

Bodies in the Void

Temporary practices in *Terrain Vague* sites

terrain vague
temporary urbanism
community engagement
artistic practices
experimental placemaking

This paper explores the potential of temporary urbanism practices in *Terrain Vague* sites – abandoned or undeveloped urban spaces. Drawing on de Sola-Morales' concept of *Terrain Vague*, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, and De Certeau's everyday practices, the paper examines how bodies engage with these undefined spaces through movement, events, and temporary activities. Through case studies in London and Lisbon, the research examines how these spaces can address socioecological challenges in cities. We introduce the concept of "Vague Catalyst" projects, which employ minimal, temporary interventions rather than permanent structures to enable diverse community uses and activities.

The research analyses two representative cases: Cody Dock in London, a community-led regeneration project of a post-industrial site initiated in 2009, and LABIC in Barreiro Velho, Lisbon, a laboratory of community innovation that ran in 2022. Both projects demonstrate how temporary practices create opportunities for environmental learning and citizenship while illustrating how different users reimagine *vague terrain* through bodily presence and activities.

The study identifies five key characteristics of successful Vague Catalyst projects: 1) implementation in previously abandoned or degraded spaces; 2) adoption of temporal and tactical urbanism approaches; 3) gradual spatial transformation based on evolving community needs; 4) community-driven management that evolves from individual custodians to communities of care; and 5) function as catalysts for adaptive urbanism that respond dynamically to immediate needs and opportunities.

The paper demonstrates how community-led temporary practices can reimagine and regenerate urban voids, transforming them into valuable social spaces, maintaining ecological benefits and contributing to experimental placemaking and community strengthening.

Kamvasinou, Krystallia¹; Iannizzotto, Lorenzo Stefano²

¹ University of Westminster, School of Architecture and Cities, College of Design, Creative and Digital Industries, London, UK.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3531-7847>
 kamvask@westminster.ac.uk

² ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, Portugal.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1955-1078>
 lorenzo_stefano_iannizzotto@iscte-iul.pt

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TERRAIN VAGUE: AN INTRODUCTION

We live in an era of cities or *planetary urbanisation* (Brenner and Schmid 2011). With the world's urban population continuously growing and moving to cities, urban development affects ecosystems, biodiversity and natural resources on a planetary scale.

Rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation coupled with economic restructuring generates *Terrain Vague spaces*, also known as *Urban Voids* (Lopez-Pineiro 2020) or *Vacant Lots* (Bowman and Pagano 2004). These are either undeveloped, leftover spaces or abandoned, derelict, post-development spaces that lie in a state of suspension, without any official function, the by-products of the process of urban space production (Lefebvre 1991). Precisely because of their nature and condition, urban voids are open to be occupied with spontaneous appropriations or informal uses, by diverse groups. They often become the locus for bottom-up projects, and alternative spatial and social practices, which highlight not what is there but what *happens*: movements, bodies, events.

The definition of *Terrain Vague* (de Solà-Morales 1995) does not focus so much on the physical, morphological characteristics, origin or legal or economic aspects of these spaces, neither is it concerned with providing a representative image or aesthetic. On the contrary, all attention is focused on: i) the passage of time and events that happen in these spaces – "empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place" (de Solà-Morales 1995, p. 119); ii) those who inhabit or use these spaces, i.e. the people who care about and fight to preserve them – "filmmakers, sculptors of instantaneous performances, and photographers seek refuge in the margins of the city" (p. 122); iii) the sense of freedom, hope and possibility that these spaces evoke, a state of indeterminacy in which anything is still possible – "void, absence, yet also promise, the space

of the possible, of expectation" (p.120). It is no coincidence that the first to take an interest in these spaces, to use them and to fight for their preservation were artists and performers, along with photographers and filmmakers. In fact, such spaces, due to their lack of control, their immediate availability and their flexibility and openness to any kind of activity, have been the privileged place for corporal artistic experiments and performances. A recent example is the DOM- collective, created in 2013 and active mainly in Rome: "DOM- investigates the language of performing arts, contaminating it with the Environmental Humanities' militant approach and the issues and imaginaries of feminist and queer ecologies. Its practice revolves around the relation between bodies and landscapes, questioning the tangle of permeability, and observing how power, nature and marginality interact in public space" (Pirri 2019). The installations or performances in these spaces are never indifferent to the context, they do not use the space as a mere support or *tabula rasa*, but on the contrary, they are research and investigation projects, exploring the relations between the body and the site, seeking to reveal hidden aspects or to bring to light memories and traces of the past, such as the project *Lichtgrenze* (border of light) in Berlin (Gandy 2022).

Temporarily cut off from the city's economic production circuit and in a fragile and uncertain condition, subject to change, the *Terrain Vague* has often been the place of artistic practices of resistance related to walking, from the walks of the Surrealists to the urban drifts of the Situationists, to the *nomadic transurbance* of Stalker collective (Careri 2006). The desire to make art without producing a physical object that could be sold, and thus fit into capitalist logic, has driven artists to meet in these desolate places on the edge of the city, where they would carry out an ephemeral action, happening or performance, with no physical trace remaining afterwards, other than the evidence of a few photographs.

