'Traces, Glimmers, Residues, and Specks of Things': Engaging with Urban Leftovers through a Counter-Archival Project

WERONIKA KOZAK ⓘD

◎ ABSTRACT

This article starts from the premise that urban leftovers hold unique potential, as their commonplace incompleteness and vagueness can be perceived as openness and possibility. However, this potentiality is often found hard to engage with, which leads to the disappearance of these spatial fragments due to redevelopments or transformations. How could their indefinite and vague status be maintained and enhanced to inspire care and interest? This article proposes to think about urban leftovers beyond mere by-products of fragmentation and perceive them as entities brimming with innumerable possibilities and operating in relationships instead (following McFarlane, 2021: 63). To properly interact with and safeguard these spaces, a novel methodological approach is undertaken—a counter-archival project— which might highlight the potentiality and heterogeneity of urban leftovers. A counter-archive of fragments could multiply perspectives and realities, encourage various interpretations, foster numerous connections and inspire open-ended journeys.

◎ CRYNODEB

Dechreua'r erthygl hon o'r rhagdybiaeth bod gan weddillion trefol botensial unigryw, gan y gellir ystyried eu hanghyflawnder a'u hamwysedd cyffredin yn agoredrwydd ac yn bosibilrwydd. Fodd bynnag, mae'r potensial hwn yn aml yn anodd ymdrin ag ef ac arweinia hyn at ddiflaniad y darnau gofodol hyn oherwydd ailddatblygiadau neu drawsnewidiadau. Sut y gellid cynnal a gwella eu statws amhenodol ac amwys i symbylu gofal a diddordeb? Mae'r erthygl hon yn cynnig meddwl am weddillion trefol y tu hwnt i sgil-gynnyrch darnio yn unig a'u hystyried yn endidau sy'n llawn posibiliadau di-rif ac yn lle hynny ynghlwm wrth berthnasoedd (yn dilyn McFarlane, 2021: 63). Er mwyn rhyngweithio â'r gofodau hyn a'u diogelu'n iawn, ymgymerir â dull methodolegol newydd - prosiect gwrtharchifol - a allai dynnu sylw at botensial a heterogenedd gweddillion trefol. Gallai gwrtharchif darnau luosi safbwyntiau a realiti, annog deongliadau amrywiol, meithrin cysylltiadau lu ac ysbrydoli teithiau penagored.

👤 CONTRIBUTOR

Weronika Kozak is a PhD candidate in Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University. Her research interests include alternative representations and methodologies, such as counter-mapping and archives. In her work she draws from literary references, artistic research, and sociology.

Address: Building E, Agoralaan, 3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium

Email: weronika.kozak@uhasselt.be

PROLOGUE

A dead-end corridor filled with haphazardly arranged furniture. Old window in a plastic white frame, found in sunroots. An overgrown plot fenced off, but still mysteriously littered with objects. White garden chair, plastic, new, hidden in cleavers. A strap of unsupervised vegetation interspersed with ad-hoc structures. A violet hoodie, size: M, new, found in ferns. Forgotten, open-air staircase leading to nowhere. Broken wooden drawer, stumbled upon in a ruin. Remnants of built structures serving as foundations for poppy flowers. An old wooden chair. An open-air living room overgrown with ivy. Old jeans, size: S, discarded under a flyover.

I guess the first question that comes to your mind is: what is the story of these objects and spaces?

I have for a long time been fascinated with the discarded, the broken, and queer urban spaces. The first sign telling me I may be unusual in that fascination was during a family holiday, when, instead of immortalising the sea or the beaches, I used up most of my roll, to my parents' dismay, to photograph a ship graveyard. The other sign was when I was analysing a site on the outskirts for a university urban project and decided that I did not want to intervene in it in any way but would like to enhance the fragmentation and weirdness encountered there: a concept that was met with mild refusal. It was then that I noticed the prevalent need in architecture to polish, fix, fill, and homogenise space, as well as a disdain towards other spaces. But it is exactly the paradoxicality, ambiguity, and unknowability, which most people find unappealing, that seemed to me to be most interesting about such spaces, which I will call in this text urban leftovers. I was fascinated by their ability to play with our expectations of order, reason, or chronology, resulting in a flat refusal to fulfil those expectations, as well as by the unwillingness of urban leftovers to settle on *the* story or to provide satisfying answers to questions, each exploration leading to discovering merely scraps of information.

So, hold your thought until the end. And think whether this is the right question to ask in the first place.

