Finding Atopia

Four Perspectives on the Non-Places of Today

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Atopia

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In the format of a round-table discussion, we bring together voices from different department, sections and roles within TU Delft to explore questions arising from the current issue of the magazine.

Unlike the more familiar 'topias' like utopia and dystopia, atopia eludes clear definition and challenges conventional understandings of space in our rapidly changing environments. As we delve into this multifaceted theme, each participant has provided their unique perspective, creating a mosaic of insights and examples that shed light on the ever-shifting landscapes of non-places.

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The terms atopia and placelessness capture the essence of the observed trend where rapid urbanization, commercial interests, and other factors contribute to landscapes that may, intentionally or unintentionally, strip away the unique qualities that define a place and contribute to a sense of belonging and community.

In the realm of landscape design, the integration of existential space and the concept of genius loci holds profound implications for fostering a deeper connection between individuals and their surroundings to fight atopias. Existential space, within a design-oriented context, is not a logico-mathematical term, but transcends into realms that evoke the basic relationships between humans and their environment. Therefore, these designed spaces become more than aesthetic landscapes; they become environments that prompt individuals to grapple with essential questions of purpose, identity, and the human condition.

The notion of an existential foothold, synonymous with dwelling, as mentioned in the book 'Genius Loci: Towards A Phenomenology of Architecture' by Christian Norberg-Schulz, becomes paramount. Humans truly dwell when they find orientation and meaning within an environment. Moreover, the incorporation of *genius loci*, or the spirit of the place, emphasizes the significance of visualizing and manifesting the unique essence inherent in a specific location. Landscape architecture, in the context of the genius of the space, becomes a means to create meaningful places that facilitate human dwelling. Acknowledging that a person's identity is complicatedly tied to their belonging to places, the design process gains a profound purpose to craft landscapes that not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also contribute to a sense of identity, purpose, and a profound connection to the human condition.

In a less philosophical way, atopias of today arise when the repeated relationships, patterns, and processes characterizing a specific region are ignored. In her essay 'Signature-Based Landscape Design,' Joan Woodward reflects on the significance of recognizing connections in the landscape, both natural and cultural, to ground oneself in a sense of place. In countering atopia, it is essential to observe and identify relationships and formative processes in the landscape, such as geomorphic, climatic, biotic, and cultural processes, and apply them to design and planning. These signatures, whether of nature or culture, contribute to a region's identity and are essential in deriving patterns of a place

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The question of metaphysics has always revolved around the concept of 'topos'. According to the architectural theorist Mark Wigley, its historical evolution involves a succession of various names for the ground – such as 'logos', 'ratio', 'archē', and more (Wigley, 1993) Each of these terms – not excluding the escapist 'utopia' and nihilist 'dystopia' – designates being, understood as the foundation for whatever stands as an edifice. Regrettably, before any inquiry even commences, the architectural subject is inherently determined as enduring above and beyond its transitory predicates. As such, it is prevented from affirming the very movement of affection.

An alternative approach is to set aside natural perception, where every individual entity, attribute, or action is perceived as already constituted. In the words of the philosopher of difference, Gilles Deleuze: "To make the body a power which is not reducible to the organism, to make thought a power which is not reducible to consciousness" (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987). Embracing such a constructivist perspective leads us into the realm of 'atopia' defined as "that which opposes the principle of Identity" (Deleuze, 1981).

Departing from the logic of discreteness and its principle of non-contradiction, 'atopia' adopts the logic of continuity. The finite could be said to consists of an infinity under a certain relation (Neyrat, 2018). The discrete and the continuous – digital and analogue – are not mutually exclusive, but rather co-determining, albeit asymmetrically. This viewpoint resonates with the architect Peter Eisenman, who has consistently rejected the idea of creating a place as an architectural objective. In his 1987 manuscript, he asserted that "if architecture traditionally has been about 'topos', that is, an idea of place, then to be 'between', is to search for 'atopos', the atopia within topos" (Eisenman, 2004).

Crucially, to fully embrace the speculative pragmatist concept of 'in-betweenness', it is imperative to recognise the real virtuality that surpasses the phenomenal and dispenses with disciplinary boundaries (Caldeira, 2022).

