

Deleuze's Fold as Urban Strategy

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This essay revisits the notion of the urban void as framed in architectural theory of the past decades, in an attempt to highlight the strategic role played by voids in enabling contemporary processes of urban regeneration. The example of the evacuated Heygate estate in South London is used to formulate a critique of a conception of such urban voids as strictly outside the city and its productive structures. Instead, the figure of the "fold", as articulated by Deleuze, is proposed as a more accurate conceptual framework to describe the relation of urban voids to the city – an outside within, which transforms it from the inside. While unpacking the procedures by which urban voids are currently used as support structures to speculative forms of urban development, the essay also asks whether these same voids may ground the construction of alternative urban futures.

Introduction

As a sort of hushed refrain within urban theory, spaces that are primarily defined by their exteriority to a prevailing urban frame have made intermittent appearances in the writings on modern cities. A far-from-exhaustive list could include the following three examples.

In the early sixties, the Belgian section of the Situationist International wrote about ‘voids’: fragments of the city that needed to be liberated from their occupation by the capitalist/spectacular urban order.¹ Only from these voids could construction start, and authentic urbanism emerge. In the Situationists’ perspective, such spaces outside of the city’s plan did not pre-exist their discovery, but had to be constructed, as a form of resistance against the processes of massive urbanisation that were unfolding at the time. Thirty years later, spaces with similar characteristics appear again: in Hakim Bey’s pamphlet T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, a tactical manual for creating places that elude established forms of control and that exist within the cracks of the urban and social order;² and most notably in the field of architecture, in the essay ‘Terrains Vagues’ by Solà-Morales, a much-quoted study of these vacant and indeterminate places which seem to sprout within the urban fabric and yet ‘exist outside the city’s effective circuits and productive structures.’³

The terms “void”, “T.A.Z”, or “terrain vague” certainly don’t mean the same thing. Nonetheless, one can identify some common traits in the concepts that they respectively sketch, which we will try to unpack here. On the one hand, such spaces all appear to enclose a certain political potential, in as much as the absence which lies at their core — of an established order of things — expands the field of the possible they are embedded in. On the other hand — and this point will be the focus of the discussion in the present essay — these spaces are described as radically separated from the city’s inside. Running throughout the three pieces of writing where they appear is the idea that such clear-cut separation does not only form the defining character of such spaces, but also their condition of existence. ‘They are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative’, writes Solà-Morales.⁴

Considering that their vagueness is an essential part of their character, the task of producing a precise and distinct definition for each of these spaces is a difficult one — and perhaps not the most urgent. Rather than putting the emphasis on what they are, we will focus here on what they do, on how they work; thereby starting from the assumption of a certain commonality among such urban forms of exteriority, in order to ask a series of questions. First, can the architect engage with these spaces, he or she who is essentially on the side of order, whose accepted social role is that of ordering space? If indeterminacy and openness are fundamental

¹ Kotany, A. / Vaneigem, R. ‘Elementary Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism’ (Point 6. ‘The Landing’ Translated by K. Knabb) in *Internationale Situationniste* #6 (1961).

² Bey, H. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991)

³ De Solà-Morales, I. ‘Terrain Vague’ in C Davidson (Ed) *AnyPlace*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995).

⁴ Ibid

⁵ A question that Solà-Morales also asks in his 'Terrain Vague' essay, and to which we will return later by trying to provide a different answer from that which he sketches in his conclusion. Ibid., pp.122-123.

characters of such spaces, can the architect keep from destroying them with programs and closures?⁵ And secondly, whether or not the architect can take part in the process, where and how do such spaces acquire their political relevance in material terms? Can such forms of exteriority be put to work for transformative purposes? How to shift from the appeal and inspiration they arouse in theoretical writings, to a practice of change that would be grounded there?

