

The Value of Emptiness
Terrain Vague Amidst a Redeveloping Landscape

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Abstract

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The urban form is a landscape that is constantly in flux. Some cities grow, while others stagnate or shrink. Most urban centers, at one point, have gone through all of these conditions. During periods of growth, development is a primary focus among designers, architects and planners. In times of decline, this construction pressure can be nonexistent.

In the midst of these moments of contraction, new places open up which lack their original purpose. These spatial conditions are called ruins, wastelands, derelict sites, dead zones and terrain vague.

These places, now devoid of inherent purpose, gain new ones through their disuse. Through their deregulation, or lack of clear ownership, the terrain vague has the potential to accommodate more than it may have before. People, in their interaction of these vague spaces, prescribe new meaning, use and importance to them. It is at this moment that I believe is an intriguing urban condition that deserves greater study. There is a clear argument that the terrain vague can be put to better use. This thesis recognizes this fact but proposes alternative arguments.

I see this thesis as an academic exploration, without a clear resolution, answer or finality. Through this thesis, I hope to have gained a greater understanding of how architecture and planning, rather than erase, can accommodate and embrace the design potential of the terrain vague.

The Value of Emptiness

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Contents

Abstract	3
1 Introduction	8-11
2 Discussing the Terrain Vague	12-23
3 Precedent Analysis	24-28
4 Site	29-41
5 Maintaining the Possibility of Potential	42-53
6 Conclusion	54-55
References	56-57

A man with no business will never intrude into an occupied house simply because he so pleases. If the house is vacant, on the other hand, travelers journeying along the road will enter with impunity, and even creatures like foxes and owls, undisturbed by human presence, will take up their abodes, acting as if the place belonged to them. Tree spirits and other apparitions will also manifest themselves.

It is the same with mirrors: being without colour or shape of their own, they reflect all manner of forms. If mirrors had colour or shape of their own, they would probably not reflect other things.

Emptiness accommodates everything. I wonder if thoughts of all kinds intrude themselves at will on our minds because what we call our minds are vacant? If our minds were occupied, surely so many things would not enter them.

- Essays in Idleness, The Tsurezuragusa of Kenko



1 Introduction

Maintaining Ambiguous Space in the Urban Context

In the context of a rapidly developing city a prioritized emphasis is often placed on accommodating population growth through new development. Parcels of land slated for redevelopment are typically evaluated by designers and planners and organized into use categories, placing value upon each parcel based on what is determined to be its most practical function. This tendency to predicate a site's use in accordance with its determined worth tends to push away, or outright ignore, the possibility of recognizing and appreciating a site's inherent and unique characteristics. Instead, designers determine, on their own accord, what they believe a site should or could be. Hyper assessments of the available urban condition, as lead by designers and planners, yields a city of ordered and fixed developed parcels inflexible in their quality.

How any one person chooses to interact with their city is of infinite and fascinating possibility. While the immediate surrounding environment is typically the scale and context that influences intimate personal decisions about how an individual might engage with their city, it is ultimately the potential connectivity their immediate context has with context beyond that influences movement and interactions. In the finite city, designed and planned through the lens of

fixed use realities, a person traverses amongst a successive series of predefined narratives and experiences, where each designed and constructed building or space contains an already realized programmatic character. By design, such places and spaces shape and define the experiential qualities for those who are present there. While it is possible for a broad range of urban use patterns to overlap and share common locations within a city, the understood use of any one particular space tends to discourage such overlap to be more common.

In contrast, a more ambiguous place or space lacks experiential clarity, prompting an individual or group of individuals present there to question their surrounding environment and determine for themselves what it is that they are experiencing there. Such places may be entirely empty, and as such may go unnoticed or may merely be passed through without consideration. While some designated public park spaces in cities might present themselves as empty parcels of land, their deliberate designation

as a public park suddenly removes all ambiguity and serves as a point of reference for an individual to know that they are somewhere. A person in a truly ambiguous space, un-named, unlabeled, and un-designated might view themselves as being *nowhere* - in an interstitial realm between one actual place and another, highlighting the importance of the potential connection between immediate context, the context beyond, and the in-between. But maybe, a person in such a realm draws question as to the nature of the environment they find themselves within. In asking such a question, a person acknowledges that where they are is actually *somewhere*. They make a decision for themselves, creating and deciding, on their own accord, what this part of the urban landscape is to them. Such a decision lends itself to individual creativity, not a predetermined narrative.

Do all spaces require designation in order to be made sense of? Can an individual decide for themselves what a space is and what their role within it is? Questions like these offer opportunities

for re-imagining how public space can function within a city and how connections to and from existing context can be understood and experienced differently.

Public spaces constitute an inherent and necessary condition within a city. Such places offer opportunities for pause, reflection, and escape from the other, denser and busier areas within a city. To some, public, empty, or open spaces are a critical release from the stress of the life around them. But empty places that are not designated as anything, unlike a public park, a parking lot, or an alley, don't lend themselves to any one particular type of use that an individual can make sense of to describe what the place actually is. When a park is named and referred to by its name people who interact with the park remember its name and associate its name with what happens or has happened there. Place association and names go hand-in-hand, that is why when someone hears of a park they're able to recall memories of what a 'park' is. When architects and designers are

given a task to design a particular space they're given the name of that space, and, along with it, its intended use. From day one of design, such spaces are conceived and thought of with intention, securing the fate of the function of the space and ultimately how the public will come to understand what the space is, instantly limiting its use to its original conception.

The role of the architect as a designer and a planner is just that - to design and to plan. But with regard to empty environments, nameless spaces, nowhere places, etc., is it not the individual who interacts with such a place, imprints upon it, and defines for themselves what it is that it is? A place that the architect, by nature of being an architect as an architect is expected to be, might not initially recognize the value of having the freedom to imprint on a place and form an opinion about its assets and its qualities as an ordinary bystander might. A cafe is only a cafe. A gym is only a gym. An office is only an office. Such a cafe, gym, or office, when designed by a designer, is preconceived to be understood and

defined as precisely what it is from the moment it is designed.

How might a city continue to grow and develop while simultaneously maintaining its ambiguity?

This thesis attempts to recognize the use potential inherent with in unfinished and undefined spaces in a city, with an emphasis on a desire to maintain this condition through potential redevelopment.

