LESSONS FROM THE BROWNFIELD: CONSIDERING THE SELF-GENERATING CITY

Author:
MICHAEL BIANCHI

Affiliation:
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, UNIVERSITY OF LIEGE, BELGIUM

INTRODUCTION

The brownfield figure lies at the crossroads of urban debates today, whether it concerns urban renewal,[1] cultural infrastructures,[2] social practices,[3] or nature in the city.[4] This contribution will focus more specifically on one particular feature of these spaces: their availability for unplanned reappropriations and reconfigurations. These phenomena will be considered here as a specific mode of space production,[5] within the general framework of critical urban studies.

Urban Brownfields

In French, the term used to designate abandoned urban spaces is "friche". In the Middle Ages, it designated abandoned land that had once been cultivated. By extension, it was adopted from the 1990s onwards in urban contexts to designate abandoned spaces that were once used. In English, it is usually translated as "brownfield". "Wasteland" is also used, although the latter does not refer specifically to formerly used spaces. Unlike the French term, "brownfield" has no agricultural origins, but was born in connection with contemporary industrial and urban contexts. The French term "friche" explicitly refers to a state of waiting, a "time of standby" or uncertainty,[6] during which a space "goes off the radar" of urban planning on the one hand, and of exploitation logics on the other.
As reflected in the French etymology, urban brownfields are characterized by their *availability* on several levels: material availability – they contain spaces that can be used or even lived in –, regulatory availability – the usual restrictions on public space don't fully apply there –, and symbolic availability – the social gaze and control penetrate them less –, not forgetting a fundamental aspect: their availability to biological regeneration, whether spontaneous or provoked.

AVAILABLE SPACES VS POLITICAL APPETITES

Urban brownfields proliferated in Western cities as a result of accelerated deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s. To these abandoned industrial spaces were added the multiple vacant lands left aside, in the same time, by extensive urban sprawl from the post-war period. Parallel to the emergence of these particular spaces, new political imaginaries blossomed, of which May '68 was a crystallizing moment: pacifism, anti-authoritarianism and ecology spread into the public arena during the 1970s. In this context, a number of initiatives took over abandoned urban spaces to set up living communities that sought to set themselves apart from the constraints of modern society: cultural constraints –

patriarchal society, sexual and moral repression –, and economic constraints – contestation of the consumer society.
Among the most enduring of these experiments, the community of Christiania, founded in 1971 on an abandoned military site in the heart of Copenhagen, managed to preserve a status of partial autonomy until 2013, at the cost of numerous episodes of conflict with the authorities. Over time, the enclave gradually became a tourist attraction, drawing over a million visitors a year. We'll return to this type of mutation later on.
Berlin's Kreuzberg district in the 1970s is another significant case. There, abandoned buildings were also occupied to resist real estate development and the ensuing rise in housing prices. Squats then became places of political and aesthetic counter-culture, with the explosion of the Punk movement and the self-organization of a broad squatters' movement. The neighborhood was regularly raided by the police, but held out until 1981, when a law was passed criminalizing the squatter movement and leading to its forced dismantling.[7] In most Western countries, the 1980s saw the advent of neoliberal politics, notably leaded by the Reagan (US) and Thatcher (UK) governments. This global trend was also to color urban policies.[8]

Figure 1. Gathering at the KuKuCK building, Berlin, around 1980. Photo Peter Homann © umbruch-bildarchiv.de

The neoliberal and cultural turn

In the beginning of the 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the squat phenomenon exploded once again in Berlin, this time in a different manner to that of the 1970s: far from the political radicalism of the punk movement, the more consensual model of the "artistic brownfield" was established in the many abandoned buildings of East Berlin. The first artistic squat, the huge and emblematic Tacheles, opened in 1990. Although different, this movement was nonetheless built on the social heritage of the 1970s, since groups from the Kreutzberg area were the driving force behind it[9]. Here, however, squats were regularly perpetuated in the form of temporary occupancy agreements with landlords. The mood was no longer for radical rupture. Nonetheless, these were still places of

counter-culture, licentious practices (partying, drugs) and a certain liberation from economic constraints, particularly with regard to the cost of housing.