OUTLINE OF THE PAPER

Never truly defined, often clandestine, uncertain, and, at times, uncanny, urban leftovers exist at odds with the apparently 'positive'—known, regulated, and ordered —urban areas (de Solà-Morales Rubió 2014: 26). Perhaps Gilles Clément reflected their character best, when writing about the concept of *third landscape*, which often exhibits strong similarities with urban leftovers, and which he defines as 'undecided spaces, devoid of function, that are difficult to name' (Clément 2016: 5). As if to enhance the confusion they foster, there exists no clear taxonomy and such spaces can be found in literature under many different names: leftovers, in-between spaces, hinterlands, dead zones, wastelands, margins, and edgescapes, to name a few. They resonate with a number of concepts: heterotopia, *terrain vague*, loose space, smooth space, and the already mentioned third landscape. Furthermore, their complex and elusive nature, evident in the lack of precise boundaries or their resistance to any form of organisation, makes them hard to pinpoint and pigeonhole. In an urban and ontological model ruled by binary thinking and dislike towards fluidity or otherness, this fosters disorientation and

disdain (Doron 2008; hooks 1989; Foucault 1986; de Solà-Morales Rubió 2014; Francks and Stevens 2007; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Clément 2016).

Urban leftovers are often 'unknown and disregarded', surviving 'by the exercise of a unique guile and persistence', and they constitute dark backyards to the *light* and *healthy* capitalist city (Ballard 1985: 69). Their 'mental exteriority' often results in a sense of discomforting brokenness and provides reasons for critique (de Solà-Morales Rubió 2014: 26). Despite a long-established discourse on urban leftovers, they still constitute the ultimate predicament for architects, who 'seem incapable of doing anything other than introducing violent transformations, changing estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete in the realism of efficacy' (de Solà-Morales Rubió 2014: 28-29). When engaged with, if not completely effaced to make way for a more lucrative development, at best their ambiguous character is capitalised upon to create artificially spontaneous places (the most infamous example would be the High Line in New York, a gentrified simulacrum achieving a hip effect of abandonment, while forcing out the its real shadowed and minor users: gays, homeless or ruderal plants). Despite urban leftovers being, as Rem Koolhaas famously called them, 'hostile to any notion of development', the temptation to interfere or repurpose them feels at times overpowering, a trap which he also succumbed to in his proposal for Melun-Sénart (1995: 977).

How might the ambiguity of urban leftovers be read and approached otherwise? Could urban leftovers appear as actually complex and intricate entities, akin to palimpsests or living archives? Palimpsests can appear blank and empty at first glance, but an in-depth and up-close investigation always reveals stratified remnants of previous lives, 'spiderwebs of intricate relationships' (Calvino 1997: 76). Urban leftovers can be considered 'results of condensing', places 'heavily charged with traces and with past readings' (Corboz 1983: 33), at times magical and as if sentient in their timelessness and time-fullness. The apparent blankness is, in fact, an ability to 'become whatever we wish, … be filled with any content' (Radović 2014: 122): a capacity for potentiality. How can this multiplicity be properly approached and point towards 'a possible alternative' instead (de Solà-Morales Rubió 2014: 26)?

Urban leftovers, to remain different and ambiguous, need to 'remain unnameable' (López-Pineiro 2020: 19), for as soon as they become specific contexts, they run 'the risk of no longer offering a threshold to any potential'. They are *in*complete, *un*clear, their potential is *un*defined, and *un*known: 'always present and never fully realised' (Radović 2014: 122). A state of potentiality, indefinition, and uncertainty, should thus require an alternative spatial, intellectual and methodological approach. The author claims an investigation of the concept of fragments, coined by Colin McFarlane (2021), could aid in outlining a possible new methodology of urban leftovers. What the author will try to put forward in the next paragraphs, after drawing parallels between fragments and urban leftovers, is that their affinity may provide the basis for a novel methodological approach towards such spaces: a counter-archive.

THE URBAN LEFTOVER AS A FRAGMENT

Urban leftovers can be considered fragments beyond the quite literal piecemeal nature, manifesting itself in paradoxical juxtapositions of structures, inconclusive topographies, ruined dreams, or broken objects. Their openness and potentiality, making them akin to blank canvases

tantalising with curiosity, rather than *tabulae rasae*, resonates strongly with McFarlane's thoughts on fragments, which he saw as 'reminder[s] of the always already multiple nature of the urban' (2021: 67) that can be considered 'a provocation, an invitation or lure to speculation' (2021: 66). Both urban leftovers and fragments can thus be considered entities holding infinite possibilities and disclosing insights into alternative futures. Urban leftovers also come close to what McFarlane (2021: 6) calls 'knowledge fragments': ways of knowing, or, more aptly, ways of being, in the urban fabric, that are marginalised, but which could potentially shape a different urban reality. This makes them spaces offering counter-modes of existence and providing possibility for resistance to capitalism, normativity, or order. Therefore, instead of seeing them as by-products of fragmentation, McFarlane's concept puts the entire production of space into question, claiming the urban tissue is always already composed from fragments, perhaps evoking Aldo Rossi's concepts of the analogous (or, rather more fittingly, fragmented) city or Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's collage city (1978). If one sees urban leftovers through such lenses, they appear as fully-fledged and equipotential entities, capable of disclosing alternative ways of being founded on mutuality and mutability, rather than awaiting more lucrative development, lamentable, and otherwise useless slivers of a broken entity wishing to be whole again.

