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From wastelands to waiting lands

Retrieving possibility from the voids of Berlin

Ross Beveridge, Markus Kip and Heike Oevermann

In debates urban wastelands can appear caught between stigmatisation and romanticisation, viewed either as blight or obscure opportunity. How can we conceive of these spaces in a more productive, yet contingent, way? This article examines the political and conceptual meanings of urban voids and explores their significance to understandings of cities and urban development. To emphasise the ways in which voids are mobilised for particular agendas, the article shows how professional and political lenses on the 'city' become entangled with these spaces and generate exclusions and contradictions. This is illustrated through a discussion of emblematic voids in Berlin and the ways in which they are made legible in relation to wider socio-political objectives. Taking inspiration from Walter Benjamin's notion of the wish image, voids are seen to become subject to utopian wishes for the city. Projecting desires onto these voids, city lenses mobilise support for broader wishes for the city, whilst never fully realising them. To usefully consider the relations between voids, cities and citizens, we draw on German debates to think of voids as Brachen, meaning fallow or waiting lands, where absences of urbanisation offer a moment of pause to reveal the diverse wish images involved in the making of cities.

Keywords urban, politics, city planning, Berlin, voids, wastelands

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As waiting land, the void asks questions of urbanites: for what purpose is it waiting, how should it be (re-)related to the city and who should be responsible?

Introduction

In this article we explore the political and conceptual meanings of urban voids and consider their relation to wider understandings of cities and urban development. In policy discourses and mainstream literature on cities, voids are primarily understood as problematic signs of urban degeneration and blight (Maantay 2013). In critical urban studies, the focus tends to lie more on the potential of voids to become places of enigmatic possibility, fractures, however temporary, in the state and market dominated city (Gandy 2013, 2016; O'Callaghan, Di Felicianantonio, and Byrne 2018). Building on these debates, this article develops an understanding of voids, which neither stigmatises nor romanticises, but seeks to hold onto the contingent possibilities they can offer.

The concern is for the processes through which an urban void is grasped, made sense of, as a particular kind of 'nothing': as a space of play, community, development opportunity and so on. It draws inspiration from an exchange between *City* journal's editors and contributors on 'the urbanism of nothing' (Krivy et al. 2011), which noted we should avoid essentialising what is a process, that the 'nothing of urban nothing is always a something—namely a set of specific processes, resistances, imaginaries, images, dreams but also designs' (Krivy et al. 2011, 243). Voids have been discussed as the 'other' to the city—where the city is ordered and rational and the void is an object apart, a place of absence (Akkerman 2009). But voids are not merely places of possibility or spaces apart from the city. Rather they are spaces where wished-for-urbanity becomes contingent, where particular socio-political projects are imposed, and cities take form. To better grasp how voids are understood and acted upon by urbanites, the article focuses on their entanglement with professional and political lenses on urban space. We do this in Berlin where voids have been strongly enmeshed with the image of the city (Colomb 2017; Cupers and Missen 2002, 2017).

In the summer of 2018 two unconnected events revealed the paradoxical importance of voids in the city of Berlin. Proposals to build a hotel and Hard Rock Café on two vacant plots at Checkpoint Charlie, the former Cold War border crossing point, attracted increasing consternation (see Figure 1). Charged with historical significance, and part of a tourist hotspot and a prized piece of real estate in central Berlin, the voids became seen as memorials in themselves, and not only in relation to the Second World War and the bombings through which they emerged or the ensuing Cold War which ensured their preservation. A journalist suggested that the two voids, amongst the last remaining few of an inner city previously so shaped by them, had already become a 'Gedenkort', a memorial, not to the Cold War, but to the Berlin that could have been, had politicians from the 1990s onwards not envisaged the future city only in terms of real estate opportunities and tourism (Maak 2018).



Figure 1: Checkpoint Charlie, former Cold War Border Crossing and contemporary tourist hotspot in central Berlin, June 2019, photograph by authors.

Around the same time, a new exhibition in the city underlined the extent to which voids were part of the contemporary (marketed) image of the city, crucial to its distinctive image on the global stage, but, contradictorily, something increasingly lost to its past. 'Nineties Berlin' aimed to provide a picture of a city apart from convention, allowing for self-expression, even freedom. Central to this narrative were the spatial possibilities of the inner city's then vast wastelands, which provided opportunities for diverse urbanisms, the flourishing of self-organised spaces. Of course, the exhibition was both mythologising the period and cashing-in on it in a (pre-COVID-19) period in which the city attracted ever more residents and tourists drawn, in part, by this fading image of Berlin.

As the inner-city becomes increasingly homogenised like many other cities, the two incidents presented encapsulate a number of ideas about Berlin and the importance of the void. Implicit was the sense that Berlin had been a different city, one of opportunities, and that the voids and expanses of wasteland in the city had been integral to this sense of possibility. The loss of the voids and the general development of the city is related to the loss of possible Berlins, past (in the case of the exhibition) and future (in the case of Checkpoint Charlie as a memorial). The image of the city and the image of the void are indelibly bound together.

