“Vague spaces - recognizing Other urbanities in the city”

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Abstract

The major restructuring of post-industrialising Western cities has produced strong policy reactions from national and urban governance in the form of what has come to be known as ‘new urban politics’. The means and aims of these policies have meant the reproduction of established societal ideals of growth and welfare. At the same time, however, recent decades of informal re-appropriation of industrial wastelands in cities all over the world have engendered new forms of innovative and inclusive urbanity as well as new means and aims of urban redevelopment. In a ‘creative’ age where economy and culture goes hand in hand, the creativity of these informal reclamations of wastelands is being integrated in formal aspirations to become creative cities. This article argues that there are essential tensions between the informal ‘political urbanity’ produced in the wastelands and the urban policy, in which it is integrated in the name of creativity. Rather than being synonymous with ‘creativity’, the ‘political urbanity’ of the wastelands is nurtured by a more general formative dynamism. It is argued that in order for the broader civilising potentials to unfold, the dynamism of the wastelands needs to be conceptualised as ‘vague spaces’ of urban formation.

Introduction

The last decade of debate on urban development has seen a new perspective growing and blowing like a whirlwind. This perspective is an off-shoot from the general discourse on crisis in Western cities, post-industrialization etc., which have engendered the development of a ‘new urban politics’ (Andersen, J., 2001, Andersen, H., 2001): Uneven development on an international, national and regional scale has led to the concentration of social deprivation and hollowing out of centrally located industrial areas built before World War II; complete zones of ‘waste’ left deteriorated and worn out to such an extent that the surrounding cities have come to be known as “shrinking cities” (Oswalt, 2005).

But while the ‘new urban politics’ have sought to alleviate the social and economic consequences of the crisis through established institutions, the new perspective grows out of the local spatial imprint of the uneven development. Through factors as the real estate market, rigid planning processes, contamination, obsoleteness and, here and there, political changes (in the case of Berlin), the international currents and structural changes creates local pockets, where the ‘rent gaps’ of uneven development, that is the difference between the actual and the potential value of a property, wont be ‘filled’ through profitable reinvestments inside a reasonable span of time (Smith, 1990; Hentilä og Lindborg, 2003; Urban Catalyst, 2003): Enter the ‘wastelands’, the rise of
alternative, temporary uses and new social, cultural, economical, political, in short, ‘urban’ perspectives on the city. An immense and fertile undergrowth of terms that underlines the paradoxes, possibilities and impossibilities of this new phenomenon, has emerged in planning as well as daily discourse. Gil Doron has noted this with a certain wonder, naming but a few of the terms:

During the last 50 years or so, from after the Second World War, the discourse and practice of architecture and planning has been perplexed with peculiar spaces in the built environment, which have been labeled ‘wastelands’, ‘derelict areas’, ‘No man’s land’, ‘Dead Zones’, urban ‘voids’, ‘Terrain vague’ etc. (Doron, 2000, 247).

And the list goes on: Vacuums, indeterminate spaces, weak places, spaces without function, empty spaces, niches, cracks, gaps, interstices, unused spaces, non-places, junkspace, temporary autonomous zones, spaces left over from planning, intermediate time-spaces, liminal spaces, transition spaces, fallow land, waiting land, residual spaces, obsolete land, fringes, brownfields. According to the specific context, the phenomenon is labeled in a certain way. For reasons that might become apparent towards the end of this article, I choose to label them as ‘vague spaces’.

The real estate market has always taken advantage of the rent gaps of these vague spaces of urban development, but now, after decades of unawareness towards their potentials, a new planning discourse has also gradually unfolded, which takes advantage of the particularities of these sites. Thus, a perspective inspired by the compact city model (Hofmeister, 2002; Neuman, 2005) has integrated the redevelopment of these, often polluted, areas in an ecologically sustainable densification of the urban fabric, which simultaneously caters for the real estate developers. Despite often already having found some sort of use, the wastelands are seen as more or less dead or empty; something yet to be integrated in the ‘real’ development; spaces that need to be “rescued from their wasteful existence” (Doron, 2000, 248). Thus, this perspective has continued a modern tradition of “reactions to such shapeless incoherence” that, with the words of Schofield, “typically range from a kindly tolerance to one of infuriation borne of a wish to transform its shadowy forms into a harder, more enduring entity that can then be located, stabilised, measured and controlled” (Schofield, 2003, 325).

