

Between the Fascination and the Commitment with *TERRAIN VAGUE*

Letter from the director

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The royal family at the inauguration of the German pavilion International Exhibition of Barcelona 1929. Restored image of photo by Brangulí-ANC.

I remember being an architecture student and visiting, in 1986, the newly reconstructed German Pavilion in Barcelona. If my fascination with its modernity was already immense at that time, it is difficult to imagine the impression it must have made on the King of Spain, Alfonso XIII, when Mies van der Rohe himself presented it to him at the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition.

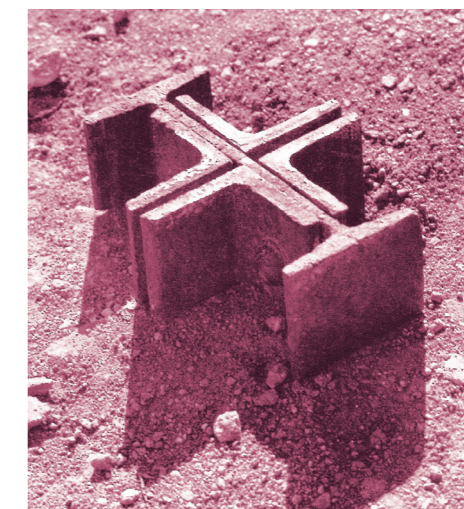
During my first visit to the Pavilion, I purchased the issue 261 of *ARQUITECTURA Madrid* explaining the reconstruction process, carried out by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Professor of Architectural Theory in Barcelona, together with Cristian Cirici and Fernando Ramos. In the subsequent accounts of the reconstruction project, the authors acknowledged:

We are aware of having lived through an exceptional experience. As architects, we were confronted with the reconstruction of a paradigmatic building of twentieth-century architecture. We began from

diverse backgrounds of training and experience. We faced the singularity of a reconstruction for which abundant information existed regarding what we were to rebuild, yet not enough to establish beyond doubt the precise characteristics of the mythical Miesian building. Our work has been a project. But an atypical project insofar as research, critical decisions, and technical solutions have related

to one another differently from the ways customary in conventional architectural projects.¹

This constitutes a reflection of their strong personal commitment, since the architects undertaking the reconstruction possessed comprehensive knowledge of the materials, all of which had been archived in Barcelona, Berlin, New York, and Chicago. They also relied upon analyses of the remains discovered on the site itself, including the foundations, which enabled them to guarantee the fidelity of the reconstruction, based primarily on the original building rather than on the drawings later redrafted by Mies himself. As well, the reconstruction departs from the original in several respects, such as updated roof waterproofing and drainage systems, the extension of the green marble and travertine finishes behind the exterior walls instead of using painted stucco, and the incorporation of contemporary safety measures.



The 1984 discovery of a fragment of the original 1929 column © Francesc Català-Roca - Fundació Mies van der Rohe.

That was my first encounter with Ignasi de Solà-Morales. My second encounter with Solà-Morales was in 1993. But this time I realized that it was with Manuel, his older brother and Professor of Urbanism in Barcelona, occurred upon the completion of L'illa Diagonal together with Rafael Moneo.

And it was not until after 1995 that I encountered Ignasi de Solà-Morales again through his essay *Terrain Vague*, published in *Anyplace* by MIT Press, and later collected in *Territorios* (Gustavo Gili, 2002). Upon reading this brief text, the same immediate effect was repeated as with the reconstruction of the German Pavilion: first fascination, and then reflection upon social commitment as an architect.

The essay *Terrain Vague* begins by considering the abandoned, empty, or indeterminate urban spaces of large modern cities. The author analyses how photography has shaped our perception of the metropolis and how, in contrast to the traditional image of the city as a symbol of progress and order, an aesthetic and cultural interest has emerged around these marginal and forgotten places.

Solà-Morales advocates the use of the French concepts *terrain* and *vague* because they refer to spaces of urban scale, without clear boundaries, empty, unoccupied, or awaiting transformation, characterized by the absence of a defined function and by a sense of freedom, uncertainty, and blurred memory. These spaces represent zones existing outside the productive logic and urban control of the city, although traces of the past always survive within them, together with open possibilities and expectations for the future. The author argues that these places exert a powerful contemporary attraction because they embody estrangement, ambiguity, and resistance to the homogenization of the modern city. More than mere urban voids, *terrain vague* spaces are charged with poetic, emotional, and critical meaning.

Up to this point, I insist, the text is genuinely fascinating, and this

explains why it has attracted so many scholars of contemporary urban thought. It is therefore unsurprising that this issue of *UOUSj*, under the title *Unscripted Grounds*, brings together articles that reference the term defined by Solà-Morales.

However, at a certain point in the essay, the author remarks that there are photographs of urban spaces that provide us with information not only about built reality but also about human reality. These are images of empty spaces in which the photographer reveals traces of previous lives. In this second part of the text, Ignasi de Solà-Morales associates *terrain vague* with a contemporary experience of estrangement and uprootedness. He argues that the inhabitant of the modern metropolis feels "foreign to himself": living within a changing, accelerated, and fragmented society in which stable identities and enduring certainties no longer exist. This sensation of not fully belonging anywhere is reflected in the city's empty and abandoned spaces.