The hypothesis to be tested here is the following: if there is any transformative potential to be activated within such spaces, one first needs to rethink their relation to the city; to move away from a conception of strict exteriority, and to focus on understanding the actual embedding of such spaces within contemporary urban processes. Through the case study of the urban regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area in South London, this essay will attempt to do three things. Firstly, it will discuss the role played by the evacuated Heygate estate, centrally located in the area considered, within the broader process of urban regeneration. In doing so, it will formulate a critique of the conceptual heritage left in architectural theory by Solà-Morales' 'Terrains Vagues' essay by mobilizing Deleuze's notion of the 'fold'. Going beyond the categorical divide between the city's interior and exterior, it will be argued that the 'fold' describes in more accurate terms the form of exteriority that urban voids embody within contemporary processes of urban production. Secondly, once described the folding operations that were deployed to produce an urban void in the Heygate estate, and how this void was made into a crucial support of the ongoing regeneration, the essay will discuss the possibility of subversion of such voids, through the example of an intervention on the façade of the Heygate initiated by the author. Finally, as a response to the notion of urban blind spots that first triggered it,⁶ the essay will reflect upon the question of the visibility of such folded urban voids – to be more precise, on what is at stake in their invisibility – and recount an peculiar response to the abovementioned intervention.

⁶ The present essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper given at the "Urban Blind Spots" symposium, at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, 14 November 2012

Folding: beyond the interior/exterior divide

Built in the early seventies, the Heygate was a housing complex of 1260 flats, now entirely evacuated and partly demolished. Today it is essentially a massive void, a fenced-off one, standing in the middle of the £1.5bn regeneration scheme of the Elephant and Castle area. The process of evacuation started in 2007, while the demolition of the Heygate's main blocks only started in February 2014, and is expected to be completed in 2015. Given this peculiar spatial and temporal configuration – a seven-years old void at the heart of one of the largest regeneration scheme in Europe – it seems pertinent to question the role of this void in the urban changes surrounding it.⁷

⁷ Having already discussed this situation in detail in some previous writings, I will here only summarise its key aspects that are relevant to the focus of the present essay. See Sebregondi, F. *The Event of Void* (London: self-published, 2011); and Sebregondi, F. (2012) 'Notes on the Potential of Void. The case of the evacuated Heygate estate' in *City* Vol.16, No. 3 (June 2012).



Fig. 1. The evacuated Heygate estate (left) and the newly completed Strata tower (right), Elephant and Castle, London, 28 October 2011. Author's own photograph.

A first element that stands out when undertaking research around the Heygate estate is its unprecedented media presence. As the focus of a massive regeneration in Central London, it has attracted much news coverage and documentary analysis. Yet it is in fictional media that it was featured the most. The early evacuation of the estate in 2007 – five years before the first planning documents outlining the scheme that would replace it were submitted – was immediately accompanied by its transformation into a hyperactive filming location. At least 76 films were shot there between 2007 and 2010, and many more since. Ranging from D.I.Y. music videos to blockbuster movies such as Michael Caine's *Harry Brown* (2009) or Brad Pitt's *World War Z* (2013), the large majority of them employ the Heygate to depict the timeworn cliché of the inner-city concrete jungle.⁸ Arguably, this overproduction of images made possible by the emptiness of the place has been actively sustaining the discourse behind the regeneration of the area, by projecting into the city an image of the council estate as a deprived, dysfunctional, and outdated place. Which now must be replaced.

There is also a material side to this media exploitation of the Heygate's void. A series of defensive measures were taken by the developer and the Council to keep the curious, or the squatters, away from the estate. The whole perimeter of the Heygate is delimited by miles of hoardings, which reinforce the enclosure effect already induced by the massive housing blocks on the boundary of the site. Together, they start working as a dyke, which keeps the city out, retains some empty space available for future development, and lets the pressure of the market rise on its edges. The entire site shall be cut out from the city, inaccessible, invisible – except from a certain distance.

⁸ Most of the information about the use of the Heygate as a filming location was obtained by the author following the submission of a Freedom of Information request (n. 160170) to Southwark Council on 6 July 2011. Responses and details about the films shot there were received on 11 August 2011.