But in the recent decade, other, more particular, economic, creative and social; ‘urban’, potentials of these sites have been acknowledged. A host of activists, artists and researchers have embraced the potentials. It is the powerful rush of experiences, which the appropriation of these sites by different social, cultural, economical and political groups, which have nurtured the whirlwind of debate on the new perspective. The discussion is marked by a commitment that only flourishes, when new aspects of (urban) life unfolds in their ‘vague clarity’. The articles, essays and the manifests with no exception contain a spark that is nurtured by a surprise of, an optimism and gratitude towards witnessing a moment, which, by some, is considered to be the rebirth of urbanity (Groth og Corijn, 2005). Because this is what it is all about for authors, researchers and
protagonists alike. The Dutch architect, Kees Christiaanse, nails the sense of epiphany in his presentation of the matter:

In *The History of the City* Leonardo Benevolo defines the transition from village to city as the point when people begin to practise different professions – in other words, when complex networks develop. By analogy we could now, a thousand years later, define our idea of urbanity as the point when new or unexpected networks arise from the combination of old ones. Among the places where new forms of city life develop are former harbour and railway sites ... Urban brownland sites provide space for different uses and activities; therefore they are the seed-bed of urbanity (Christiaanse, 2002, 6).

The current reflection on the potentials reveals that an understanding of their full 'urban' breadth is only emerging gradually from the initial ecstatic discovery. This epiphany of seemingly historic proportions has spread to planners and politicians through different translating channels. But now, the question is: What happens in this translation? Does this shapelessly urban and political phenomenon become a fragment in yet another urban policy for the creation of some negotiated balance of growth and welfare? Or, will policy-making take in some of the civilising differences of the phenomenon? In other words: Are we ready to recognize the potentials politically and theoretically or will these seed-beds of urbanity be reductively utilized according to an old policy perspective?

I will argue that it is possible to uncover potentials and perils alike. I will argue this by way of short presentations of:

- an 'urban action research' case study of a place in the inner harbour of Copenhagen, Krøyers Plads, which underwent the development from a centrally located but underutilised wasteland to the hot spot of debate and urban development in Copenhagen, if not Denmark;
- some of the implications in this case according to some new perspectives on wastelands, and finally;
- ‘vagueness’, one of the core practical and semantic dynamics of the new phenomenon, which feeds the perspectives of both formal ‘urban policy’ and informal ‘political urbanity’, however in different guises.

**Krøyers Plads: The making, taking and breaking of a vague urban space**

After centuries of activities, the historic Greenlandic trading company abandoned the central part of the Copenhagen harbour bearing its name. Thus, from the mid-1970’s until the turn of the century, the area laid more or less waste – earning it all sorts of nicknames from ‘Dead dog space’ to ‘Sleeping Beauty’. While suburban municipalities outside of Copenhagen were experiencing a development with housing and industry/business, the central

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1 This is a revision of the interpretation of the developments at Krøyers Plads, which can be found in Brandt, Frandsen and Larsen (2008).
The harbor became an ever larger and more abandoned space awaiting changes in the real state market and in planning.

However, from the late nineties new agents with little money but good ideas moved in on temporary leases and entered the urban development arena in the form of different, informal often café-like establishments around the harbor, among them Luftkastellet (literally the ‘pipe dream’) in the historic harbor trading place. Luftkastellet seemed like sent from heaven to many Copenhageners who invaded the café with its characteristic beach design making a new informal social arena with the guiding principle being ‘sand on the floor’. Named the Copenhagen café of the year in 2001, the place gradually went from the production of café latte to the production of television, video, clothing designs and magazines as it turned into a creative milieu – frequently referred to in official plans for a future ‘creative’ development of Copenhagen. In other words, a little group of cultural entrepreneurs caught some of the fleeting potentials of the site and produced new practices and meanings, a new space, where earlier there was none.

As the real estate market and planning started moving and several modern housing and office blocks was erected a very blatant dualism developed vis-à-vis the informal café milieux as well as the increasing amount of house boats in the harbor. Thus, combined with rising public critique of the first formal redevelopments of the harbor and municipal ambitions to support more activities and life in the harbor, this led to quite a public debate on the future possibilities for development and urban life in the harbor – both on the quays and on the water.