Moreover, the uncertain future and the impossibility of building makes such spaces available for temporary uses not permitted or tolerated elsewhere, for spontaneous, artistic, self-managed, experimental design or alternative economic practices stimulating creativity (Zetti and Rossi 2018).

TEMPORARY URBANISM

"Temporary Urbanism" is an approach that challenges traditional urban development by embracing short-term, flexible, and often experimental uses of space in cities. Bishop and Williams (2012) highlight how vacant lots, underused buildings, and other urban spaces can be temporarily repurposed for a variety of uses, ranging from pop-up shops and art installations to community gardens and event spaces, involving diverse users. Some of the actions involved in temporary urbanism come under the banner of "tactical urbanism", defined as "an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies" (Lydon and Garcia 2015, 2); however not all temporary urbanism is tactical, so it is a broader umbrella term that can include larger scale interventions. This form of urbanism is characterised by its transient nature, often seen as a response to economic downturns, urban decay, the lengthy process of formal urban redevelopment, or providing interim solutions pending long-term development (Bishop and Williams 2012). It represents a shift in urban planning, focusing on immediacy and the potential to quickly adapt urban spaces to meet changing community needs and desires, contributing to placemaking. While digital online platforms may be used to self-organise and bring groups together, the actual placemaking takes place in person, through strongly embodied practices of making, moving, training or events. Temporary urbanism encourages innovation and creativity in urban design (Kamvasinou and Roberts 2014), allowing for a diverse range of stakeholders, including artists,

entrepreneurs, and community groups, to contribute to the urban fabric.

Temporary urbanism also addresses sustainability in urban development. Reusing and repurposing spaces minimises waste and environmental impact, contributes to addressing the climate crisis, and provides opportunities for social equity and economic regeneration. A 'light touch' intervention practice as advocated by temporary urbanism is more likely to preserve local site biodiversity and ecology. In that sense, temporary urbanism is not just a stopgap measure; it is a strategic approach shaping the way cities evolve over time (Bishop and Williams 2012).

THE CORPOREAL EXPERIENCE OF TERRAIN VAGUE

The absence of prescribed function in *Terrain Vague* spaces creates unique conditions for bodily exploration and activation, and vice versa, the material and temporal qualities of *Terrain Vague* spaces shape bodily experience (Merleau-Ponty 1945; De Certeau 1984; de Solà-Morales 1995).

Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) argues that embodied perception is fundamental to our being. We can't separate our understanding from our physical presence. The body is both subject and object – "one's own body": we both are a body and have a body (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], p.127, 168-175). Hence the body is not just an object in space but our primary means of "being-in-the-world" (p. 440, 504). Further, our bodily awareness isn't just about knowing where we are, our orientation in space or potential for movement, but also about understanding our possibilities for action in space. Hence, space is not just geometric but experiential. We explore and understand *Terrain Vague* spaces that don't have clear functions or boundaries through movement and physical engagement, in other words

through direct bodily experience and embodied perception rather than just visual or conceptual understanding.

The undefined nature of *Terrain Vague* allows for more creative spatial scripts as bodies 'write' new meanings through their spatial and temporal movements and activities. For de Certeau (1984), walking creates a unique spatial story; his concept of tactical spatial practices contrasts the top-down view of planners and institutions with the everyday lived experience of people. Planners might see 'vacant' land from above, but bodies on the ground experience these spaces differently through direct engagement – often as places of memories, nature, informal play and activities. While institutional power operates from a place of strategic control and creates prescribed spaces, everyday practices are tactics that operate in, and rewrite spaces designed by others. As *Terrain Vague* spaces have lost their original designation or meaning and are outside strategic control, they become perfect grounds for tactical practices where bodies can improvise more freely and creatively in time and space away from formal structures of control. Artists creating temporary installations, community groups establishing gardens, and informal gatherings and events are just a few examples of such corporeal appropriations and experiences that the *Terrain Vague* enables. Movement patterns create new meanings in these spaces, with bodies tracing desire lines and informal paths. *Terrain Vague* becomes the vessel for temporary marks and traces left by bodies, ranging from graffiti art and impromptu adventure playgrounds to less acceptable behaviours such as homeless sheds or downright illegal activities such as drug use. Perceptions of the *Terrain Vague* will hence vary from open space or wildscape (Jorgensen and Keenan 2012) to a precarious no-go zone.

De Solà-Morales (1995) describes *Terrain Vague* spaces as "Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation" (de Solà-Morales 1995, 120). The

promise/expectation suggests both the opportunity for exploration and a bodily anticipation or readiness. De Solà-Morales emphasises these are spaces "in which a series of occurrences have taken place" (p. 119) which suggests a layering of bodily experiences over time, where past occurrences inform present bodily engagement and creates a temporal dimension to corporeal experience. Temporal uncertainty affects how bodies occupy space and can allow new forms of spatial engagement on the margins of possibility: physical encounters with decay and dereliction can lead to sensory engagement with emerging ecologies.