Taking inspiration from AK Thompson's (2018) interpretation of Walter Benjamin's notion of the wish image, this article argues that voids can be interpreted as wish images of the city. Voids are seen as objects of our desires, and the utopian, unrealisable aspects they include. From this perspective, despite the intentions of architects, planners, real estate developers, as well as activists, the promises of the voids are repeatedly frustrated, at least in view of realising the wish. Both the fascination and fear voids provoke amongst diverse groups of urbanites underlines the paradox that the 'city', like the void, can never be a completely knowable, fixed object which can be bent to the wishes of differing interests, even as it pulls such wishes towards it and lays bare desires to realise, even absolve, them. Examining emblematic examples of voids in Berlin, in terms of the wish images of the city projected onto them, the article casts light on the exclusions and absences which emerge as they are brought back into the city itself. Drawing on the term commonly used in German debates, voids are recast as *die Brachen*, meaning fallow land or waiting lands (Züst, Joanelly, and Westermann 2008). This semantic shift foregrounds the potential of such space

to become subject to the projects of urban actors. As a waiting land, the void can be seen as a condition of both possibility and impossibility: the possibility of space (Stavrides 2016) and the impossibility of realising innocent or conflict-free visions of it.

The article proceeds in the following steps. Section two addresses the meanings attributed to voids and their relation to cities and urban development, arguing for an understanding of them as waiting lands and an analysis in terms of wish images. Section three explores this line of thinking in relation to emblematic voids in the city of Berlin. Five lenses on city-making are delineated: artistic, conservation, architecture/ planning, real estate and activism, each of which relating to wider wishes about the city itself. Through these particular lenses, multiple actors mobilise wish images and project them onto these voids. Although the examples detailed are specific, the purpose here is to sketch out generic political and professional ways of thinking about voids in urban contexts. Section four reflects on the possibilities of the voids of Berlin, developing the idea of the waiting land in relation to the Tempelhofer Feld case. Section five closes the article with reflections on the relation between the city and the void positing the notion of the city-in-waiting.

From wastelands to waiting lands: the political possibilities of voids

In English language debates the term ‘void’, denoting absence or empty space (Oxford English Dictionary), offers the best way of beginning an engagement with urban ‘nothingness’, notwithstanding its wider political and cultural meanings (e.g. see volume edited by Kingsbury and Secor 2021). In *A Glossary of Urban Voids* (Lopez-Pineiro 2020) the author identifies over 200 terms (e.g. ‘abandoned areas’, ‘no-man’s-land’, ‘wastelands’) used to grasp the void within urban areas. Urban voids can emerge for a variety of reasons such as deindustrialisation, ecological disaster, war, real estate miscalculations or strategies of disinvestment. Given the diversity of spaces which can be ‘urban voids’, there can be no satisfactory unifying term. The French term *terrain vague* embraces the impossibility of complete precision, combining ideas of emptiness and uncertainty of space with those of movement, change, and thus possibility in relation to particular places within cities (Mariani and Barron 2014). Voids have been increasingly the subject of media¹ as well as scholarly attention, prompting, as with urban ruins, feelings of romantic loss (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). This may be bound up with ambivalent feelings towards urban decay and deindustrialisation (e.g. Apel 2015). Moreover, however, the wider sense that increasingly gentrified inner cities have become diminished as spaces of encounter and spontaneity (Keil 2017) has also focused attention on these more unruly urban places.

Commonly used terms used in English, ‘wasteland’, might be synonymised with a blank and unproductive space, but it is a notion that has come to encompass multiple meanings, which reflect the possibility of such spaces in ecological, political, economic and poetical terms (Gandy 2013). O’Callaghan, Di Felicianantonio, and Byrne (2018, 7), following Povinelli (2011), point to the productive potential of wastelands, noting ‘that ‘waste’, ‘excess’ produced

by capitalism can become a resource that is re-appropriated by alternative social projects in order to sustain themselves'. The dominance of logics of property rights, market forces and state planning become loosened in these spaces, creating 'an opportunity for deconstructing imprints of power on the city' (von Schéele 2016, 15). Urban voids are important to urban political and cultural practices (Lopez-Pineiro 2020). They are gaps in the urban fabric, breaks or interruptions in urbanisation processes, which is often understood as indicators of urban blight, blots on the urban landscape, places of dereliction and delinquency, which cannot be resolved until they are filled (Maantay 2013).

They are also places which are hard to 'read' or categorise, that are undecided, better seen as 'interim spaces' or 'interstitial landscapes,' which might be claimed, at least temporarily, as spaces of alternative and autonomous social and cultural life (Gandy 2013, 1302). Hence, wastelands may lie dormant but they might become subject to a range of competing claims. As noted at the outset, the nothingness of the void is best seen as an outcome because the 'nothing of urban nothing is always a something—namely a set of specific processes, resistances, imaginaries, images, dreams but also designs' (Krivy et al. 2011, 243).

Voids are not simply islands in a sea of urbanisation. They are shaped by contested property rights and related institutional frameworks sanctioned by the state and performed by the market. They exist in the context of their immediate surroundings, citywide urbanisation processes, local and national government regulations and the force of market logics of commoditisation. They are also burdened with history if not meaning, their presence, or at least persistence, a political outcome (resulting from prior decisions). The classification of space as void is inevitably bound up with economic, social and political agendas or becomes exploited in different ways by actors. The notion of the void has striking similarities with the colonial settler images of *terra nullius* as a legitimising device to conquer lands of indigenous people (Blomley 2004). Similarly, declaring a territory a void makes the implicit claim that previous claims are not valid and populations such as 'the homeless' are often brushed aside in such processes as established interests discover a 'void' (Wright 1997).