In another context, 1992 saw the opening of Marseille's Friche Belle-de-Mai, an emblematic artistic site set up in a former tobacco factory on the outskirts of a struggling working-class neighborhood. Far from the spontaneous, counter-cultural initiatives of Berlin, this project was quickly taken up by the urban authorities and a number of key cultural players. It should be noted that, although it is still called a "friche" today, the Belle-de-Mai does not possess the 3 characteristics identified above (i.e., material, regulatory and symbolic availability): the site is a public institution with centralized management and controlled uses. It is therefore not – or no longer – genuinely a brownfield or a *friche* as defined above. This type of transformation of urban brownfields into cultural institutions has since acquired the status of an urban operation model, given its spread and repetition. This is a recurring aspect of the culture-based urban regeneration model, in search of a "Bilbao effect"[10] and in the wake of "creative city" theories.[11] This model has been widely contested for its contribution to gentrification and social exclusion.[12] As Philippe Foulquié, then director of La Belle-de-Mai, told a journalist in 2005: "This injunction to build relationships with the neighborhood is a bit heavy".[13] We're clearly not in the Berlin spirit here, but, as Boris Grésillon points out, in an institutional logic that focuses on a "supra-regional" scale, and therefore a "hard" development strategy that has nothing to do with the idea of an available, undefined space.

These examples illustrate one of the highly political aspects that crystallize around the figure of the urban brownfield. The spontaneous uses to which it is put are the sign of needs and desires repressed in conventional public spaces, and which find fulfilment there thanks to a pause, a "time of standby", a troubled time, which can sometimes extend over a very long period. Eventually, the brownfield is most of the time reintegrated into the institutional game, losing its true character as a brownfield.

Nurturing from the margins

So far, only social issues have been evoked, and for brownfield sites located in dense urban areas. But one of the current issues about brownfields in urban contexts is also the stage they set for relations between humans and non-humans: their availability to biological regenerations and agencies. Addressing this issue takes us back to the 1970s, with the emergence in the public arena of large-scale environmental movements in Europe and the United States. In line with these new political issues, the first theoretical discourses linking environmental issues more specifically to brownfields were to be found two decades later, even if some local experiences had already highlighted this link before, as we shall see later.

In the 1990s, Edward Soja began to theorize the extensive, chaotic urbanities that blossomed in the post-Fordist period, using the emblematic situation of Los Angeles as a starting point.[14] At the same time, the Stalker collective was founded in Italy in 1995, around the idea of exploring what they called the "current territories" on the outskirts of Rome. The collective drew up a manifesto inviting to recognize the specific identity and paradoxical richness of residual spaces neglected by urban expansion, caught between the extensions and infrastructures of the diffuse metropolises that developed in the post-war years.

They form the negative of the built-up city, interstitial and marginal areas, abandoned spaces or spaces in the process of transformation. They are places of repressed memory and the unconscious becoming of urban systems. The dark side of the city, spaces of conflict and contamination between organic and inorganic, nature and artifice.[15]

The resonances seem obvious between what is pointed out here and the cases discussed above. Stalker's "current territories" are large areas, but they possess to varying degrees the features

previously identified to describe urban brownfields: uncertain status, pending future, and above all material, regulatory, symbolic and biological availability. Here too, these places are described as dedicated to accommodating what is rejected from the city, its repressed part, whether in terms of beings or practices. A few years later, in 2000, an architecture student in Bordeaux named Yvan Detraz extended Stalker's approach in a memoire entitled “Zone Sweet Zone”; a significant illustration of this new field of interest emerging in urban studies at that time. It, too, proceeded from an awareness of spaces abandoned by deindustrialization or neglected by urban sprawl, envisioning for it an expanded definition as a new form of public space.