In this liberation from function, bodies, human and non-human, can define their own relationships with space in experimental and unscripted ways. For example, when nature reclaims such spaces, biodiversity and wildlife are bound to thrive compared to their prior scripted existence. Artists and performers have used bodily presence to document and explore the *Terrain Vague*; physical presence becomes a way of understanding these spaces while performance can be a means of revealing spatial potential. Through individual experiences a collective corporeality can be developed and built into collective practices, with shared physical activities that create community, performance and artistic intervention, and collective memory through bodily presence.

BODY AND EMERGING PRACTICES

LaFond (2010) and Kamvasinou and Roberts (2014) highlight that experimental approaches to urban spaces can breed opportunities for cultural, sustainable planning and transform vacant land into valued community spaces, serving as catalysts for revitalising neglected areas.

Over the past two decades, a variety of formal projects and emerging practices have capitalised on the opportunities presented by these spaces, designing and

implementing experimental initiatives characterised by their ephemeral nature, though often with variable durations. These efforts have highlighted the remarkable flexibility of such spaces and their capacity to accommodate diverse activities and communities based on evolving needs.

Some initiatives in London, UK, for example Canning Town Caravanserai, Cody Dock, Cultivate London Brentford Lock, have leveraged the opportunities created by the 2008 global economic crisis, such as the temporary suspension of large construction sites and planned projects, along with the legacy of extensive spaces left out of the 2012 Olympic Games regeneration, to propose and implement temporary projects with diverse functions and activities (Kamvasinou 2017a and 2017b). These initiatives have often demonstrated the potential for long-term sustainability and impact, challenging traditional dichotomies in urban planning.

In Tokyo, Japan, small-scale *Terrain Vague* sites, typically rented out as a parking space, have been made available for a variety of neighbourhood cultural events, such as, for example, in the case of Kasu Harappa ONDI (2006), a small privately-owned vacant lot. Through a simple agreement outlining usage rules and assuming responsibility for event organisation, the space has been utilised for diverse activities, including performances (such as a Butoh performance in 2006), demonstrations, art exhibitions, cultural gatherings, markets, and student workshops. Given the small size of the lot and to facilitate the diversity of events, the space has remained unbuilt, maximising its flexibility for different uses (Rahmann and Jonas 2014).

In Paris, France, the architectural studio *Atelier Architecture Autogérée* (Petrescu and Petcou 2023) has designed and implemented two notable projects in collaboration with the local community and associations: Passage 56 (2006) and Eco-Urban Network/ECobox (2001-2005). Passage 56 was developed

in a small interstitial space deemed unbuildable under French law due to its limited size. This constraint initiated a collaborative effort among the local community, associations, professionals, and local authorities, leading to a participatory consultation process to determine the future of the space. Through these meetings, the concept emerged to maximise the potential of the site while ensuring flexibility, creating a space that could host meetings, screenings, workshops, celebrations, markets, and even small-scale urban farming. The project, led by professionals but constructed with the involvement of residents, featured a suspended wooden structure serving as a threshold to the site. Additional structures were designed for cultivation purposes, while the rest of the space was intentionally left open to accommodate various other functions.

In Berlin, Germany, eXperimentcity (2003) showcases a series of cultural and ecological initiatives and experiences within Berlin's vacant open spaces, which emerged in the aftermath of the East-West conflict. Initiated by the non-profit organization id22: Institute for Creative Sustainability, eXperimentcity has fostered the reuse and regeneration of these spaces through diverse temporary activities and practices. These initiatives range from ecological housing projects and cultural and creative hubs to urban gardens, highlighting and demonstrating the potential of such spaces for innovative and sustainable urban development (LaFond 2010).

In Lecce, Italy, a series of events and activities (2012) known as Incontri del Terzo Luogo (Encounters of the Third Place) were designed and implemented to activate abandoned spaces within the city (Capasso and Georgieff 2016). This informal group, based at Manifatture Knos – an abandoned building repurposed as an independent cultural and creative centre – promoted a new awareness of these spaces. They organised meetings, activities, workshops, and projects inspired by a novel

concept of the garden of the third landscape (Clément 2004), often in collaboration with Gilles Clément, who frequently contributed to their initiatives.

Similar examples from Ljubljana, Slovenia, include a multidisciplinary collective that discovered and later secured the management of Krater (2020), a large, abandoned site located in the heart of the city (Sretenović and Osole 2022). Originally used as a quarry for the construction of a nearby district, the site had remained unused for thirty years due to a series of unfulfilled proposals and projects. Drawn by the feral landscape and the site's rich and complex biodiversity, the Krater collective organised workshops to experiment with the site's invasive plant species, cultural and creative events, educational activities focusing on biodiversity and the value of spontaneous nature, and even a major cultural event and workshop to propose an alternative project to that of the local authorities, who had planned the complete destruction of the site. Temporary and flexible structures, constructed from repurposed materials, were installed on only a small portion of the site, leaving the remainder to evolve naturally under the forces of spontaneous ecological succession.

