

Lessons from the void

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## Foreword

The following text deals with urban aspects of time and space, especially with a very special in-between space, the wasteland. Architecture is the primary nature of a big city. Within built structures, in ordered spaces, on planned street systems we move, guided by electronic lights, markings and signs we pass through doors and bridges, gates and tunnels to yet other spaces. Like in a machine, always in the same paths, always in the same rhythm. In the course of time, new architecture is created and old architecture disappears. What remains of the old time are memories. In addition to archives, photos, maps, stories and art, it is above all film that is perhaps able to capture architecture most impressively and also emphasizes time particularly strongly. The only constant of the city is its change. The city and its architecture are a rigid and at the same time wavering construct that always represents and holds in check the prevailing form of society. Architecture dominates people, or as the Berlin band *Einstürzende Neubauten* once put it, "Architektur ist Geiselnahme" ("*architecture is hostage-taking* ")<sup>1</sup>. But there are also free spaces and possibilities of escape, there is a different kind of architecture in between, or there was. Architects, artists and filmmakers who think about such spaces have their say in this text. The story begins with a view from above.

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<sup>1</sup> Einstürzende Neubauten, *Strategies against architecture III* Germany: Mute Records (2001).

**Lessons from the void**

**A plea for the wasteland**

## 1. Chapter: The past



Figure 1

*The eye of the airplane is pitiless. This time we have the actual record of reality. What an appalling thing! Do human beings live here? Do they consent to do so? Will they not revolt against it? <sup>2</sup>*

These lines are written by the modern architect Le Corbusier under an aerial photograph of the London Stock Exchange and its surroundings. The architect looks questioningly into an indeterminate future; he does not want to believe that people live voluntarily in such cities. Le Corbusier could do nothing with such urban planning, but he was fascinated by the airplane. At the request of the London publication *The Studio*, he wrote a text on the subject of aviation in 1935. Le Corbusier appeared extremely enthusiastic about the new prospects and possibilities that the airplane would bring to architecture and urban planning. His text with the title *Aircraft* always reads like a manifesto.

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<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* (New York, N.Y.: Universe, 1988).

A manifesto that is fervently directed against the old architecture, against the universities, against common curricula, against the professors and against the lecture halls. Le Corbusier, inspired both by the shape of the airplane [3] and by the new perspectives it allows on the cities [4], is therefore vehemently in favor of the workshops, of the engineers, of the machines and of the functionality. The airplane plays a key role and becomes the architect's hope. In the same year as *Aircraft*, Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* is released in Germany. The film opens with a scene filmed from an airplane showing various German cities from the air. The plane flies low to impressively stage the mass marches of the National Socialists taking place on the ground for the film. All of Germany appears mobilized and in a mood of departure. A nation appears on the move and the message of unstoppable change is propagated to the population. At the same time, Le Corbusier also foresaw great changes and stated in his text what the new perspective

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[3] Le Corbusier, in *Vers une architecture* extolled the characteristics of the plane and its aerodynamic struts, adopting their forms for the entrances to villas (the Villa Stein at Garches) and the legs of dining tables. For the early functionalists there was an unbroken path between the precise contour of a flight machine and the aesthetics of modernity. The journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* between 1918 and 1923 published articles on houses built by the Voisin aircraft factory, houses conceived like airplanes, built on assembly lines like airplanes, moved to their sites like airplanes, and that were, in Le Corbusier's terms, fit for the upbringing of tomorrow's engineers and technocrats. Airplanes were, after all, simply "houses that fly". Vidler, *Warped space*.

[4] We desire to change something in the present world. For the bird's-eye view has enabled us to see our cities and the countries which surrounds them, and the sight is not good. We knew quite well that our cities were steeped in indignities abhorrent to men; that our cities made martyrs of men, and that we are deprived of "essential delights," huddled and shut up in tanneries which at every day and at every hour are undermining us, ageing us, destroying the species, and making us serfs. The airplane is an indictment. It indicts the city. It indicts those who control the city. By means of the airplane, we now have proof, recorded on the photographic plate, of the Tightness of our desire to alter methods of architecture and town-planning. There is a degree of error that cannot be exceeded. It is the moment when the conditions which have plunged persons and society into apathy, misery, and misfortune, must be revolutionized. The brief and rapid history of aviation, so close to us, explains to us the hostile elements surrounding us, and provides us with the certainty that soon the very laws of life will justify us. Corbusier, *Aircraft*.

from the air means: "The eye now sees in substance what the mind formerly could not subjectively conceive. It is a new function added to our senses. It is a new standard of measurement. It is a new basis of sensation. Man will make use of it to conceive new aims. "<sup>5</sup> And almost casually he adds: "Cities will arise out of their ashes. "<sup>6</sup> As if infected by the pioneering spirit that prevailed in the still young aviation, Le Corbusier longs for a different urban planning, even if this meant the destruction of the present and the old. For him, the architecture of his time is nothing more than the expression of old capitalist power structures that do not allow for an organic life that corresponds to the nature of man [7]. As philanthropic as these words may sound at first, his criticism of inhumane urban structures must be taken with extreme caution. What Le Corbusier wrote in 1935 as a seemingly optimistic and positive plan for the city of the future reads in retrospect like a gloomy vision.

