditions, a *Terrain Vague* offers a continuous possibility for things to evolve. Suppose for a minute that all vacant lots were all of sudden built, the city would simply cease to evolve and transform. There would be a critical need to demolish in order to re-build and to keep evolving.

¹ Carole Levesque, to include journal

Now considering vacant lots are as essential to the development of a city as they are in offering a place of total freedom, why shouldn't we honour their existence by allowing users the freedom to use them while they're still available?

As Morales explains,

"considering we as architects provide solutions through the manipulations of the natural environment and the space it provides us with, how can we act in the form of absence without becoming an aggressive instrument of power?"

I believe the answers lies in understanding and accepting the dynamics created by a *Terrain Vague* as a valuable part of our environment. Therefore, this thesis proposes to simply remove the black chain link fence that surrounds Solow's entire site and allow users the freedom the use it, until his proposed masterplan undergoes construction. By doing so, users will further benefit from this valuable spatial alternative while simultaneously permitting its natural continuity in the metropolis.

In retrospect, there is a consistency throughout the entire thesis. From the casts and the pictures to the exhibition all the way to the architectural proposition, there is an underlying temporality reflecting both the concept itself and the process of understanding the *Terrain Vague*. From uncovering Morale's concept through Solow's site, I came to the realization that some of the most educative and promising spaces can be found in the most neglected parts of a city. With that in mind, what if as architects, we considered that, maybe in some cases, it might be ideal not to intervene? What if perhaps it's okay to do nothing in New York City?

Fig. 84 : Photograph of the mold used to cast the “Conclusion” descriptive panel

07 / Postscript

Considering New York City's importance as a global city, it serves as the perfect ground to discover new urban theories that could shape and influence how cities are occupied.

In response to Manhattan's desire for everything to be filled, doing Nothing in New York City demonstrates the value in spatial alternatives and unpopular spaces in a metropolis. By granting public access to these unpopular spatial alternatives, the city becomes more accessible which by Muschamp's theory, means more successful. Granted there are numerous ethical questions and a tremendous amount of responsibility related to granting public access to Solow's site, yet we deal with similar responsibilities everyday when it comes to the built environment. The difference simply lies in our willingness to practice one form of design over the other.

If we accept that our job as architects is to improve the quality of life for the users through the space they occupy, then perhaps there is value in encouraging cities and investors to allow public access to these beneficial temporary urban conditions. If we consider a built proposition as a valid architectural response, then why would a non-built proposition be considered otherwise?

Even though this thesis suggests “Doing Nothing in New York City”, making a case for a Terrain Vague has nothing to do with doing nothing. It takes a tremendous amount of work and determination to challenge our practice as architects and to try and convince others that there is value in the un-built. This thesis isn’t strictly about one site, but rather about the theory of a Terrain Vague examined through Solow’s vacant lot and illustrated by means of casts and photographs.

Therefore, the work is to be critiqued in two different ways; first as an exhibition and secondly as a future speculative practice. The intention and success of this thesis lies in these following questions:

Is the work presented in the exhibition enough to spark interest and force users to pause and be intrigued? Does it shine light and re-define how one sees Solow’s Terrain Vague? Does it offer new ways of looking at an otherwise overlooked urban condition? Does it offer a platform that encourages new discussions about our profession? What can we learn from how these urban voids are occupied?

Although the photographs and the casts presented as part of this thesis show no sign of people, they undoubtedly reveal traces of human activities. By not including people yet illustrating these traces of human life throughout the exhibition, it reinforces the concept of a Terrain Vague as an overlooked urban condition. In order to see and understand how, through its unplanned and unprogrammed vacancy, Solow’s site offers

a valuable spatial alternative to Manhattan, one must first have an open mind and a willingness to discover and to discuss unfamiliar territories. While the value of a Terrain Vague lies in the eyes of the beholder and is easily understood through the lens of its users, perhaps for architects, its value can only be justified through a deeper analysis and conversation.

Finally, while the exhibition presented as part of this thesis is extremely curated and might seem like a contradiction to a Terrain Vague, but in fact, it serves its exact purpose and is rather in synch with the value that lies in these urban conditions. Solow's site is no longer seen as an unimportant forgotten piece of land but rather, a well curated series of casts and photographs that offer new ways of looking and experiencing the true value that lies in a Terrain Vague.

07 / Bibliography

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