As part of this debate a public meeting was arranged by an organisation of people living mainly in houseboats in the harbour. The format was that of a classic public meeting with a panel that consisted of people in power: a leading politician, the director of the Port Authority of Copenhagen, the chief city architect, and a representative of Luftkastellet as an exception. The whole process and physical set-up of the public meeting caught the invigorated participants in old unconstructive habits of verbal communication and produced a very simplified (but strong) reaction against the panel that prevented a constructive exchange of arguments between mutually recognising adversaries. Supertanker, and the initial participant-observing phase of an urban action research project, was formed after this meeting with the aim of working for a more constructive and creative dialogue regarding the harbour development. As such Supertanker initially placed themselves in a position that challenged simultaneously the positions of the local citizens and the politicians, planners and developers. In a phase of contrasting positions in a diffuse agenda Supertanker was thus, at the beginning, a symbol of a constructive alternative in the debate relating to the Harbour development in Copenhagen and was received with open arms – by investors, planning authorities as well as local citizens.

Having been developed as an implicit but very concrete alternative to modernist urbanisation, the informal environment at Luftkastellet, with its old wooden warehouses, had now nurtured an explicit articulation of its urban potentials. Supertanker, on the other hand, had the chance to explore the validity of its
hypotheses first-hand by simultaneously practising what they preached. From its spontaneous start Supertanker included people from a great variety of backgrounds: small entrepreneurs, academics (geographers, architects, lawyers), designers, sailors and so on. Most of these people were working voluntarily for the cause. The positive response to their initiative meant that they received some limited financing from a developer, the Port Authority and the city of Copenhagen, combined with a grant from a large foundation, enabling them to start experimenting with interdisciplinary workshops for students, a range of different types of public meetings, boat-rides, exhibitions and concrete proposals for the area. The diversity of the team, the locally embedded workshop and exhibition space were all linked to the idea of exploring urbanity as a generative force that can emerge from a diversity of people living and imagining in the same place.

A central aspect of Supertanker’s take on urbanity was therefore that it should embody an open, equal, respectful and direct form of interaction between people. They argued that the life of the city and its ability to renew itself depends on new ideas, networks and other entities that emerge from this urban encounter between different people. The ensuing developments concerning their kernel at Krøyers Plads, however, did not heed these considerations.

Thus in 2004, the Supertanker area, Krøyers Plads, became the focus of a heated debate about the plans for a new, very expensive and aesthetically ambitious housing project, which expressed the vast potentials of this ‘underdeveloped’ site in a more formal language than that of Luftkastellet. For many citizens of Copenhagen the tall project (in relative terms…) and its massive, political support from the planning authority of Copenhagen came as a shock. A local resident contacted Supertanker concerning the ongoing construction plans. Supertanker took up the challenge, and with that my studies of Supertanker took on an action research perspective. With a large conflict looming in the horizon, Supertanker’s aim was to consult widely and hold public meetings that made sure that everybody’s voice was heard. In the polarised climate, Supertanker managed to involve not only opponents but also a range of local landowners, citizens, stakeholders and others in surprisingly positive and constructive discussions regarding the future of the site. This provided proof that it is possible to be constructive even in a situation like this, but only if you manage to set up an arena for discussion that is open to all parties in the conflict.

The dependence on a variety of different funding bodies meant that Supertanker were perceived to be impartial, a necessary prerequisite for successful dialogue and intervention. Still, in spite of Supertanker’s activities, the dawning of the magnitude of and oppositions in relation to the project meant that habitual antagonistic positions was constructed in an agenda thus strongly defined: Either the project was to be built or it should be scrapped. Having initially met under Supertanker’s dialogical experiments, one very active group of critical citizens parted with this perspective and went ahead with their campaign against the project, exploiting the media’s taste for situations of conflict to bolster its arguments. In the ensuing media hype, the municipal authorities played the adversary part as supporters of the project – in a way that further infuriated many citizens.
In the spring of 2005, the politicians eventually abandoned the plans for Krøyers Plads. Supertanker was put on the black list (by developers and planners), and held partly responsible for the biggest popular opposition to development plans in Copenhagen to date. By initially supporting Supertanker, the planning authorities and developers had sent a signal that they desired an alternative dialogue in an alternative urban context. However, the following turn of events showed that this kind of experiment implicated consequences not considered by them. At the same time, it seemed that the formal, and in many ways correct, procedures of public consultation in planning, due to conditions not acknowledged, almost inevitably lead to polarisation and forced the people involved in the process into much more stereotypical positions than necessary.