While a wide array of labels and adjectives might exist to describe such places, they are commonly referred to as empty spaces, vacant lots, zones of deindustrialization, ruins, interstitial spaces, etc.

Through their lack of definition, an infinitely imaginable myriad of potential might reside within such spaces, setting them apart for greater programmatic possibility than other areas within a city. In their unfinished state, such places could be maintained to exist in an ever changing state of use and appropriation. Such a constant

evolution of place could invite new and compelling realizations of program, use, and exchange.

By eliminating such places, does society run the risk of stifling possibilities of expression and use? Can the characteristics of undefined space, or terrain vague, be maintained in the context of design?

2 Discussing the Terrain Vague

In his 1995 essay titled, *Terrain Vague*, theoretician Sola-Morales characterizes the allure of sites with an 'absence of use.' His work states,

“the relationship between the absence of use of activity and the sense of freedom of expectancy is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city’s terrain vagues, void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, expectation.”¹⁶

Credited as the first to classify sites with abandoned structures and sites simultaneously outside and within productive areas of cities under the notion of the term terrain vague, Sola-Morales highlights the inherent imprecision such sites exude as a result of having no assigned, strict programmatic functional qualities. Different in this way, such sites could be seen as alluring escapes from a surrounding environment of otherwise set-in-place urban context.

Of intrigue, the term *terrain vague* is perhaps as indeterminate as the spaces it describes. Therefore the following terms share relatable similarity:

terrain vague
heterotopia
wasteland
dead zone
drosscape
derelict sites
void

Due to the fact that places defined by these terms possess a lack of determinacy, Sola- Morales, with regard specifically to the term *terrain vague*, says that,

“in these apparently forgotten places, the memory of the past seems to predominate over the present. Here, only a few residual values survive, despite the total disaffection from the activity of the city. These strange places exist outside the city’s effective circuits and productive structures. From the economic point of view, industrial areas, railway stations, ports,

unsafe residential neighborhoods, and contaminated places where the city is no longer.”¹⁶

In essence, Sola-Morales points out that *terrain vague* could be essentially any place; a place devoid of the normally productive and ordered conditions of urban centers.

Similarly, Michael Foucault in his work, *Of Other Spaces*, defines the term *heterotopia* as “...having the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible.”³ In other words, the spaces he describes are both without use and of infinite use. Since *heterotopia* spaces lack definition, such spaces are able to incorporate different realities of existence within the same physical site.

In her essay titled, *Isn’t All Public Space Terrain Vague?*, Karen Franck describes her view by stating, “the spatial characteristic that seems to most clearly distinguish *terrain vague* from other kinds of public space is its state of abandonment. It is usually

apparent that a previous use is no longer present, and that current uses, should they be present, are probably not officially sanctioned.”⁴

It is through this imprecise and uncertain condition that Sola-Morales and others see value. Rather than advocating for these sites to be replaced or redeveloped, he suggests a renewed focus around the desire for the preservation of such areas as post-architectural conditions valuable to both the urban and the human condition.

“Filmmakers, sculptors and instantaneous performances, and photographers seek refuge in the margins of the city precisely when the city offers them an abusive identity, a crushing homogeneity, a freedom under control. The enthusiasm for the vacant spaces - expectant, imprecise, fluctuating - transpose to the urban key, reflects our strangeness in front of the world, in front of the city, before ourselves.”¹⁶

In his work, *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression*, Gil M. Doron discusses, in a methodological and personal manner, how the current discourse used to view certain zones of use, or terrain vague, lie beyond the realm of current observable architectural practice. Importantly, Doron views these places as not without architecture, but rather, without the profession of architecture. He states, “during the last 50 years or so, the discourse and practice of architecture and planning has been perplexed with peculiar spaces in the built environment, which have been labeled ‘wastelands,’ ‘derelict areas,’ ‘no-man’s-land,’ ‘dead zones,’ ‘urban voids,’ ‘terrain vague,’ etc.”² He aims to point out that architects typically fail to recognize the value of these types of spaces, attributing labels to them in lieu of alternative analysis.

However, while architects may lean toward labels that denigrate these site’s true value, other individuals and community members might be the key to truly recognizing the potential such sites could possess. In an investigation

by the Civic Trust of LA for the publication *Urban Wasteland Now*,

“...people who actually lived near such sites were asked what these sites were and what effect they had on their surroundings. They revealed that the ‘wasteland’ was actually not a waste at all. Although many of those questioned said that these ‘wastelands’ were ugly and looked dirty, 59% of them stated that they were also an asset.”²

With this in mind, “does this different order exist in all of a city’s ‘wastelands,’ ‘derelict areas,’ and ‘voids’? And if so, are planners and architects blind to this? And if not, why do they continue to see these areas as waste and nothingness?”²

Doron believes that one of the reasons these sites exist in the first place is because they are suspensions of planning. The site of the ‘dead zone,’ according to Doron, could be considered as a place between architecture. This observation can be illustrated in two ways. First, such sites are literally spaces of ‘between’ - as

a vacant lot may reside between two already developed sites. Second, such sites may also reside as vacant after a previously existing development was demolished to make way for a future redevelopment. Therefore, terrain vague acts as the suspension of architecture, if at least temporarily. And while such places might inherently yield a wide variety of use patterns by the members of the surrounding community, for better or for worse, Doron states,

“...in taking such a point of view, I am not taking the position of their defender or advocate...but for the reason that I truly believe that architects and planners have a lot to learn from the way these communities create their environments and from contemplating the assets of such environments.”²

By taking this stance, Doron makes a distinction between acknowledging a space’s wide variety of potential use and condoning or approving of such uses. He makes no attempt to imply that certain site uses, perhaps illicit ones, should be permitted to take place



Figure 2.1 "The Zone" from Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker (1979)

in these spaces, but rather that "...it is not architecture or planning that is being abolished in these places, it is simply that unlicensed architects and planners have taken over."² He uses this distinction as a means to point out the failure of design by designers - as other individuals see opportunities of use in these 'dead zones' where designers do not.