In conclusion, because of its characteristics and status, the *Terrain Vague* does not highlight physical space, or objects. Rather the space is a container that foregrounds and allows the presence and emergence of bodies, both through movement and the act of walking, and through the temporary actions and practices that are carried out; relationships, material and immaterial, which, through events and activities, can contribute to the strengthening of the community.

METHODOLOGY: TEMPORARY PRACTICES IN TERRAIN VAGUE SITES

Our research aims to explore the potential of temporary urbanism practices and strategies in the *Terrain Vague*, demonstrating how this approach can preserve and enhance existing corporeal appropriations (human and non-human) and enable new ones, increasing social and ecological benefits (Nunes, Björner, and Hilding-Hamann 2021; Petrescu et al. 2021) and recalibrating the role of the architect (Petrescu and Petcou 2023). We present indicative examples of a certain type of project in *Terrain Vague* sites, realised by applying temporary urbanism, which we call *Vague Catalyst*. This concept refers to projects addressing uncertain and fragile site prospects by avoiding permanent structures or functions. Instead, these projects focus on temporary activities, situations, and actions, using minimal and light interventions like installations, events, artistic works, or sometimes no physical changes, allowing the everyday occupation of space and the movement of bodies to emphasise their presence. The emphasis is on community involvement and maintaining the site's inherent ambiguity and unpredictability, thereby making these spaces catalysts for change and adaptable to fluctuations in community needs (Kamvasinou and Roberts 2014).

Methodologically, while our analysis is broad, covering a wide range of such projects, we focus in more detail on two representative case studies from London, UK, and Lisbon, Portugal, selected as indicative of North and South European regions, as well as for their experimental, community/artist-led approach, and longevity: Cody Dock, a community-led regeneration, river revitalisation and social enterprise project on a post-industrial site in Newham, East London, initiated in 2009, and LABIC (2022), a laboratory of community innovation, based in Barreiro Velho, a city part of the Great Metropolitan Area of Lisbon.

Cody Dock, located in a socioeconomically deprived yet diverse area within the London

Royal Docks regeneration zone, and south of the Olympic sites, has a rich history from pre-industrial times to post-industrial decline and recent regeneration. Historically significant for its strategic position in coal transportation, it became derelict after 1967 due to industrial shifts. Since 2009, the Gasworks Dock Partnership (GDP), led by Simon Myers, has been transforming it into a community marina for live-in boats and an arts hub (Kamvasinou 2017a). This transformation includes environmental restoration, history and ecology education, and diverse temporary community activities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted its value as a communal space supporting health and wellbeing, affirming GDP's slow, organic, and collaborative approach to placemaking (Kamvasinou et al 2023).

LABIC (2022) operates in an area that has undergone a recent shrinking process due to de-industrialisation, partial abandonment and neglect. In this area, they identified and photographed 25 urban voids, totalling 4,250 m², equivalent to a football pitch. This was part of their 'map and identify' initiative, involving a collaborative effort with students, an architecture office, and local residents. Proposals were developed for regenerating these spaces, and the owners of the abandoned plots were contacted. The owner of "Void number 12"

temporarily entrusted their lot to LABIC, leading to its cleanup and community discussions about its future. This culminated in the "Festival a Rua é Nossa" in April 2022, featuring cultural and sporting events for the city and community (LABIC 2022). Created as a project of a temporary nature, the idea of LABIC is to activate long-term and lasting processes, leading to a stronger community that can take care of the spaces. Even a small, abandoned space can be a pretext and catalyst for larger, long-term changes.

By bringing side-by-side different time periods, practices and dimensions of placemaking projects through the case studies, we reveal how urban voids can operate as experimental sites/vessels of corporeity to creatively address current socioecological challenges in cities.

BODIES IN THE VOID: OBSERVED EXPERIENCES

BODIES IN THE VOID: CODY DOCK

Cody Dock is south of the Olympic park, in the Borough of Newham, East London, sitting on the river Lea which leads to the river Thames (Fig.1, 3). It is located within a very large regeneration zone. The