The affinity of urban leftovers to fragments becomes even more intriguing when one investigates the concept of 'dis-articulated' spaces proposed by Tim Edensor (2007: 250). Disarticulated entities are not merely disjointed, indefinite or imperfect, but also disruptive; in Edensor's writings, such spaces are filled with 'numerous scraps of stories that wait to be told', and can be best represented through narratives constructed from 'occurrences, shafts of momentary insight and sensations' (2007: 250). To him, 'enigmatic traces' and juxtapositions found in and comprising urban leftovers, invite open-ended speculations, 'full of non-sequiturs, irrelevances and inconsistencies' (2007: 250). Taking these thoughts into consideration and embracing the multiple readings of fragments McFarlane himself proposes, the author in this text similarly adopts the word 'fragment' to talk not only about urban leftovers, but also their potential representation: the counter-archive. A counter-archive of urban leftovers could maintain the mystery and inconclusiveness of the urban leftover, while activating its hidden potential through collaging and arranging it into constellations of fragments, revelling in juxtapositions and contradictions. It could trigger imagination both towards the unknown surrounding a fragment, and the fragment itself, where numerous realities coexist, encouraging various interpretations. However, the task of a counter-archivist is similarly difficult to the one faced by the mythologist, a figure described by Roland Barthes (1972: 157): someone who always runs the risk of causing the reality which they wish to protect, to disappear. A mythologist of urban leftovers should be akin to a bricoleur, creating from occurrences, or a poet, capable of simultaneously reflecting brokenness while reimagining it into new, hopeful narratives (Rowe and Koetter 1987: 131). How to construct such a representation?

'ANY STORYTELLING MUST BE OPEN-ENDED AND IMPROVISATORY' (EDENSOR 2007: 250)

If one acknowledges that urban leftovers are not only fragments and dis-articulated spaces, but also heterotopias—places that, according to Foucault (1986: 25), hold unique potential and juxtapose several realities within one reality—a certain picture of a possible methodological approach emerges. To

safeguard the many possibilities existing there in parallel, the potential held by urban leftovers needs to be enhanced, rather than reduced, which puts into question representations akin to single stories (clear-cut, authoritative representations or prescriptive urban solutions) and calls rather for a polyvocal, unruly and imprecise mythology (Ngozi Adichie 2009). It should be a non-linear, manifold, and open-ended representation, composed of multiple fragments which would encompass a plurality of voices and encourage different and personal readings. Such a rhizomatic narrative could, on the one hand, foster a sense of disorientation, which, in turn, might activate imagination and invite exploration, while on the other hand it might shield these spaces, preserving them as vague and unknown geographies. This narrative would have to be akin to a patchwork, an assemblage, a geography, which one can travel through haphazardly, forming ever newer itineraries and meanings, so our understanding can never be final. Rather than a clear-cut and structured methodology, fragments invite a fluid and shapeshifting representation. In the author's opinion, a counter-archive has the potential to be a promising methodology to engage with urban leftovers in order to maintain the multitude of geographies, temporalities and voices present there.

What is a counter-archive, then? Sitting somewhere between an artistic project, methodology and a research tool, the counter-archive is inspired by the thoughts of Jose Esteban Muñoz (1996: 7) on queered (spoiled) archives: counter-repositories, going against the 'rigour' official and authoritative representations often entail. In the spirit of gathering 'anti-evidence' he called for collecting 'ephemera': partial truths, inconclusive statements, and lapses. For him, ephemera were 'traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things', artefacts containing information and detail, yet disorientating, questioning the normative forms of knowledge production, and revealing alternative modes of representation (Muñoz 1996: 10). In light of McFarlane's (2021: 66) writings on fragments as disruptive entities and Edensor's (2007: 250) thoughts on possible narratives for dis-articulated spaces consisting of occurrences and irrelevances, the methodology of a counter-archive gathering ephemera seems fitting to deploy towards urban leftovers.

