

Urban Voids – Grounds for Change Ideas Competition

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Void-spaces: the New Urban Typology
Recognizing the Archetype and Diverging

“...The public ambit, in the purest sense of the word, is often found in random spaces rather than in the town squares and parks we design for the purpose.”¹

The mandate of the Urban Voids competition sponsored by the Van Alen Institute was to help generate ideas to allow the city of Philadelphia to develop “...a compelling long-term vision for developing its public vacant lots, a strategy that envisions how vacancy in Philadelphia can be changed from an obstacle (vacancy as absence) to an asset (vacancy as possibility).”² John E. Hancock suggests that on the matter of architecture and urbanism “the works of the past always influences us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work.”³ Our competition aims to recognize the importance of the existing examples of traditional urban fabric in Philadelphia, while at the same time diverging from the traditional method of void-space development to create new spaces for shared public recreation and activities within the city. We have presented a series of montage images of void-spaces in Philadelphia illustrating the proposed usage activation that would occur once that particular space was assigned a programmatic “plug-in” and a unique percentage of activation.



1. Philadelphia: Urban Perforations



2. Industrial districts: Waterfront wastelands

¹ Bru, Eduard. “Mutations: Harvard Project on the City”. ACTAR, pg. 458

² http://www.vanalen.org/urbanvoids/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=86&Itemid=58

³ Hancock, John E. The Harvard Architectural Review. Volume 5. Precedent and Invention. Between History and Tradition: Notes Toward a Theory of Precedent.

It is clear that the success of the urban fabric of the contemporary inner city of Philadelphia demands the rethinking and creative reuse of its prolific urban void-spaces. William Mitchell has stated: “cities operate as huge machines for sorting their populations and organizing opportunities for face-to-face encounter and exchange.” Taking this into consideration, the city of Philadelphia has a tremendous opportunity to rethink the manner in which it revitalizes its vast urban voids, and at the same time a great responsibility to the inhabitants of the city to create new public spaces that are exciting, vibrant, work to knit together the fragmented fabric of the city, and provide successful spaces for human interaction.

The existing, traditional pattern of urban development in Philadelphia followed the gridiron layout of many North American cities. In Philadelphia, as in other communities, the grid provided an important level of urban density and services. With all of the inhabitants of the city so closely clustered together, it was easy in the past to provide opportunities for public community interaction, municipal services such as transportation, park systems, police and fire protection, and utilities. As the city fragmented, residents and businesses vacated, and large void-spaces developed, it became more and more difficult for the city to maintain its traditional level of services. Large areas became vacant, overrun with transients, and virtually impossible to police. Tax revenue disappeared as residents and businesses abandoned their properties, and consequently water and power services became almost impossible to maintain in many areas.



2A. The traditional urban fabric

We can look to the existing urban form and acknowledge its importance in that it clearly represents the archetypical North American city, but we must also accept that, “our sense that a city functions as collective memory and as a crucial site of shared cultural reference depends upon its power to provide physical settings for interchange among its inhabitants”⁴. In that respect we must challenge the accepted, traditional typological layouts, which are clearly no longer serving to provide that much-needed shared cultural space for the city, and work to accommodate the contemporary methods of living. Simply filling in a void-space within the grid with architectural fabrications is no longer the best solution. Our

⁴ Mitchell, William J. “Placing Words – Symbols, Space, and the City” MIT Press, 2005. Pg. 7.

competition entry proposes that each void-space should first be examined and assigned a programmatic usage “plug-in” (see Fig. 14) which will allow the space to draw people to it, and will in turn help to reinsert the space into the public sphere. In our competition proposal we suggest that the re-inhabitation of a public void-space can take many forms; from small parks (Fig. 5) to large-scale redevelopments such as golf-courses and bike trails, to preserves for native plant and animal species (Fig. 7).

The city of Philadelphia has an extremely rich urban history, onto which the contemporary city of voids has developed. Founded in 1682 by William Penn it has played witness to many of the major public events that have worked to shape the United States as a modern nation. The city served as home to the US Capitol for 10 years, as well as the residence of Benjamin Franklin. It is clearly a city in which the memory of the past is very much used as a reference for the actions of today. To solve the problems of the urban void in Philadelphia, we must look to the traditional urban form and usage patterns of the past and acknowledge their validity, while at the same time recognizing that the way in which people in the contemporary city live is very different from the way in which they lived in the past. We need to recognize the typology but at the same time, we must diverge from this historical past to create meaningful contemporary shared spaces. Our competition entry proposes to respect the fabric of the existing city, while inserting specific activation strategies into the void-spaces. Our aim is to allow people to rediscover the void-spaces around them, and to recognize the spaces as providing important physical relief from the congestion of the traditionally dense city. The spatial re-uses that we propose will also help to change citizens perception of the city, and help to foster a more positive image of the blighted urban core.