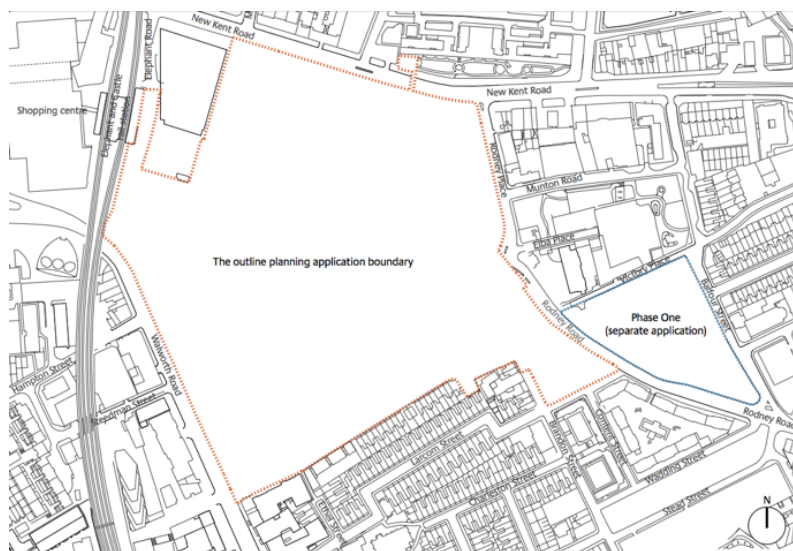


Fig. 2. Folding and inner void. 'Plan showing application boundaries'. Extract from Lend Lease/Southwark Council's 'Transforming the Heygate' public campaign (Part 1 - Planning and Process).

All around the Heygate, the empty and decaying blocks (which only now start to be demolished) compose a particular urban landscape: one that juxtaposes the dereliction of the past with the shiny new developments that are mushrooming in the area. The architectural imperative of the new development seems to be that of showing a radical contrast of appearance with the council estate's ruined aesthetics—as developed through films and photographs, just as materially staged on site. This way, regardless of the quality in absolute terms of what is being built, its relative, perceived value is pushed to an extreme. A concrete example of landscape 'as an instrument of cultural power':⁹ through this mise-en-scène a clearly intelligible discourse is diffused from the Heygate to the city, both in images and locally. Namely: council housing has failed, urban renewal is now on his way – and you'd better strive to be part of it.

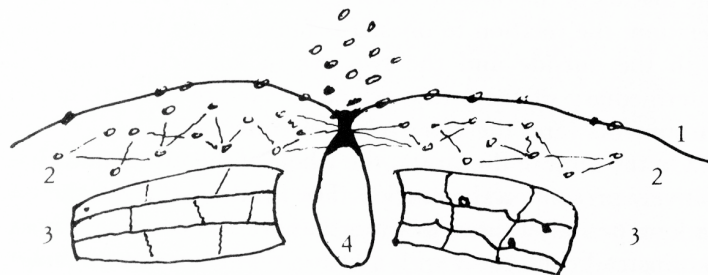
One could say that landscape displays as much as it hides, and in that sense, the expression blind spot is pertinent to describe the inside of the evacuated housing complex as it stood for nearly seven years. Because of a few remaining residents – the last having been forcefully evicted in December 2013 – the central open space behind the hoardings was still accessible, albeit by tortuous paths. What one could find there was a calm and silent place, dozens of mature plane trees, and a series of more or less marginal activities going on. Teenagers are of course among the first to discover such places of lower urban control, and it didn't take long before the Heygate's void was turned it into a hot spot of BMX, parkour, graffiti, or casual hangout in South London. Other activities taking place there comprised 'guerilla gardening' in the formerly collective greens, cinema screenings, various spontaneous public events, as well as the informal meetings of an activist network campaigning for an alternative model of