More specifically, Doron labels these 'dead zones' as 'zones of transgression.' He sees these spaces as between places of official architecture or planning. This 'in-between' exists both spatially and temporally, as stated previously. And because a site may exist in a state of suspension, it is, in that moment, devoid of any kind of official planning. It is during this devoid moment that the site may be considered as officially unbuildable until new plans for its use are established. Until that time, however, a new reality takes shape. It is within this new reality that unofficial appropriation takes place where it wasn't meant to. It is, according to Doron,

"...an opening of a different space, a space that was always there within the most rigid boundary of architecture. Whether architects and planners can engage with the space where their sovereignty is suspended, and what architecture will arise, is a question that maybe only architects and planners could give the answer to."²

This zone, or this new way of thinking about and perceiving space, holds tremendous implications and potential for designers and planners - allowing such spaces to act as an architectural 'laboratory' for designers as it acts presently for others. In other words, while architects, in the suppression of plans, yielded a void; others filled it. Therefore those who chose to fill the void inherited the new role as the creators of the space.

And, naturally, unexpected things can arise through the ability of individuals and communities to create space beyond what a space actually is. Architects could be able to intend for such unexpected things, however they cannot always readily or easily infer

how to do so.

When interacting with the terrain vague, Sola-Morales advises caution and care to architects and planners. How might designers incorporate their views, designs, and expertise without challenging or changing the imprecise conditions of terrain vague sites? Can architects and planners maintain the alluring qualities that allow such sites to stand out in the first place? Moreover, “what is to be done with the[se] enormous voids, with their imprecise limits and vague definitions?”¹⁶ And if something is to be done, does the act of doing something challenge the very notion of what the terrain vague actually is? Karen Franck warns that,

“once [a site] is appropriated for a single, ongoing, all encompassing use that affords no room or time for additional activities, the space in question is really no longer abandoned, and hence, no longer a terrain vague.”⁴

Perhaps, then, a different view toward how the terrain vague is approached, from the perspective of design, is of

critical importance - one that preserves and celebrates the unexpected and unique qualities the concept of the terrain vague adds to the ever evolving discussion of design and planning in an urban context.

In order for design to successfully interact with the terrain vague, rather than destroying its inherent qualities, an evaluation of its potential to the members and inhabitants of the communities within its vicinity ought to be considered in parallel with its immediately perceivable use as buildable land. In *Interim Spaces*, by Krystallia Kamvasinous and Marion Roberts, the easily appropriable nature of terrain vague is discussed alongside its potential to better adapt to and to serve the immediate needs of those within its surrounding context. They state,

”overall, interim uses constitute a critique of the aestheticization of urban space by design that does not reflect the social needs of the community of users in a more substantial manner, they act as an alternative to overt



Figure 2.2 terrain vague by Ben Alper. An exploration of waste as monument.

commercialization, privatization, and sanitization of public space.”⁹

Such ease of alteration and intervention could more readily yield useful programmatic character for the present need and present condition.

To Kamvasinous and Roberts, the terrain vague “...challenges common perceptions of ‘wastelands’ as empty and abandoned, as, under closer scrutiny, terrain vagues may prove to be anything but empty, often occupied by everyday activities and reclaimed by nature, hence actively enriching a city’s societal and green space resources.”⁹ The two authors continue by stating, “the power of terrain vague lies in its offer of an alternative space of freedom to usually heavily motorized and commercialized contemporary public spaces.”⁹

Despite this recognition, the two authors make an attempt to see a way to best incorporate terrain vague’s value in a changing city. Because such spaces are often created in times of economic or social uncertainty, they

can be utilized in their own continued evolution. “First, is there a way that interim use can be incorporated in future plans, and the qualities of terrain vague be integrated in, and inspire, future designs?

Second, is terrain vague an idea that can only exist if untouched; is it prone to erasure the moment intervention begins?”⁹ Importantly, Kamvasinous and Roberts postulate that the terrain vague cannot and should not be left untouched in its current state.

Because of the inherently unfixed nature of these spaces, they become useful as spaces of change. To do otherwise would be antithetical to such usefulness.

Recognizing that terrain vague spaces are non-fixed, non-formalized entities, Kamvasinous and Roberts emphasize that such spaces, when viewed as important to an urban context and when incorporated into the matrix of the urban form, have the ability to reflect a city’s current needs - ultimately assisting a city’s efforts to foster

continued development. They state,

"...in the contemporary city, terrain vague is a necessity, not a problem: an important urban valve, an urban space in flux, and hence, one welcoming, absorbing, and registering change, a barometer of a city's inherent pressure and processes of growth and decline."⁹

We are already beginning to see a reorientation toward the perception of cities by recognizing that,

"beyond the physicality of architectural objects and practicalities of programmatic content, enmeshed experience is not merely a place of events, things, and activities, but something more intangible, which emerges from the continuous unfolding of overlapping spaces, materials, and detail."¹⁵

Importantly, this mental reimagining is possible even in the most densely built of cities. Tanu Sankalia's *Perception and Exploration of Interstitial Space*, highlights this reinterpreted view as one not only of solid and void, as is typical

with such discourse, but rather, as void and solid as well.

In criticism of our tendency to have an inability to perceive a city differently, he states,

"part of this perceptual conundrum, I argue, is our enigmatic inability to recognize that which lies outside existing historical and epistemological ways of seeing. Gestalt modes of perception are still dominant, as figure trumps ground and produces, as in the case of San Francisco, an image of urban and architectural form intently focused on the object: the city viewed as silhouette, the building encapsulated as edifice."¹⁵

and claims that "proposing new ways of seeing is precisely how we can dislodge entrenched epistemologies and inaugurate new knowledge."¹⁵

Reflecting upon the redevelopment efforts of Berlin in the 1970s, Rem Koolhaas expresses a disapproval of how the city of Berlin chose to fill gaps in the urban fabric resultant from the

city's most recent period of decline. In a 1999 interview titled, *Cultivating Urban Emptiness*, Koolhaas discusses the condition of the city before its redevelopment, stating,

“not only was it beautiful, but it also had a programmatic potential, and the potential to inhabit a city differently represented a rare and unique power. The irony of course is not only that the architecture being built is not the right architecture, but that it is built at all. It's a city that could have lived with its emptiness and have been the first European city to systematically cultivate the emptiness.”¹⁰

He means to acknowledge that “they were blind to the mysterious qualities of this alleged void, first of all its unlimited freedom,”¹⁰ and that through such blindness, development for developments sake, although not necessarily misguided, was perhaps shortsighted. Therefore through filling the void, there exists the possibility for the elimination of the potential of what that void could be.



