UNUSED URBAN SPACE: CONSERVATION OR TRANSFORMATION? POLEMICS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF URBAN WASTELANDS AND ABANDONED BUILDINGS

Merten Nefs

Abstract

The paper discusses the role of unused urban spaces in the metropolis by reviewing polemic discourses about their futures. An inventory is made of international literature, pointing out difficulties in the definition of unused urban space. Examples of different cities and theories are used to illustrate the role of unused urban space in city planning and the production of urban space, being a powerful instrument during the formation and growth of cities and even in the case of their decline. Historical, economical, ecological and other values are identified as the cause of polemics regarding the future of vacant terrains and abandoned buildings. The effects of these polemics and disputes in practice are described, and criticized in the cases where they threaten the citizen’s right to the city.

1.0 Introduction

This paper discusses the role of unused urban spaces in the metropolis by reviewing a number of polemic discourses about their futures.

What is unused urban space? Before reviewing the polemics it’s important to have a definition. In the first chapter an overview of literature from different countries and disciplines is analysed to point out the difficulties that exist with respect to the definition of unused urban space.

What is the role of unused urban space in city planning and the production of urban space? In chapter 2 a brief comparison of city planning models shows that unused urban space, as a potential for future development, plays an important role. The different models of city planning, however, do not explain the diversity of interests in specific unused urban spaces and the overheated discourse about their future.

In chapter 3 it is suggested that the different values, which are attributed to unused urban space, are causing the polemics regarding its future. Some of these values, such as

---

* Coordinator of the Study Programme for the city of FLACSO-Ecuador, Member of the Town Hall - Quito, editor of the newspaper, Diario Hoy. Merten Nefs graduated in architecture in 2003 at the Technical University Delft, the Netherlands; worked in Dutch offices of urban planning and public space design; realized a research at FAU-USP in 2004 and currently works as an architect in São Paulo.
economical, historical and ecological ones, are indicated and the resulting attitudes towards the conservation or transformation of unused urban space identified.

What are the effects of the polemics and disputes regarding unused urban space in practice? Although the entire city planning and the day-to-day management of the metropolis in general are somehow affected by these polemics, chapter 4 emphasizes a few specific results. In some cases the disputes generate negotiations or democratic decision-making. In other cases they lead to pressure by real estate speculators and claims by housing movements and other squatters. The impact of the neo-liberal management of the metropolis is considered, especially where part of the population is denied access to central unused urban space.

Fig. 1 Barra Funda, São Paulo. Photo: Merten Nefs 2005

Fig. 2 Barra Funda, São Paulo. Photo: Google Earth

2.0 Definitions of unused urban space

How can unused urban space be defined? Definitions of unused urban spaces are generally related to their origins, the way they were created. An important distinction can be made between terrains that have been kept vacant during the formation of the city around them and terrains that have had previous occupation and have been abandoned at some point. Both, but especially the second category, are the object of this study. For the purpose of this paper underused urban space will be regarded as (partially) unused.

Great caution has to be taken with the terminology, which is associated with unused urban space. When we are dealing with built structures for example, the term “vacancy”
refers to abandoned buildings. In contrast with vacant terrains that never had any form of occupation.

Some definitions of unused urban space emphasize the emptiness of the terrain, compared to the surrounding built environment, the fact that they are not occupied by neither people nor construction and infrastructure: Vacant Terrain, Vazios Urbanos, Terrenos Baldios, Leere, Freiräume, Terrain Vague. Others emphasize the fact that they are abandoned, without urban activity and in some occasions contaminated: Urban Wastelands, Brownfield1, Derelict land, Degraded and Deteriorated land or buildings. All of these definitions, however, point out the potential of the terrain or building for future development.

As Calixto and Brito (2004, p1) affirm, many relations are connected to a certain “vacant” space, which cause an ambiguity in its definition. Vacancy percentages, Ebner (1997, p64) states, are often inaccurate because they fail to clarify what exactly is meant by “vacant”, or because the definition changes according to the objective of the study. For the purpose of this study it would therefore be more sensible to reconstruct a more generic description of unused urban space from the beginning.