As for the development of Krøyers Plads, the conclusion for now is that it has not only been abandoned by the (evicted) informal agents, but has been completely annihilated. Having initially shown what kind of urban practices, meanings and forms of communication can evolve from spaces with no clear cut and established functions, it now shows how fragile these developments are, when strongly defined practices, meanings and forms of communication unfold – today leaving only the informal sprouts of vegetation on the site.

**New discourses on vague spaces in urban development**

**Temporary uses and the creative city**

This was a short presentation of some of the specific events and developments at and around Krøyers Plads in the Copenhagen harbour. What, then, is the significance of this kind of temporary use of urban wastelands, and the debate concerning its future use, in a broader perspective? First of all it is important to have in mind those virtualities that did not survive the development, that is the emerging creative and/or urban cultures, and those that conquered the arena, that is the traditional political forces that attempted to do it of with each other in an antagonistic fashion. In Copenhagen, the aftermath of Krøyers Plads is very much about the antagonism between the local opposition and the architectural ambitions of the planning authorities and the real estate developer. However, as the presentation above might suggest, other interpretations are pertinent.

In other cities and countries, with other cultural, social, political and economic situations, other insights and possibilities have been recognized in developments like this. A new and influential discourse on temporary uses of wastelands has thus been established. The research and development being conducted in the EU project called ‘Urban Catalysts’ has been a major factor in this development. Through mostly architectural interventions in and studies of temporary uses of wastelands in the cities of Helsinki, Amsterdam, Berlin, Naples and Vienna, the ‘Urban Catalysts’ project concluded that a hitherto unnoticed creative potential for urban development existed in the mostly informal appropriations of industrial wastelands. In short, when ‘urban pioneers’ such as small scale cultural and economic entrepreneurs unfold their projects on certain dilapidated sites, not only the site but also the immediate surroundings, the general growth potentials in the creative industries of a city and the overall urban development benefitted from them.
This perspective resonates with several of the facets in the Krøyers Plads case. It has also had a significant impact on urban politics. Thus, planning research, consultancy and practice currently both utilize and contribute to the condensation of the vague potentials in the temporary uses in the established discourse of urban politics – which to a certain degree is a very positive development. But the question is: What happens to the broad and ‘soft’ values of the alternative development when they become ‘hard’ currency in the discourse on urban development? In my view, very important aspects of urbanity are reduced in the process.

The thing is that the phenomenon of temporary uses of wastelands is developing into a natural extension of the discourse on ‘creative’ cities, which has replaced or rather usurped more business oriented perspectives on creating economic growth in urban regions (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002; 2003). What the temporary use theses has done is to articulate the hitherto obscure potentials of the specific milieus in which (business and growth attracting) ‘creative’ entrepreneurs gather and evolve. The floating signifier (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) of ‘creative cities’ thus gradually integrates the ‘temporary’ perspective so that these developments become the avant-garde of a regional growth with a human face. The central discursive mechanism is a closed loop of professionals (researchers, consultants, practitioners) that gradually gives the ‘temporary’ perspective an ever more ‘creatively’ defined and more or less precise (according to criteria internal to the existing planning, architecture and real estate mechanisms) definition. A ‘new’ phenomenon has thus been conceived and conceptualised within a decade, but what came of the historic ‘urban’ proportions that Christiaanse (founding member of the Urban Catalysts research project) voiced? A look at kindred but still different interpretations of the ‘temporary’ developments in the urban wastelands might reveal some of them.

**Civilisation redefined or urbanity reclaimed – new processes and agendas**

Both inside and outside the ‘temporary’ culture there have been voices sharing Christiaanse’s prophetic proportions. According to Urban Unlimited what they call “freezones turn out to have been of particular importance for the origins of urban culture, the expansion of states, the protection of minorities and the renewal of the city” (Urban Unlimited, 2004, 12). Likewise, in a more academic manner, the geographer Kevin Hetherington has studied the possibility of the ‘badlands of modernity’ having essential functions as heterotopias of alternative practices and thoughts – the space of the Palais Royale in Paris, for example, thus paving the way for the French Revolution (Hetherington, 1997).