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However, the growing momentum of the revolution encountered a chilling response—an organized and systematic obliteration of entire neighborhoods. This act was carefully calculated, intending to extinguish the flame of opposition and protest. The devastation was surgical, aiming not only at homes and infrastructure but also at erasing the shared memory of communities, acting as a form of collective punishment. These neighborhoods, once bustling with life, transformed into atopias—places devoid of the familiarity and history that once defined them. Syrians were forcibly detached from the very spaces that had been an intrinsic part of their identities and collective experiences. The coerced displacement of residents served as the initial sign of placelessness. Following that, the deliberate erasure unfolded, morphing these localities into cities of ghosts, further cementing their evolution into undesirable and desolate places, lacking any allure.

In this challenging scenario, academics and thinkers hold a weighty responsibility. It extends beyond acknowledging the magnitude of these injustices, encompassing the task of bringing obscured narratives to light and ensuring their thorough documentation and dissemination. This comprehensive documentation is pivotal in constructing frameworks aimed at resurrecting these atopias. The objective is to envision and advocate for the revitalization of these spaces, reinstating familiarity and cultural identity for the impacted communities. It's a multidimensional endeavor, necessitating interdisciplinary collaboration, innovative urban planning, and policies prioritizing the restoration of dignity. Through collective efforts, we endeavor to contribute to the healing and resurgence of Syria, envisioning a future where these atopias thrive once more, resonating profoundly with the hearts of its people.

The war's turmoil in Syria, sparked by a cry for societal change and justice, wrought immense devastation and disarray. The origin of the revolution lay deep within the informal settlements, where marginalized communities grappled with persistent injustices, economic imbalances, and a lack of fundamental necessities. These areas, frequently neglected and denied essential services, emerged as the hub of discontent, prompting a profound transformation. Lefebvre's ideology of the right to the city resonated powerfully as individuals commenced reclaiming their rights through grassroots movements, chiefly by taking to the streets in protest. The streets, previously mere passageways, metamorphosed into symbolic spaces where people reclaimed their rights and vocalized their collective frustrations, envisioning a city that was more equitable and just.

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Other than utopia and dystopia, atopias can be real spaces (although the word non-place implies they are not). There are different ways in which these locations are considered not to be a place. One end of the spectre describes anonymous spaces that are generic and interchangeable, like airports, as in the original definition by Marc Augé (1992, 122). On the other end are there are those leftover, undefined spaces that that are hard to read and have no clear meaning or use. These spaces are a consequence of the transition from clearly defined cities surrounded by open landscape into the contemporary metropolitan landscape, which is a contiguity of urban and landscape fragments, networks, programs that are ill-connected, leading to all sorts of gaps, chinks, margins and residues.

Such atopias are also often inaccessible and unwelcoming. What if we could transform these atopias into heterotopias, or other places, sheltered places that are contrary to their surroundings, and at the same time mirroring, reflecting them, as Michel Foucault wrote (1997, 352). Such a place is the Essenburgpark in Rotterdam. This once inaccessible, neglected fringe where the railway cuts through the centre of Rotterdam, has been claimed by the local residents, who added subtle elements such as an entrance, a narrow bridge and stepping stone, just enough to give a hint to the passers-by that they are allowed to enter and explore this wild place, transforming the atopia into a heterotopia. Whereas in the metropolitan landscape, 'outside' - in the sense of outside the landscape which is regulated, accessed and controlled by humans - is rapidly disappearing, in the interstices between the urban fabric a new form of 'outside' can be found: in the holes and interstices of the metropolitan landscape itself. These gaps between urban tissues allow us glimpse of the landscape underneath and make it possible to appreciate the landscape space by bringing it within the visual, physical and conceptual reach of the city dweller, face to face with natural processes, the longue durée of evolution and natural growth, with silence and emptiness. As much as such locations are expressions of the metropolitan landscape, at the same time they provide an escape from it.

They are disconnected from the regulated spaces of society and as such, they allow for the unexpected and the unregulated, for alternative and surprising uses and meaning. Thus, these spaces also become spaces of coexistence where people 'encounter people like themselves and others who are extremely different, activities they may expect and ones unanticipated' (Franck and Stevens, 2006, 19), as well as unexpected encounters with non-humans, realizing a cosmopolitics 'without recourse to old binaries of nature and society' (Hinchliffe, 2005,643).

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