

# On Unscripted Grounds

A conversation between  
the Editorial Committee members

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**HAS:** If we approach *unscripted grounds* not as a fixed type of place, but as situations in which scripts of access, use, value and ownership are not yet, or are no longer, stabilised, what forms of reading, inquiry and action do they call for in architectural and urban practice, architectural education and research? And how might such grounds be engaged without being romanticised, instrumentalised, or too quickly reabsorbed into more conventional logics of planning and control?

**MLN:** *Unscripted Grounds* poses many questions in relation to our discipline, specifically in relation to architectural research and practice. If architecture – through its methods – is able to read a palimpsest of traces, spaces, voices and human behaviours, material and immaterial elements; we could argue that the power of architecture is in being capable, through the imagination, of opening up possibilities rather than proposing specific solutions to each problem.

Often, the notion of unscripted ground is instrumentalised and translated into policies that do not leave much space to the variety of practices, determining conflictual conditions. In other cases, as in the current condition of global crises, top-down decisions and power are determining situations in which we – as educators and researchers – are in a position in which it seems to be important to react.

I am referring to a definition of ‘unscripted’ whereby the notion of indeterminacy is central, as is the reliability on tools, such as maps, which by their very nature are sometimes more accurate than at othertimes, and their potential for defining new grounds. An example is the current debate on the power of maps and digital tools in determining the definition of grounds and territories. “Since early March, Israeli evacuation warnings and strikes across southern Lebanon and Beirut’s southern suburbs have triggered mass displacement. Nearly 1.3 million people have been forced from their homes – with little hope of return as Israeli occupation and strikes continue. Schools became shelters, families slept in cars and authorities built improvised systems to track aid, medicine and available shelter space. Apple says nothing was removed. But the episode shows a separate truth of digital infrastructure: when a place cannot be easily found, users may experience that absence as erasure – regardless of the technical explanation.” (Alomar, 2026)<sup>1</sup>

Architecture is a political discipline – as debated in other previous issues of the *UOU Scientific Journal* – and its values are based on a common trust among us and the context/s in which we live. At a time when technology has the power to delete territories and international laws are undermined by violence and power, what is the role of architects and planners in re-defining the role of these unscripted grounds?

**AKP:** As a relational practice, walking situates us in specific landscapes; connecting knowledge, body, place and materialities. Read through the lens of peripatetic practices, “unscripted grounds” are not empty sites waiting for design intelligence to arrive but instead they are fields where experiences and memories are negotiated.

Read through the lens of movement, pause, hesitation, comfort, fear and exclusion, walking does not simply traverse territory; it produces meaning and relationships, showing landscape as something continuously enacted, recalled, and contested through embodied passage. We ask: who can move here easily? who cannot? It actively discloses and, in part, constitutes the spatial narratives through which land is known, inhabited, and contested.

**JAB:** An *unscripted ground* is not blank. It is a place where instructions have broken down, where one order has been forced over another, and where people still invent ways to live. That is the uncomfortable lesson of *unscripted grounds*. The question is not only how does architecture react to instability, it is whether architecture helps keep unstable places readable, or whether it joins the machinery that makes them disappear.

The case Maria Luna presented is not abstract. Local authorities had to improvise systems for aid, medicine, and sleep. You present a point of no return and you are asking about our role as architects.

My position is simple: architects and planners should treat politics and ground as material, not as background information. Not as 'context' to be summarised in the first pages of a report and then forgotten. The classroom shelter, the car, the aid spreadsheet, the failed search result: these are spatial facts. They are what organises movement, exposure, privacy, care, fear. They are design problems already in motion.

This dynamic model of thinking and designing helps, because it rejects a closed idea of form. It says that contemporary architecture is made through media and information processes, and that politics, sociology, economics, culture, and everyday life enter the process from the start. I would push that claim further. In a place of displacement, the 'start' is not the commission. It is the warning, the roadblock, the damaged façade, the school door relabelled as the entrance to a shelter, the list of medicines, the photograph sent to prove that a street still exists.