In 1941, just six years after the disparaging remarks about the aerial view of the London Stock Exchange, the capital of Great Britain was attacked from the air by German bombers. *Aircraft*, as they still appear aesthetically staged in numerous illustrations in *Aircraft*, razed entire cities from Europe to Japan to the ground during the Second World War, creating precisely the space for new things that

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<sup>5, 6</sup> Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* (New York, N.Y: Universe, 1988).

[7] *With its eagle eye the airplane looks at the city. It looks at London, Paris, Berlin, New York, Barcelona, Algiers, Buenos Aires, San Paulo. Alas, what a sorry account! The airplane reveals this fact: that men have built cities for men, not in order to give them pleasure, to content them, to make them happy, but to make money ! Thus all that is dearest to the heart, the very atmosphere of daily activity, love, friendship, sorrow the house and the view on which its window opens all this is a morose and brutal environment without character or attraction.*  
Corbusier, *Aircraft*.



Le Corbusier had previously dreamed of: "In order to create the organic architectural entities of modern times, the soil must be re-divided, made free and available. "<sup>8</sup>The course of history now seemingly followed his directive: "Cities must be extricated from their misery, come what may. Whole quarters of them must be destroyed and new cities built. "<sup>9</sup>Such formulations not only reveal Le Corbusier's attitude to the situation of cities, but also his sympathies for fascism, which was on the rise at the time, and Adolf Hitler's plans for a new order.

*Sometimes in the course of the centuries a man has  
sprung up here and there instinct with the power of  
genius, establishing the unity of his time  
A man !  
The flock needs a sheperd. <sup>10</sup>*

*Aircraft* reads more and more like an inhuman manifesto that sees the burgeoning fascist developments and even the war as an opportunity for a new architecture. Towards the end of the Second World War in 1944, Hitler, who was retreating from France, ordered the destruction of Paris, although he actually admired the city for its beauty [11].

Le Corbusier had already proposed in the 1920s to completely demolish parts of Paris in order to realize a sprawling complex of modern building structures there [12]. He would probably not have objected to the destruction of Paris by the Nazis, albeit for different reasons. The Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, all the bridges, Notre Dame and other structures as well as the bridges were to be blown up. Due to the blasting of the bridges and an associated increase in the

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<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* (New York, N.Y: Universe, 1988).

[11] Gianluca Falanga, *Berlin 1937 : the calm before the storm* (Berlin: Berlin Story, 2007).

[12] Le Corbusier et al, *Oeuvre complète*. (Zurich: Les Éditions d'architecture, 1973).

His there would also have been widespread flooding. Paris only narrowly escaped this catastrophe and [13] one can only

speculate whether Le Corbusier regretted his sympathy for fascism and Hitler after the war, but in the end the architect's destructive visions were realized. The reshaping of Europe that Hitler had embodied for him until then now took place even without his victory.

Cities lay in ruins and modern architecture and its representatives realized their visions of modern life in the gaps left by the war. They became the celebrated architects of the post-war period. The extent to which these new buildings lived up to the utopian ideals of a better organic life is questionable, and it seems more likely that Le Corbusier also ultimately adapted to economic conditions and that his great urban planning and social visions remained limited in the postwar period. Le Corbusier's architectural ideal of urban planning beyond dense and chaotic streets full of traffic, noise and bad air were not realized even after the Second World War.

The situation was similar for modern architects in Germany. There, the construction industry was booming in the 1950s, and the large housing estates of Gropius or Taut were mainly realized on the outskirts of cities. In the destroyed cities, on the other hand, the centers were not infrequently reconstructed instead of completely redesigned. This was partly because the residents wanted the old familiar back and partly because the responsible authorities were still working with the same people.

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13] Why Paris was spared in the end is not completely clear. The direct order from Hitler was to destroy Paris, but this did not happen. The German General Dietrich von Choltitz, who was stationed in Paris and in command at the time, presents the rescue of Paris in his book *...Brennt Paris?* as his merit. In Volker Schlöndorff's film *Diplomatie* (2014), this view is partly supported, although here it is a Swedish diplomat who persuades the general to spare Paris. Others think it was the Resistance that forced von Choltitz to surrender before Paris could be destroyed.

were occupied as they were at the time before the war, and so these people were able to have a significant influence on the reconstruction. Although the *Association of German Architects* pursued a modern course, the great new beginning failed to materialize and the modern buildings merely blended in with the old ones instead of replacing them. As in other cities in Europe, there was no fundamental redesign of urban planning.

So the question arises, what became of the utopias of modernism? The apartments of Gropius, Corbusier and Taut have meanwhile become objects of speculation and from today's point of view they also seem aged, as if from another time and at most still like a utopia that could not be redeemed [14].