Clearly, the terms deployed to define void spaces have implications, shaping social and political understandings (Mariani and Barron 2014). Debates tend to collate around two poles: ideas of voids as places of unexpected—social, economic and ecological—opportunity or as indicators of urban blight (Genske and Hauser 2003; Gandy 2013, 2016). To avoid both the stigmatisation or romanticisation of voids, whilst holding onto the possibility, albeit a contingent one, voids offer, inspiration can be found in a term popular in debates in Germany. Urban voids have been very apparent in Germany, mainly in relation to the deindustrialising cities of the former German Democratic Republic, but also, and increasingly, in parts of Western Germany, such as the Ruhr Valley area (*Ruhrgebiet*). A void is usually referred to in Germany as *eine Brache* meaning fallow land, or waiting land, an agricultural term, which has taken hold in planning, architecture and cultural studies (Genske and Hauser 2003; Broich and Ritter 2015). This notion, on the one hand, reinscribes the void as a space suspended, but one part of a wider system, i.e. urbanisation, or rather one that will be returned to the wider system. On the other hand, voids are seen as breaks in the normal constitution of urban space. They are usefully characterised as a *Zäsur*, a caesura (Broich and

Ritter 2015, 381)—abrupt intrusions, invasions, or slices into urban space. The absences of the void, in terms of buildings or, sometimes, sovereign property rights (cf. Blomley 2004), open-up limited possibilities for urbanites.

The idea of waiting lands suggests that voids stand in a relation to urbanites. They ask the question, not only to what productive purpose will they be put in the city, but who should be responsible to take care of them? In the following section, we argue that waiting lands provide opportunities for the projection of ‘wish images’ of the city, the absences in the urban voids contrasting to more defined and determined spaces in cities.

Wish images

Voids can become subject to diverse and contrasting images of what the city can be. Envisioning new futures for voids inevitably attracts the urban professions (planners, architects), activists devising alternative urbanisms, but also the entrepreneurs of real estate and finance, looking for lucrative investment opportunities, who very often doom creative or political projects to eventual co-option or failure (Colomb 2012; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; O’Callaghan, Di Felicianantonio, and Byrne 2018, 12). To help think through the knotty processes at work in making sense and use of urban voids, inspiration is taken from Walter Benjamin’s (2002) idea of the ‘wish image’. Space is too limited to engage with the lively scholarly debate around the interpretation of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* and its conceptualisation of the wish image (Buck-Morss 1989; Schinkel 2015). Instead, we follow AK Thompson’s interpretation as our point of departure.

Following Freud, Benjamin understood wish images as projections of collective utopias onto particular objects (Thompson 2018, 125), where the ‘collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organisation of production’ (Benjamin 2002, 6). The problem with wish images, according to Benjamin, is that the object’s (the void’s in this case) evocation of a future happiness is premised on a mythical historical notion of a society without conflicts of class and so on (Benjamin 2002, 6). Rather than asking the question why such promises have not been realised and what means would be necessary to finally redeem them, the wish images position the void itself as the object of resolution (Thompson 2018, 134).

Seen in this light, the activist, academic and popular embrace of voids as spaces of possibility becomes thornier. As Thompson (2018, 126) notes about the wish image, ‘while it stimulates desires and provides a compelling vision of what the future might hold, it’s far from inevitable that the energy drawn to the wish image will be directed toward making that vision a reality’. As shall be shown below, the wish images of the city projected onto the voids in Berlin propel the hope or myth of redeemed and conflict-free social spaces. But the mobilisation of such desires by itself is not sufficient to realise them and as such they are always compromised. For our purposes the wish image captures the move from thought or vision to action and practice and the contingencies this inevitably entails.

Voids never exist beyond our comprehension, or indeed apart from our ideas of the city and how it might be transformed (Lopez-Pineiro 2020). However, the nothingness of the void is always understood as something, be it

economic opportunity, political opening or poetical statement. Hence, voids are embroiled with plans, passions and politics and these are processes of excluding interests and possibilities as much as they are an articulation of others. It is our contention that the active processes through which the void is made productive has been underplayed in the literature and that a consideration of wish images driving void-making can generate debate on how contrasting projects of the city play out in relation to these waiting lands. This is not to argue that projects aiming to establish alternative urban spaces should be seen as naïve. Rather it is necessary to critically engage with the tendency to view voids as objects to resolve underlying wishes, to achieve political aspirations in relation to the 'city'. At the same time, a wish image, when connected with a critical analysis of the translocal forces present, also carries the potential to lay bare struggles over urban space.

The following section focuses on emblematic voids of Berlin, examining the active role of nothingness in structuring urban dynamics (Krivy et al. 2011). As such we examine the relationship between the image of the 'void' and the wished-for city.

Wish images and Brachen in Berlin

Voids have been of major significance to cultural and political developments in post World War II Berlin. The vast voids in the city, a result of wartime destruction and the absence of development pressures and resources during the Cold War, generated interest among planners, politicians and architects (Novy and Zwoch 2016), but also those seeking opportunities to realise artistic and political projects, experimenting, challenging the mainstream. The urban *Brachen* became a source of inspiration to realise different approaches to city-making, from the house squatting movement (Holm and Kuhn 2010), to social and ecological innovations such as community and neighbourhood-run (*Kiez*) projects (Huyssen 1997, 68) to the development of urban ecological research, as discussed in the excellent 2017 documentary film *The Brachen of Berlin* directed by Matthew Gandy.