Interestingly, the Stalker collective, when investigating urban leftovers (what they called Actual Territories) claimed that the only possible way of representing them is through an 'archive of experiences' (Stalker 2000: 25). This short statement, in the author's view, points directly towards a counter-archive as methodology: it reveals the inherent impossibility of any immediate, truthful or rigorous representations of urban leftovers, and renders them visible only through intimate and subjective interactions, assembled later in time in necessarily imperfect and imprecise narratives. In that light, Muñoz' writings about ephemera seem all the more pertinent to urban leftovers. Ephemera are, 'all of those things that *remain after a performance*, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but *certainly not the thing itself*. It *does not rest on epistemological foundations*' (Muñoz 1996: 10). The counter-archive and its artefacts are never 'epistemologically framed and grounded, but, instead, [are] performatively polyvalent' (Muñoz 1996: 6). Rather than providing a faithful visual representation, time-stamped and localised, a counter-archive is intended to store memories of performance, inspiring embodied exploration and personal interpretation. This kind of narrative not only seems fitting for the quite mysterious and fluctuating nature of urban leftovers, but can also shield the identity of not only the spaces in question, but its often under-the-radar and clandestine inhabitants, both human and more-than-human. As *Queering the Map*, a project

developed by Lucas LaRochelle, beautifully shows, empowerment and care do not need precise coordinates, names, or dates to arise. The website, completely devoid of time-stamping and giving freedom to leave your story even in the middle of the ocean, may be the most beautiful example of anonymous, disorientating, yet collective and caring archive-cartography. The design process was also heavily influenced by fictional archives, existing within (mainly artistic) discourse - for instance, the seminal *The Atlas Group* project by Walid Raad. Fictional archives revel in imperfection and disorientation, and demonstrate a refusal to provide verified and total truths. In the author's opinion, however, it is the ability to provide nuance to an 'official' narrative which seems crucial in developing a new imaginary on urban leftovers, and is the characterising quality of counter-archives. Thus, the author has chosen this term rather than a fictional archive. As counter-archives gladly embrace confusion and partial truths, they could constitute a valid method of engaging with urban leftovers in such a way that their potentiality is not only maintained but enhanced.

A narrative collecting pieces of information and inconclusive fragments not only refuses any total narratives and embraces incompleteness, but also fosters building connections, finding nexuses, and revealing new significations. By refusing organisation or linearity, often found within official archives, it builds 'capacity to prompt relational thinking' (Giannachi 2016: 131). As such, it is 'a text not leading to a truth or a valued conclusion, but rather to a sequential tissue of misreadings – errors which produce the condition for each new level of reading' (Whiteman 1986: 82). By focusing more on 'latency, lapse and speculation' (Chouteau-Matikian 2011), 'possibilities and fantasies' (LaRochelle 2021: 146), it encourages multiple interpretations. A counter-archive of urban leftovers would not be a rigorous taxonomy, a finished form, but rather a never-ending rearrangement of meanings and a labyrinthine journey through traces and poetic juxtapositions. How could such a counter-archive be constructed?

A COUNTER-ARCHIVE OF URBAN LEFTOVERS

To test these ideas in real life, I decided to create a counter-archive of urban leftovers. My aim from the start was to produce ephemera —inconclusive representations —which could only provide hints, never a full picture, of urban leftovers, to trigger interest and invite interpretation. I tried to play with the expectations of order, truth, linearity and legibility that official archives promise to provide (and usually fail to do so), and produced atemporal (Artefact 5), confusing (Artefact 6), and even contradictory (Artefact 4) objects. I specifically chose methodologies, representations and media which could, on the one hand, reflect and enhance the ambiguity and vagueness found in these territories, while, on the other, reflect specificities and nuance hidden within each urban leftover - such as riso printing (an affordable and low-impact technology using stencils to create non-identical and slightly imperfect prints), hand drawings, and collage. I tried to create diverse perspectives, deployed different temporalities and described multiple geographies. To increase the non-linearity and atemporality, I drew not only from my personal experience, but also worked intertextually: the artefacts contain many different paragraphs and quotes collected from literature, film, and other visual representations of urban fragments.

The process of creating a counter-archive was a lengthy one, informed by long-term fieldwork conducted internationally, mostly in European contexts (including cities like Milan, London, Wroclaw, Krakow, Warsaw, and Rotterdam); archival search through photographs; memories and

impressions of my previous trips; research into the history of certain urban leftovers; extensive photographic documentation; and a literature review, spanning across both non-fiction and fiction literature, as well as films, music, and poetry. I also studied examples of counter and fictional archives such as the already mentioned *The Atlas Group Project* and Queering the Map, as well as *Cuirtopia* (a project conceived by Regner Ramos), along with rhizomatic and non-linear fiction stories like *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino and *Garden of Forking Paths* by Jorge Luis Borges[1] The result of this preliminary stage was a collection—a true cabinet of curiosities —of quotes, photos, notes, objects, and spaces, as well as tools, representations, or techniques I could draw inspiration from. When I gathered these building blocks of the counter-archive —often fragments themselves, little seeds of ideas that sprouted throughout my research, but became side-lined during writing, waiting on the margins to bloom—I tried to connect potentially complementary elements into one artefact. Sometimes, an idea for a specific medium or technique gave shape to visual and textual details - risograph printing that gave life to mini zines or over- and under-exposed polaroid photos which grew into a series of ruined photos (undisclosed here) that someone collected and attempted to speculate on their once colourful content. In other cases, the spatial characteristics or a certain perspective on urban leftovers triggered an idea for a representation; analysis of satellite photos followed by fieldwork from a train and on foot gave me an idea to construct fictional maps. Each time, I tried in a different way to tackle the issue of talking without saying too much: to establish what information could be shown to trigger interest, and which details should remain hidden.