*It can be quite disconcerting, I think, to recognize just how fast this has happened, to acknowledge that high-modernist forms have become historical ones. By this I mean that we can no longer fully identify with them, as they belong to a different time, to a different knowledge, and finally, of course, to a different ambition.*<sup>15</sup>

### The void afterwards

Must city dwellers resign themselves to living in the clutches of real estate sharks and in the constantly outdated utopias of others? Must history repeat itself over and over again and always leave the city to those who have the will and the power to destroy it and plan it?

Are there no alternatives that include the inhabitants of the cities as creative forces?

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14] The artist Mark Lewis describes in his text *Is Modernity our Antiquity?* how a building, the moment it is built, is already obsolete again. Lewis speaks of an antiquity in modernity, of a contradiction that no modern architecture, however seemingly timeless, can escape. On the contrary, such distinctive architectures reveal even more clearly that they are the ideals and utopias of a bygone era. Cf. Lewis, *Documenta magazine. Reader*.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Lewis et al, *Documenta magazine. Reader* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007).

What would an architecture look like that does not age, that leaves spaces alone and that does not block paths, but leaves them open? Does truly utopian architecture may consist neither of buildings that have already been built nor of the modern visions of acclaimed architects? Is it, in the end, the empty spaces on which the homeless, Roma, young people, etc. reside? The powerless, whose behavior would meet with rejection elsewhere or whose needs the built architecture does not and does not want to take on.

These empty spaces, gaps and wastelands are characterized by an absence of any architecture, any ideology. As a result, they are accessible and allow us to get a break from the city business as usual. There is no code of conduct for the wasteland. In this sense, an architecture of emptiness would have its own function within the city, a function that has not yet been considered because it makes no sense from an economic point of view, open space as a new function. Only the wasteland can embody such an absolute free space. From the emptiness it harbors also arises its openness and its philosophical and extremely alternative potentials. Lessons from the voids would question the oppressive mechanisms of architecture, because when architecture can escape its primary functions and becomes indeterminate, it is no longer oppressive.

*In this sense (...) it is also outside the consumerist onslaught, bombardment and encroachment of meaning, signification, and messages. The void claims a kind of erasure from all the oppression, in which architecture plays an important part.*<sup>16</sup>

The Palast der Republik in Berlin, for example, was such a place in the years before its demolition [17]. It was only a hollow space where now low-threshold actions and events like concerts and exhibitions could take place, the palace was in this

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<sup>16</sup> Koolhaas, Rem, and Sanford Kwinter. *Rem Koolhaas : conversations with students* (Houston, Tex. New York: Rice University, School of Architecture Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

[17] The building was closed in 1990 due to asbestos contamination. In the years from 1998 to 2003, the building was then cleared of asbestos and could then still be used until demolition work began in February 2006.

de-bureaucratized and disempowered state has finally, and only finally, become a real palace for the people. In a kind of accessible emptiness now lies the key to an expanded concept of architecture that offers space for doubting the built structures.

### Architecture fails

Architect Rem Koolhaas, who has harbored a fascination for the divided Berlin since the 1970s, sees the Berlin Wall as an expanded and pure form of architecture, in theory at least. He draws the comparison to a film strip in the course of which a multitude of dramatic events can be read. For Koolhaas, the wall even becomes a work of art, he compares armored crosses with minimalist sculptures by Sol LeWitt, and the entire death strip becomes for him an architecture of absence and emptiness. For him, this emptiness is more powerful than any built architecture.

*In fact, in narrowly architectural terms, the wall was not an object but an erasure, a freshly created absence. For me, it was a first demonstration of the capacity of the void-of nothingness-to "function" with more efficiency, subtlety, and flexibility than any object you could imagine in its place. It was a warning that-in architecture-absence would always win in a contest with presence.*<sup>18</sup>

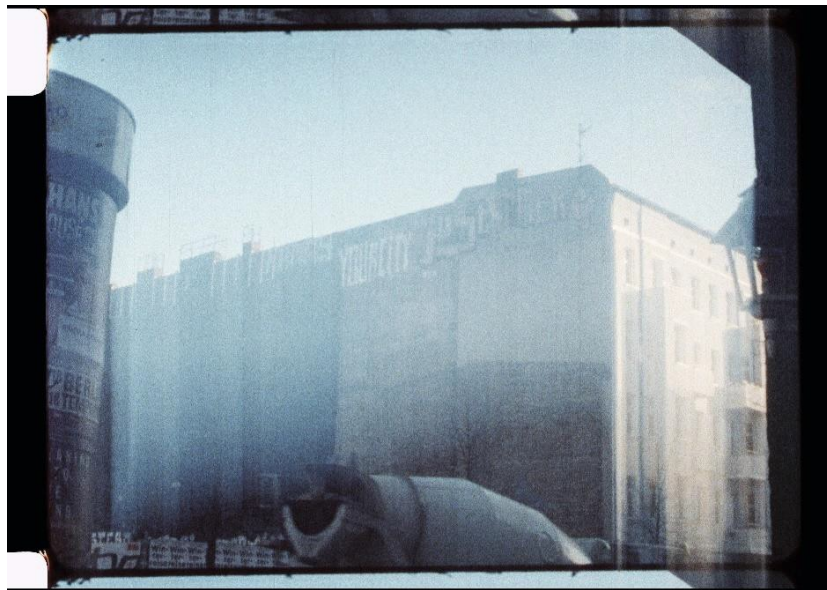
But the Berlin Wall is also an architecture without morality or reason, an architecture born of an emotional reaction, the result of enmity, a symbol of human abyss and failure. From such architectures of emptiness one can learn something about the human condition. In this sense, Koolhaas' comparisons to art actually make sense. In Andrzej Żuławski's 1981 film *Possession*, the Berlin Wall also becomes both a metaphor for a failing relationship and the real backdrop to that story. The levels of reality begin to blur. In one scene, this becomes very clear. A watchtower is shown, where real guards look on with