⁹Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power*, 2nd Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

¹⁰ See the campaign website: <<http://www.35percent.org>>.

regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area, which would not exclude its current low- or medium-income residents and traders. Headquartered in and around the flat of Adrian G., last resident of the estate and leader of the “35 Percent” campaign for affordable housing,¹⁰ a community of people had emerged who in large part were first drawn to this place precisely because of the unique possibilities it offered, by being temporarily exterior to the urban order of things. A condition of exteriority that can only be understood as relative though, since the Heygate’s void is, as we saw it, also deeply embedded in the urban processes surrounding it, and employed as a support to the local update of an urban regime already in place elsewhere in the city.

Folding operations



1. Line of the outside
2. Strategic zone
3. Strata
4. Fold (zone of subjectivation)

Fig. 3. Diagram included in the final pages of Deleuze’s *Foucault*, in the chapter ‘Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)’ (1986)

In order to better understand how this relative exteriority works, it may be relevant to refer to the spatial form of the ‘fold’, as described by Deleuze. In the famous last chapter of his *Foucault*, titled ‘Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)’¹¹, Deleuze delivers his interpretation of a problem at the core of Foucault’s writings — that of the production of the New — by mapping it as a process of folding. In condensed terms, the fold is the process through which the outside (an open field of undetermined forces and potentials, which can also be understood as the future) penetrates and nests itself at the core of the inside (the realm of stratified knowledge, which we may call the past). Hereby the fold modifies the form of the present (of this thick frontline between the stratified past and the fluid future) and causes a rupture in the determinacy of this relation by channeling in some indeterminate forces, that can bring about a twist, or a bifurcation, from the linear process of stratification in time.

¹¹ Deleuze, G. ‘Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)’ in *Foucault* (Translated by S. Hand, London: The Athlone Press, 1986).

The accompanying diagram that concludes the chapter is particularly relevant here, in as much as it expresses a temporal problem in very spatial terms: it spatialises the process of change in time (see Fig. 3). It does not only describe how change can be produced, but also locates where this happens, thereby acquiring both a strategic and a political dimension. Tentatively, it is worth pushing forward this spatial reading of Deleuze's fold, and insert into the contemporary urban context.

What the fold describes is a particular condition of exteriority, an outside that is always within, in deep relation, and co-present to the inside – transforming it from the interior. In this perspective, the composite agency behind the regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area seems to deploy a similar strategy to that outlined by Deleuze, applying it to the context of the production of urban space. One could say that the evacuation of the Heygate estate amounted to a folding of some outside, undeveloped space, in the inside of the urban fabric; which was used to rewrite the history of the place in a fashion that justifies the operations of replacement; in order to finally actualise a significant urban change – in this case, a shift from housing as a right to housing as a commodity. It is easy to misinterpret the case of the Heygate's void as an exception because of its specific and unique features, such as its central position in the area being regenerated or its parallel functioning as a fabric of images. The contrary can be argued. The Heygate is a caricature, its exaggerated traits simply highlighting a process to be found among hundreds of regeneration sites across major western cities: the encircling of an invisible vacuum and the consequent generation of a localised depression, which starts putting in motion more or less massive flows of financial capital. To some degree, processes of regeneration always involve a folding of the urban fabric – be



Fig. 4. Claydon block and intervention on its roof, Heygate estate, 21 September 2011. Author's own photograph.

it around already vacant spaces, or around places whose vacancy has been actively produced.

It is then interesting to rethink the essay 'Terrains Vagues' against the backdrop of the particular context of urbanisation at the time it was written. While from the post-war period up to the late eighties the globally dominant mode of urbanisation was the sprawl, which constantly expanded the frontier of modern/urban capitalism, the reflection on the 'terrain vague' emerges at a hinge moment between two modes of urbanisation – most large cities reaching a turning point, where the extensive model of the sprawl becomes less valuable than an intensive one, and when cities start looking back at the holes they left behind in their careless expansion. The fold then becomes an urban strategy, by which the capitalist city reabsorbs its forgotten exteriors, or produces new exteriors by temporarily withdrawing from certain spaces, before re-occupying them with increased intensity. Far from being 'foreign to the urban system'¹², the voids at the core of these folds have an essential agency in the present: they find themselves at the very center of 'the city's effective circuits and productive structures'; they act as attractors in a dynamic field of investment streams, themselves the motive force of the urban changes that will materialise in the future.