There is, however, a thin line between making entities known and exposed, and maintaining mystery and escaping to abstraction. If the counter-archive was concerned too much with factuality and lending visibility, it may easily become 'a trap'; if it was too universal and vague, it would fail in its purpose as well and not instigate care for urban leftovers (Foucault 1995: 200). While the problem of exposure has already been mentioned above, getting rid of any specificity, which would be a natural way out of this predicament, would actually defeat the whole purpose of the counter-archive in the first place: reclaiming the agency of urban leftovers as layered, unique, and intricate spaces. I believe it was the affinity between urban leftovers and fragments that prevented crossing this line in either direction: fragments can be decontextualised, yet, they are never—strangely—fragmentary.

Rather than seeing them as incomplete shards of a whole, failed reminders of the full potential lying in the forgotten archipelago, urban leftovers are independent and autonomous islands, territories irrigated with wondrous potential in their own rights. Urban leftovers are always unique compositions of ruins and traces, created by singular combinations of factors. In the counter-archive, I strived to maintain a balance between attention to detail (reflecting quirks and specificities of certain geographies, and disorientation) and blurring boundaries and timelines, deterritorialising, and decontextualising. This is where fiction became an indispensable tool: the stories, photos, snippets, and glimpses comprising each artefact were created with the greatest exactitude, following extensive research, but through a playful collage and poetic juxtapositions the artefacts gained life on their own, as fragments, and, through that, the potential of urban leftovers could become actualised. Artefacts 4, 5, and 6, described below, are probably the clearest examples of that - all the represented entities and stories were results of careful observation, representation, and, then, re-creation, playfully rearranged, questioned, or juxtaposed with other

ephemera, creating a kind of patchwork. A careful observer and explorer will still see the connections between different parts of different artefacts, if they wish, but they could also follow the process and find joy in the unpredictable and the weird. Thus, the counter-archive fulfils its task: it recognises and reflects a shared paradoxical yearning manifested by all urban leftovers, a yearning to be unknown and known at the same time.

All the artefacts I managed to make were gathered in a physical form, similar to 'regular' archives, in envelopes deposited in a filing box. Yet the descriptions they bear immediately betray the strangeness found inside. The descriptions of artefacts were crafted to create an illusion that someone found these objects by accident and attempted to make sense of them, without knowing the purpose lying behind them.

Such presentation of fragments helps release the potential of urban leftovers, while keeping them clandestine. Thus, the counter-archive provides a triple mystery. Not only the spaces the artefacts depict remain vague geographies—their location or status is never given in any of the artefacts, so there is no real proof of their existence—but also the significance, age or authorship of individual artefacts is unknown, not to mention their possible interconnectedness. Simultaneously mischievous and faithful, the counter-archive is brimming with innumerable possibilities, inviting speculation, just like the spaces it portrays.

In total, seven artefacts were created, encompassing all the concepts crucial during the design process: mystery, ambiguity, atemporality, fictionality, and potentiality.

The order of presentation within the text does not align with the chronology of the creation of the artefacts, but with their (fictional) inclusion in the counter-archive. One could argue they were arranged in a way to reveal more mystery and detail as diving deeper in the counter-archive, from the most speculative and ambiguous ones to the more intricately detailed and grounded ones. However, this is a purely subjective observation of our counter-archivists. The texts describing the artefacts are in part excerpts from the fiches on physical envelopes, which were crafted to maintain (or to attempt to dispel) the mystery surrounding not only the space, but also the provenance and intention of the artefact itself, and in part additional reflections. The photos depicting the artefacts were taken in an urban leftover as a provocation: is it just a curious metacommentary, encouragement to exploration, or a recreation of circumstances in which these objects were included in the counter-archive?

Artefact 1, polaroids

An anonymous donation has been made to our archive of what appears to be ruined polaroids. Interestingly, the only thing remaining quite intact—even corrected several times, as if to make it more visible—are the captions of photos. The whole collection was delivered in a box bearing the name 'Our secret private beach'. We have not been able to ascertain the precise reason for the defacement of the polaroids. It might have happened due to overexposure, extreme lighting or bad storage conditions, or the purposeful action of third persons or the author(s). The last reason seems to convince us the most: the photos bear visible traces of use, so they must have contained something, or they would have been immediately thrown away. The adjectives 'secret' and 'private' in the title of the collection suggest an unsupervised no-man's-land which might have been illegally accessed by the author(s). Perhaps the photos were ruined deliberately to keep this place a secret?