In their most basic conception vacant urban spaces are “land”. As any lot in the capitalist city, they are subject to laws of ownership, taxes and valorisation. This valorisation process does not depend on the production or labour on the lot itself, but on the development of the city as a whole and the geographical position of the lot within the city. Alvarez (1994, p2) explains clearly that a terrain or lot can only be explained and justified by its circumstances, in this case the development of its surroundings.

Ebner (1999, p67) continues that in fact vacant urban spaces are also part of the built environment, since it is the construction and urban activity around them that defines them as empty. Both the built and non-built areas are part of the same process of production of urban space, even though it may seem that urban wastelands are the products of nature. For this reason Alvarez (1994, p10) sees vacancy as just another modality of land-use.

Indeed an accurate description of unused urban spaces would include not only spatial aspects but also time, considering their origins and possible transformations. The history of the terrain reveals the causes of its vacancy or abandonment and explains the absence of activity and production. The origins can be found in city planning models, based on land reservation in the growth pattern of the city, estate speculation or the dislocation and decentralisation of industry. And in some cases, like Berlin and other European cities, violent ruptures such as bombings and destructive urban management before and after World War II are responsible.

The transformation of unused urban space follows a global trend. In the 1950's and 60's the abandonment of the historical centres and respective growth of the peripheries began. In the following decade squatter movements were formed and temporary use of unused space emerged, taking advantage of the gaps. From the 1980’s political programs and public-private cooperations have led the way to transformation of docks and industrial areas into residential and office space. After this we have seen a strategic return to the downtowns, which continues until today. Operations of urban revitalisation, requalification, renovation and redevelopment almost always deal with unused terrains and buildings.

---

1 brown-field: A piece of industrial or commercial property that is abandoned or underused and often environmentally contaminated, especially one considered as a potential site for redevelopment.

In general these places, deprived of human activity, do not as such provoke many questions or special interests. It seems that they become inspiring when we consider them as part of history, platforms for temporary use or, as a potential for future activity. For this reason scholars and planners have shown interest in the future of unused urban space and have chosen to defend either its conservation or transformation.

3.0 Unused urban space and city planning

What is the role of unused urban space in city planning and the production of urban space? On the one hand unused urban space provokes urbanistic discussions about density, compactness, sprawl and the structure of the urban fabric. It plays a central role in models for city expansion as well as intensification and the description of existing urbanised land. On the other hand it nourishes a political and academic discussion about the power balance between the government and landowners in urban planning issues. The following paragraphs illustrate the role of unused urban space in different countries, cities and theories.

During the last decades European cities have adopted “compact city” strategies for their urban development. Swedish urban planner Nyström (1997, p1) affirms that “The only effective urban development policy in years to come is renewal within the existing urban fabric, and possibly also contraction. Such policies entail raised densities, more intensive land use, including redevelopment of brownland and other kinds of underused land.” Dutch geographer Van der Waals (2004) questions this belief in the compact city model, which is generally thought to produce less mobility because of smaller distances and preserve nature more effectively. After his analysis of the Randstad agglomeration in Holland he concludes that the relationship between urban form and quality of the environment is complex and uncertain. Air quality measurements do not show the desired differences and biodiversity is in fact much bigger in urbanised areas than in the agricultural lands between them.

Besides this there is the so-called “compact city paradox”: smaller distances may reduce mobility but at the same time concentrate air pollution and noise in the urban centres. He therefore concludes that the advantage of the compact city model lies in other aspects, especially the flexibility that it provides for future development and the possibilities for implementation of public transport.