Figure 2.3 postwar Berlin
A small fair was setup amongst the ruins of the city in ruins

To conclude, the research presented in this document serves to describe and define how the preservation of terrain vague - through its characteristic underutilization and fluctuating qualities - and the redevelopment of its surrounding context are not mutually exclusive. Preservation and redevelopment are, rather, reiterative toward one another - where one may in fact reiterate or strengthen the other. Poetry excerpts from Rem Koolhaas's *Imagining Nothingness* are presented as summation:

“Where there’s nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible...”

“...It is a tragedy that planners only plan and architects only design more architecture. More important than the design of cities will be the design of their decay. Only through a revolutionary process of erasure and the establishment of liberty zones; conceptual Nevadas where all laws of architecture are suspended, will some of the inherent tortures of urban life - the friction between program and

containment - be suspended...”

“...Imagining Nothingness is:
Pompeii - a city built with the absolute minimum of walls and roofs ...

The Manhattan Grid - there a century before there was a “there” Central Park - a void that provoked the cliffs that now define it... Broadacre City...

The Guggenheim...

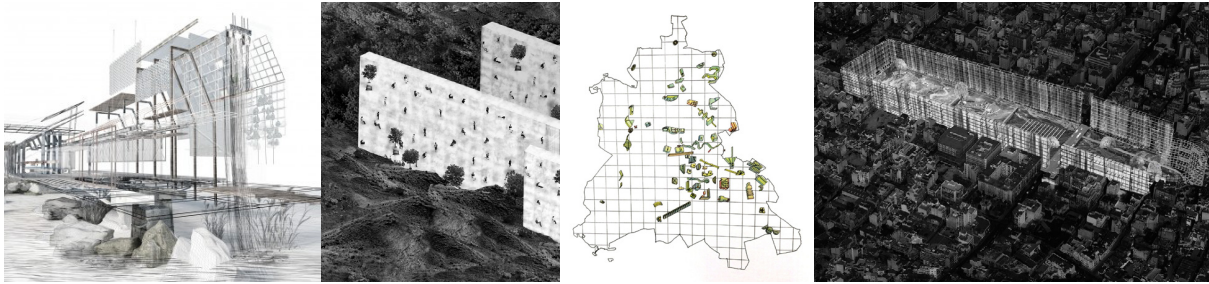
Hilberseimer’s “Mid West” with its vast plains of zero-degree architecture ...

The Berlin Wall...

They all reveal that emptiness in the metropolis is not empty, that each void can be used for programs whose insertion into the existing texture is a procrustean effort leading to mutilation of both activity and texture.”

3 Precedent Analysis

Illustrating a spectrum of typological precedents, Figure 3.1 presents a quick categorical glance at design appropriations of underutilized spaces. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate more specifically how design appropriations can foster creativity, engagement, and re-imagined perceptions. It became evident that, while a spectrum of typological distinctions is to some degree visible, often the boundary is tough to discern - as certain design appropriations incorporate aspects of multiple categories.



Theoretical Intervention



Interim Intervention



Participatory Intervention



Organic Intervention



Unsanctioned Intervention

Figure 3.1 precedent case studies



Figure 3.2 an adventure playground

An adventure playground - as overregulated children's play spaces became common in the 1970s, it was thought that creative expression through play might be at risk of being stifled. By allowing children to create and alter their own play environment, however, creative expression through play could be nurtured and explored more freely, boosting children's sense of their environment and social play dynamics.



Figure 3.3 the Carrie Furnace, Rankin PA

The Carrie Furnace, Rankin PA - the remnant structure of this formerly abandoned, de-industrialized facility has become a place activated by community organizations and artists, illicitly appropriating the site to foster a re-imaged perception of its character. Through numerous interventions and temporary installations the site has gained respect as a site for the free expression of art, as a site for gathering, and as a site for celebration.

Grassroots organizations shed some light toward unsanctioned uses by taking advantage of underutilized spaces in both official and unofficial capacities.

Typically, such spaces were landscapes of intermediate ownership. However, vacant and/or abandoned buildings were also explored.

These types of interventions ranged from either short-term, momentary occupations to more long-term occupations. In some cases, temporary interventions on sites became recognized as valuable assets - serving as inspiration for future conditions of similar occupation. And in other cases, interventions lead to the creation of permanent social and cultural space.

In many cases, interim occupational uses for such sites were generated by design groups in an attempt to persuade new uses on sites in places of anticipated future development. These types of interventions were usually, if not universally, permitted, many of which even being encouraged by city governments and development groups. Design characteristics typically featured inexpensive and re-positionable components and elements, selected in accordance with their impermanent nature.

4 Site

Overview

The Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan region (Figure 4.1) is home to nearly 3.8 million people. Pressures on the region to accommodate the influx of new growth are shaping the city of Seattle to rapidly build and densify. While Tacoma is also growing, Seattle appears to be feeling this pressure more visibly. Whole blocks of single family homes are demolished and hastily replaced with larger, taller, denser residential buildings. When choosing a site to design within the framework of ambiguity, it appears to be quite a challenge for Seattle because of such short in-between time between demolition and new construction, greatly limiting, and in many cases outright prohibiting, opportunities for in-between, interim interventions. Tacoma, on the other-hand, with its slower growth rate and available real-estate, offers considerably more opportunity for instances of ambiguous urban intervention. While some sites in Tacoma are experiencing rapid redevelopment after demolition, others are not and some are entirely stagnant. This thesis looks to Tacoma and its more readily available potential to envision an investigation into ambiguous space and how the permeability and connectivity of such space to existing context could foster variation of personal narrative and experience.