Ignasi de Sola-Morales speaks of the urban disillusionment and abandonment of the modern era as resulting from “...what Nietzsche called the death of God; that is to say, from the disappearance of any kind of absolute reference that might in some way coordinate, or close, the system of our knowledge and our values at the point at which we articulate these in a global vision of reality.”⁵ It was precisely this dissolution with the promises of the modern era that led



3. Rebirth of the infrastructural corridors

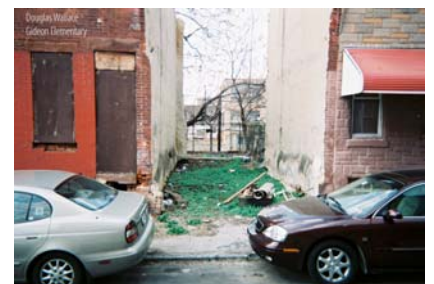
⁵ Sola-Morales, Ignasi. *Differences – Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*. MIT Press, 1999. Pg. 58.

to the whole scale abandonment of the urban core of many North American cities, Philadelphia in particular. The utopian dreams and promises of the Modern era fell short, in dangerous crime-ridden housing projects and failed urban renewal schemes. Without a system of beliefs to guide the citizens they lost faith in modernism, forgot the true value of urbanity, and fled the cores for the egalitarian promise of the suburbs. In the re-inhabitation of Philadelphia's void-spaces, the historical context must be acknowledged, and in some cases preserved or referenced – this will allow the citizens to form a common bond, a belief and pride in the heritage and form of their urban environment. We propose that the past should be acknowledged, but not recreated; and historical buildings and sites respected. The contemporary insertions and land-reuse interventions will be cognizant of the past and will serve as a new reference, or system of communal values.

The city of Philadelphia has become the archetypical example of what has happened to the urban core of many North American cities from the second half of the twentieth-century onwards. The “Vacant Land Report” prepared by the city Planning Department outlines the process by which the inner city deteriorated:

“As in many eastern American cities, Philadelphia's fortunes fell with the decline of industrial manufacturing after World War II. Exacerbated by Federal highway development and Federal housing policies that encouraged new development outside the city, as well as racial and political unrest inside the city, large areas of Philadelphia's Center City and surrounding neighborhoods fell into disrepair. In addition, narrow lots crowded with small, aging townhouses (including Philadelphia's distinctively tiny three-story "Trinity" townhouses with one room per floor) became less attractive to Philadelphians than larger houses in outlying suburbs. Philadelphia has consistently lost residents since 1950. Between 1950 and 1990 the city lost over 400,000 residents. In the 1990s alone another 4.3% of the population left, many headed for nearby suburban areas...”⁶

As large numbers of the population fled to the outer suburban areas around the city, the properties that they left in the inner city were sold, or simply abandoned. This is the primary cause of the uncountable areas of urban blight. As



4. Residential districts: Gaps in the urban fabric

⁶http://www.vanalen.org/urbanvoids/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=86&Itemid=58

Philadelphia, like many of the cities of the Eastern United States, ceased to serve as a primary manufacturing centre for the continent, large tracts of industrial land were also left to ruin as the manufacturing operations closed, or moved to foreign soils. This loss of valuable employment opportunities for the citizens exacerbated the suburban flight.

Consequently, the number and distribution of these vacant spaces has increased steadily since the mid part of the twentieth century, in proportion to the expansion and fabrication of the suburban landscape, creating an inner cityscape rife with perforations (see Fig. 1). Abandoned properties have created spaces that are conducive to crime and debris. Empty houses and factories have been commandeered by drug-dealers and the homeless, vandalized, and in many cases burned to the ground, demolished, or simply boarded up (see Fig. 1).

For the purpose of our competition entry, we have identified and categorized the void-spaces of Philadelphia into three main typological groups. First of all we have the residential void-spaces. These are rifts in the inner city residential districts caused by the abandonment and dereliction of housing stock leading to eventual demolition and property lot vacancy (Fig. 1 & 4). Our competition aims to address these small void-spaces in a very specific way. We have classified them as Territory Type 2 – Bits and Strips (Fig. 11). The abandonment and demolition of residential properties has left large gaps in the traditional urban fabric. We propose that these spaces be analyzed and have specific interventions or programmatic “plug-ins” assigned to them. These gaps create an excellent opportunity to create a network of public spaces within the formerly dense residential quarters of the inner city. Various uses present themselves as a possibility, from development as “vest-pocket” parks, to neighborhood gardens (the Philadelphia Horticultural Society has already started a program to address these spaces through planting community vegetable gardens and native plant species), to passive green-spaces (Fig. 5).