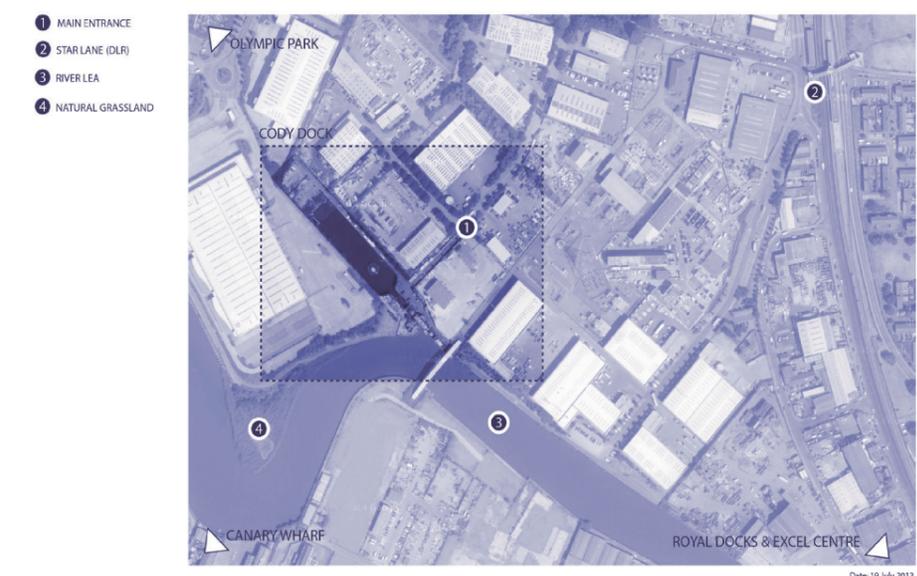


Fig.1 – Cody Dock aerial view, July 2013. Author's own, adapted from Google Maps.



Fig.2a and b – Cormorants at the River Lea, March 2024. Author's own.



Fig.3 – The River Lea at Cody Dock, with new and old developments on the opposite riverbank and London's Canary Wharf financial district in the background, March 2024. Author's own.



Fig.4 – Cody Dock, the rolling bridge and the floating riverbeds. Author's own.

area is ethnically very diverse and socioeconomically deprived. Cody Dock's history spans pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial periods, decommissioned as a port in the early 1980s (Kamvasinou et al 2023). The landscape combines active industrial development – including warehouses, business parks, and cement facilities – with derelict industrial sites that have

over time become crucial habitats where endangered species find sanctuary (Kamvasinou et al 2023) (Fig.1, 2a and b).

The repurposing of Cody Dock, led by Gasworks Dock Partnership (GDP), aims to create a sense of place and ownership for locals through community-led development. The timeline

of the project involves Simon Myers (Founder, Gasworks Dock Partnership - GDP) discovering the site while living in his boat in 2001. In 2005 he enters a dialogue with key stakeholders and is offered a 5-year lease which he rejects as it was not enough time to do anything significant with the site (Myers 2013). With the global financial crisis at full swing, more opportunities

for alternative governance open: in 2009 GDP is set up as a social enterprise, and a 999-year lease on site is set up with Thames Water and Newham Council (Myers 2013). In 2011 GDP becomes a charity as a vehicle to regenerate the site. It aims to transform the site into a working marina and arts hub through provision for moorings for live-in boats, renting artist studios, and restoring footpath access to River Lea. By 2015, several organisations and individuals are engaged so that the place is shaped in partnership, from social enterprises, charities such as Mind and Groundwork, corporates, small businesses, to local volunteers from communities, and artists (Myers 2013; Kamvasinou 2017a). During Covid19 the place becomes popular with locals and others who discover it during a time when access to other places is restricted. By 2022, GDP has completed site specific works for an exhibition space, a Therapeutic Horticultural classroom in collaboration with the University of Westminster, and



Fig.5a and b – Student Exhibitions, Workshops and Field Visits at Cody Dock. Author's own.

a 'Rolling Bridge' in anticipation of the dry dock boat moorings, as well as ecology surveys on the River Lea and small-scale projects in collaboration with London-based universities (Kamvasinou et al 2023; see also <https://codydock.org.uk/>) (Figs 4, 5a and b, 6a and b).

Connecting people to the ecology of the river Lea and introducing lighting installations, floating riverbeds (Fig.4) and community gardens and spaces has been an important part of the activity and mission of the Gasworks Dock Partnership, that are primarily a community and artist-led collective



Fig.6a and b – The Therapeutic Horticultural Centre, March 2024. Author's own.

that manage and safeguard the site so that it is not developed for housing, as has happened in the surrounding area, and remains open to access the river Lea. For example, the Therapeutic Horticultural Centre (Fig.6a and b), led by University of Westminster school of architecture staff Maria Kramer and Corinna Dean and co-designed and produced by their students, is for propagating plants as well as a space for learning for patients from the National Health Service (NHS) Social Prescribing programme (Kamvasinou et al 2023; see also <https://codydock.org.uk/>)