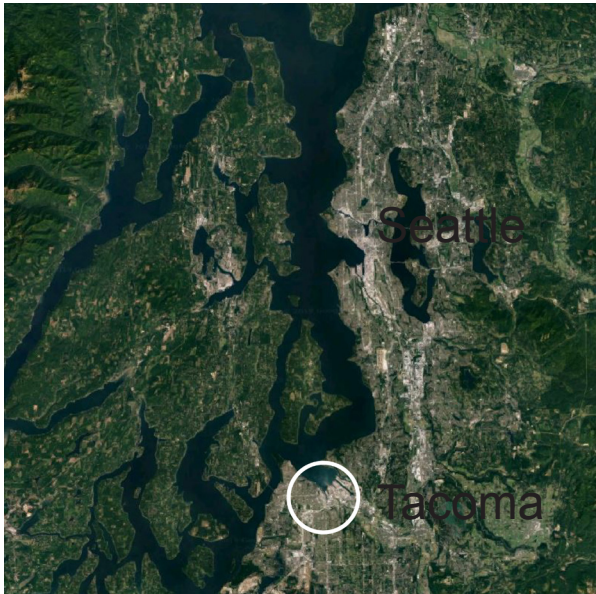


Figure 4.1 Puget Sound region, WA (left), City of Tacoma (right)

History and Context

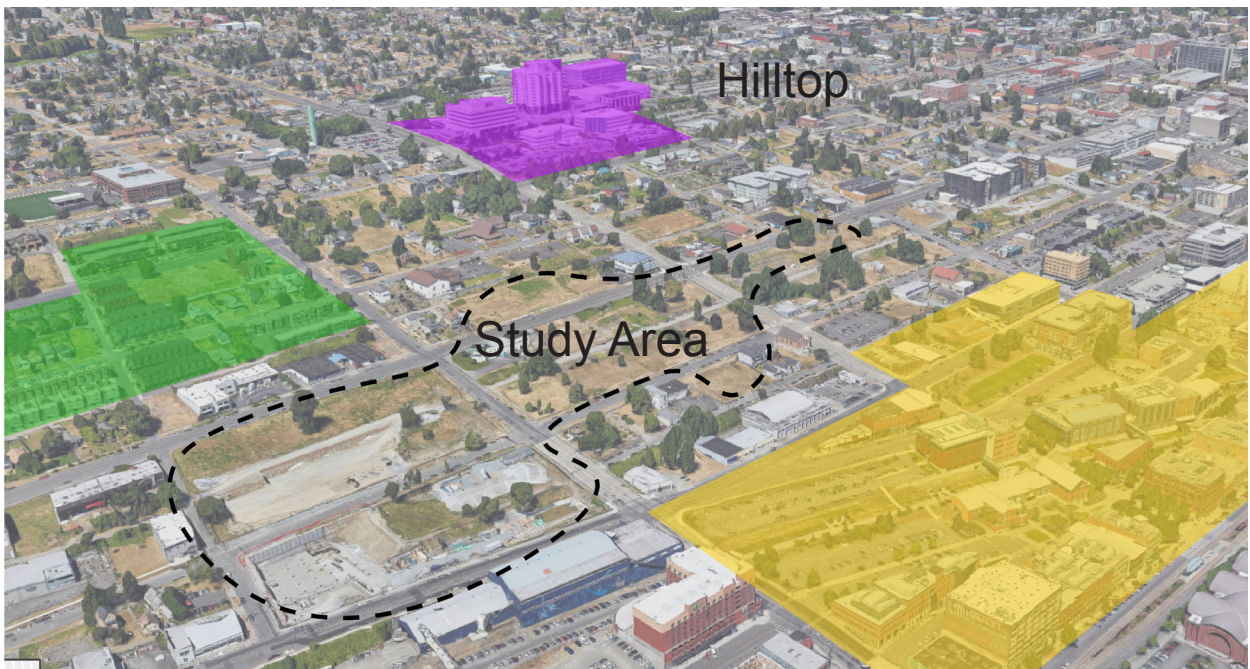
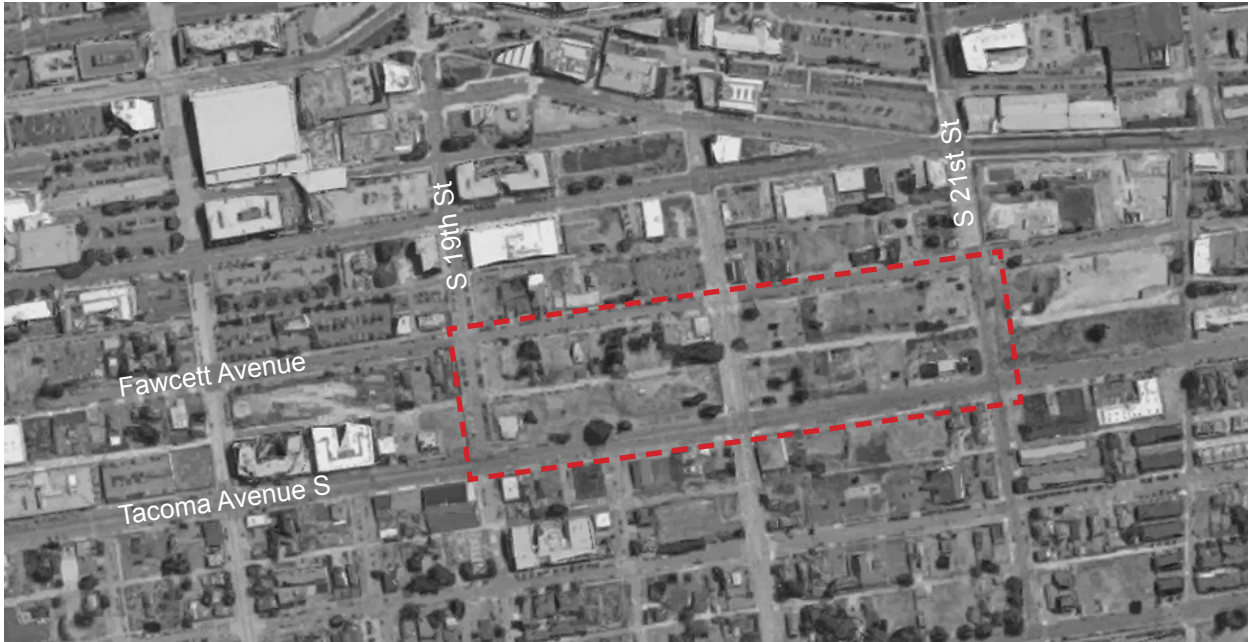
For the investigation of this thesis, and to discuss opportunities and implications for design interventions, a site was chosen from a study area constituting a wide gap in the urban fabric of Tacoma WA (Figure 4.2).

The study area chosen was selected for (a) its physical position and adjacencies - its location between the UW Tacoma campus and the Hilltop neighborhood, and (b) its present character as a series of undeveloped, successive open lots. Both the UW Tacoma campus and the Hilltop neighborhood are actively and visibly developing and densifying.