¹² De Solà-Morales, I (1995). op cit.

While 'Terrains Vagues' was instrumental in bringing such urban voids to light, Solà-Morales's essay has also left a problematic heritage in architectural theory. The clear-cut divide between the interior of the city and its exterior to which the 'terrains vagues' would belong, as formulated in the essay, has casted a long shadow over the role these urban voids have been increasingly playing ever since the explosion of a neoliberal, speculative mode of urban development globally. Thus, Terrains Vagues has also contributed to relegate such urban voids to a depoliticized field of architectural musing and conjecturing: a peculiarity, a paradox, a fascinating moment of 'estrangement', yet nothing for architects to work with. To the problem he highlights in his conclusion – 'How can architecture act in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?' – Solà-Morales provides the following answer: 'undoubtedly, through attention to continuity: not the continuity of the planned, efficient, and legitimated city but of the flows, the energies, the rhythms of the passing of time and the loss of limits.'¹³ Two decades later, this answer seems unsatisfactory to us. Firstly, because of its elusive, vague character, while we claim that it is necessary to shift from the lyrical to the political register when approaching urban voids. The present essay argues against the misreading of such voids as the incidental expression of a repressed urban desire for escape and freedom, and calls for a (re-)integration of the urban voids within the strategic debates about the city and its production. And secondly, because the approach hinted at by Solà-Morales's answer – 'attention to continuity' – seems precisely opposite to that which can be articulated by using a different – and we

¹³ Ibid. p.123.

would argue, more accurate – conceptual framework to characterize such ‘folded interstices’. Just as they already are exploited as the incubators of a particular urban model that is materialising globally – that of an extreme commodification of urban space and all its components –, it seems worth examining, through careful analysis, whether these urban voids may also support the production of alternative urban futures.

The fold, in Deleuze’s conception, is a place where the future is at stake, in the present, and against the past. A topological twist, a bypass of linear sedimentation. A process through which structural changes and radical deviations can take place, allowing new statements to be heard and new forms to be seen, faster, and with a broader extent, than through progress on established bases. If we dwell a little longer on this analogy – perhaps impertinent – between the realm of thought and the realm of the city, we can easily understand the reasons for the fold to be deployed as a strategy within a capitalist mode of urban production, which ‘has necessarily targeted the breaking down of spatial barriers and the acceleration of the turnover time as fundamental to its agenda of relentless capital accumulation.’¹⁴ Regeneration appears both as: a radical break with the sedimented history of an urban area, most often implying a replacement of its inhabitants; and the guarantee that the overarching rule of a speculative housing market is maintained, either by extending it to a new area, or by re-injecting some financial vitality where it was already in place. In spite of the drastic changes it may bring about – the obliteration of the long fought-for policy of social housing is a recurrent example – there is also a quite conservative dimension to a process of urban regeneration, in as much as it leaves unquestioned the very mode by which the city is essentially produced today – as a commodity – thereby allowing this mode to endure and expand. We ask: what are the conditions of transformation of the city, beyond its mere regeneration?

¹⁴ Harvey, D. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. (London: Blackwell, 1996), p. 411.