Other experts, mostly planners and architects, have emphasized the importance of porosity of the urban tissue instead of compactness. Urban brownland sites, they say, provide space for different uses and activities and have inspired many artists and planners. These “seed-beds of urbanity”, as Christiaanse (2002, p1) calls abandoned industrial and railway sites, offer the unique conditions of accessibility, being located in central areas, but without the restrictions of the over-regulated and gentrified centre itself. It can be said that unused terrains and buildings are necessary for urban renovation. In these empty lots the city reinvents itself; they are playgrounds of urbanistic innovation and cultural breeding grounds.

But will this come to an end when the unused spaces have been redeveloped? After analysing various European cities Oswalt (2001) concludes that urban vacancy, temporary use and re-occupation is in fact a cycle that guarantees flexibility for urban development. The cycle, however, can be interrupted by rigorous operations, such as the “critical reconstruction” in Berlin after the Wall, which aimed at the immediate filling of all gaps in the urban tissue. Koolhaas at that time suggested that traditional city planning as a way of
controlling the neo-liberal metropolis had failed, and that punctual occupations on
unused terrains would be the most effective way of intervention.

In the 1990’s Dutch urban planner Geuze\textsuperscript{2} designed public spaces with deliberate emptiness and a minimum of furniture and other elements to provoke alternative kinds of use and spontaneous occupations. Metz (2002) describes in her book about leisure in the Netherlands the “touristification” of the downtowns and simultaneously the rise of “pleasure peripheries”, including many cases of reuse of unused and sometimes even contaminated land for events, sports and other kinds of leisure.

In a study about the spatial quality of Randstad Holland (population 6.6 million)\textsuperscript{3}, Geuze\textsuperscript{4} criticizes the compact city policy. This policy has protected the central green area of the Randstad agglomeration for decades, but in the end the quality of this area with its irregular activities, subsidised agriculture, lack of opportunities for leisure and low biodiversity, is questionable. As the cities of the agglomeration became more and more experienced as one poly-nuclear metropolis, the central green was being understood as a very big underused urban space.

Evidently a new urban model was needed and in 2001 a new urbanisation policy (Nota), called the “Deltametropool”, was presented. Instead of the contrast between city cores and agriculture, this new “network city” model provides more flexibility of development in corridors between the urban centres and at the edges of urbanized areas.\textsuperscript{5} Discussing the city on a different scale level has changed the discussion about its unused space. Old values have been criticised and new ones, related to the overheated real estate pressures and lack of recreation space in the Randstad agglomeration, have been adopted.

As mentioned above, city growth involves both planning (reservation and destination) and management (occupation and speculation) of unused urban space. Downtown Almere, Holland, is a recent example of reservation of empty space for future public development. Almere was founded as a satellite city in 1976 on new land acquired from the central lake near Amsterdam. Very low densities were maintained in the central area, especially near the riverfront. In the 1990’s OMA made a master plan for Almere’s “new” downtown.

The new programs can easily be inserted by intensifying the central lots and occupying what was still empty, such as reserved land around the central train station and railroad tracks. In 2007, when the population will reach about 240,000, the master plan that includes a shopping mall, theatre and other entertainment, offices, WTC, apartment buildings and other urban program, will have been realized. The “sleeping city”, as Almere has been known until now, finally awakens.

Vacant urban space and estate speculation have been essential factors in the growth pattern of São Paulo. During the fast expansion in the 1960’s and 70’s, city planning was unable to keep track and even later, in the 1980’s and 90’s, the neo-liberal system allowed the city territory to be managed and controlled almost completely by the real estate market. While the government was investing in infrastructure to connect the periphery to the central region, speculators created pockets of vacant space between centre and periphery, which can now be developed in high density, generating high profits. And

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Adriaan Geuze, West 8. Public spaces Schouwburgplein and Blaak in Rotterdam}
\footnote{www.regio-randstad.nl (Accessed on 1st July 2005)}
\footnote{Adriaan Geuze. Wildlife. 1993}
\end{footnotes}
while the well-equipped historical centre fell into decadence, the city invested in new infrastructure for office parks in the southwest region to attract foreign investors, valorising technically unused urban space, but in practice expulsing informal settlements of the poor population from the area.