[What possible stories might emerge from the darkness and abstract colours of ruined polaroids? What could this secret private beach have looked like? What did it mean to its inhabitants? Could this meaning have changed over time, which was the reason for the photos' obliteration?]

Artefact 2, postcards

Different series of postcards, retrieved at a flea market, showing various cities in Europe. They appear relatively new, and show different urban wastelands. However, they are time-stamped with future dates. Despite tireless efforts, we have been unable to ascertain if they comprise a part of an artistic project, a city branding experiment, or a speculation on the future.

[Are those postcards speculative fictions or evidence from an alternative future, where urban leftovers lure tourists constituting destination points? Postcards, simulacra and orchestrated representations of fragments of reality further disguise the true geographies and temporalities of urban leftovers.]

Artefact 3, zines (Figure 1)

Two zines donated by an anonymous author(s). As zines are always collections of unsolicited thoughts, often imaginary, it is quite difficult to claim with certainty the topic of the booklets. However, they seem to concern ruined spaces. They are both differently designed, with posters inside, printed with a risograph machine and containing hand-drawn finishes.

[Zines, standing in opposition to factuality, uniformity or orientation, can be considered as 'arts of possibility' (Oakley 2022: 28), assemblages which point to alternative realities. Never exactly the same, processed differently by the xerox machine, with hand-drawn additions and layered, they are bricolages of traces, moments, and performances.]

Figure 1: Artefact 3, zines. Photo: Weronika Kozak.

Artefact 4, maps (Figure 2)

A collection of double-sided illustrations. The recto (our archivists established the sides based on what seems to be the title of the illustration) is a hand-drawn map, while the verso is a short story: either a description of the map or a story pertaining to the encounter with the space represented. The descriptions, titles, and coordinates suggest these are either speculations, depictions of fictional lands, or flawed representations: the locations given do not seem to correspond to the satellite view.

[Maps, despite their professed truthfulness and accuracy, always remain a bold interpretation of reality; here, this fact is enhanced as the assembled cartographies are mere assumptions or figments of imagination. The map becomes a fictional and imaginary territory, tantalising with curiosity about the possibilities and realities held by the original fragment located in the unknown.]

Artefact 5, journal (Figure 3)

A journal of recollections, written between 2020 and 2024, from excursions undertaken probably by its author to various urban areas. From our detailed analysis, it seems it is a collection of stories, memories, quotes, and thoughts, rather than facts, dates, or locations. There is no apparent order to the entries, and they are neither time-stamped nor localised. The only indication of the chronology is the changing colour of the ink and division lines suggesting later additions to already existing descriptions.

[Journals usually constitute trustworthy sources and are grounded in specific data. However, this journal possesses neither chronology nor geography, which creates a sense of disjunction and disorientation. It is a collection of

Figure 2: Artefact 4, maps. Photo: Weronika Kozak.

Figure 3: Artefact 5, journal. Photo: Weronika Kozak.

recollections—temporal distortions and manipulated impressions—interspersed with excerpts and photographs, which propel this journal further into realms of fiction and speculation.]

Artefact 6, *objets trouvés* (Figure 4)

A notebook of *objets trouvés* found in, as we surmise, empty spaces or abandoned areas. It is of unknown authorship; however, the author(s) possess a certain focus on and degree of familiarity with species. There is also a mystery as to the arrangement of the objects. Are they ordered chronologically or randomly? Is one page one space, but for some reason, anonymised? The details of spaces seem to be repeating, so there is a possibility the objects are gathered and later arranged in specific combinations. What is the purpose behind it remains unknown.

[Objects float in the white space of the paper, their arrangement, devoid of any details of chronology or geography, seems random and turns the whole notebook into a giant canvas encouraging rhizomatic itineraries and connections. Perhaps the descriptions and the void surrounding the objects are the true space of exploration?]

Artefact 7, photo album

A series of photographs taken by Robert Foster, who donated this album to our counter-archive in 2023. The snapshots depict glimpses of spaces seen through fences, walls, and enclosures. Inside of the album there is a quote, which our archivists have been unable to trace back to any source: The cuttings of the world are no longer the world but the starting point for imagining worlds to come.

[Does the album of glimpses merely showcase floating, disjointed, and disconnected shimmers and shards? Or does it say more through the whiteness surrounding them, which is not only an invitation to speculation

Figure 4: Artefact 6, objets trouvés. Photo: Weronika Kozak.

on the *unknown unknown*, but also a telling representation of the current perception and esteem of urban leftovers?]

Do these descriptions and artefacts seem disorientating and fragmentary? Tantalising curiosity, yet providing no real answers?

Could it mean that they might be working, then?