5. The residential vest-pocket park

The next void-space type is the industrial void. For our competition proposal, we have classified this void-space as Territory Type 3 – Industrial Vacant Land (Fig. 12). As Philadelphia became a less important manufacturing and industrial centre, many operations closed and vacated the riverfront land and factories along the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. This has led to an enormous amount of waterfront land that is completely inaccessible to the general population. The heavy industrial nature of many of the sites will require that environmental remediation be employed to fully clean up the residual toxins. John E. Hancock suggests that in order for new work to be valid it must look to “esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded.”⁷ The Duisburg Nord Country Park in the Ruhr region of Germany provides one such exceptional example of the reuse of industrial void-space lands in particular (see Fig. 6). Much like Philadelphia, the area is punctuated by large-scale tracts of vacant land with a long history of intense urban and industrial use: “the north of Duisburg is among the areas of the Ruhr region which were only wakened from their quiet rural life when the iron and steel industry began to flourish during the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the 19th century. As industry left the Ruhr valley and migrated north, it transformed the country which lost its rural innocence.”⁸ Duisburg is located in the Ruhr River region of Germany, the most intensely populated and industrialized sector in all of continental Europe. In Duisburg, the abandoned industrial land was put to a variety of uses; passive park space, structured planted areas, but in many cases the landscape was allowed to heal with minimal intervention from man. Historical buildings were integrated into the new development schemes where possible on many sites. The landscape and architectural interventions employed by the planners of Duisburg park looked to the historical industrial architecture and planning of the past, but also recognized the need for a divergence from



6. Duisburg: Industrial land reclaimed

⁷ Hancock, John E.

⁸ <http://www.landschaftspark.de/en/derpark/industriegeschichte/ueberblick/index.html>

the existing method of land-reuse in order to create a series of spaces that would resonate with meaning for the contemporary inhabitants of the region.



7. Native-species, waterfront regeneration

The last void-space type is the infrastructural void. In our competition proposal we have named these space Territory Type 1 – Infrastructural voids (Fig. 10). These are spaces under the city’s massive freeways, and along the railway and power line corridors. For these spaces we have proposed several different usage possibilities. The vast open areas and structural concrete framework under the automobile overpasses are conducive to the construction of climbing facilities (Fig. 7), while the broad and grassy expanses along power-line and rail corridors allow for native-plantings and the creation of hiking, biking and nature trails within the city (Fig. 15). These areas are especially important to complete the network of existing waterfront green-spaces within Philadelphia.



7. Under the freeways: alternative uses

At the same time that we are examining these three types of void-spaces and contemplating the new uses that could be proposed, we must also consider the stark realities of the new urban life as suggested by William Mitchell:

“The standard story is that gunpowder and, transportation systems, and capitalism did away with city walls. But of course they didn’t, really. I am reminded of the old story of the topologist who wants to cage in a lion that is frisking around somewhere. She simply prepares the cage enclosure, stands inside, and then inverts the universe. Now, the lion is inside the cage – along with a lot of other stuff – and the topologist is safely on the exterior...Modern cities have performed a similar inversion. The good citizens are now *outside*, while the feared others are concentrated, as far as can be managed, within jail walls.”⁹

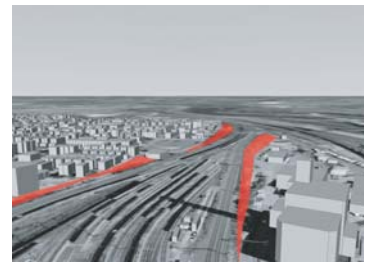
This new reality is one of increased surveillance, terrorism, paranoia and urban crime. Though it has become popular in recent years to gentrify our North American city centres, the fact remains that large sections still remain the realm of the working class, the drug dealers, the homeless, the prostitutes and the gangs. These marginalized residents and the areas that they inhabit demand that a new typology of urban space be explored and employed. The very variety and chaotic nature of urban life demands of the void-space solutions the same type of varied approach.