Despite or because of the paradox, namely the decaying condition of the city formerly divided by the Wall (1961–1989) and the political efforts on both sides to display national strength, Berlin became subject to significant interest from architects and the site of major urban development projects, such as the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in West Berlin and the reconstruction of the *Nicolaiviertel* in East Berlin. Of most relevance is the pamphlet 'City in a city. Berlin: a green archipelago' (Hertweck and Marot 2013) by architects Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovasca. Written in 1977, within a broader context shaped by the oil crisis and the Club of Rome report 'The Limits of Growth' (1972), it reflected a changing discourse on cities generally through an engagement with the very particular case of Berlin—a place of non-growth, full of emptiness, a discontinuous urban fabric. The pamphlet presented a novel approach to the decay and disintegration of urban space in the city—to integrate rural elements in the city: landscape, forest, agriculture (see Figure 2). The architects used the archipelago as a



Figure 2: 'Block 6' decentralised water treatment and open space design project (International Building Exhibition Berlin/ *Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin* (IBA), 1987), photograph by authors.

metaphor to conceive green and rural areas as grounds and flows in which the still used entities of the city are embedded and connected as a group of islands in the sea. Here, *Brachen* are converted from waste land into rural or 'rurban' (Krivy et al. 2011) space.

The political conditions of this period (especially the 1970s and 1980s) did not last and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990 brought the pressures of globalisation to the fore and justified fears that the city would be overwhelmed, its uniqueness lost in speculation and nation-building (Cochrane and Jonas 1999; Ladd 1998). Initially, the city's economic struggles after decades of separation and the loss of the Cold War subsidies in both the East and West hampered boosterist visions of 'global city' Berlin (Bernt, Grell, and Holm 2013; Beveridge 2011) and slowed the development of the city's voids, vacant buildings and ruins, providing ample spaces for alternative urbanisms (squats, clubs, political projects) to flourish through the 1990s (e.g. Scharenberg and Bader 2009). Contemporary Berlin has become a more attractive site for multinational firms, creative industries and start-ups, as well as a major (pre-COVID 19) tourist destination. Voids still, however, trigger contests, even if they are less central to political and urban discourses.

In the following, we discuss voids in Berlin in relation to five wish images which highlight generic lenses of city-making: artistic, conservation, architecture/ planning, real estate and activism. These diverse and often

conflicting lenses are the key professional and political ways in which urbanites make sense of, act upon voids and formulate wish images about the 'city'. They encompass what we might see as the main urban professions: conservation, architecture and planning, which seek to design and shape urban form and life, and hence become inevitably entangled with voids and questions about their relation to other urban spaces and the wider city. We also include the sector which seeks to commoditise urban space in its search for profit and is a crucial driver of its conditions of transformation: real estate, for which voids are, or are not, opportunities for profit accumulation. Finally, we include an activist lens on voids, the view often taken by citizens that voids often offer chances to expand the urban commons and urban democracy. Of course, these lenses on city making can overlap, but we detail them as distinct ways of seeing both the city and voids to expose more generic features and practices. While the wish images presented are general, the examples are, of course, specific to times and places in Berlin. The discussions draw mainly on secondary literatures on urban voids in Berlin, as well as our own engagements with some of the spaces discussed as residents of the city. In all of the lenses, wish images capture a form of idealisation of the void which seeks to blend-out contrasting interpretations. The overall purpose is to show the contradictions, closures and exclusions of interests which can occur as their realisation is pursued.

The artistic lens

An artistic lens shows us the potential to understand the city as something that consists of magic, poetry and fantasy. It also reveals a wish for a different interpretation or appreciation of urban space and how people act within and react against it. The idea of the void resonates in and beyond artistic discussions of the urban. Central to the notion of the wasteland in literature and art is that 'it is a landscape that resists notions of proper or appropriate use' (Di Palma 2014, 3). In urban landscapes the void has been identified as a recurrent aesthetic figure but with a heightened spatiality, a relation to the idea of *the* city or *a* city. Seeing voids as uncanny places stimulates desires and can provide a compelling vision of the city, but in the moment of grasping voids—and without an analysis of the conditions of possibility for making this vision a reality—this lens opens them up to processes of aestheticisation, also of eventization (Colomb 2012). In Berlin, voids have had a particular potency, given their vast size and number. The archipelago of voids emerged as a result of destruction caused by the Second World War. The Cold War division of the city and insulation from economic and political forces driving urbanisation in other large cities in Europe (Huyssen 1997) helped prolong their existence.

Artistic representations of post-second world War Berlin engaged with this curious landscape, its causes and symbolic meanings for the city and nation (Cupers and Missen 2017; Huyssen 1997). The German film maker Wim Wenders was particularly prominent in seeing the Berlin of the 1970s/1980s in symbolic terms: the desolation in the postwar inner-city 'ruined landscapes' (*Trümmerlandschaften*) reflective of the void in German society resulting from National Socialism, the holocaust and defeat in war. In his film *Wings of Desire* (*Himmel über Berlin*) the huge empty spaces encompassing Potsdamer Platz, part of the city's Berlin Wall voids (*Mauerbrachen*) are a place of disorientation



Figure 3: Skalitzer Straße in Kreuzberg between Kottbusser Tor and Görlitzer Bahnhof, first half of the 1980s, photo with permission from Manfred Kraft/Umbruch Bildarchiv.

and discontinuity (Ladd 1998, 120), but also of magic and some hope (Calvedt 1992). Seen through voids contributed to a ‘wilderness’, as Wenders himself put it (Monclus and Diez Medina 2017, 251). Through this lens on voids, notions of a ‘wilderness’ emerge, as Wenders himself put it (Monclus and Diez Medina 2017, 251), evoking ideas of freedom, the possibilities of the unfinished and disrupted spaces of the city, even a re-enchantment of the urban, given the freeing of space from the obvious ordering of the state, market, and bureaucracy (see Figure 3).