In contrast with expanding metropolises East German cities such as Leipzig or Dresden are losing population and are literally shrinking, leaving behind abandoned terrains and buildings. Southwest Germany is still economically attractive, but even there the heavy industry is being dislocated and the population is aging. It is estimated that the total area of available and yet to be converted harbour, industrial and railway land is much larger than the construction land needed for the next fifty years. Besides this the European agriculture is also systematically being reduced.

This initiated an interesting debate about strategies for shrinking cities: What to do with the abandoned terrains and buildings? How to maintain an infrastructure with a shrinking local economy and how to react to cheap sprawl? Researchers from different disciplines are studying the possibilities for those new unused spaces. In some cities, like Rada describes in his article about an East German border city, this new “luxury of emptiness” is attracting “space pioneers” like artists, handicraft people and those who work in the design or media industry.

Shrinking city scenarios can include de-verticalisation and conversion of industrial complexes into parks. Also in this case, long term planning can conflict with short term advantages. Depending on the circumstances, a more valuable result for the urban community can be obtained than a high construction potential. In some cases unused space can turn itself into valuable leisure space or a nature reserve.

4.0 Values of unused urban space

What causes the divergence between the interests in unused urban space and the polemics regarding its future? In this chapter examples of economical, historical, ecological and other values are compared, illustrating how they have influenced decision-making and the attitudes towards conservation or transformation of unused urban space.

What is the value of a terrain or building? It can be argued that for the citizen with low acquisitive power, who acquired the lot with this own resources, it has the value of the use; on the other hand, for the real estate speculators, the well located lots have exchange value or, in other words, generate capital. These two values are quite measurable and can be compared if necessary.

There are, however, other values at stake such as historical, cultural and ecological ones, which do not always have an economic component. Disputes over unused terrains with non-comparable values, for example historical values and the urban demands of today, can be endless and make us aware of the dynamic and delicate position of these terrains between forces of conservation and transformation.

Historical values are not always as straightforward as they seem and can even contradict each other. History, composed of layers, events and processes in different time spans is not static, and always subject to interpretation and evaluation.

---

Let us observe the example of the reunion of West and East Berlin in the beginning of the 1990’s. City planner Stimman took the historical city plan of the 1930’s as a model for his “critical reconstruction” of Berlin, after the demolition of the Wall. The bombings of WWII and the construction of the Wall had created many wounds in the urban tissue, gaps that – according Stimman - had to be filled to restore the closed city block structure.

Despite the noble idea to unite the divided city, this plan ignored 40 years of socialist and modernist city planning and the new alternative planning strategies that could develop Berlin’s unused spaces, like Potsdamer Platz and the Wall trajectory. Whiting writes that in Berlin “…unification has brought daunting complexity. It has only increased the number and variety of parties with conflicting interests in the future shape, soundscape and ambience of the new capital. Nearly everything is marked, sacred to someone, vivid with memories shared or denied.”

Of course it would not be possible to maintain every historical void empty. We realize this instantly observing the redevelopment plans of Ground Zero NY, which have provoked enormous economic pressures that in the end turn out to be stronger than symbolic values. In the case of Berlin, however, the choice for traditional redevelopment of the voids was ideological instead of economic, judging by the high vacancy rates in the recently developed areas.

The ambiguity of the collective memory of the city is clearly seen in the discussion about Berlin’s Volkspalast, the former DDR government building, which included shopping mall and entertainment centre for the socialist citizen. Despite protests and suggestions for reuse of the complex, the government has decided to demoliish it and rebuild the 19th century Prussian palace that had been destroyed there in WWII, the façade that is. In the near future not much will change on the premises, since the city is bankrupt and has no resources to neither renovate nor demolish the socialist mirror glass palace. But the project points out well the core of the historian’s debate about the unused building: “which history is more valuable”?