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<sup>18</sup> Rem Koolhaas, "Field Trip. A(A) Memoir" *S,M,L,XL* (1997).

binoculars out, directly into the lens of the film camera. The camera zooms out further and now you can see the surrounding wall, then even further and you notice that it is a view from an apartment through a window, a clock hangs on the window knob and the main character played by actor Sam Neill enters the picture. He marks the transition to the fictional plot of the film, which repeatedly juxtaposes the divided cityscape with the relationship problems of the protagonists. In this way, the Berlin Wall actually becomes a filmstrip in the course of which the protagonists' relationship also turns out to be a metaphor for the political situation in Germany. In this sense, the Berlin Wall is a profoundly human architecture in which the emotions, the dramas and the problems of societies are revealed.

## II. Chapter: Present



*Figure 2*

Such conditions of the society also reveal themselves on the wasteland. There, everything can take place that is not allowed elsewhere or is unwillingly seen, but which, despite all this, is inherent in human nature. On the wasteland everything else becomes a possibility and this gives hope for those who are forgotten and left out.

Just as the Berlin Wall led to an expansion of his concept of architecture for Rem Koolhaas, so the wasteland did for me. In the following chapter, therefore, I would like to address the state of these fallow spaces in my present.

## Berlin

*Berlin's identity is closely related to the concept of the urban void. History has become imprinted so brutally on the physical presence of the city that, besides the well-known ideological monumentality, there is an underlying stratum of ghostly present absences that recall the city's past.*<sup>19</sup>

Berlin is a suitable example for dedicating oneself to these areas. Of course, you could also look at it the other way around, the topic just forces itself on you in this city. If I hadn't grown up here, I might have a different relationship to the city, because it doesn't look the same today as it did when I was a child in the early 1990s. At that time, Berlin was already in the process of becoming a metropolis as it once was before the Second World War. A city with sprawling nightlife, endless shopping miles and a wealth of art and culture that was to become known around the world. At that time, not everything had been rebuilt that had been destroyed before. Berlin was still poor and creative. I grew up in the Berlin of the 90s and the traces that history had left behind were still very visible. You didn't really need monuments to feel what had happened here. The Berlin Wall was still very present at that time and even where it had already been removed, you could still guess where it once stood by looking at the immediate surroundings. The death strips were not yet built on and I remember that as a child I was afraid of stepping on a mine somewhere. At that time, I often went to fun fairs and flea markets that were held on wastelands.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetics of Absence," *Lettre International* 43 (1998).

Or on my way home from school, I used a shortcut across the wastelands. At that time, the paths through the city were like discovery tours. The wasteland is more unpredictable than the rest of the city, where everything is meticulously planned and regulated. There are no rules of use on the wasteland. In the shopping center, the school, and even in the parks there is a code of conduct to which one must adhere, a structure that can hardly be changed. On the wasteland it's different, the emptiness is a structure that people in Berlin have become accustomed to, that they have learned to use.

*To many, it is Berlin's layering of present absences that holds the city's deepest meaning and fascination. Contradictory as it may seem, absence does not only characterize but even structure the city. The now absent Wall, as being the enigmatic absence of Berlin, remains in many ways a structuring principle for the united city in the same way as the divided city parts were defined by the absence of their counterpart.*<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the 80s, the director Wim Wenders shot the film "Der Himmel über Berlin" ("Wings of Desire"). The film features many former wastelands, among them Potsdamer Platz. In the film, two angels play the main role, looking down from heaven on a Berlin that is still full of empty spaces. The Berlin Wall also appears in the course of the film and there are other references to the city's past; on the back of a building, for example, is written in black paint "*Whoever builds bunkers, throws bombs.*"<sup>21</sup> Wim Wenders succeeded in showing how these wastelands are like monuments and reminders of what happened. Before the war, this empty Potsdamer Platz had once been the bustling center of Berlin, and it was to become so again at the end of the 1990s. The architect Renzo Piano was appointed and Potsdamer Platz became the largest construction site in Europe.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetics of Absence," *Lettre Internationale* 43 (1998).