POSSIBILITY (AND LIMITATION) IN THE FRAGMENT

A counter-archive, due to its rhizomatic and open-ended character, instigating playful exploration and imaginative journeys, might be a fitting approach and an apotheosis of vagueness. Such a methodology, embracing confusion, ambiguity, and inconclusiveness, could endlessly multiply perspectives and make urban leftovers appear as spaces of enormous potential for imagination. There are still, however, some potential limitations of this counter-archival project. The first flaw may lie in the slightly flaneuristic character of the project. At the start, I made a decision to partly rely on memories of trips I have already made to various urban leftovers, and, on the other hand, to embark on new field excursions without any rigorous sampling of the contexts. Such an approach, resulting in a collection of haphazard experiences and chance meetings, may be considered a fallacy: what perspectives might have emerged had I engaged more in-depth with one specific urban leftover or a particular city? In my view, however, this fieldwork technique resonates strongly with the nature of urban leftovers and fits into the counter-archival method. Since urban leftovers are usually chanced upon by an urban explorer, then it would seem fit that an archivist aiming to construct a narrative combined in equal measure from secret passageways as strange dead-ends should undergo a similarly haphazard journey. Moreover, since this particular counter-archive is a methodology relying on auto-ethnography and artistic methods, I always treated it not as

an unquestionable and complete dissemination, grounded in finished data, but rather as an exploration tool, an inexhaustible source of questions and inspirations. Its shape will never be finished or complete, but rather will perpetually grow and expand. It will become a living archive.

One last critical question is whether, despite incorporating various existing narratives, using my considerable experience and knowledge, basing stories and artefacts on field trips to urban leftovers, and taking various positions and standpoints, this counter-archive is truly polyvocal, being an individual artistic work confined within academia. Might it not work better had it been shared with others through a website, which could potentially turn it into a forever changing, living space, brimming with possibilities (Figure 5)? An online counter-archive of urban leftovers could work similarly to *Queering the Map*, and allow others to add their stories and perspectives. The website could have different modes of viewing and browsing through stories, to generate multiple possible arrangements and itineraries through gathered fragmentary evidence. The artefacts fabricated by me could kickstart such a project and trigger different stories, memories and perspectives; the bigger and more diverse the counter-archive becomes, the more itineraries through them would be possible. But, one could also ask if opening this project up completely should be the goal if the aim is to provide a successful mythology?

Maybe it should become a more clandestine effort, found only by those wanting to stumble upon it? Read unannounced in urban leftovers, advertised through stickers or mysterious posters? Or become even more fragmented and charged, by being released in tantalising teasers, patiently assembled by its readers, slowly forming a very personal picture? This dilemma and multiple possibilities of disseminating shows clearly that the method of a counter-archive is still imperfect and presents the potential for further research.

Figure 5: potential online archive of empty spaces. Graphic made by Weronika Kozak.

However, as imperfect as it may be, the counter-archive, in my opinion, could become a valid methodology to engage with urban leftovers – not merely a montage of animated fragments, 'bits and pieces thrown together', but, as McFarlane wrote, 'an ontology' of dis-articulated spaces (2021: xvii). Taking a counter-archival lens could provide 'a pretext to multiply images' on urban leftovers, and encourage engaging with uncertainty, seen as a potential, rather than limitation (Bachelard 2014: 170). It might give value to spaces usually thought of as other and strange, and significance to the 'numerous scraps of stories that wait to be told' hidden there (Edensor 2007: 250). What stories might they reveal if we were to embrace inconsistency and be open to imagining innumerable possibilities?

EPILOGUE

Under the flyover, a small canal appears as if out of nowhere, leading to an enfilade of spaces. The standard white plastic garden chair is sitting comfortably on the bank of the canal, looking as if its owner has just moved it while standing up, to come back in a minute. The small garden growing on the banks, fenced off, is filled with cleavers, remnants of a dryer, cilantro, aluminium poles, ferns, broken wooden drawers, and poppy flowers. Only when looking closely can one see that these interspecies structures grow from foundations of a now vanished building. The idyllic image of a meadow is further disrupted by other out-of-place elements: a plastic window frame abandoned in greenery, a hoodie, and a pair of jeans. Suddenly, behind the tall ferns, there is an opening revealed through a wall; behind it, a room-like space emerges, a table surrounded by wooden chairs in the centre, a few steps remaining from a staircase on the right (remnants of a living room?) Instead of people, spiders, bats, fungi, ivy, and nettles are invited to the dinner table. A more-than-human assembly.

Is this story *the* story—the *verified* and *correct* explanation for an urban leftover—or a *real* description of an urban leftover? Or is it a mere personal interpretation, one of the many itineraries one could take through 'traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things' that urban leftovers encompass and constitute (Muñoz 1996: 10)? Did I encounter these entities? Were they parts of one urban leftover or many that I visited? Or maybe I fabricated all of them? Does that even matter? As Glenn Most wrote, it is often the space surrounding the fragment that matters the most (2009: 18). The unfilled blanks, tantalising inconsistencies, words left unsaid, nexuses only suggested, not confirmed – they weave and re-weave multiple narratives. The blankness or vagueness of an urban leftover should be embraced to release imagination and spark a multitude of stories, real or not.