The primary focus of the investigation of the study area is bordered by S 19th

Street to the North, S 21st Street to the South, Tacoma Avenue S to the West, and Fawcett Avenue S to the East. The chosen study area and its successive undeveloped blocks reside within the urban grid between these two centers and is typically traversed through when traveling from one to the other.

Over a decade ago, the city of Tacoma purchased and demolished many of the site's existing structures in preparation for the development of a planned police station. However, the planned development fell through in favor of an alternative site, rendering the initial site barren and vacant. Since then, the site has remained dormant and virtually unchanged while



- NEW RESIDENTIAL
- HOSPITAL
- UW TACOMA



Figure 4.2 chosen site in context

the context surrounding the vacant land has continued to develop. While recently, redevelopment appears to be taking hold, the discussion of this thesis intends to explore alternatives.

East of the site, the University of Washington Tacoma campus and the Museum District have been steadily growing. UW Tacoma, since its inception, has continued to build itself both upward and outward since the institution has restored, adapting and adding to what was once Tacoma's former warehouse district. Along the Foss waterway, land that was once vacant is now home to several museums and residential properties.

West of the site, Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood has enjoyed efforts to attain a renewed investment in its value as a resurgent business district. A steadily growing mix of infill projects such as single family residences, townhomes, and apartment buildings have begun to reclaim the neighborhood's role as a vital component of Tacoma's urban form. Development such as this is

expected to continue, and is predicted to accelerate, as an extension of Sound Transit's Tacoma Link Light Rail is expected to serve the Hilltop neighborhood by 2022.

Development conditions to the East and West of the site have visibly begun to serve the role of strengthening the site's edges, highlighting its stark contrast as a terrain vague. Figures 4.3 - 4.5 illustrate how the site's built form and its built context has changed over time.



Figure 4.3 change over time, 1990.



Figure 4.4 change over time, 2005.



Figure 4.5 change over time, 20019.

Conditions and Uses

Within the site's indeterminate landscape (Figure 4.6), a varied array of uses have taken root in its continued absence of redevelopment. These uses (or programs) constitute both sanctioned and unsanctioned habitation and occupations.

Recognizing the implications of wide use variety - whether these uses be illicit or not, legal or illegal - this thesis defends a position not of approval, but rather, of acknowledgement, understanding the organic appropriation of terrain vague.

Unsanctioned art

The site features several unofficial alterations - taking the form of street art, graffiti, and sculpture.

Rewilding

Flora, largely consisting of grass, weeds, and shrubs cover most available surface area. Remnant trees of various sizes remain in place in areas that were once green spaces or yards.

Ruins

Remnants and fragments of demolished structures and buildings remain (Figure 4.7) - such as pieces of former front porches, stoops, etc. While these ruins were once part of a larger whole, they stand alone today and are occasionally unofficially appropriated as seating and places to gather.

Parking

Parking is ubiquitous in the absence of surrounding development.

Circulation

Primary pedestrian movement patterns follow the surrounding existing street grid and tend to favor a West-East orientation. However, evidence of deviation in favor for more direct routes is visible.