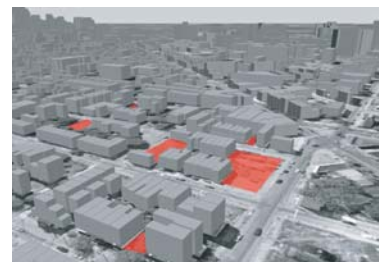
9. Industrial reactivations

To successfully reintegrate these voidspaces into the fabric of the city requires the understanding that the voids should not simply be “filled in”, as they were in the past, rather they are to be seen a vital and integral component of the new urban typology. The void activations and re-activations will require working with many different types of sites and stimulating changes in them over time. Rem Koolhaas suggests that voids within the contemporary city should be tackled with an entirely new form of urbanism that addresses the unique character and potential of the site:

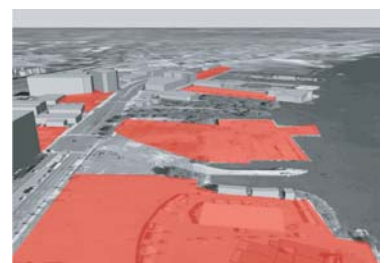
⁹ Mitchell, William J. “Placing Words – Symbols, Space, and the City” MIT Press, 2005. Pg. 49



10. Territory 1 - Infrastructure



11. Territory 2 – Bits, Strips



12. Territory 3 – Vacant Industrial

“If there is to be a new urbanism, it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence, it will be the staging of uncertainty, it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential.” If urbanism’s work is to define the possibilities that architecture can only exploit and exhaust, this is because architecture cannot claim to shape the city in its own image, nor even to express, with its single voice, an adequate response to the demands of the urban condition.”¹⁰

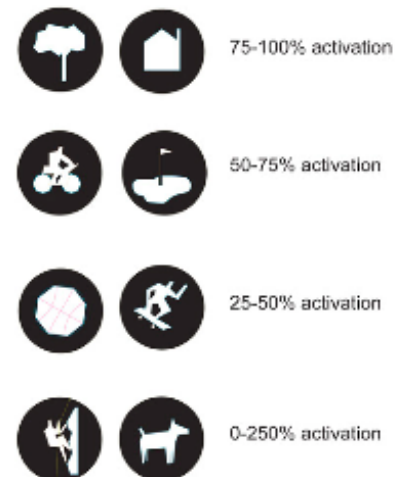
As Koolhaas suggests, the most important action in reactivating the voids, will be to recognize and “irrigate” the territories with the most potential, to recognize the “uncertainty” inherent in the urban condition of today. The former urban model of the fully-populated city block, with an unbroken cadence of façade is no longer the desired reality in a city where many neighborhoods have degenerated to the point that there is a higher percentage of vacant land than there is land with any type of structure or inhabitation.



13. Vibrant use of abandoned industrial lands

Our competition entry asserts that by defining and assigning a system of “plug-ins” to specific voids the city of Philadelphia will be the instigator of urban change within each distinct situation (Fig. 14). The key is to see the void-spaces as a system or network of public interventions, which will work to change the urban landscape and positively affect the lives of those who inhabit the areas.

“...the potential does exist to incrementally “restructure” City neighborhoods, especially those plagued by vacant and underutilized land, to make them more attractive living environments by rethinking how this land is used, managed, and



14. Programmatic Plug-ins

¹⁰ Attali, Jean. “Mutations: Harvard Project on the City”. ACTAR, pg. 270

maintained.”¹¹

The process of assigning various programmatic “plug-ins” to specific sites will involve detailed investigation into the nature of the site, the carrying capacity of the site, the environmental stability of the site, and the contextual environs of the site. Various programmatic possibilities and options could be applied to the sites based on a thorough examination of these particular specifics. It will also be important to consider the level of activation that is appropriate for each location. Levels of activation will be assigned on a gradient percentage scale from 1 to 100, with 100 being the most intense usage such as the construction of housing or major land-covering programmatic activities.



15. Active spaces on the waterfront

In conclusion, the city of Philadelphia must work to change the way that people view the void-spaces within the urban fabric. Our competition asserts that the best way to accomplish this will be through the studied application of void-space activation “plug-ins”, and through the creative reuse of vacant land. This will lead to a more seamless reintegration of the void-spaces into the public consciousness. It will be important to acknowledge the architectural and urban development uses of the past, and look to “esteemed examples” of urban planning and regeneration on “which new work may be effectively grounded”, but we also propose that the city consider alternative planning uses to reactivate its various public void-spaces.

¹¹ Philadelphia City Planning Commission, “Vacant Land in Philadelphia”. City of Philadelphia, 1995. Pg. 5

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List of Illustrations:

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