On a more modest scale, several researchers has pointed out the innovative capacities of contemporary informal activities in ‘cracks’, ‘weak places’ or ‘indeterminate spaces’ of cities (Swyngedouw et al., 2003; Moyersoen; Lehtovuori, 2000; Groth and Corijn, 2005). For example the urban experiments of City Mine(d) in Bruxelles or those in Makasiinit, Helsinki has produced not only original suggestions for new social activities and physical forms in urban development. Maybe even more importantly, new forms of dialogical processes and political agendas have evolved from these incubating cracks, eventually challenging the rigidity and antagonism of formal urban policy processes.
The experiences from Krøyers Plads also resonate with these interpretations. But due to their quite political character, they have not become part of established discourse of urban policy making. And their implications are only fragmentarily incorporated in critical perspectives such as those of the neo-Marxist critique of neoliberalism – partly due to their kinship with the ‘creative’ perspective (Swyngedouw et al., 2003; Lund Hansen et al., 2001). I will argue that the ‘vague’ and oscillating understanding of the peculiar ‘political urbanities’ of the wastelands (Larsen, 2007) is a result of attempts at integrating these new tendencies in established vocabularies that essentially alienates their very implications; a concrete consequence of what Lefebvre alluded to as the “blind spot” in the modern “industrial” gaze (Lefebvre, 2003). A more sensitive conceptualization might be developed by taking in precisely the ‘vague’ character of these new tendencies.

‘Vague’ conceptualizations of ‘vague’ spaces

*The ‘vague’ essence of the new ‘political urbanities’*

Maybe the most potent explication of the theoretical and social potentials of the new ‘political urbanities’ has come in an article by the Dutch and Belgian researchers Groth and Corijn. They point to what they call ‘indeterminate spaces’ as hubs for the reappropriation of urbanity in times otherwise dominated by commercial developments and abstract planning. They refer to Henri Lefebvre, whose thoughts on social space are absolutely essential in developing a more inclusive understanding of urban development. But maybe most importantly, they refer to the very peculiar indeterminate character of these ‘weak’ or ‘soft’ wastelands as the core dynamic in the innovation of new social, economic and political cultures and their innovative reclamation of ‘urbanity’:

> In particular, urban residual spaces such as abandoned industrial areas — i.e. interstitial sites that are weak in spatial terms may, due to their ‘indeterminate’ character and a certain degree of ‘semantic emptiness which reigns supreme’ — provide opportunities for new, transitional reappropriations that are assumed by civil or ‘informal’ actors coming from outside the official, institutionalised domain of urban planning and urban politics (Groth and Corijn, 2005).

Several researchers, architects and urbanists refer to these spaces as ‘empty’, ‘soft’ or ‘weak’. In using ‘weak’, for example Lehtovuori allude to the relative powerlessness of these alternative practices and utterances. But this weak quality is an effect rather than the defining characteristic of the spaces. If we take a closer look at Borret’s (quoted by Groth and Corijn, 2005) argumentation, other underlying aspects of the phenomenon come up. He says:

> Contrary to other unclear sites in the dispersed city, the terrain vague continues to resist straightforward definition, because its semantic emptiness turns out to have less to do with an absence of codes than with a multiple presence of codes that are superimposed, that clash, or even destroy each other ... They are not weak in themselves ... but express an excessive number of interpretative codes (Borret, 1999).
In fact, Lehtovuori also alludes to the “many systems of meaning” as a defining characteristic of these sites (2000, 408). One could thus substitute Borret’s and other’s use of ‘empty’ or ‘weak’ with ‘vague’, meaning not only relatively weakly defined but also merely ‘uncertain’ both in practical and semantic definition. I consider this concept not only to be in tune with the internal dynamism of the urbanism mentioned by Groth and Corijn, but also to hold theoretical coherence, thus making it an important instrument for reflection as well as political critique.