Environmental values are causing many polemics about unused urban space as well. Also in this case different points of view can be distinguished. There are, for example, organisations that have the objective of re-qualification of urban wasteland, to improve urban public spaces and greens. British organisation CABE Space “has already managed to boost awareness for its work to find better use for 70,000 hectares of derelict land across Britain through its well-publicised "Worst Wasted Spaces" campaign.”

Other organisations fight for recognition of the current ecological value of urban wasteland. A British urban wildlife habitat statement affirms that urban wastelands, including disused railway sidings, demolition sites, redundant industrial land and derelict land, contain the most diverse of London's habitats. “They encompass a wide range of sites with varying substrates, topographies and other factors that determine the

---

9 Terminology used by Aldo Rossi who points out in his book L’architettura della città that the functional/economic land-use-thinking of the 1960’s is no longer capable of explaining the social and ethinical dynamics of the city.
10 A recent off-shoot of CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, CABE Space, is headed up by director Julia Thrift. CABE is a non-departmental public body, funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.myweb.tiscali.co.uk/london.gardens/features/cabe.htm (Accessed on 1st July 2005)
distribution of plant and animal species”. About wastelands in Berlin, Randstad and other European cities similar statements have been made.

It has proved to be an impossible task to assess ecological resources of all urban wasteland. It is constantly being created by abandonment and redeveloped for new housing. Besides redevelopment the lack of awareness of the nature conservation value of urban wastelands is a threat to these ecosystems. “Many good wasteland sites are subject to programmes of enhancement to ’improve’ their nature conservation value without first appreciating or ascertaining existing value”, the habitat statement declares. “Often the only enhancement required is improvements to interpretation and public access”. Nevertheless few urban wasteland sites have been protected as nature reserves, and even fewer have managed to maintain their urban wasteland character.12

Similar to history, also ecological and environmental values are defined through debate, since nothing in the city can be regarded simply a product of nature. In some cases, like the central green of the Randstad, the protected landscape is even completely cultural instead of natural.

Analogous to the natural pioneer species, human pioneers thrive on unused terrains and buildings with specific conditions that make them ideal for temporary use. Many studies, symposia and projects have already been organised regarding urban catalysts, urban incubators etcetera.13 These cultural production and social low-profit companies, called “soft infrastructures” by Söderlind (1999), are normally driven away because the traditional development structure with homogeneous real estate prices and block sizes does not create possibilities for them to stay. Besides the value that the region represents for these activities in terms of access, the soft infrastructure in turn valorises the region and makes it more attractive for investments.

Hentilä (2002) defends the strategy to create space for low-profit organisations in abandoned (industrial) areas near the city centre, because “the principle of having a stake in land and property is the best way to ensure that less powerful local interests can benefit from changes in valuation as well as the uses their land can be put to. … [It] diminishes the risk of low-profit companies to become depended on the public or private subsidies. If they are located in a central area, the gap between the market rent and their paying capacity has almost always to be covered by subsidies. This does not support the soft activity – it is the estate owner who benefits of this.”

All of the values and interests mentioned above are somehow represented in the polemic discourses about the future of unused urban space.

12 A sign of appreciation of urban wastelands the way they are: www.urbanwasteland.com (Accessed on 1st July 2005)
13 Some examples of temporary user strategies: (Accessed on 1st July 2005)
Der leere Raum. www.stadt-plan-mitte.de/index/1656/
www.arena-berlin.de/event.aspx?eventld=1019
www.zitty.de/event/index.asp?subpage=3&EVID=5535&res=djregister
www.urbanspacelab.wien.at/home/cityfutures/amucity/prenzlau/
www.urbancatalyst.net
www.urban-os.com
5.0 Pressures and claims on unused urban space

What are the effects of these disputes? In a healthy democracy the polemics and disputes about the future of unused urban space generate a political debate in which all values are evaluated and the best possible decision for the community as a whole is made. When the dispute is not yet resolved by the public power, the organisations and individuals involved are left to defend their interests in the unused urban space by pressure and claims. A strong neo-liberal market ideology, as we will see in this chapter, can threaten social interests and the citizen’s right to the city. Lower income groups are frequently denied access to unused urban space in central regions, especially in neo-liberal cities such as São Paulo, but also in European cities.