Do you still want to ask this question? Or maybe think of your own story?

Ethics and consent

The research presented in this article did not require ethical review or participant consent.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

_____

NOTES

[1] All of Borges' writings, but especially *The Garden of Forking Paths*, with its twisting and impossibly bifurcating narrative, has been a great inspiration in creating stories for the counter-archive. See Borges, J. L. (1964) *Labyrinths. Selected Stories & Other Writings*. New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

[2] See Kozak, W. (2024). How to uncover and nurture potential hidden in empty spaces? Multiplying perspectives through the construction of a counter-archive (Masters thesis, Politecnico di Milano, POLITesi). https://www.politesi.polimi.it/handle/10589/217557

REFERENCES

Bachelard, G. (2014) *The poetics of space*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ballard, J. G. (1985) *Concrete island*. New York: Vintage Books.

Barthes, R. (1972) *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press.

Calvino, I. (1997) *Invisible cities*. London: Vintage Books.

Chouteau-Matikian, H. (2011). War, there, overthere. In G. Knape (Ed.), *Walid Raad: I might die before I get a rifle*. Göttingen: Steidl.

Clément, G. (2016). A landscape manifesto. In P. Belanger (Ed.), *Landscape as infrastructure* (pp. 48–79). London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315629155-7

Corboz, A. (1983). The land as palimpsest. *Diogenes*, *31*(121), 12–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/039219218303112102

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

de Solà-Morales Rubió, I. (2014). Terrain vague. In P. Barron & M. Mariani (Eds.), *Terrain vague. Interstices at the edge of the pale* (pp. 24–30). London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552172

Doron, G. (2008). '...those marvellous empty zones on the edge of our cities': Heterotopia and the 'dead zone'. In M. Dehaene & L. De Cauter (Eds.), *Heterotopia and the city. Public space in a postcivil society* (pp. 203–214). London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203089415-25

Edensor, T. (2007). Social practices, sensual excess and aesthetic transgression in industrial ruins. In K. A. Francks & Q. Stevens (Eds.), *Loose space. Possibility and diversity in urban life* (pp. 234–252). London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203799574

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, *16*(1), 22–27. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

Francks, K. A., & Stevens, Q. (Eds.). (2007). *Loose space. Possibility and
diversity in urban life*. London: Routledge. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203799574

Giannachi, G. (2016) *Archive everything. Mapping the everyday*. Cambridge,
MA: MIT Press. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262035293.001.0001

Hooks, B. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness.
Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 36, 15–23

Koolhaas, R. & Mau, B. (1995) *S,M,L,XL: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-
Large*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

LaRochelle, L. (2021). Queering the map. On designing digital queer
space. In R. Ramos & S. Mowlabocus (Eds.), *Queer sites in global
contexts. Technologies, spaces, and otherness* (pp. 133–147). New
York, NY: Routledge. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003002338-9

López–Pineiro, S. (2020) *A glossary of urban voids*. Berlin: Jovis.

McFarlane, C. (2021). *Fragments of the city. Making and remaking urban
worlds*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv20ds9qd

Most, G. W. (2009). On Fragments. In W. Tronzo (Ed.), *The fragment:
An incomplete history*. (pp. 9–22). Los Angeles, CA: Getty
Publications.

Muñoz, J. E. (1996). Ephemera as evidence: Introductory notes to queer
acts. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, *8*(2), 5–
16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228

Ngozi Adichie, C. (2009) The danger of a single story. TED Video.
Presented at the TEDGlobal 2009, Bonus Session, July 23, 2009.
https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg?si=2Mlb_g7QNliDDPie

Oakley, B. (2022) *Imperfect archiving, archiving as practice: For a love of
softness*. New York, NY: Genderfail.

Radović, S. (2014). On the threshold: Terrain vague as living space in
Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. In P. Barron & M. Mariani (Eds.),
Terrain vague. Interstices at the edge of the pale (pp. 114–129).
London: Routledge. DOI:
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552172

Rowe, C & Koetter, F. (1978). *Collage city*. Cambridge, MA:
MIT Press.

Stalker. (2000). Stalker Manifesto. In B. Lootsma & Y. Simeoforidis
(Eds.), *5tudi: Stalker / Ararat* (pp. 24–30). Rome: Librerie Dedalo.

Whiteman, J. (1986). Site unscene – Notes on architecture and the
concept of fiction. Peter Eisenman: Moving arrows, Eros and
other errors. *AA Files*, Summer 1986(12), 76–84.

AGORIAD
A Journal of Spatial Theory