The phenomenon of ‘vagueness’ has been the object of many studies in art, architecture, linguistics and, especially, analytical philosophy. The latter has deliberated thoroughly on epistemological and ontological issues of vagueness, mainly focused on the ancient Greek ‘sorites’ paradox concerning the logical relation between the amount of sand grains and the ‘vague’ concept of ‘heap’ (‘sorites’) (Schofield, 2003). A tangential perspective on vagueness draws in the reasoning in several pragmatist and life philosophical thinkers. Like the new perspective on urban development, I have discussed here, this focus on the ‘vague’ is all about developing new forms out of seemingly nothing and the dynamic tension between these new forms and older, different, and more established forms. Thus in arts and life philosophy, the vague is conceptualised in reciprocal tension to what could be characterised as abstraction: Partly as a spectrum between vague and precise definitions of phenomena, partly as a spectrum between intimacy and distance in a conceptualisation of personally lived phenomena.

The tension is absolutely paramount to an understanding of the potentials and perils in the ‘vague’ urban developments. Whereas its opposite is often characterised as precise, strong and established, the vague can, in Schofield’s words, be seen as “a site of activity and novelty where alternative possibilities may be contemplated and tried out. In other words, the vague harbours a generative potential that can find expression in any number of ways” (Schofield, 2003, 329). I will conclude this article by suggesting some of these ways in a non-systematic inventory of important aspects in the current ‘vague’ tendencies of urban development.

**Perspectives on ‘vague’ phenomena in social theory**

Whether termed as such or not, within social theory, what I conceptualise as the ‘vague’ or ‘vagueness’ has been scrutinised from a host of angles. The common denominator is the presence of a latent potential as the driving force behind, as suggested here, economic, functional, social, aesthetic, semantic or cultural development processes.

**Economic and functional potentials:** As already implied, the Marxist tradition of studying uneven development has a fine vocabulary for the study of the economic potentials of vague spaces with large rent gaps. In a seesaw movement some areas become redefined and revitalized through reinvestment according to current needs on a market. Partly because of this, or through more or less active disinvestments, other areas become relatively obsolete. Unless they receive ongoing investments, they lose in relative value and eventually enter a phase where they are laid completely waste in wait of cost-effective possibilities; that
is, when a certain gap between potential and actual rent develops (Smith, 1990; 1996; Clark, 1994). Being in dialogue with landowners, the planning system both influences this mechanism and is influenced by it, picking out certain areas for (re)development while leaving others unplanned or undefined according to the current trends in urban development; buffers for future development. As mentioned, recent perspectives on compact city planning has integrated the functional potentials in redeveloping central wastelands as a core planning tool. What is less developed in economic and planning perspectives is the theme of the existing social and cultural potentials of these spaces;

**Social potentials:** Michel Maffesoli has noted the “importance of the ‘black holes’ of sociality” for the development of new socialities. He says that “any construction requires an interior space on which to rest”. The situationists also alluded to physics in their reference to the ‘positive voids’ of the city for alternative cultures. Dienel and Schophaus (2002) maybe go furthest in explicating the generative mechanisms of spaces with no dominant or only vague orders, that, in Schofield’s words, “invites new ways to imagine social relations that can be realised through acts of organization” (Schofield, 2003, 329). In short, due to the relative absence of otherwise dominant and normal(izing) orders, ‘vague’ spaces invite the gathering of other people and the development of other social organizations (Tonnelat, 2008); new ‘groups in fusion’ (Sartre, 1976) with new forms of ‘sociality’ (Maffesoli, 1996) contrasting more or less with the ‘seriality’ of ‘institutions’ and ‘society’ in general.

**Aesthetic potentials:** An important part of the development of other social organisations is the possibility of producing and living by new physical and aesthetic forms. The Danish artist Willy Ørskov has treated what he called ‘vague terrains’ as the ground zero of meaning and form in the landscape, and from there followed the production of meaning in pre-verbal ‘simple organizations’ of matter or ‘elementary sculpture’ with the simplest of functions (Ørskov, 1999, 100). He thus performs much the same argumentation as thinkers in the phenomenological (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), life philosophical (Nietzsche, Dilthey, Bergson) and ‘Surreal’ Marxist (Benjamin, Lefebvre) traditions. Before language develops, we have other means of understanding, reflection and expression. Language, thus, is only one specific means of making ourselves understood in relation to others;