In the metropolitan region of São Paulo spatial conflicts occur on a daily basis between speculators, housing movements and environmentalist organisations. The rapid expansion of the city, mentioned above, has left many unused spaces in its interior and has led to contradictory situations. While the historical centre was being abandoned by the elite, vast peripheral areas were being urbanised. Abandoned buildings in the centre were kept vacant during the following decades. Both inhabitants and municipality have suffered the consequences of this in high costs of new infrastructure to the periphery, long distances and transport problems. Mappings by Schiffer and Cardía (2002) show higher room occupancy rates and population density in the periphery than in the central region. The domicile vacancy in the central districts Sé and República increased from 6.219 out of 41.784 units in 1991 to 10.062 out of 42.259 in 2000. The population of the same areas dropped from 93.873 inhabitants in 1980 to 51.340 in 2001 (Bomfim, 2004, p7).

How can this long-term vacancy of the centre be explained? Is the demand for housing and commercial space too small to generate a revitalization of the centre? Bomfim (2004, p4) explains in a study about vacancy in the centre of São Paulo that the region is an area of uncertainty, speculation and experiment. The owners of vacant buildings wait until the government starts a revitalization policy that they can trust, and until that time they prefer to leave their property empty. Much higher profits can still be achieved in other areas, especially the southwest, and renting or selling estates in the centre for lower prices now does not give the profit that speculators are counting on. When the market is ready for the “return to downtown”, increased real estate pressure will also cause social impacts. Higher real estate prices and rents expulse the economically weak population that occupies parts of the centre today.

For some decades housing movements have claimed vacant buildings to house their members. The demand for affordable housing is not answered by the governments social housing program and the complexes that are realized are generally located far from the centre. With great political effort and sometimes by force the movements succeed in occupying buildings that have been empty for more than 10 years.

In an article about the role of housing movements in the revitalisation of downtown São Paulo, Pallamin and Lima (2004, p4) observe that “under more democratic administrations, impoverished social groups have gradually started to claim the recognition of their rights of citizenship, by creating and occupying new political and physical spaces in the city.” Land movements, both rural (“sem terra”) and urban (“sem teto”), have criticized land laws that makes access to land ownership more difficult for those who do not have land already. The exclusion from property rights, according to Pallamin and Lima, are in the root of the spatial and social inequity of Brazilian cities. The only way to revert the formation of spatial and social gaps is to reform the legal instruments concerning land ownership.
On the one hand occupations by squatters draw attention to the discussion about the need for social housing projects in the central region. On the other hand investors and estate owners that are interested in valorisation of the centre, have formed organisations to promote revitalisation and public cultural investments in the area to generate gentrification, in other words to attract the more affluent population to the centre. This is in itself a positive development, but without a strong social housing policy it can mean the exclusion of the poor from the historical centre.

Looking at the real estate pressures and social claims upon abandoned terrains and buildings in downtown São Paulo, we realize that unused space is the arena of urban negotiation and conflict, clashes and dissent. By means of negotiation of unused urban space the democratic process is activated and citizenship redefined. Proves of this struggle are the raising of estate taxes for vacant buildings in the centre by socialist mayor Suplicy (2000-2004) and the polemic expulsion of squatters from long-term abandoned buildings by current mayor Serra. In the meantime the growth of the city continues at the edges, threatening nature reserves and the existing landscape.

It is a myth that only in developing countries the access to central space is limited for people and organisations with low economic force. In some European cities, for example Helsinki, high demands of space near the historical centre has pressured speculators to realize commercial exploitations of former harbour and industrial areas quickly. Only in some cases, when there was a delay due to contamination research, conflicts or political changes, temporary use of the premises was organized. In general European governments have more legal instruments to persuade proprietors to initiate redevelopment, causing lower vacancy rates.