Counter-strategies

Undoubtedly the most public façade of the Heygate estate, the 12-storey high, 180 meter-long Claydon block was among the first to be evacuated – turned blind by the sealing of all its windows and doors, and left in a derelict state right in front of the Elephant and Castle rail station. There, tens of thousands of commuters would pass it by everyday on their journey to Central London, its dark perspective lines converging on a horizon dominated by the glitter of the Shard. On the morning of May 11, 2011, two large painted inscriptions reading “NOW... HERE”, respectively 8 x 3,5 m and 11,5 x 3,5 m, appeared on the roof of the Claydon block, as a result of an unsolicited intervention initiated by the author.¹⁵ Below is a retroactive account of the theoretical grounds for such intervention.

¹⁵ For documentation of the intervention, see Sebregondi, F. (2011) *The Event of Void*, op. cit.

We have recognised the fold as a means by which changes are both negotiated and actualised. As a spatial form, it seems to accurately describe one of the strategies through which the global market of speculative urban development modifies the cities today, in ways that serve its expansion and intensification. If one were to try mobilising the fold for other purposes – to tend towards a change that would open up alternative urban outcomes – then it would make sense to look a little closer at Deleuze’s abovementioned diagram and at the explanation he provides for it.

In this diagram Deleuze identifies a ‘strategic zone’, which corresponds to the interface between the ‘strata’ and the ‘outside’.

The informal outside is a battle, a turbulent, stormy zone where particular points and the relations of forces between these points are tossed about. Strata merely collected and solidified the visual dust and the sonic echo of the battle raging above them. (...) Each atmospheric state in this zone corresponds to a diagram of forces or particular features which are taken up by relations: a strategy. If strata are of the earth, then a strategy belongs to the air or the ocean. But it is the strategy’s job to be fulfilled in the stratum.¹⁶

¹⁶ Deleuze, G. (1986), *ibid.*

If we apply this reading to the urban folds, we can identify a strategic zone precisely at the limit of such folds, where the folded outside – the urban void – meets the city – the strata. The permeability of such zone is a key stake in the determination of the kind of new that will be produced through the process of folding: control over the set of relations that will be ‘taking up’ forces of the outside means control over the channeling of these forces into the strategic objective that is set. In the case of the city, a localised void can be seen as immediately crisscrossed by those ‘forces of the outside’, in as much as a void opens up a multiplicity of fluid and conflicting future scenarios, only one of which will materialise there. As argued above, the discourse supporting processes of speculative urban regeneration are often articulated through landscape, which determines the way the area to be regenerated is perceived from the inside of the city, and projects upon it the particular future scenario chosen by the developers that will finance it. A complement to this process of landscape building is one of control over the urban void to be regenerated (whatever its scale, from a single building to an entire area)– which shall not be accessed nor practiced as a void, but entirely sacrificed to speculative practices,¹⁷ cut out of the urban present to allow for the incubation of a predetermined future. In the city, urban speculation appears to be the main set of relations in which the ‘forces of the outside’ contained in a folded urban void are taken.

¹⁷ The term “sacrificed” here refers to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “profanation”, which he describes as ‘restoring into common use’ of those things that have been sacrificed, that is, excluded, separated, bounded, put out of access and touch. See Agamben, G. *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books 2007).

(...) there are not only particular features taken up by the relations between forces, but particular features of resistance that are apt to modify and overturn these relations and to change the un-stable diagram. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Deleuze, G. (1986), *ibid.*

If an urban void amounts to a field of yet undetermined forces in the city, it may potentially be overturned, and give birth to a different future than the one it is vigorously framed to produce within a process of speculative urban regeneration. In this perspective, access to that void seems inherently political. Urban voids are places from which to stand back and question the city we are accustomed to, places in which one is confronted with the concrete possibility of multiple alternatives. As such, they have the potential of altering urban perceptions and subjectivities. “Disentangling the possible from the Capital”, to use the words of Franco Berardi, is perhaps one of the main political problems of our times. ¹⁹ In the current configuration of the process of urban production, the pragmatic necessity – as the Situationists would have it ²⁰ – of inventing and designing possible futures for the city, is essentially left to the limited imagination of investors and developers. It therefore seems relevant, as a form of creative resistance, to develop tactics of visibility and access to these withdrawn fragments of the city, in which anyone is called to invent a possible use of the site.

