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LANDSCAPE |
OFF THE PATH
BY
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POSITIVE TENSION
terrain vague as public space

Terrain vague is Ignasi de Solà-Morales' term for abandoned spaces within a city that exist outside the common social realm and are often perceived as empty.

WHILE THE concept of *terrain vague* has become widespread, its presence continues to spark debate. Isolated and forgotten, the sites attract urban explorers, photographers, naturalists and cyclists seeking the exhilaration of venturing off the structured path. For the same reasons *terrain vague* has a reputation for danger and degradation.

Terrain vague is the unadorned alternative to the public square, though often an equal part of city identity. A public square generates visible, collective movements while upholding the touristic self-identity of the city. Harboured the discards of a productive society, *terrain vague* is what the city expels in order to exist. Unkempt and disregarded, these sites are exempt from typical expectations of the public square; therein lies their value.

Though increasingly recognised as a defining and celebrated part of the identity of Toronto, the Don Valley ravine is *terrain vague* in transition. Long protected from intervention by floodwaters and topography, the ravine defies construction and therefore profit: it is a fracture in an otherwise unified urban fabric. The Don River valley was influential in the shaping of Toronto, but after generations of industrial development it has deteriorated to a repository for the exiles and excrement of the city, channelling sewage, highway infrastructure and institutes for the unwanted with jails and hospitals.¹ This accumulated abuse of the land resulted in its neglect by the public majority, leaving its unprogrammed parts to social cast-offs, individuals without an economic stake in the city and who are often overlooked as valid constituents of the general public.

Today, parts of the Don Valley are being developed: the Evergreen Brick Works, a former industrial site now a farmer’s market and community environmental centre, River City’s five condominium towers, Athlete’s Village for the 2015 Pan-Am Games and the new 125hectare Lower Don Lands, a revitalised industrial area of park, activities and housing at the mouth of the Don River. While these projects have successfully raised awareness of the beauty of the ravine, to presume that change promises improvement disregards the existing richness and fragility of these landscapes. The benefits of these development projects are largely directed towards a public concerned with sustainability and safety. The value of the still- unaffected land – and the relief it offers to a highly developed city – is difficult to quantify. Attempting to preserve *terrain vague*, or even drawing attention to it, can result in its collapse: for example, the success of the High Line in New York, such a unique public park, eclipsed the initial appeal of its original loose, unprogrammed space, and Lower Don Lands has generated an array of themed development which prohibits any potentially raucous or uncontrolled activity, including climbing, large gatherings and loud sounds.

The Don Valley is currently zoned as Open Space, a category further subdivided into Natural, Recreation, Golf Course and Cemetery, each supporting highly controlled environments, whether through monitored native species or manicured recreational lawns. Nothing in the Open Space category describes the hybrid territory of *terrain vague*. At present, the ravine bylaws are, rightfully, structured from an environmental perspective to support necessary remediation. While it may be possible to imagine adding the category Unconstrained Natural Space where land must be left undeveloped and uses are limited to temporary structures and events, by definition *terrain vague* is lawless, the inadvertent remains of urban development, contradicting any attempt to write such spaces into zoning bylaws.

Environmental projects often adopt the cheerful and ambitious rhetoric of well-meaning environmentalism. However, they could learn from the introverted tendencies of the ravine, allowing change to occur incrementally through conflict and negotiation. Interventions within the valley should be approached lightly, sensitive to its complexity and sympathetic to its flaws. Taking advantage of the space beneath and around the infrastructure of raised highways, disconnected sewers and railways thickens surfaces and open possibilities for use. As an example, the raised railbed of the abandoned CPR tracks in the lower Donlands creates a threshold between a homeless camp and the recreational path. Only a few metres apart, the break in sightline integrates two groups, in the same area, by creating separation without rigid exclusion. The increasing number of people drawn to the valley should be able to experience it without being sheltered from its reality.

Terrain vague allows individuals to be conscientious public participants in unregulated environments. Visitors in search of escape instead encounter, and become accountable to, the consequences of environmental and social actions. Similar to the Task Force to Bring Back the Don disbanded by Mayor Ford in 2011, this *terrain vague* could be strengthened with vested government support as long as it included social as well as environmental goals for ravine management.

Opening a dialogue on the appropriate care of the city’s *terrain vague* returns a political, rather than economic, emphasis to public space. Whether *terrain vague* is seen as a vacant lot awaiting development, or as a romanticised opportunity for freedom, both are projections of an ideal; interest lies in the tension between these polarities, evidence of diverse city demographics. Although *terrain vague* cannot be protected without losing some of this tension, we can appreciate and learn from it when we encounter its spaces. □

1 For more information, see the extensive historical research of Jennifer Bonnell (various publications). Don Valley Historical Mapping Project. <http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmp>.



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