This changes the work we are doing as architects. The architect is not only the author of a final object, and certainly not the designer of a beautiful image of a crisis. The planner is not the keeper of a neutral map. Both should become builders of recognition: people who make fragile evidence public, usable, and difficult to erase.

That may take the form of housing, but it may also take the form of a counter-map, a register of temporary shelters, a repair protocol, and a civic room, a plan for schools that can absorb emergency use without surrendering their educational function, or an archive where testimony and material damage are held together.

The questions should be blunt. Where do people sleep tonight? Which routes are usable after dark? Which buildings can hold bodies without turning refuge into storage? Where are water, shade, privacy, power, legal information, and children's routines placed? What names have vanished from the map? Which image, list, or message carries evidence that the official plan cannot hold? These are small questions only on paper. In the city, they decide whether life remains organised enough to continue.

The material described within the dynamic model - videos, performances, abstract models, collages, modified images, citizen-generated fragments - matters here because it is not decorative. In a damaged territory, such fragments may be the archive. A blurred photograph can be more accurate than a clean plan. A child's drawing may show orientation and loss in the same line. A modified map can reveal the route people actually take, the checkpoint they avoid, the back entrance that has become the real front door. This material should enter the project without being polished into silence.

So, the role of architects and planners is not to write one new script over the damaged one? Is it to keep several unfinished records open: domestic, legal, territorial, digital, bodily, administrative, and remembered? Does form still matter?

**SS:** These *unscripted grounds*, vestiges of unclaimed territory or forgotten realms that have slipped through the imposed governance that surrounds them, seem precious places. As Luna writes, architecture is political, it can be used as a means to define, determine, limit, overwrite. In this light *unscripted grounds* emerge as precious sites, spaces to be guarded, spaces that might enable fluid discussion rather than just black and white answers. Might an architecture support and protect their indeterminate state, hold its essence and nurture it, offering spaces of respite, spaces of uncertainty where multiple truths can sit alongside each other in equanimity. Might they offer the spaces we so need today?

**MD:** I remember, a long time ago now, being inspired by Avril Maddrell's paper<sup>2</sup> on absence-presence. Her powerful argument considered the loss of someone (absence) as being signified by a bunch of flowers (presence) on a bench. Of course, the idea of one thing signifying something else is not new to us. Barthes (1957)<sup>3</sup> is probably the best-known exponent of this idea. For this edition of the *UOUSj* we are to some extent considering such ideas in a new light. We are looking at *unscripted grounds* - places with cultural layers both tangible and intangible - open to being read. In their book 'Edgelands', Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts<sup>4</sup> 'celebrate' such places. The places they reflect upon in England are not voids - where there was never anything - they are places of absence - something was there but has now gone. Something that was (and still can be) important to someone, to a community. These are today's *unscripted grounds* and they are not confined to England. Wherever they are to be found in the world, the map, like the flower on a bench, can serve as a presence to remind us of this 'absence.' As the call for submissions tells us: we need to consider how '*...such grounds can be approached as situations where new ways of acting and living together may be rehearsed - and learned from...*' We all have a responsibility here.

**HAS:** What I take from these exchanges is not a shared position, but a set of useful displacements. *Unscripted grounds* do not appear here as empty blanks. They appear as situations where access and ownership, but also use, value, memory and absence, remain unstable. They call for situated forms of reading: by walking through them, by attending to traces, memories and the fragile signs of what has been lost or pushed aside. These situations also depend, for their visibility, on the tools that record them and make them legible: maps and counter-maps, registers, images, lists, testimonies and other forms of fragile evidence. The task is therefore not to overwrite these situations with a new script, nor to turn their indeterminacy into an aesthetic value, but to keep them legible without normalising them, to make their traces, uses and claims harder to erase, and to support practices of recognition and careful attention.

## NOTES

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