<sup>21</sup> Wenders, Wim, *Der Himmel über Berlin*. BRD and France: Road Movie, Argos, WDR, (1987).



The artist and filmmaker Hito Steyerl, who was still an art student in the 90s, shot a film at that time on the construction site of Potsdamer Platz, exactly where a few years later shopping malls and cinemas were built and where large corporations now maintain their offices. Her film, "Die leere Mitte" appears like a documentary snapshot of this place at that time. However, Steyerl works with cross-fades of footage from different times, filming repeatedly from the same perspectives. Thus, the construction gap at Potsdamer Platz can be seen one moment with green grass and a wall and the next moment completely covered in snow and without a wall. Only the perspectives and the buildings in the background still indicate that it is the same place. Steyerl points out, however, that there was already a wall here at a completely different time, hundreds of years earlier. She brings into play a time from which there are no pictures. One now gets a sense that this place has experienced much more than what is visible, that borders, fences and walls have been shifting here for much longer and will continue to do so in the future. The city appears in constant change, structures crumble, borders shift and the reasons for this are manifold, wars, dilapidated buildings that have to be demolished, lack of housing etc., old things crumble and new things are built again and the time in between is always the time of the wasteland. The wasteland allows only fleeting uses and, according to common opinion, it only develops real value once something useful is built there. There must be a concrete use, whether that is a building, a park or a playground; there is little understanding here for a wild and unused wasteland.

### Harappa

In Japan there are several positive terms for the wasteland. In the term *Harappa*, which means *open space*, or wild field, for example,

is co-inscribed with a nostalgic reference to the wild and overgrown wastelands [22]. After the Second World War, Japan also had a large number of wastelands where children in particular went on discovery tours in the post-war years. As a result, an understanding and appreciation for such places developed. This can also be seen, for example, in the films of contemporary film director Kiyoshi Kurosawa. In almost all of his films, abandoned buildings or wastelands play a role. His protagonists spend time or hide in such places. Sometimes from enemies, sometimes from their wives, from the constraints of society or from themselves. On the *Harappa*, human conditions express themselves, unlike in the office, at home, or on the street, where people are controlled by rules of conduct and duties and can only reveal their innermost feelings to a limited extent. In the film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky, a writer and a scientist, in search of knowledge, are led into a forbidden zone by a so-called stalker. In the course of their journey through this mysterious zone, it becomes increasingly clear that both the writer and the scientist are driven by their own plans, desires and ideas about life, only the stalker appears sensitive and fragile, his self-sacrificing helpfulness and his belief in the triumph of weakness and flexibility over hardness and strength coincides with the landscape of the zone, an abandoned wasteland with decayed and overgrown building structures. Such wastelands are places that make you think, places of youth that do not age themselves but around which everything else ages. They are abysses where one can seek shelter from the mundane and whose existence is desirable.

[22] *While contemporary vacant spaces are not on the radar of the wider public audience, the Japanese people still have fond memories of Harappa (open field, wild field). Harappa is frequently cited in association with void spaces and seems to function as a code for instantly grasping the capacity the spaces offer: playgrounds for exploration and games. The term reflects a cultural nostalgia: an innocent childhood memory of the abundance of overgrown, open, and vacant spaces dispersed through cities after World War II, which children would conquer for play and adventure.*

Jonas and Rahmann, *Tokyo Void*.

*As a place of sensually perceptible decay, the wasteland is an empty space in the functional thicket of the city. As a physical sign of a not-more and not-yet, it generates momentary perplexity and situational openness.*<sup>23</sup>

## Dérive

In 2018, more than 80 years after the publication of Le Corbusier's *Aircraft*, I flew over Berlin for the first time with a drone, in search of the last wastelands. The development of Potsdamer Platz in the 90s of the 20th century had only been the beginning, in the following decades urban construction boomed, housing became scarce, rents rose immeasurably and one wasteland after the other disappeared. It started with the ones in the center, first signs were inconspicuous fences, then followed billboards announcing a construction project, then digging and building started. Fixed on the display of the remote control I looked down on Berlin as the drone meanders between cranes, somewhere behind Hauptbahnhof. The gap between Mitte and the district Wedding is just being closed. The Bundesnachrichtendienst (Federal Intelligence Service) sits here, where opposite once stood abandoned factories in which non commercial exhibitions were setup by young motivated and idealistic people. In front of the empty factory buildings, there were sandy floors where people could sit, eat and drink together. Now there are futuristic facades and condominiums. At most, you sit on benches anchored into the ground or in front of expensive cafes and supermarkets, if you even walk along there at all, there's really no real reason to do so anymore. I drive by there today, only by bike or car on the way to something else.

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<sup>23</sup> Hasse, Jürgen in *Nicht-Mehr/ Noch- Nicht*, Berlin, Filminstitut UdK, (2006).