Surrounding Vistas



Framed Views



Areas of Greenery



Previous Habitations



Interventions

Figure 4.6 site photos

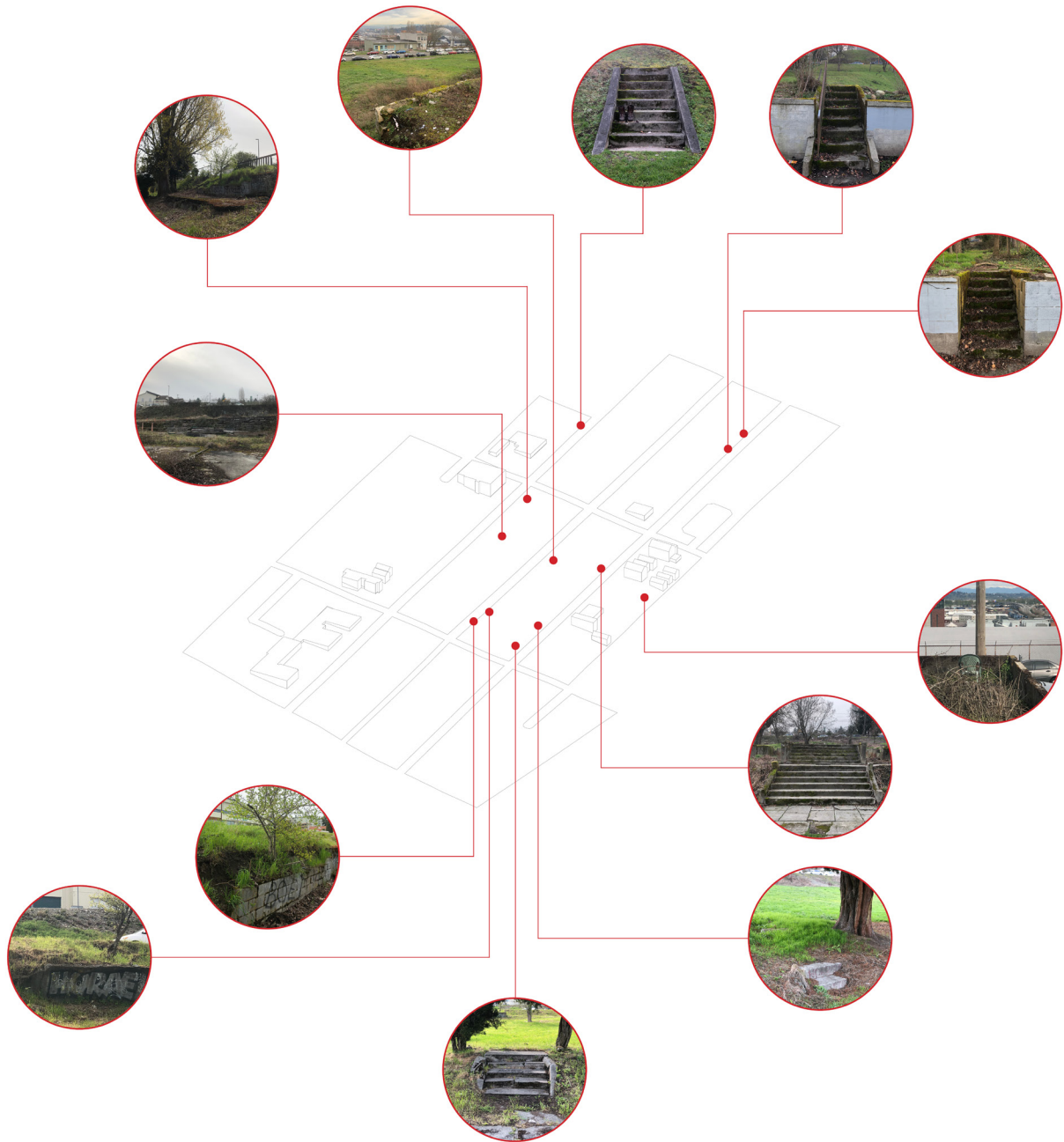


Figure 4.7 existing ruins



Figure 4.8 programmatic use potential engaging existing ruins

5 Maintaining the Possibility of Potential

While the research presented in this document makes an attempt to define terms to describe the value of empty spaces, it does not fully illustrate what these spaces could be through the lens of design. Therefore, as a primarily conceptually based and theoretical thesis, the design project discussed in the following section will examine more closely one of the many possibilities for how an architect could approach and maintain terrain vague with regard to the redevelopment of the chosen site.

While realistically acknowledging the potential development of the site, it becomes important to clarify that it is through the spaces in-between buildings and through the construction of architecture that permit the qualities of terrain vague to continue to persist through time.

As a designer it is inherently difficult to imagine how to approach designing a space with the aim of having its function be ambiguous. For the purpose of this thesis a theoretical diagram was produced using architectural design thinking to illustrate the duality between defining spatial character in context while simultaneously leaving that spatial character ambiguous. The result of the diagram aims to highlight the incongruence between permitting a space to remain vague in its character while also anticipating redevelopment.

The beginning of this investigation starts with an understanding of context and human use patterns between and within the context of the study area.

The site for this investigation lies between two primary urban nodes. It is, essentially, a place between places due to its characteristic absence of development. But while the site itself may be mostly empty, ruins of previous habitation are frequently traversed past while people maneuver and walk through the site to wherever

their destinations may be beyond. These ruins (Figures 4.7 and 4.8) serve as a reminder that the site has been inhabited in the past and that its previous inhabitation is no longer part of the site's current reality. What exists today is, instead, a different reality - one of an in-between or suspended nature somewhere after the site's previous use, as indicated by the presence of the ruins, and somewhere before an unknown future inhabitation and development.

The context of the site's history and the ruins left behind from it persuade current occupation of the site, influencing patterns of movement and circulation.

While buildings no longer stand and serve programmatic function, the landscape left behind was not erased cleanly and is not an empty plain, but rather a collage of what once was, generating an intricate layout of obstacles and spatial oddities. Retaining structures from former buildings yield complexity in the site's grading, trees remain in place in what

were once former yards, and temporary fencing guards pedestrians from sudden drop-offs adjacent to sidewalks. Characteristics such as these leave the site in a state of suspended animation caught somewhere between demolition and regeneration, persuading individuals who interact with the site to engage with it in a variety of unique and interesting ways.

Some people choose to restrict where they walk to paved sidewalks. But others, however, might decide instead to walk along a route of their own choosing to better suit where they're going. Referred to as 'desire paths,' these unprescribed patterns of movement illustrate in a very literal way where people decide to go and how. This direct engagement with the site provides a fundamental basis for considering how to design in context while retaining the site's most desirable desire paths, placing value on these paths and understanding them as assets to preserve and to design around.

But since an essentially "empty" site

possesses a theoretical infinity of possible ways of movement through it, how could a designer respond to this notion and preserve desirable paths as a public asset? In other words, which paths are worth preserving, ensuring their continued existence, and which paths can be deemed less worthy of preservation? Does favoring some potential paths over others diminish ambiguity? With regard to the paths that are chosen to be preserved, what are the implications of their preservation?

The desire paths present through the study area offer a primary starting point for determining how and where architecture could respond (Figure 5.2). By intentionally leaving spaces open, outlined by desire paths, a wide range of site use potentials emerge.

The possibilities could be left open for anything to happen within a broad spectrum ranging from that of an individual to that of a group or a large gathering. One person might want to simply walk through the site. Another might wish to pause and reflect. A small