This, to some over-wrought and historically de-contextualized presentation of the city through its voids (where no direct reference is made to the city’s place in German history in the film) (Cook 1991, 43) can be problematised as aestheticizing the city. In a sense the voids represent the city, or at least become central to an imaginary of the city, one which persists, as we noted above, in cultural representations such as the ‘Nineties Berlin’ exhibition. More prosaic readings of the voids and the city were offered by the Berlin writer Tanja Dückers (2016) who saw the voids as part of the *Kiez*-life, places of local play and delinquency, whose symbolic meaning seemed stronger to non-Berliners and, most particularly, New Berliners (*Wahl Berliner*), though arguably this is part of a wider felt nostalgia for the idea of a pre-gentrified ‘Babylon’ Berlin (Sark 2017) built on urban ruins and voids.

Ultimately, a dominant artistic narrative can create a wish image of the city (like Wender’s 1980s Berlin) that marginalises other artistic visions in its treatment of voids. Moreover, an aestheticisation of urban space can distract from social needs or the actions required to deal with urgent challenges within the city.

The conservation lens

The lens of heritage conservation allows us to understand some of the major difficulties of understanding voids as (future) urban spaces. The general idea of heritage conservation is to protect something material—documents of the past. Therefore, voids are not usually objects of heritage conservation in a traditional sense and even if they were, preserving a void promises authentic experience of the history of the place. At the same time, however, the actual practice of conserving the history of a void would limit its being and future possibility, foregrounding particular understandings of the heritage of the site over others, marginalising different and contesting viewpoints.

Berlin has, however, at least one void that is widely discussed as a heritage site due to its political significance to the Cold War period of divided East and West Berlin: Checkpoint Charlie. From 1961 to 1990, Checkpoint Charlie served as the passing point for the military services to cross the border between the American sector in West Berlin and the Russian Sector in East Berlin. Ultimately, it is a place with symbolic meaning as the meeting point in the Cold War struggle between NATO-aligned countries and those of the Warsaw Pact.

Frank's (2018) analysis of the heritage industry focused on this space showed a range of conflicting stakeholders, plans and understandings of history. It also conveys the high significance of the voids as cultural heritage and lays bare a central problem in the field of heritage conservation. There are few material objects to preserve at Checkpoint Charlie but rather memories or histories. Emptiness as heritage compounds a contradiction that leads to two central questions for those professionals charged with dealing with it. On the one hand, the conservationist asks: What is it exactly that we are trying to conserve here in this emptiness? On the other hand, the urban planner asks if and how we can use such an emptiness. Nonetheless, a coalition of actors (including architects, conservationists, historians) emerged aiming to conserve the heritage of the site in an authentic and readable form that recognises the importance of the voids to the history of the city, the history of the World War II bombing of this site and the subsequent instalment of the border checkpoint on its ruins. Projecting this wish onto the void, however, does not help to conserve the void within the urban landscape in the long-run.

While both questions might be understood as philosophical or, at the least, professional conundrums. In Berlin they have caused complex problems because they have significance in practice. Due to the sale of the ground to a developer in the 1990s, and their central location in the city, the development pressure has increased over the years, just as it has in Berlin generally. In short, this is what is usually called prime real estate. Today this contradictory situation is shaped mainly by four competing visions and interests. First, there is the plan to create a museum and memorial. Second, there is a consortium pushing for a major real estate development with housing, offices and spaces for recreation. Third, there is the wish to define and protect important heritage objects of this site, such as two walls of the surrounding buildings (*Brandwände*) and objects which remained on the ground; and finally, the hope to avoid further touristification and gentrification around the site through local participation in decision-making. None of these competing visions entail a maintenance of the void as a literal space nor as a space of pristine possibility. Whatever decisions are



Figure 4: Alexanderplatz in the summer of 2003, picture taken from the Television Tower (*Fernsehturm*), photo from Bjarki Sigursveinsson (Wikicommons).

ultimately taken, the void will in some way be compromised as it is embroiled in the wider wish images of Berlin at play in the controversy.

The real estate lens

A real-estate lens frames voids in terms of their (unrealised) potential to be developed for the wider city's benefit: to develop profit, housing, offices, built form and so on. Real estate development strategies, however, respond to market demands and the expectation of profit thereby regularly frustrates the promised common interest of urban society. Alexanderplatz is a good example of how such a real-estate lens works. Built as the main square of East Berlin, the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) capital, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after reunification in 1990 the vast open space of Alexanderplatz became seen as a development opportunity (see [Figure 4](#)). Designed to open out onto the grandiose boulevard of Karl-Marx-Allee, Alexanderplatz had hosted huge rallies and marches in the GDR. In contrast to the dense inner city of pre-World War II Berlin, it was also intended to symbolise the new freedom brought about by the socialist regime for its people. The end of that regime and subsequent German reunification brought a feverish run on land and real estate in the early 1990s due to the grand, and in the short-term, unrealistic predictions of economic and demographic growth for the city.

In the years immediately after reunification, this real estate boosterism did not include Alexanderplatz. The square was left to deteriorate, becoming a symbol

for the demise of the GDR (Weszkalnys 2007, 211). Around 100,000 people who had been employed in and around the square during the GDR times lost their jobs within months of reunification. Shops and restaurants at Alexanderplatz gradually closed down during this period, fostering the impression that it was in decay, an 'empty' space, attracting the increasing presence of punks, subcultures and other street folk. The vast open spaces, framed by the large areas of the square as well as the broad streets linking to it, were soon likened by developers and media commentators to 'Siberian Plains' (Weszkalnys 2010). The square and the building composition itself were criticised as an example of overwhelming 'socialist monumentality' (Sigel 2009, 105).