There are no more exhibitions. Now other people walk along there.

I flew, drove and walked through Berlin reminiscent of a situationist wandering or *dérive* [24]. I fly south again, past Potsdamer Platz, towards Schöneberg. I once filmed a fallow area there, there was an opening in the fence and suddenly you were standing on a field with tall grass, various plants, sandy soil and a lot of garbage, used syringes, used condoms, etc. On my trips to work in a project space I co-founded or to visit the family, I kept noticing the fenced-in wastelands. I wrote down the addresses and at a suitable time I visited the wastelands again with my film camera and documented their condition. The apparatus, an old 16mm film camera, had a peculiar modification or defect that caused any light sources to run in long wisps toward the bottom of the frame. A piece of sky thus flowed down over a roof or a ridge of houses, or a red lighted traffic light became a horizontally running red line, light pushed through gaps between houses and ran down like a small waterfall. This blurring of light resulted in a manifestation of temporality even on the single frame. The movement was no longer given only by the sequence of images, but also on the single still there was now an effect that suggested temporality and movement. There was something painterly about the way differently colored areas of light flowed downward. This surprising defect/effect made the camera an adequate device for documenting something as ephemeral as wastelands. In general, the interplay between film and wastelands now resulted in interesting philosophical overlaps.

In the narrative of building facades lining up one after the other, the wasteland represents a break. If one sees the rows of houses of a

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[24] Guy Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*" *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

street blocks as a sequence of images then the wasteland marks a pause, a blank space, and a difference. In film, there is also a space in between the images on the film reel, that is, the small black barrier between exposed frames. It lies completely free and undescribed. You never see it, however, because at the exact moment when this barrier slides over the projection lens, it is dimmed so that the film strip can appear as a timed sequence of its individual frames. Driving along rows of houses, a narrative of facades emerges, of different architectures and times and contrasts from luxury and poverty to decay. Each house becomes a single image flying by. A new house means a new image and the transition to the next house is expressed in the rupture of the successively appearing facades. In the case of film, as mentioned above, this is the barrier between the individual frames, where later the film editing also takes place. This blank space between the frames and between the houses and this pause is necessary in order to mark a difference between the images at all and thus ultimately to be able to set them in motion. If we didn't have this limitation, we wouldn't be able to perceive the film or even the different houses, but would only see the rush past of a single long image in the form of a horizontal motion blur. In the case of the city, this would then appear as a single endless facade. In the play of image and non-image of building and void, light and shadow, material and opening, emulsion and permeability are also terms that illustrate the similarities between film and city, between wasteland and film material. And in the case of cities with a large number of gaps between buildings or wastelands, interestingly enough, there is also the notion of the *perforated city* [25]. Now, at the latest, the analogy of perforated film strips and perforated rows of houses becomes tangible.

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25] The concept of the perforated city is to be understood here in the true sense as a negative development in the context of shrinking cities. Here, the city develops more and more into a wasteland, while in growing cities this perforation disappears more and more.

Cf. Altrock and Schubert, *Growing City*.

For an exhibition in Berlin's Alexanderplatz subway station, I exhibited six film stills from my archive of wastelands in the form of large-format billboards. They showed six wastelands which, now lined up, provided an insight into a perforated city. On the edges of the billboards the perforation of the scanned film strip is still visible. The billboards were placed in groups of three instead of the usual advertisements and now also provided information about what was happening to the city above ground. Five of the six stills were subtitled with texts by me, thoughts on the meaning of emptiness and memories of the wastelands from my youth. There was the flea market at Tacheles, for example, which brought back memories of swapping video games because they were too expensive to buy new. Various generations of games from SNES to PlayStation 1 testify to the period when I was there [26]. On the sixth film still, completely without subtitles, one sees at the lower edge of the picture, slightly blurred, a concrete mixer driving past a wasteland, a messenger of a soon to be hermetic city.

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26] I only noticed this wasteland again after a few years when it was converted into a parking lot and finally barricaded with boards and released for construction. I filmed it there one last time before this gap would also close and only the memory and the film document would exist.

### III. Chapter: Future



Figure 3

The final chapter will now take up what began with Le Corbusier's destructiveness, which then, as a result of a failure of modernism, identified the wasteland as a possibility for utopian or heterotopian architecture in the city, and now raises the question of possibilities for a future.

*For us, void is an ephemeral object, a site- yet not only a space- but also a possible future and a counter-perspective on a predictable city.<sup>27</sup>*

The disappearance of wastelands in Berlin marks a dangerous tendency. The threatened city now appears in double version, once by destructive wars and once by total building. The space for a future appears threatened in both cases.