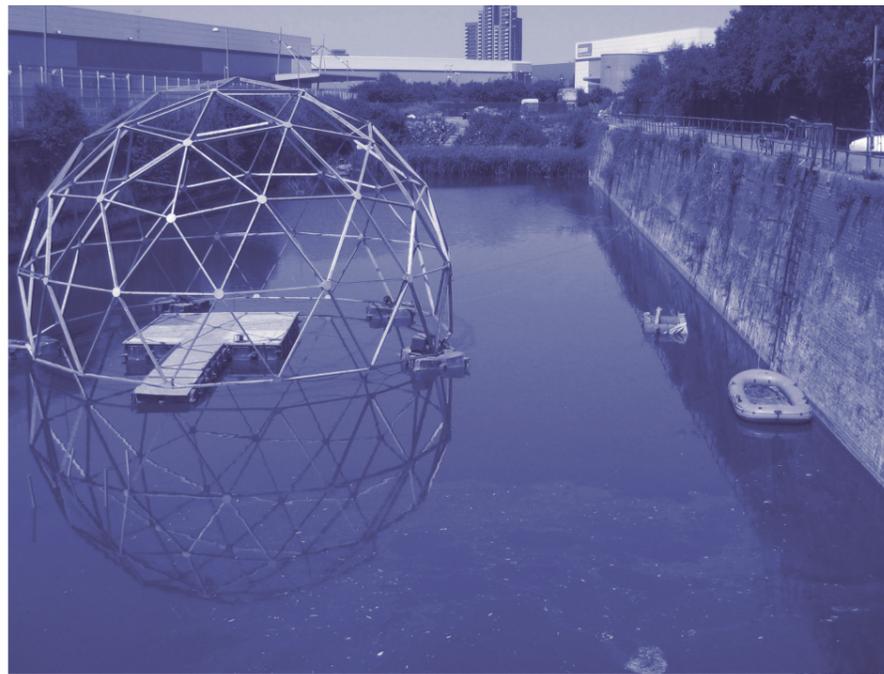


Fig.7 – Cody Dock: Transformation Over Time, 2013/2022, Digital Photographs, Cody Dock, London. This composite image shows Cody Dock in 2013 with a temporary geodesic dome floating stage, and in 2022 featuring newly installed artists' workspaces. Author's own.

therapeutic-gardening/). As the scope of Cody Dock has expanded to educational repurposing beyond the environmental and artistic, so have the corporeal experiences in time and space. The appropriation of the site by different users – bodies in the void – includes student visits and guided tours (Fig.5a and b), workshops, organised events, and film nights, while sensory installations allow visitors to experience the sounds of the river. The project now employs a permanent ecologist leading the ecological and biodiversity surveys

(see <https://codydock.org.uk/ecology/>).

Temporary structures still dominate the landscape as a working site but they gradually multiply, providing space for diverse people – artists, ecologists, boat moorers, local businesses, community – to work on the site (Fig.7). The *Terrain Vague* therefore embodies different temporary practices, exemplifying Cody Dock's philosophy and repurposing approach that emphasises slow place-making.

The site's regeneration unfolds organically over time, allowing for unexpected events like the COVID-19 pandemic to be accommodated. Collaborating with various actors, such as corporate, public, and third-sector organisations, local councils, residents, and schools, helps educate and create awareness about socioecological place-making while generating income and support for the project's longevity. Over the past 15 years, the project has opened the *Terrain Vague* to be experienced by tens of thousands of visitors and engaged with thousands of volunteers, and, through that corporeal experience of the river environment, gradually growing a community of care for the Dock and the river Lea.

BODIES IN THE VOID: LABIC

Barreiro Velho represents the historic centre of Barreiro, a town located south of Lisbon and part of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Due to its geographical position and distinct characteristics, Barreiro historically served as a significant industrial hub and a strategic railway junction in Portugal. These factors drove the town's rapid growth, transforming it from a relatively small fishing village into a comparatively large city within the Portuguese context. However, beginning in the 1990s, the city faced a decline due to rapid deindustrialisation processes, leading to demographic reductions and the abandonment of vast areas, including industrial zones and residential neighbourhoods. This decline created challenges in integrating new waves of residents, bringing different habits and often unfamiliar with the town's heritage and history, with the longstanding residents, who often perceived the current situation negatively.

LABIC BARREIRO VELHO is a community innovation laboratory in Barreiro's historic centre funded by the Bairros Saudáveis, a public call for financing projects presented by local entities (Cardoso et al. 2022). Bairros Saudáveis is a public project, with a participative nature,

with the objective of implementing small interventions financing projects presented by associations, collectives, civic movements, and resident organisations.

LABIC emerged as a network to bring together various organisations and actors active in the region, particularly in the social, cultural, and artistic sectors, while fostering new connections with institutions in the surrounding area, such as the University of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL). The primary objectives of the project, as outlined during its proposal and presentation, encompass several interconnected goals. First, the project seeks to conduct surveys aimed at mapping and identifying key locations and individuals within the area. Second, it aims to foster and strengthen relationships, contributing to the development of a robust sense of community. Third, the project intends to design and implement initiatives in collaboration with local citizens, ensuring active participation and engagement. Finally, it strives to reinforce the connections between

the community and relevant institutions, creating a network of mutual support and cooperation (Iannizzotto and Paio 2022; 2023).

The activity plan presented during the project proposal phase and subsequently implemented – published and accessible on the LABIC website (LABIC 2022) – outlined a one-year duration for the laboratory (aligned with the funding period), along with a preliminary diagnostic phase and a post-funding phase to ensure continuity and sustainability of certain activities beyond the funded timeframe. Following an initial diagnostic phase, which identified key challenges and the existing conditions through participatory activities with the local community, the project was structured into five phases:

I. Mapping and Identification, 1 month: This phase focused on mapping and identifying the local population, community, associations, and other stakeholders within the area. Collaborative activities were conducted to create

a comprehensive network of local actors (Fig.8). Additionally, vacant urban spaces were mapped, having already been recognised during the diagnostic phase as potential areas for territorial regeneration due to their significant presence in the region.