Abandoned land can be to the peri-urban what the street and the square are to the traditional city: a fundamental public space. [...] The city has to take on the residual and indeterminate situations of its abandoned land. It must be able to relax and provide shelter for the wild, the nomadic and the unplanned; for a space that is economically unproductive but profitable from a social, symbolic and ecological point of view.[16]

Figure 2. Stalker walking in the outskirts of Rome, 1995 © Stalker

In 2004, landscape architect Gilles Clément published his “Manifesto of the third landscape”: a plea for recognition of the role played by various neglected or disused fragments of the landscape in maintaining fundamental biological richness and balance.

By its very nature, the Third Landscape constitutes a territory for the many species that cannot be found elsewhere. [...] The Third Landscape acquires a political dimension by virtue of its content, the stakes involved in diversity, and the need to preserve it - or maintain its dynamics. [...] The unwritten but proven status of the Third Landscape is global. Its continued existence depends not on experts, but on a collective consciousness.[17]

The work of Stalker, Yvan Detraz and Gilles Clément reflects a dual concern: considering a forgotten or disregarded side of physical space, and enhancing its role as a receptacle for multiple – sometimes repressed – diversities: diversity of species, uses, behaviors and even political ethos. But the association of these different types of diversities is not self-evident. While biological diversity acquired the status of an institutional value with the 1992 Rio Convention[18], this is not the case for social or aesthetic diversities. In the work of Stalker and Detraz, however, an analogy is established between biological diversity and diversities of a social nature; and connections – even confusions –

are cultivated between them. This orientation reflects an ethical approach, to which we'll return after a brief detour through a last case study.

The slag heaps of Charleroi

Charleroi is an industrial city in southern Belgium. It was one of the main cities of the first industrial age, in the 19th century. However, deindustrialization began in the 1960s. As a result, it inherited a large number of brownfield sites, including numerous slag heaps. As soon as they were abandoned, these sites were taken over by pioneering vegetation and the inhabitants of nearby working-class neighborhoods.
In the 1970s, against the backdrop of the oil crisis, the Belgian government considered authorizing the exploitation of slag heaps as energy resources. Although promising a possible economic revival, this new policy met with fierce resistance from local residents, who were attached to these sites as spaces of leisure, play areas for children, memorial monuments of working-class culture, and also places of contact with nature in the face of a severely degraded urban environment. Among the many battles waged by local residents to protect the slag heaps from exploitation, the victory of the Martinet Neighborhood Committee is emblematic. They succeeded to make the site classified as a "natural site", thanks to an ecological study that listed the plant and bird species present there. This is a particular example of an "interspecific alliance", to phrase it the way some environmentalist intellectuals do today.[19]

Figure 3. Industrial landscape in Charleroi with slag heaps © Francis Pourcel

Since the 2000s, various social and agricultural activities, both legal and illegal, have taken place on the slag heaps of Charleroi: vegetable gardening, grazing, biomass production, motocross, hiking. The slag heaps also welcomed camps for the homeless, who found refuge there, protected from view but close to the city. Despite being privately owned, many of them offer to varying degrees the four *availabilities* mentioned above. Despite the absence of planning or institutional funding, they progressively embodied a range of positive values for the public, which echoed those described by their advocates in the 1970s. They are now places of nature, leisure, working-class memory and small-scale craft productions, as well as a refuge for other, more marginal practices – like sheltering homeless people.