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<sup>27</sup> Marieluise Jonas, and Heike Rahmann, *Tokyo Void: Possibilities in Absence* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

## Solidified cities

In the science fiction film *La jétée* (1962) by Chris Marker, the city is brought to an abrupt end by the atomic bomb, following on from the destruction of Paris in 1944, which was averted at the last moment [28]. The film, described by Marker himself as a photo-novel, consists of a series of photographs and a voiceover, through which the story is told from the protagonist's point of view. The film begins with a scene at an airport, the protagonist remembers that a man was shot there, he remembers the face of a woman at that moment. Then a photograph with the outline of an airplane appears in the sky, possibly a fighter plane. The plane appears once more as a bringer of doom and Paris is destroyed by an atomic bomb. The surviving population lives underground and a time machine is developed to prevent the start of this third world war. The protagonist is the one who is sent to both the past and the future in the course of the film, hoping to find a way out of the situation. However, the protagonist does not pursue this goal, but instead pursues his love for the woman from his memory, knowing that the war is approaching again he passes a good time. The film ends with the scene at the airport with which it began. It turns out that the protagonist himself is the man who was shot at the airport at the beginning. The war cannot be prevented again and everything starts from the beginning. The film could theoretically run itself in an endless loop. It creates a gloomy finality that is reinforced by the use of still photos instead of moving images.

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28] Marker's gloomy vision of the future appeared in February 1962, three years before Le Corbusier's death and in the midst of the Cold War, eight months before the Cuban missile crisis. The latter gave a broad public to understand that humanity was not far from the reality of nuclear war. *La jétée* was therefore also a film that was contemporary in the extreme, addressing an absolutely real danger.



There is no more movement and everything is reduced to memories. There is no present and no future anymore, everything has already happened and will happen again and again.

I juxtapose Chris Marker's fantasy of a continuous and eternal destruction, an eternal above-ground wasteland, with eternal and absolute building. The atomic uninhabitability and the flight into the underground of Paris, is contrasted with a metropolis used to the last square inch. My exhibition of film stills of past wastelands in the underground station now almost merges with the dystopia of *La jétée*. The snapshot of approaching doom, in the form of the concrete mixer in front of the wasteland from the previous chapter, becomes the equivalent of Marker's image of the doom-bringing airplane, just before the destruction of Paris. Le Corbusier's aerial view of London also appears related here.

Time seems petrified in such pictures and the city seems petrified as well. And my drone over Berlin, like the head of Medusa detached from the body, it hovers above the city and everything it looks at is petrified. Architecture is a photo-novel, it appears motionless until a next building appears and replaces the old image. Such solidifications and petrifications now also point to sculptural qualities of the city.

In the work "House" (1993), the British artist Rachel Whiteread filled the interior of a three-story London house to be demolished with concrete. After the exterior walls have been demolished, the actually hollow and empty interior now appears as a massive concrete structure. Whiteread uses the house as a mold. The resulting inversion of spatial emptiness results in inaccessible mass, an architectural wasteland. At the outer edges of this solid void, one still finds the imprints of windows and doors, suggesting a different kind of past. Through these holes one could once look into the interior of a room and from the interior out into the open. Now they are reliefs and all that has become impossible. The void is petrified and the space unusable. Whiteread puts the monstrosity of architecture on display by taking the air out of us, the inhabitants of such spaces, and filling the space with the material that otherwise surrounds it.

The development of the wastelands exudes a similar oppressive charm as "House", but at the same time blocks any artistic aspirations. A hermetic city in the style of Brutalism would possibly be an appropriate and honest aesthetic for such a massive development as is currently taking place in Berlin, for example. Even the most playful-looking new buildings, ecologically designed and with integrated cultural measures, cannot replace the characteristics of the wasteland. Such buildings therefore always seem like a fraud to me.

### Urban Protected Areas

However, the question arises whether the wasteland can be protected at all or whether it is in its autonomous nature not to be protected and to always submit to its fate.

In "The missing house" (1990), the artist Christian Boltanski refers to the history of the former inhabitants of a house destroyed by bombing in 1945. The wasteland and the empty space become a work of art. Only plaques with names and occupations of the former inhabitants are attached to the walls of the surrounding houses. The artwork was initially intended only as a temporary action, but the gap with the plaques has survived to this day, even though it is located in what is now an exclusive residential area of Berlin-Mitte. The gap most likely owes its existence solely to Boltanski's work of art created there, although it should be noted that today it is no longer a wild and freely walkable wasteland, but a completely tidy gap that resembles a monument rather than a wasteland. Here, ultimately, a work of art has made the space its own and the wasteland appears enclosed as if in a museum showcase. In one scene of Cynthia Beatt's film "The Invisible Frame" (2009), the protagonist, Tilda Swinton, looks at an artificially preserved piece of the death strip around which tourists gather. The past also appears here as if preserved in a showcase

and a feeling of alienation sets in. This piece of well-kept and barely aged death strip seems too real to be true. A ruin, an old watchtower, a photo or a film from that time would be more credible witnesses.

In the film, Swinton rides a bicycle along the former Berlin Wall. She is on a search for clues of the division. At the same time, the film is a sequel in the form of a remake. In *Cycling the Frame* (1988), Beatt already sent the actress on the same bicycle tour through Berlin, at that time along the still-standing Wall.