II. Connecting, Motivating, and Mobilising, 3 months: During this phase, a series of activities, meetings, and workshops aimed to activate local communities, strengthen neighbourhood relationships, and enhance interactions between the network of local actors, associations, and institutional support structures.

III. Capacity Building and Empowerment, 4 months: This phase aimed to empower the community and enhance both individual and collective technical skills. Support was provided for the implementation of projects proposed by the community, selected through an open public call.



Fig.8 – LABIC, Mapping of the Commons, Barreiro Velho, 2022. Source: LABIC.

IV. Enhancing Governance, 2 months: The project sought to improve the community's direct participation in governance and shared management by revitalizing the historic community association Grupo dos Amigos do Barreiro Velho (GABV), which had been weakened by the loss of its meeting space and limited engagement from younger generations. Efforts were made to reactivate and strengthen the association, as well as to secure a new headquarters (Os Franceses building).

V. Consolidating and celebrating, 2 months: The final phase focused on designing and preparing for the temporal sustainability of the project. This included establishing a community group, reactivating the association, maintaining some of the projects and activities initiated during the previous phase, expanding the network of local and institutional support, and connecting with other citizen laboratories across the country. The goal was to ensure continuity beyond the project's completion and the cessation of funding.

During the initial phase, as

outlined in the project proposal, a collaborative mapping of urban vacant spaces in Barreiro Velho was planned. The preliminary diagnostic phase identified the significant presence of these spaces as a particularly relevant issue. These areas, often neglected, unclean, and used as informal dumping sites, contributed to a negative community perception but also represented potential opportunities for regeneration as community spaces, given their temporary state of disuse.

To address this, a photographic exploration and mapping walk was organized for residents and the community on March 20, 2021. This event, conducted in collaboration with the local photographers' group (Clube de Fotógrafos do Barreiro), aimed to identify, map, and photograph the urban vacant lots of Barreiro Velho (Fig.9).

In this mapping exercise – as in others, such as the mapping of land uses, common goods, and the cultural-historical itinerary – while the results were consolidated in collaboration with researchers and professionals, the data, decisions,

and observations were primarily gathered through community walks. This approach transformed the act of data collection and mapping into a collective journey. Residents and community members moved as a group through the streets of Barreiro Velho, exploring, discovering, and making decisions together.

As part of the mapping process – published and accessible online – a total of 25 urban vacant plots were identified and documented. Their total area, amounting to 4,250 square meters, was calculated and compared to the size of a football field to highlight their collective potential. Subsequently, LABIC initiated a process, involving both local institutions and neighbourhood actors, to identify and establish contact with the owners of these plots.

In one case, "Void number 12", LABIC successfully contacted the owner of this small buildable space (likely the result of a prior demolition). An agreement was reached for the temporary use of the site, coinciding with the duration of LABIC, to host community

meetings and events. Together with residents and volunteers, a series of collaborative sessions were held to clean and prepare the space, which had previously been used as an illegal dumping site and was otherwise inaccessible. Once rehabilitated, the space was employed for meetings (notably during the COVID-19 pandemic), workshops, and community events. Additionally, it became one of the primary venues for the urban festival "A Rua é Nossa" ("The Street is Ours"), a weekend-long event featuring a dense program of sports, cultural activities, music, markets, city tours, and performances that traversed various streets and squares in the city (Fig.10a and b).

AFFECTED TERRAINS: REFLECTIONS ON TEMPORARY PRACTICES IN TERRAIN VAGUE SITES

The two case studies exemplify how temporary practices create opportunities for embodied environmental learning and citizenship and illustrate how different user groups physically engage with, affect and reimagine urban voids. *Terrain Vague* spaces, due to their abandonment and their openness to alternative experiences, have been places-opportunities for corporeal artistic experiments and occupations, and environmental stewardship, highlighting the relationship between bodies and landscapes.

In LABIC, the decision to repurpose a small urban vacant plot – emphasising its potential and immediate availability – and to organise a mobile and itinerant festival that moved across different streets and squares in the city resulted in flows and movements of people through otherwise unused streets and abandoned spaces, such as "Void number 12". Despite the ephemeral nature of the event, this initiative generated material and physical transformations with long-



Fig.10a and b – LABIC, Void number 12 before and after intervention, during the LABIC Festival A Rua é Nossa, Barreiro Velho, 2022. Source: Homero Silva, Clube de Fotógrafos do Barreiro and LABIC.

lasting impacts.