**Semantic potentials:** In his reference to the unique frontier experience shaping the American mentality, Maliavin goes on quoting one of the leading figures in the American pragmatist tradition of philosophy: “It was perhaps the present of this Void in the inner cores of American life-attitude, that prompted William James to speak about some fundamental ‘vagueness’ of American mentality and to call for ‘the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in (America’s) mental life” (Maliavin, 108). Along with Peirce, James played a significant role in this reinstatement. He was very critical of the way we explain and analyse lived experiences through more or less abstract concepts: “[T]he more careful the discourse, the further away one gets from the vibrant sense of lived experience”. He thus saw a necessity of using concepts characterised by “metaphor and vagueness” when relating to lived experience (Seigried, 1982, 360, 359).
Different theorists of the lifeworld and the lived has since then developed concepts for communicative forms that in their vagueness and ambiguity holds a special relation to “the vagueness of the transcendent experiences” represented by them and has also noted the difficulty of translating their meanings into discursive terms of more or less precise denotations (Miller, 2006, 459). For example Lefebvre in his concepts of ‘image’ and ‘symbol’ with their tension with more abstract representations (Larsen, 2007), Benjamin in ‘Erfahrung’ and ‘Erlebnis’, and Alfred Schütz’ in his concept of ‘symbol’ (Miller, 2006, 459).

*Cultural potentials*: Both Lefebvre and Schütz work with general concepts for the semantic instruments through which we both understand and make ourselves understood. Whereas Lefebvre terms it the ‘semantic field’, Schütz closes in on the phenomenon through what he characterizes as ‘provinces of meaning’ (Schütz in Miller). In this way we can imagine the semantic instruments at hand in a given urban culture as a more or less vague or strongly defined field with different ‘provinces of meaning’ in more or less tension with each other and more or less open towards the understanding of new, ‘vague’ phenomena. Schütz likens this dynamic field with the fluctuating topography of the landscape:

“The terms “zones” or “regions” of various relevance might suggest that there are closed realms of various relevance in our lifeworld and, correspondingly, of various provinces of our knowledge of it, each separated from the other by clear-cut border lines. The opposite is true. These various realms of relevances and precision are intermingled, showing the most manifold interpenetrations and enclaves, sending their fringes into neighbor provinces and thus creating twilight zones of sliding transitions. If we had to draw a map depicting such a distribution figuratively it would not resemble a political map showing the various countries with their well-established frontiers, but rather a topographical map representing the shape of a mountain range in the customary way by contour lines connecting points of equal altitude. Peaks and valleys, foothills and slopes, are spread over the map in infinitely diversified configurations” (Schütz in Miller, 2006, 113).

In the current limbo between creative-temporary, critical and ‘yet to be determined’ interpretations of the ‘vague’ tendencies in urban development it is worth taking a look at how and through which more or less precise and established ‘tools’ the ‘vague’ potentials are mobilized in varying agendas including varying agents and having different (implicit) aims. What I have argued is that both the creative-temporary and the critical perspectives on the contemporary ‘vague’ spaces make use of semantic instruments already defined or in the process of definition according to discourses and in social organizations that is related to it through ‘floating signifiers’ such as ‘creativity’ (signifier of possibility here; signifier of peril there), thus turning the ‘vague’ spaces into new ‘floating signifieds’ of a discursive conflict (Temporary space? Freezone? Counterspace?).
Conclusion

The rise of ‘temporary uses of wastelands’ on the agenda of creative city-making has engendered expectations of more innovative and inclusive forms of urban planning and development. However, the rise of the informal re-appropriations of wastelands comes at a certain price. Thus, the increasing influence has come by way of the discourse of creative cities, which, apart from feeding on certain proto-urban dynamics, is closely connected to discourses on regional growth. In this way, the informal and inclusive character of the temporary uses is gradually reduced according to the imperatives of creative urban planning. Another, more political aspect runs the risk of either being filtered from this representation or projected into radical critiques with just as little contact with urban, cultural tendencies. Yet, all these different representations seem draw on the same development processes of vague spaces, which, if untamed, incarnate contemporary social, cultural, economical and political reclamations of urbanity. In unfolding a vague vocabulary of concepts, the vague spaces can be made to work as motors of a new urban perspective rather than prolonging an established and blinding policy perspective.

References