¹⁹ Franco Berardi "Bifo" in conversation with Nina Power, August 28th, 2011 at Auto Italia South East, London SE 1.

²⁰ Kotany, A. / Vaneigem, R. (1961) , *op. cit.* (Point 8. ‘Conditions of Dialogue’).



Fig. 5. Holes in the hoardings around the building site of “Les Halles”. Still from *L’Écume des Jours*, dir. Michel Gondry, France, 2013.

This point does not bring us back to an approach of urban voids focused on the contemplative experience that they may offer – an approach that we have partly criticised for its ambiguity in Solà Morales’s essay. There are concrete examples of the workings of an urban void in the production of alternative, radical subjectivities. A key example is the building site of ‘Les Halles’ in Paris in the mid-1970s, soon renamed ‘the hole’²¹ : at the same time as the city was building an unprecedented commercial and transportation hub in its very centre, the hole, which lasted for years,

²¹ Eudeline, P. (2003) ‘Village Punk’, *Nova*, December; p.30: "And then there was the hole. Marvellous abyss with its wooden barricades, nailed up in haste, soon covered with layers of posters. A building site. For many years. Which were the sweetest of the *Halles*."

became the birthplace of the French Punk movement and of a series of other marginal counter-cultures – whose pioneers established their rally point behind the fences that encircled it. A culture of contestation and refusal of the mainstream future that was being promoted could coalesce there. Arguably, it is still running as an active current within today's political subjectivity in France.

Interestingly enough, the hole of 'Les Halles' has reappeared today, due to another massive regeneration scheme: after only thirty years of existence, the vast and structurally sound 'Forum des Halles' was demolished, to be replaced with a new, programmatically identical urban complex that will allow to channel more people, goods, and money in and out of the center of Paris. And again, it is entirely concealed behind 3-meter high hoardings – this time drastically secured from any intrusion. In his recent filmic adaptation of Boris Vian's novel *L'Écume des Jours*, director Michel Gondry makes an interesting comment on this point.²² Among transparent limousines, cocktail-making pianos, and other surreal elements that are dispersed throughout the film, at some point the two protagonists meet in 'Les Halles' – also in construction in the film – and the hoardings around the building site are all pierced with holes. Colin and Chloé spontaneously pass their head through them and spend a moment looking at the much bigger hole... Something, indeed, unimaginable today. Gondry's poetic clin d'oeil hints at what can arguably be considered a political stake: that of making the transient states of the city appear. Rare are the sites undergoing urban development that are not behind opaque hoardings today – that both conceal the building site, and display an image of what will be built there. Beyond the dubious aesthetic argument, there is a clear interest for developers and city-makers to maintain a homogenous perception of the city as it is, and to monitor the amount of change one is allowed to envision. A hole, a void, a building site, is in itself the expression of a possible alternative, and perhaps an invitation to all citizens to ask themselves what could emerge there.

²² *L'Écume des Jours* (English title: *Mood Indigo*), dir. Michel Gondry (France, 2013).

The intervention on the roof of the Claydon block attempted to do two things. On the one hand, to disrupt the promotional landscape in which the derelict Heygate estate was framed, by affirming the material presence of the empty complex not yet demolished and replaced. On the other hand, to invite to its access, exploration, and practice – the hand painted words indirectly pointing out to the fact that the estate was still accessible, if one were to look for a way in. The result of the intervention lasted until September 2013: two years during which the last few inhabited flats on the estate were being evacuated, the fenced-off space increased, the local campaign for affordable housing faced more and more drawbacks, and an intense construction of new low-to mid-rise housing took place in the surrounding area. Perhaps the most interesting critique of this intervention is provided by the response it triggered from the developer of the area.



Fig. 6. ‘Photomontage’ extracted from the planning application n. 13/AP/2477, submitted by Lend Lease on 10 August 2013, for the installation of a 25 x 17.5 m banner on the façade of the Claydon block, Heygate estate.