The text also criticizes the defensive reactions that emerge in response to such uncertainty. According to Solà-Morales, many societies respond to fear and insecurity through forms of xenophobia, extreme nationalism, or closed identities based on race, culture, colour, or territorial belonging. These rigid identifications attempt to construct a false stability yet ultimately produce exclusion and conflict. *Terrain vague* thus appears as a metaphor for this contemporary condition: open, ambiguous spaces without fixed identity, standing in contrast to society's obsession with classifying, controlling, and defining everything. The author warns against the danger of imposing absolute identities—national, cultural, or urban—because they eliminate diversity and the possibility of coexistence with "the other."

Finally, he argues that art and architecture should embrace complexity and difference rather than attempt to erase everything strange or indeterminate. These

empty spaces preserve a critical and human value precisely because they allow us to imagine alternative ways of living and relating to one another. Consequently, the essay questions how architecture should intervene in such places. Solà-Morales warns that aggressively urbanizing them may destroy precisely what makes them valuable: their indeterminacy, memory, and freedom. He proposes instead a more sensitive approach, capable of respecting their open character and symbolic potential.

The essay concludes in a prophetic manner regarding our contemporary reality, marked by conflicts, displacement, and devastated cities, where vast urban sectors are transformed into abandoned and dehumanized spaces:

Through the violence of war, an urban space becomes terrain vague; the contradiction of war brings to the surface what is strange, unclassifiable, and uninhabitable.²

This once again leads us to reflect upon whether there exists a limit to what should be considered a *terrain vague* case study. Ignasi de Solà-Morales' statement takes the concept of *terrain vague* to a far more radical and political dimension. By asserting that war transforms the city into a strange, destroyed, and uninhabitable space, he describes a condition in which the functions, identities, and certainties that once organized urban life disappear. War produces an extreme form of *terrain vague*: not merely an urban void, but an existential and cultural void.

The text therefore raises an important question: how far can the concept of *terrain vague* be extended? If it originally referred to abandoned or indeterminate plots within the modern city, the term now appears to expand so as to include territories devastated by violence, exclusion, or social collapse. We are therefore compelled to reconsider whether *terrain vague* is merely an urban and architectural category, or whether it also constitutes a political, historical, and human condition linked to the crisis of modernity. Empty spaces



By Palestinian News & Information Agency (Wafa) in contract with APImages, CC BY-SA 3.0.

are not simply "physical places," but visible manifestations of deeper conflicts: wars, collective fears, social exclusion, and the loss of identity.

I believe that our social commitment as architects must compel us to investigate physical spaces whose identities demand reinforcement, while simultaneously rejecting, in unequivocal terms, the manifestations of armed conflict that produce unsafe and devastated environments for human existence.

This reflection has remained with me since the moment I invited Hocine Aliouane-Shaw, professor at ENSAP Bordeaux and colleague within *UNIVERSITY of Universities (UOU)*, to serve as Guest Editor for the present issue of the journal. Coincidentally, this invitation occurred simultaneously with the beginning of my participation in the European research and innovation programme *COST*

(Cooperation in Science and Technology), particularly within the Action *OBSERVISTA* (Observatory of Innovative Strategies for Repurposing Terrain Vague).

Under this shared research framework, it initially seemed possible for all these colleagues to contribute to this remarkable issue, *Unscripted Grounds*. However, events did not unfold as I had anticipated, and regrettably such collaboration failed to materialise, except in a few valuable instances. Reflecting again upon the reasons for this divergence, I have come to believe that many of my colleagues within *COST OBSERVISTA*, when studying, selecting, and even awarding case studies of *terrain vague*, remain captivated by the conceptual fascination of the term itself. Shouldn't we go beyond and fully engage with the responsibility of distinguishing between the fundamentally different conditions encompassed by these spaces?

Writing this editorial letter has allowed me to understand more clearly that those political *terrain vague* produced by war not only obliterate every trace of prior identity, but also prevent the possibility of its reintroduction. Within such spaces, the victors impose new forms of existence founded upon different ethical and cultural values.

It will therefore be profoundly valuable to try to establish a dialogue between these two research communities — the contributors to this issue of *Unscripted Grounds* and the participants in *OBSERVISTA*. Such a debate could help us, or at least help me, to define a critical position that would allow continued engagement with this otherwise remarkable European research and innovation programme without requiring withdrawal from participation, as several members have chosen to do.

BRUIT DU FRIGO

By contrast, a magnificent example of fascination combined with genuine social commitment emerged through the opportunity to travel to Bordeaux and work with the collective *Bruit du Frigo*.