These generally positive values associated with slag heaps have made them interesting objects for the city authorities, as well as for their private owners. In Charleroi, a major urban renewal project has been underway since 2010. Within this framework, the authorities developed an image policy that reconsiders the city's industrial past, seeking to rebuild a positive image. The slag heaps are mobilized in this process as legacies of the mining past, which nature's reinvestment has transformed into symbols of resilience. The city's new logo, created in 2015, features the letter C, topped by a design that evokes all at once a crown, the crest of the Walloon cockerel and the relief of the slag heaps. Their exploitation as a tourist asset is also ongoing.
As for the many remaining private owners of slag heaps, the temptation remains to exploit the newly rediscovered land value of these sites. Real estate projects are emerging around some slag heaps. Advertisements for these projects use their new social and ecological image to promote housing that is close to the city and close to nature at the same time. In these promotional speeches, references to the spontaneous social practices that reinvested these spaces are tangible.
From being a spectator, the slag heap inhabitant becomes a contributor. From a static object to be contemplated, the slag heap becomes a dynamic place to live, as shown by numerous examples of successful development in Europe.[20]
As in the case of the Belle-de-Mai “friche” mentioned above, the values that have developed in the informality of these places – ecological values, but also social or symbolic ones – are thus mobilized, in a reified form, to generate commercial added value; an operation likely to ultimately alienate these values, in part or in whole.

Figure 4. Demonstration against the evacuation of the Tacheles, Berlin, 2010
Photo © Imago

Back to Berlin

In Berlin, the artists of the famous Tacheles were evicted in 2012, as were many other art squats born of the 1990s wave. The city is gradually gentrifying, and the Tacheles, under the aegis of its owner, is now the subject of a rehabilitation project by internationally renowned architects Herzog & De Meuron, to accommodate a luxurious complex of restaurants, boutiques and cafés.

Gap sites long dominated vast swathes of the Berlin cityscape. The wastelands held enormous potential, and the resulting creative scope and open-minded outlook were exploited in a diversity of ways. Berlin became both a field of experimentation for urban planners and architects, and a playground for culture and sub-culture.[21]
Strangely, these architects don't seem to conceive that the “gap site” on which their project is being developed was lately inhabited by a social and cultural profusion that had been a major point of attraction over two decades. Before being “field of experimentation for urban planners and architects”, Berlin's brownfields were the site of an entirely different kind of creativity, as we saw above. Marion Ernwein recently showed how, in Geneva, new green space management methods in the neoliberal urban policies were “putting the living to work”, using spontaneous biological processes to optimize productivity.[22] Here, we might suggest that putting informal practices to work is at stake in these scenarios for the economic remobilization of brownfields. At the same time as these places and their human and non-human protagonists are discarded, their reified image is summoned up to support land valuation. The specificity of the neoliberal city is that this re-capture of added value is carried out by both the public and private sectors.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic remobilization of these processes by institutions or private operators, of which we have seen a few examples here, is a sign that the spatial values they generate are widely recognised, and therefore that they correspond to a demand that is not just confined to the margins of society. The cases evoked here reveal recurring patterns. Brownfields represent a stage in the life of a space, in a more general cycle that involves phases of destruction – or abandonment – and phases of creation, which generally neglect or subvert what has regenerated meanwhile. Yet these processes of spontaneous regeneration of human and non-human configurations produce spatial values that should be considered in all their richness and potential. In a general context where new arrangements are being sought between human development and ecological processes, on both a local and global scale, these places are experimenting with balances that could be studied and valued in the same way as other historical urban productions. Studying brownfields and the self-generating arrangements they host as a model that could have a place in the grammar of contemporary urbanism would be all the more relevant given that, as we've seen, these spaces owe their very existence to two phenomena that are also characteristic of our present condition: deindustrialization and the urban explosion, both still in progress.
Beyond that, this approach reveals an ambiguity of the production of space under the aegis of inter-urban competition and extensive private property. It is torn between an irrepressible tendency towards standardization – inherent to the needs of merchandization – and a desperate need for alterity, which leads it to seek values on its margins – while alienating these same values in the process. Incidentally, the original producers of these regeneration processes, both human and non-human, are generally left out of the final equation. To paraphrase what Gilles Clément wrote about the Third Landscape in the quotation above, we could suggest that the maintenance of values generated outside the field of governance does not depend on governance itself, but on a collective consciousness, meaning a more spontaneous and diffuse political process, which undoubtedly needs to be collectively awakened and nurtured.

NOTES

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