The above mentioned artists and non-profit organizations that often colonized unused space in German and Dutch cities did not have a chance here, because temporary rental contracts could be closed with many businesses of the financial and legal sector for commercial prices. Hentilä (2001) concludes her article about temporary use in Helsinki saying that the “number of occupancies and other informal uses of unused buildings have been extremely limited in the history of Helsinki.”

6.0 Final considerations

What can we conclude about the role of unused urban space in the metropolis? When we observe the multiplicity of definitions we already become aware of its dynamic character and the diversity of points of view with regard to unused urban space. A brief inventory of international literature on the subject illustrates that underused, empty and vacant terrains are often mentioned by geographers, urban planners, economists, politicians and NGO’s. Definitions of unused urban space change according to the point of view and the objective of the study. For this reason we currently have to deal with a rather confusing terminology.

It seems essential to describe unused urban space as a process or a cycle, rather than a static phenomenon. The dynamic role it plays in the metropolis is related to its continuous creation, conservation and transformation. The future destinations of unused terrains and buildings – whether it is conservation or transformation - are defended and attacked continuously by individuals, organisations, companies and the government. These positions and their confrontations provide the key to a better understanding of unused urban space.

Unused urban space plays a central role in debates about urbanisation models and density. When the urbanistic debate shifted to a higher scale level, the metropolitan or city
region, this simultaneously generated new thoughts about its unused space. On the one hand planning of unused urban spaces (reservation and destination) and their management (occupation and speculation) are central issues in growing cities. On the other hand the way that abandoned terrains and buildings are handled is essential in city renewal and shrinking city scenarios.

To explain the diversity of interests in unused urban space and the dynamic debates about its future it is necessary to observe the underlaying values, which are attributed to these spaces. Historical values, often related to the origins of vacancy or abandonment, are in practice confronted with economic (real estate) values, ecological values, the urban demands of today and the values of the user. In this context it’s important to recognize that also different historical and ecological values of the same space can clash and lead to disputes.

Now that we have understood why and how the polemics about the future of unused urban space occur, what can we say about their effects?

In the ideal situation of a healthy democracy the disputes generate negotiations or democratic decision-making, benefiting the common interest. The last chapter of the paper has focused on the cases where this mechanism fails, leading to pressure upon unused urban space by real estate speculators and claims by housing movements and other squatters. The balance between market economy and social interests, in both developed and developing countries, is frequently disturbed and threatens the citizen’s right to the city.

Metropolises like São Paulo with a powerful real estate sector, aiming at valorisation through gentrification, tend to have stronger reactions by housing movements, fighting for affordable housing near the centre. By means of disputes and negotiations over unused urban space, social groups claim their right to citizenship, affordable housing and land ownership. Also in cities in developed countries real estate pressures in urban centres are high and have limited the access of lower income groups and low-profit organisations to these areas. Due to government intervention and the small amount of available unused space, buildings and terrains remain unused for shorter periods.

Unused urban space has been a powerful instrument for governments and investors during the formation and growth of the city, and for some organisations and individuals even in the case of its decline. Today the most significant urban projects in many metropolises concern the transformation of unused urban space. The size and investments of these urban operations is still increasing and many values are at stake. There is a lot to gain but also much to lose in strategic planning, depending on how and for whom the unused urban space is being made accessible. It is therefore of great importance that decisions regarding its future, whether this is conservation or transformation, are made in a responsible and democratic way.

Bibliography


CALIXTO, Maria José Martinelli Silva; BRITO, Márcia Aparecida de. Os Vazios Urbanos e o Processo de Redefinição Socioespacial em Dourados-MS. Campo Grande: UFMS, 2004


_____


NWR/STAWON. *Ontwerpend aan Holland…* Amsterdam: Jan Mets, 1994


WHITING, Steven M. * (Re)constructing Berlin: Architects and Academics Consider the Once and Future Capital*. [www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol8no1/Whiting.htm](http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol8no1/Whiting.htm)

(Accessed on 1st July 2005)