Founded in 1997, this urban creation studio brings together architects, artists, urban planners, mediators, and builders. It develops artistic, participatory, and contextual projects in public space, combining urban installations, micro-architectures, collective actions, and cultural events, and has become particularly renowned for its work along the Rocade, Bordeaux's urban ring road. Its objective is to promote the transition toward sustainable, shared, and welcoming cities by advocating cooperative urbanism, breaking with the dominance of specialists, and restoring power and agency to civil society.

This approach was initiated in the late 1990s by Gabi Farage and Yvan Detraz, while they were architecture students in Bordeaux. From their awareness as students, they one day realized that their education failed to provide what they were truly seeking. Architectural training seemed to conceal the architect's social responsibility, reducing the profession to the mere production of spaces:

We were more concerned with the ethical and political foundations of the discipline than with the realities of the profession. We therefore decided, alongside our studies, to go out into the streets in search of what we could not find at school: a culture of everyday life and reality, an active and creative relationship with places and people. How do inhabitants experience the city and appropriate public spaces? What are their needs and dreams? What can be invented to improve our living environment? How can we enjoy our cities more fully? What else can they offer us in terms of emotions and experiences?... All these questions were ones we wished to address together with the population, inventing a new way of being architects, outside the traditional model of architectural practice.³

Through multidisciplinary collaboration and processes of self-construction, they created an atmosphere of experimentation and self-learning in the streets that helped reinforce a position and form of social and political commitment that is of great interest to us.

RETHINKING PUBLIC LIFE ON BORDEAUX'S RING ROAD EDGES

Organized by Hocine Aliouane-Shaw, professors and students from five universities (Alicante, Peru, Tallinn, Trieste, and Umeå) participated alongside colleagues from the Bordeaux school. We worked at *La Fabrique POLA*, the former industrial warehouse of paints, restored in 2019 to house the facilities of this collective together with other local artists and cultural actors (contemporary art, architecture, cinema, comics, photography, graphic design, multimedia, mediation, etc.).

Its central location, on the banks of the Garonne River, and huge area of 4,000 square meters, it is perfect to host organizations, artists, and three production workshops (woodworking, metalworking, model-making, analog and digital photography laboratories, and artistic screen printing), as well as an exhibition space, a restaurant, and a café terrace. Throughout the year, invitations extended to the local population take the form of exhibitions, training sessions, conferences, artistic workshops, cultural experiences, and unexpected events.

One such event was our intensive workshop, held from 20 to 24 April of this year, 2026, during which we worked on a sector of the Rocade. As Hocine explained to us in his introduction, this 45-kilometer ring road carries approximately 250,000 vehicles per day. But beyond its mobility function, with him we discovered by a long collective walk — picnic included — that it has generated a complex landscape of limits, thresholds, and residual spaces, marked by fragmentation,



La Fabrique POLA. The name POLA is a blend of two French terms: pôle administratif (administrative center) and pôle artistique (artistic center).

informal uses, and latent possibilities.

The workshop focused on these unplanned spaces already produced by this infrastructure: places whose status, access regulations, and uses remain diffuse, contested, ambiguous, or not yet stabilized. We explored how these places might become spaces of prefiguration, where alternative ways of using, sharing, and transforming space could be tested through scenarios grounded in present conditions.

Without a doubt, this issue — *UOUSj#11* — has been the most challenging to produce throughout the five and a half years of our collaborative learning project, *UOU*, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we are by now a network of 50 international schools of architecture, each with its own culture, our architectural affinities have proven stronger than our differences. And even those differences are deeply valuable, for it is through them that we continue to learn from one another.

Even so, much like the many interpretations generated by the brief yet influential text of Ignasi de Solà-Morales, this issue has given rise to intense intellectual and emotional responses surrounding such a complex concept. These tensions are perhaps inevitable when engaging with an idea that provokes not only fascination, but also a profound commitment to our own ethical consciousness.

The tensions, disagreements, and diverse interpretations that emerged during the preparation of this issue should therefore not be understood as failures, but rather as evidence of the conceptual complexity and political urgency of the subject itself. If *terrain vague* continues to provoke debate, it is precisely because it confronts us with unresolved questions regarding memory, identity, violence, freedom, and the role of architecture within contemporary society.

Ultimately, this editorial journey has reinforced the conviction that architecture must move beyond the passive contemplation of urban



Picnic and long collective walk organized by Hocine Aliouane-Shaw as a way of sharing and experiencing peripheral metropolitan territories that people would not normally explore. La Rocade 20/4/2026.

emptiness. Our responsibility is not only to interpret these spaces, but also to critically discern the conditions that produce them, to defend the dignity of human life where it has been threatened, and to imagine forms of intervention capable of preserving openness, coexistence, and social justice within an increasingly fragmented world.

The remarkable diversity of outcomes, techniques, and working methodologies developed by the participating schools of architecture significantly enriches the final section of this journal, *ATLAS*.



CITED WORKS

1. <https://www.arquitecturacatalana.cat/es/obras/reconstruccio-del-pavello-alemany>
2. "Terrain Vague" Solà-Morales. Originally published in Anyplace, NY / The MIT Press 1995.
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