In the interplay of both films, interesting superimpositions of time emerge, as they did, for example, in Hito Steyerl's *Die Leere Mitte*.

If one can no longer see or find the past, but it only has to be artificially preserved, then this past hardens and appears as if petrified, like a monument. Monuments are quite necessary where traces have disappeared or will disappear. The imminent development of Berlin's last wastelands marks a turning point in the city's history. From now on only built architecture will determine the past and the future, may be monuments should be erected in honor of the wastelands at least. A better solution to the problem seems almost impossible. Artificial preservation of wastelands would immediately transform them into something that would contradict their unplanned and unplannable nature. I would still try to do it though.

In the end, it is probably not about conserving or saving the wasteland, but rather about being able to remember it and create an awareness of its significance in order to stop people destroying them. I think we need to remember the wasteland because this form of temporary anti-architecture has become rare in ever-growing cities, and because something about the nature of the city can be learned and experienced there, something that buildings cannot express and that one might otherwise only get told by contemporary witnesses, in texts or films, moments of truth.

## Architecture vérité

Such moments are already known from the *cinéma vérité*, the cinema of truth. The theorist and former architect Siegfried Kracauer remembers in one of his texts a film scene he had seen as a small boy, he describes a street scene where sky and house facades are reflected in a puddle [29]. an amalgam of film, architecture and a sky from which, many years later, cities were to be filmed and destroyed and filmed again. Such an observation of real but ephemeral states of cities is only possible through their recording. In this sense, wastelands could also be called *architecture vérité*, that is, architecture of truth, which is at least as much an expression of everyday human conditions as its built counterpart. With their disappearance, a piece of truth would be lost. The emptiness of the wasteland offers an architecture on which a multitude of human needs, problems are expressed and on which no rules prevail, on which everyone has access, on which no style is fixed and no function is inscribed. An architecture oriented to the truth, because it does not hide anything, does not try to take people hostage, to direct or to shape, it is an architecture without an authoritarian narrative voice. An architecture that adapts to all circumstances and does not shrink from its own disappearance. *Architecture Vérité* also coincides with the Foucaultian heterotopia, a utopia of a utopia of the many.

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[29] Among the most rigorous of the new realists, Siegfried Kracauer, himself a former architect, was consistent in his arguments against the "decorative" and artificial, and in favor of the critical vision of the real that film allowed. From his first experience of film as a pre-World War I child to his last theoretical work on film published in 1960, Kracauer found the street to be both site and vehicle for his social criticism. Recalling the first film he saw as a boy, entitled significantly enough "Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life," Kracauer remembered being thrilled by the sight of "an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house facades and a piece of sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the facades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle-this image has never left me." Vidler, *Warped space*.

*Utopias are placements without a real place: perfection of society or inversion of society- in any case effective places drawn into the establishment of society. Counter-placements and counter-campings, so to speak, in which the real places within culture are simultaneously presented, contested and turned over. I call them the heterotopias in contrast to the utopias.*<sup>30</sup>

It is an architecture that points to an indeterminate past and to an indeterminate future and can thus embody the utopias and visions of many. It is elastic and flexible, where, on the other hand, built architecture represents only the builder or the most assertive utilization concept and thus can no longer offer any space for a different future; it is hard and rigid.

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault: *Andere Räume* (1967), in: Barck, Karlheinz (ed.): *Aisthesis: Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik; Essais* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993).

*What hardens will never be able to win.* <sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Stalker* Soviet Union: Mosfilm (1979).

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## Movies

*Cycling the Frame*, directed by Cynthia Beatt. 1988; BRD: Sender Freies Berlin, 1988. film

*The Sky over Berlin*, directed by Wim Wenders. 1987; BRD and France: Road Movie, Argos, WDR, film.

*Die leere Mitte*, directed by Hito Steyerl. 1998; Germany: HFF Munich, 1998. film

*Die letzten Brachen*, directed by Lars Preisser. 2016; Germany, Lars Preisser, 2016. film

*Diplomacy*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff. 2014; France and Germany: Gaumont, 2014. film

*La jétée*, directed by Chris Marker. 1962; France: Argos Films, 1962. film

*Nicht-Mehr/ Noch- Nicht*, directed by Daniel Kunle and Holger Lauinger. 2006; Germany: Filminstitut UdK, 2006. video

*Possession*, directed by Andrzej Żuławski. 1981; France, FRG: Gaumont, 1981. film

*Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. 1979; Soviet Union: Mosfilm, Vtoroe Tvorcheskoe Obedinenie, 1979. film.

*The invisible Frame*, directed by Cynthia Beatt. 2009; Germany: Filmgalerie 451, 2009. video

## Images

Figure 1 Photograph from Le Corbusier. *Aircraft*. (1935) Figure 2

Film still from Lars Preisser. *The last wastelands*. (2016) Figure 3

Film still from Chris Marker. *La jétée*. (1962)