Alexanderplatz was increasingly seen not in terms of its actual spatial and material features, nor its historical past (or a positive view of that past), but in terms of the potential to become a different space within the wider making of the 'New Berlin' (Till 2005): to move beyond the ghosts of the past (Ladd 1998), to generate social and economic development in the common interest of the city as a whole. The enormous state-owned space appeared like an enormous opportunity for investors and politicians to develop a key site in the inner city. The results of an architectural competition in the early 1990s proposed a (revanchist) redesign of the area with eleven skyscrapers. However, economic recession in the mid 1990s and the city's stagnant economy until the 2010s put a break on these grand plans. Several parts of the open spaces of Alexanderplatz and the surrounding areas, however, have already disappeared with the construction of shopping malls and large retail centres. As the past 30 years since the fall of the Wall have shown, the piecemeal approach to real estate investments at Alexanderplatz was driven by the expectations of profit for developers not by a public deliberation about what common needs exist for this state-owned site.

The planning/ architectural lens

Planning and architecture, especially landscape architecture, seem to be appropriate professions to deal with voids, given their practice of creating open spaces, visual relations and atmospheres—all three important aspects in the making of voids. Planners and architects are also the urban professionals most clearly tasked with actualising the wishes of others (as well as their own) in relation to the city. However, contrary to the wish image of the voids as a space of openness and spontaneity, planning and architecture are, in simplified terms, centred on building, on buildings and their arrangement to each other and the forms of urban life they are intended to support and enliven. This inclination to create space anew, however attuned to maintaining generative and empowering opportunities, will inevitably entail some programming and fixing of the void. While new possibilities emerge from building on voids, others will be lost, however abstract or unrealistic they may have been. Planning is also the field in which various public and private interests are governed and managed. Clashes and conflicts about value, use, and design (*Gestaltung*) arise about and in urban spaces. This lens grasps voids as an opportunity in a double sense, namely as trigger and tool to generate private and/ or public interest. However, the medium and long-term effects of planning and architecture interventions on places and their dense urban surroundings, especially in recent times, include gentrification, the displacement of residents, homogenisation and speculation.



Figure 5: Ladestraße Waage-Aufsicht, now incorporated in the site of the German Museum of Technology (Deutsches Technikmuseum (SDTB)), photo by Stefan Stern 1982–83, with permission from the Historical Archive of the SDTB.

The development of the Park at Gleisdreieck (*Park am Gleisdreieck*) in Berlin illustrates these processes. The triangular junction (*Gleisdreieck*) emerged through the crossing tracks of the elevated city train lines (S-Bahn) in 1902 above an area of rail and water infrastructure. While the city train lines are still running, the two railway stations (*Potsdamer Bahnhof* and *Anhalter Bahnhof*) and long distance train tracks mainly disappeared after closure in the 1950s or were incorporated into the underground train system. The obsolete land had been a wasteland until 2006 when a landscape architectural competition was launched by the city of Berlin, who still owned the land (see [Figure 5](#)). Up until that point, only the northern parts of the wasteland were enmeshed with the urban, most notably the site of the German Museum of Technology (*Deutsches Technikmuseum*) opened in the 1982 and includes parts of the park, tracks and railway buildings.

For over twenty years, local initiatives prevented the wastelands from being developed into an infrastructural area again and secured it as a green space, in parts with special ecological status. From 2005, an intensive participatory planning process began and local initiatives fought to become part of the working group accompanying the project. They succeeded in bringing in their ideas such as keeping existent allotments, conserving historical artefacts, bringing in urban gardening and diverse uses (Müller 2015). At least in some respects the interests of citizens, particularly local residents, were incorporated into the planning and design processes. It wasn't the image itself however, but rather

the enduring activism that achieved some success. Further, the state planning paradigm that was activated in this case also resulted in the marginalisation of those citizen initiatives aimed at safeguarding the park as a site of alternative uses and informal urbanisms. Hence, these practices that we might associate with voids were enrolled as part of a strategy of gentrifying this central area of the city (see [Figure 6](#)).

Parts of the park have designated uses such as skateboarding, basketball, playgrounds, while others are open to different usages (grassed areas, steps and platformed areas). This variety attracts a wide range and high volume of people throughout the day and night. The multiple coding of space and time, with some places left as *Brache* and inaccessible, and others organised by different communities, such as the community gardens and allotments, give the park a *Brache*-type appearance, even if it is intensely used. The park provides a place of value to a range of interests, but is also part of a wider development strategy to create an attractive area for the high end speculative—and poorly designed—housing built around the northern parts. The park provides an attractive view for many of the new apartments, which has in effect been paid for with public money and resources, though it increases the profit of the investors. In this sense, the memorialisation of the void at Gleisdreieck also becomes part of the creation of lucrative inner-city vistas and lifestyles.

The civic initiative lens

Voids have been important sites for social experimentation and for the development of alternative culture in Berlin, such as trailer parks (*Wagenburgen*), the installation of temporary cultural centres, recreational spaces and urban gardening spaces (e.g. *Prinzessinnengärten*) (Clausen 2015). While voids were of cultural and political significance in Berlin prior to the end of the Cold War in 1989 (see above), reunification in 1990 and the appearance of voids in the Eastern part of the city and along the route of the Berlin Wall and its security zones (*Mauerbrachen*) increased opportunities for informal and temporary uses (Boland, Bronte, and Muir 2017). The generic wish image associated with the appropriation of voids for such uses is one of inclusivity, collective experimentation, forms of communing and freedom from constraints. It raises the hopes for marginalised groups to realise their own heterotopias.