Blind spot

On August 15, 2013, German national newspaper Die Welt published an online article on Britain’s ongoing social decline and “war of the rich against the poor”, which featured as its main image a photograph of the Heygate estate seen from the Elephant and Castle rail station (with the intervention clearly visible on the roof of the Claydon block).²³ That same week, the urban development corporation Lend Lease, behind the regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area, submitted a planning application for installing a 25 x 17.5 m advertising banner on that same façade of the Heygate that read: “Change is HERE, transformation starts NOW”.²⁴ The photomontage included in the planning application was based on the same picture used by Die Welt, and in the technical drawing showing the dimensions of the banner in elevation, the applicant carefully redrew the outline of the hand-painted letters on the roof of the block – itself otherwise only represented as a light grey rectangle. (see Fig. 6)

Southwark Council approved the application and the banner was installed in September 2013. During its installation, which lasted for several days, the original intervention on the roof of the Claydon block was covered by a new layer of graffiti, most likely facilitated by a breach in the security measures that prevented access to that roof. Thereby, the message that the banner explicitly made reference to was erased, and only its (counter-) détournement was visible. The banner itself didn’t last long either: almost immediately defaced, it was definitively removed within a month of its installation.

²³ < <http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article119060642/Grossbritannien-auf-dem-Weg-zum-Armenhaus-der-EU.html> >

²⁴ Planning application n. 13/AP/2477, 10 August 2013. Full application documents are accessible at <<http://planningonline.southwark.gov.uk/AcolNetCGI.exe?ACTION=UNWRAP&RIPNAME=Root.PgeDocs&TheSystemkey=9550740>>

²⁵ Coincidentally, the first major redevelopment project in the Elephant and Castle area, completed in 2010 and located right in front of the Heygate estate (and visible in fig. 1 to the right), is called the *Strata Tower*, ‘a landmark for urban living’. <<http://www.stratalondon.com>>

What this anecdote seems to confirm is, above all, the strategic dimension of the Heygate façade visible from the Elephant & Castle rail station, and of the landscape that it participates in constructing. The efforts deployed by Lend Lease to re-integrate the Claydon block within the discourse that promotes the urban regeneration they lead seems to indicate that the intervention on the roof was perceived as a challenge to that discourse. The limits of such folded urban voids can indeed be thought of as a ‘strategic zone’: a predominant discourse is formulated through landscape, whereby ‘forces of the outside’ are taken up by determined relations and materialise into the ‘strata’;²⁵ yet it is there that these determined relations can be challenged and possibly overturned, so that a divergent outcome may become actualised.

We have argued that urban folds and the voids at their core are a motive force of current processes of city-making. The form of exteriority described by Deleuze’s concept of the fold – an outside that is nested in an inside, transforming it from within – allows to take into account the temporal dimension of urban voids and the latency they generate, which is crucial to understand the role they play in a speculative mode of urban development. As powerful transformative agencies, urban folds can perhaps be overturned: they are strategic places to act upon in the negotiation of urban futures alternative to those promoted by profit-driven urban developers. As such, they tend to be framed as blind spots in the urban fabric – withdrawn from the present of a city and concealed behind an image of the predetermined urban scenarios that will replace them. The paradox highlighted by Solà-Morales remains: the political potential of such places exists only insofar as they are open-ended and call for the imagination of their use; it is immediately dissolved when they become designed for a determined practice. Yet designing what should occupy a void may not be the only way architects, and spatial practitioners at large, can engage with urban folds. Another way – one that was tested through the intervention recounted in the essay – would be to challenge their invisibility and withdrawal in the city, so that an increasing number of urban dwellers may encounter these suspended places, where the future of the city is materially *in question*.



Fig. 7. Heygate banner installed, 15 October 2013. Courtesy of Gary Kinsm
Claydon block just after start of demolition, 5 March 2014. Author's own
photograph.

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