The movement and flow of bodies through the seldom-used streets of Barreiro Velho's historic centre and its abandoned spaces – rhythm by time, schedules, and the presence or absence of events – transforms how residents and the community perceive urban spaces. This dynamic also reshapes the perceptions of external visitors. Moreover, it leaves lasting physical traces, such as the cleaning and

maintenance of "Void number 12", the creation of urban furniture specifically designed and self-built for the occasion, the cleaning of public areas, and the installation of posters, drawings, and urban decorations. Such actions have the potential to initiate processes of care and stewardship of public spaces by the community.

Cody Dock in London demonstrates how urban voids are best placed to creatively address



Fig.9 – LABIC, Walking Photographic Mapping, Barreiro Velho, 2022. Source: LABIC.

challenges in cities, such as post-industrial abandonment, the global financial crisis and the COVID19 pandemic, increasing social benefits such as community bonds, care for the local environment, accessibility and safety. A "light touch" intervention practice like in Cody Dock is more likely to preserve local site biodiversity and ecology and symbiotically link "bodies in the void" and the environment of the void.

Crucially, the *Terrain Vague* is never really "void" but always full of potential. Even small interventions like in LABIC that temporarily reimagine a site can promote innovation that can be scaled up or replicated and mainstreamed for social benefit. The act of walking through the partially abandoned streets of Barreiro Velho not only constituted a form of spatial transformation, albeit temporary, but also activated processes with significant and potentially long-term implications.

By engaging directly with the environment, residents could experience the space firsthand, potentially altering their perception of public areas. This experience may challenge or reshape existing fears and preconceived notions while fostering processes of urban care and strengthening community identity.

It is noteworthy that, for example, the results of the mapping exercises were consistently displayed publicly, utilising streets and building walls as supports. This practice not only disseminated the findings but also induced spatial transformations, signalling the presence of the events and leaving a visible trace of the working group and the broader community.

In essence then, temporary urbanism practices and strategies in *Terrain Vague* sites contribute to reimagining and regenerating the sites through embodied practices of making, moving, training, or events and redefine them as public spaces or urban commons – vessels for diversity and uncertainty, adaptable to changing community needs.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF VAGUE CATALYST. FROM CUSTODIANS TO COMMUNITIES OF CARE

To conclude, from the intersection of the concepts and theoretical lenses outlined in the first section, combined with detailed direct observation and analysis of the two presented experiences, the authors propose an initial attempt to define a series of emerging and innovative practices that share common characteristics.

We believe that collecting, analysing, and classifying this type of experience is both timely and important. Over the past twenty years, several emerging and innovative projects have been observed in *Terrain Vague* spaces across various European cities. These projects are diverse in nature, approach, and outcomes.

However, we argue that there is room for improvement in the systematic organisation, analysis, and classification of such practices, aiming toward a structured categorisation of their methods, approaches, and actors. Recognising common characteristics in these practices – initiated and implemented as exploratory and innovative efforts in specific contexts – may contribute to transforming these isolated niches of innovation into more widespread and integrated practices within institutional planning frameworks.

From the comparison of the two observed experiences and the theoretical framework introduced in the first part, certain shared characteristics emerge:

1. Context of Implementation: Both projects were carried out in *Terrain Vague* spaces that were previously abandoned, polluted, and degraded. However, the two projects differ significantly in terms of their environment, ecological

context, scale, and duration.

2. Temporal and Tactical Urbanism Approach: Despite the opposing durations of the two cases – one involving a 999-year lease and the other a one-year project – their approaches, methodologies, and strategies align with the principles of temporary and tactical urbanism. Instead of designing abstract plans on paper for future implementation, these projects began with physical occupation and exploration of the spaces. They progressed through targeted actions and activities developed collaboratively with local communities, building the spaces incrementally while maintaining clear objectives.

3. Gradual Spatial Transformation: This approach results in spatial modifications that are not abrupt or fixed. Instead, they involve a gradual, day-by-day transformation of the space based on evolving needs, opportunities, and community input. These spaces lack a singular function or a predefined spatial form. Instead, they remain open and flexible to accommodate diverse activities, ephemeral structures, and temporary constructions that change over time. This flexibility allows the spaces to adapt to various uses and functions.

4. Community-Driven Management: Although these spaces are often located on private land, they are directly managed by local associations, communities, and residents. In these projects and within this context, through daily practices and activities that transform both the space and the individuals, the local community managing these spaces evolves from a few initial enlightened custodians to a much larger community of care. The daily stewardship of these spaces becomes an essential component of their spatial transformations and management. Much like a garden cultivated in the summer, which would quickly become barren and unproductive without the care and dedication of the community inhabiting and managing it, the daily care of these spaces defines the spatial condition of these projects.

5. Catalysts for Adaptive Urbanism: As a result of these characteristics, the projects do not impose rigid, pre-designed plans on the spaces or neighbourhoods. Instead, they self-define and self-construct incrementally, hosting a wide variety of activities and functions.

The spaces evolve dynamically over time, serving as catalysts that respond to the immediate needs and opportunities of the moment and the people who inhabit and manage them. Spatial changes are highly fluid, shaped by the movements, flows, and appropriations of the spaces by the community members who engage with and care for them.

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