Nonetheless, and as in all wish images, these forms of alternative urban development also produce their compromises of principle and types of social exclusion as they are realised in practice. An example of these ambiguities can be found in the developments on the riverbanks of the Spree close to the former East–West border. The sale of many voids seemed an obvious way for the city of Berlin to address its own financial problems during the decade. The former *Osthafen* (East Harbour) was identified as one of the largest investment projects in Berlin under the label ‘Mediaspree’: a media-focused waterfront development plan. The promise of the private redevelopment of these areas was to create some 40,000 jobs and add high quality housing to the neighbourhoods in a city that was—until the late 1990s—predicted to grow enormously.

However, the development was seemingly complicated by alternative cultural projects and clubs who had already occupied many of the empty spaces



Figure 6: The Gleisdreieck Park in June 2017, photograph by authors.

with access to the water and wanted to keep them open to the public. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the public-private-partnership of the Mediaspree investment project became increasingly known publicly, the Berlin Senate and several investors saw these 'temporary usages' as a positive contribution to the branding of the area as creative and unique. This was particularly attractive as



Figure 7: Holzmarkt complex, waterfront in May 2020, photograph by authors.

the Mediaspree development sought to attract global commercial actors in the spheres of culture, arts and media (Dohnke 2013, 264). However, the various projects occupying the voids sought to make their presences permanent and to disrupt the wider development of the area, with resistance taking the form of the 2006 citizen's initiative 'Sink Mediaspree'.

While most of the corporate led Mediaspree-projects have been implemented on the voids, public access to the waterfront has been secured along some sections (see Figure 7). Additionally, a few alternative projects have survived and they retain the appearance of informality one might associate with a recently occupied void. Of particular interest is the Holzmarkt area at the banks of the river Spree, which was squatted by a cultural collective at the forefront of the struggle against 'Mediaspree'. Formerly the site of a famous techno club ('Bar 25'), it is now owned by a cooperative with spaces primarily for projects related to arts, crafts, creative industries, cultural events, student housing and child care facilities. While projects such as the Holzmarkt still largely uphold the ideal of allowing public access to the riverbank without, they also clearly profit from the huge tourist and local interest in the site. The challenging political-economic context in which such projects unfold should be foregrounded: the intensely gentrifying and commodifying centre of Berlin. Nonetheless, despite the project's achievement to endure as a location of alternative culture, the site today hardly fulfils the wish image of underground low-budget experimentation or a refuge for socially marginalised groups. The Holzmarkt has become a fashionable, well-visited and thus expensive location in the city and ultimately caters primarily to the interests of its tenants and paying customers. It is popular mainly with young people in their 20s or 30s, international visitors to the city, residents from the recently built neighbouring apartment blocks and workers in the nearby offices of media companies.

Voids as ‘waiting lands’

These five lenses reveal different wishes that are commonly inspired by voids: creating poetry and magic (artistic); enabling an authentic experience of history (conservation); profit maximisation and individual property rights (real estate); shaping the socio-material space (architecture/planning) or promoting collective experimentation and inclusion (civic initiatives). Common to the five vignettes is a wish unencumbered with conflict and difference. However, the resolution of the wish on the basis of the void repeatedly frustrates these projections. In other words, in all cases the promises that the voids initially appear to hold can never be fully resolved. Voids are not simply open, or spaces of possibilities, but are rather predefined through the lenses, caught in the specific pull of the wish, as well as a wider desire to remake the city. Furthermore, if absence is potential, then presence will be contingency, an exclusion of alternative options and a disappointment of ideals (if not visions) when a comprehensive strategy of implementation is missing.

To draw on the wish images of the voids in a more productive way it is necessary to move away from a focus on the object alone and open the void and the city to an alternative understanding. Against the backdrop of increasing economic valorisation and curation of urban space in Berlin, voids were no longer—if they ever had been—the sole receptacles of possibility and spontaneity in the city. This was highlighted by the contributors to Cupers and Missen (2017) edited volume on Berlin, who reflected on the conditions of possibility and uncertainty in relation to voids. Most Berliners are surely aware that the voids have been disappearing over the last 30 years and that they have generally been developed by conventional real estate interests. The political and cultural position of voids in the city has changed.

This sensitivity to the increased scarcity of open space in the city is arguably apparent in the case of Tempelhofer Feld, a 355 Hectares site of a former airport in the inner city. The Berlin government's planned development (of mainly public and private residential buildings) was suspended after a public petition and referendum in 2014. Intriguingly, the government's plans to build housing on the central site, in a city with a shortage of housing (and with many notable large public parks, it could be added), were rejected in favour of maintaining the void. For the majority of Berliners, the vastness and emptiness of the site, its function as a public space and common, apparently offered possibilities worth maintaining.

Tempelhofer Feld is, ultimately, for many a park, a place for recreation, and some formal rules and demarcations are apparent. It has also been used by the city government as temporary accommodation for refugees. Informal gardening and cultural projects have also taken root in the vast space, even if the airfield aesthetic remains relatively intact. We might say there are a number of wish images apparent. Tempelhofer Feld has, however, maintained a sense of the unfinished openness associated with the void: alongside the joggers on the runway—community, self-organised in the form of urban gardens, an emergency space for state services, providing temporary accommodation for refugees, spaces of nature and urban biodiversity. Above all, there is a feeling of contingency about the space, a realisation that the local government will

probably one day again seek to use at least some of the space to build housing and address the shortage in the city (as well as provide investment opportunities for real estate). Indeed, it is the sense of a suspended state of affairs, under the close attention of urbanites, which generates the sense of possibility at Tempelhofer Feld, and has affinities with some of the wider debates on urban voids in Germany.

As noted above, the most common term for the void is *die Brache*, an agricultural term, 'fallow land'. In the architectural debate in Germany *Brachen* have been conceptualised as 'waiting lands' (Züst, Joanelly, and Westermann 2008), which expresses the idea of future possibilities inherent to something seemingly caught in stasis. The meaning is slightly different to that of the void, where absence is the source of potential. Instead, fallow or waiting lands provides a sense of hiatus, productive rest, not wasted space or time, but a sense of things still to come. Also, by implication, even stewardship, guardianship, an understanding that these spaces require looking after, care. It also clearly places voids in a wider system (of urbanisation rather than agriculture) and in relation to other more productive spaces, suggestive of the rhythms of crisis within capitalist economies. Perhaps, then, the potential of voids is not only the contingent possibilities for alternative urbanisms to emerge, but rather the opportunity to reflect on our collective lives in the city, and the contingencies of finding collective solutions to diverse interests and objectives. We should embrace the absence and inaction of the void as an opportunity to lay these processes bare, a counter to the constant desire for action and presence.

The example of Tempelhofer Feld is instructive as the void has become part of the idea of the city itself. The void is compromised, as the space has become used and partially and temporarily developed. But its status as a legitimate urban space (part of the city) reveals on-going tensions in the making of that city. It is inherently on the cusp of becoming more than a void, even as its emptiness is valorised in relation to other potential uses. Going further it might even be argued that the on-going negotiations over the void between the state and urban society provide an image of city-making akin to a 'public-commons partnership' (Milburn and Russell 2018), complete with frictions and spatial tensions. The void of the Tempelhofer Feld allows us to consider the idea of the city as a void, as lying in wait (see Figure 8). The wishes for the city will always create conflict, but the citizens, as guardians of the city, have become decisive to its future.

Conclusion: towards the city-in-waiting?

The discussion of wish images of the *Brachen* of Berlin voids has emphasised the bundled, multi-layered nature of the urban fabric and the generative and performative nature of change and power through it (Williams 2019). This conceptual way of seeing the city, in terms of wish images, exposes limits and exclusions. Here urban space itself has political potential, but is always contingent. While the complete realisation of wish images may not be possible, due to the conflicts and contradictions which unfold. Even at the Tempelhofer Feld competing visions are held in productive tension and become the purpose and promise of the void as waiting land. Thompson (2018, 134), taking inspiration



Figure 8: Tempelhofer Feld, state park on a former airfield in central Berlin, June 2020, photograph by the authors.

from Benjamin, argues that wish images can only advance the promise, the dreamed of ending. A dialectical understanding of the relationships between wish images and the objects to which they refer is necessary to reveal the actual means through which the promise is to be realised. More generally, Benjamin thought that a dialectical approach presented the possibility to halt developments, provoke a break in time, one that allows for the conception of processes of becoming as processes of being (Tiedemann 1983, 35). Thompson (2018, 134) argues that this has political as well as analytical potential, in that it lays bare processes of social organisation, exposing them to wider struggles. The social and political challenge, and opportunity of the void, is to develop a collective understanding of the implications pursuing particular wish images of the city.

How should those (planners, architects, politicians) formally charged with leading urban development think about voids and their relation to the wider city? As shown in the previous sections, the relation between voids and the wider city is a fundamentally political one, the presence of the void unsettling the veracity of the 'city', contests over one revealing of contests over the other. But what if, at a conceptual level, the relation between the void and the city was reversed so that rather than seeing the void as a repository of wish images of the city, the city is viewed as a repository of wish images of the void? What would be gained, if we thought about the city in the terms and register of the void or, better, waiting lands? What happens conceptually and politically, if we open up the city to the wish images of the void without materialising them?

If the political possibility of the void for the city lies in its unoccupied, unallocated sense, what if we thought of the city in similar terms, as in a state of 'in-waiting'? The 'city-in-waiting'² might be considered as a way to apprehend the pent-up desires inspired by the voids, to think through how these relate to the wider wishes for the city as a 'thought object' (Sayer 1984 in Wachsmuth 2014, 78). Grasping the city in this way generates an open, incomplete map, in which the normal forces of urbanisation, as well as their counterparts, are held back, not given space. The gains might be twofold. Conceptually, there would be a pause, a holding back of the processes of city making, a reigning in, however temporarily, before space in the city is developed. This waiting would not refer to a temporary period leading to a certain stage/ mode of development of urban space or being a certain stage in a development scheme. Rather it could be thought of as a *Zustand*, a condition as well as a situation, something continuing, in tension (as the Tempelhofer Feld example laid bare). Politically, this could serve the purpose of exposing the wishes projected onto urban space. It could provide the opportunity to subject them to scrutiny, to place them alongside and in dialogue with other wishes, to ask questions about how a genuinely democratic and just city would deal with the exclusions and losses incurred in the pursuit of specific visions and plans.

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Notes

- 1 For example, this series in CityLab: <https://www.citylab.com/special-report/wastelands/>.
- 2 This line of thinking has some resonances with recent debates inspired by the post-colonial turn in urban studies, particularly AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) *For the City Yet To Come*, where the focus lies on the contingency of the urban (Roy 2016, 810).

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