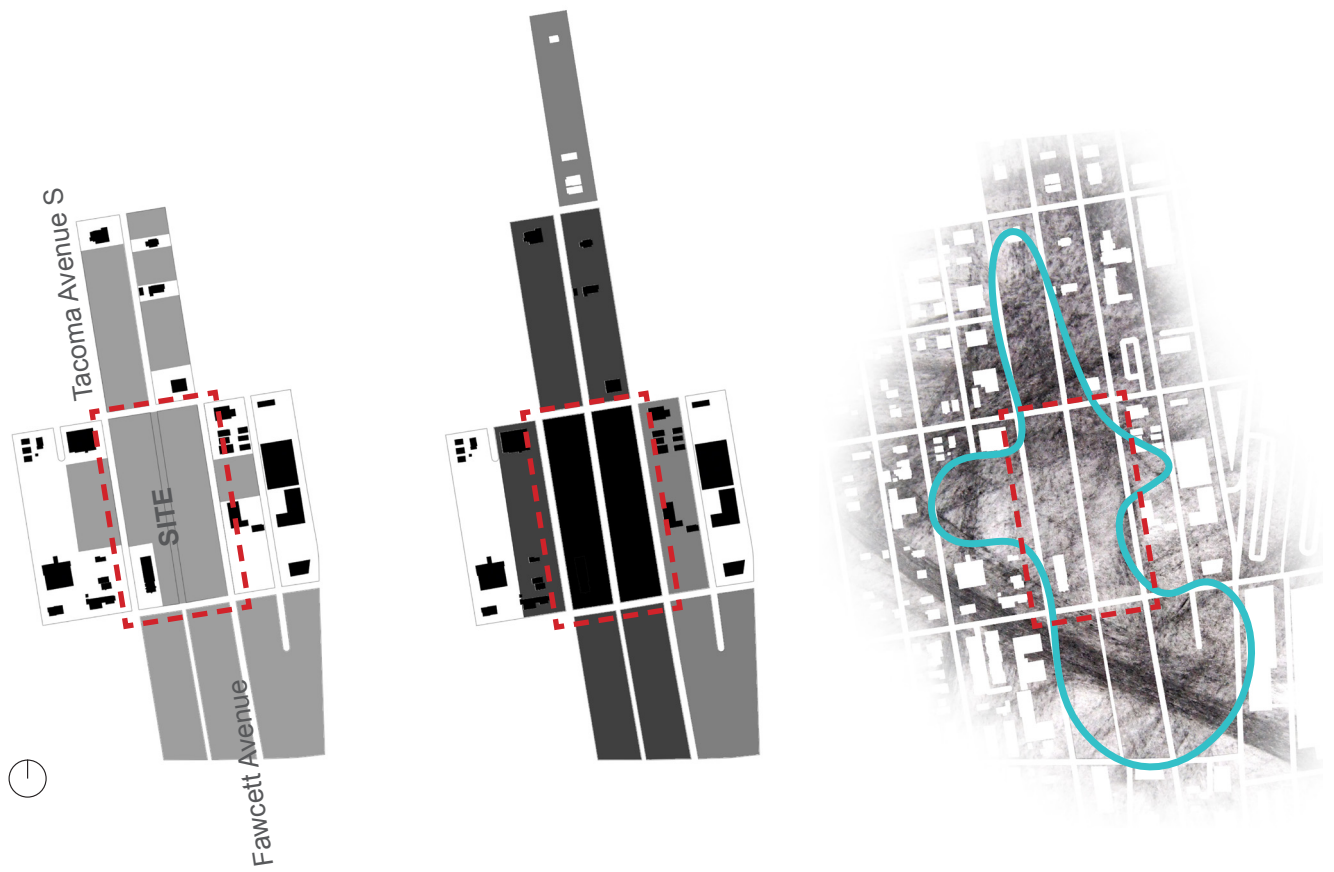


Figure 5.1 epicenter of vacancy
un-developed blocks in the urban grid between UW Tacoma (to the East) and Hilltop (to the West)

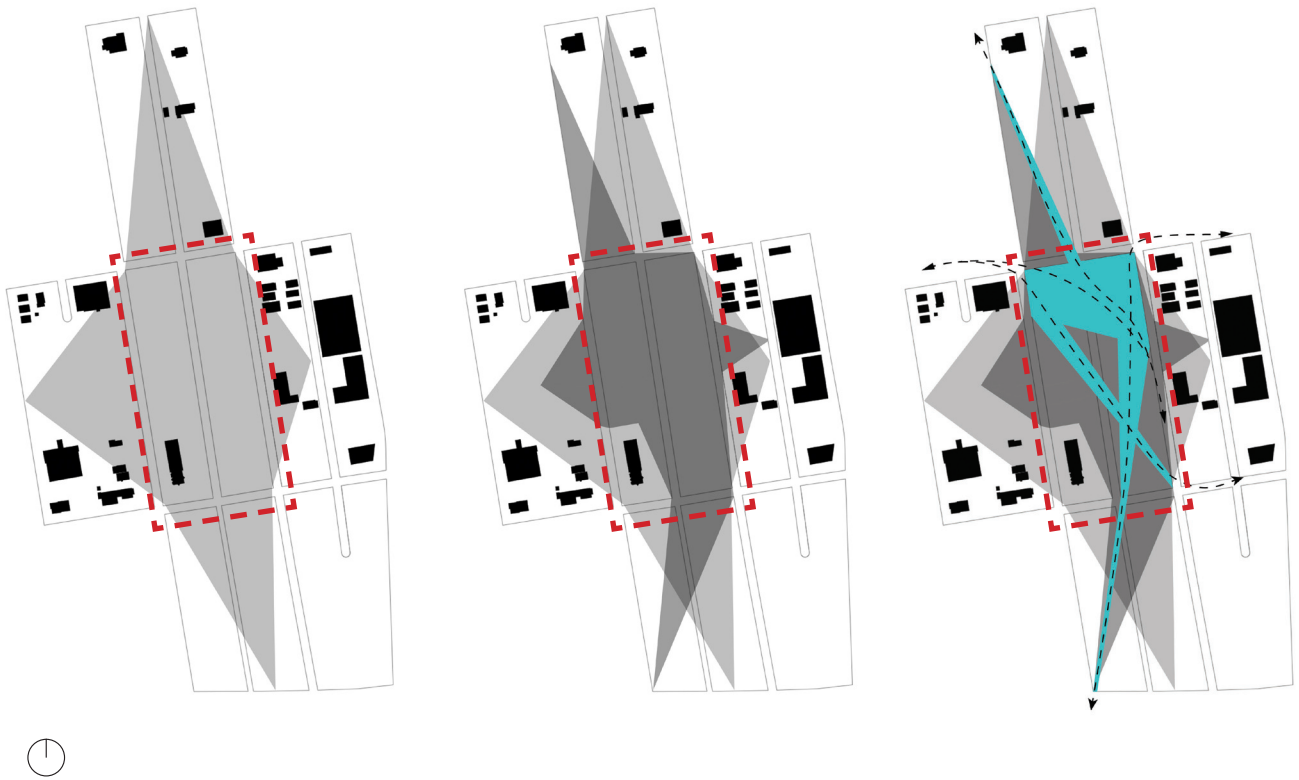


Figure 5.2 identification of site forces and desire paths

group of people might meet there. A neighborhood gathering could take place. A festival might occur. Since any one particular use of the site is impossible to predict with certainty, analyzing what happens there now, in the absence of development, is a strategic and critical first approach.

After careful observation and analysis, several of the site's desire paths were chosen for further study and incorporation into a design framework.

With a network of pathways and circulation potential understood and in place, what then does the resulting space around and in-between such paths become? While a hierarchy of paths may serve as a theoretical border for the space of the overall site, architectural edges through an analysis of massing can more concretely anchor and frame what this space could be. But can a designer give form to the possibility of potential?

Development taking place within the UW Tacoma campus and the Hilltop neighborhood could begin to place

pressure on the site from both sides as the site resides between these two growing centers. Realizing the likelihood of infill projects gradually filling in the voids in the blocks of the study area, new development could permanently change how the site is used and eliminate the multi-use ambiguous potential the site possesses presently. Infill projects in the study area that maximize buildable land area could become typical in the future. For the purpose of the investigative diagram discussed in this thesis infill project such as these are represented conceptually as large masses infilling the empty blocks around the site.

With this in mind, is it possible to conceive of a massing strategy that takes on a re-envisioned focus of maintaining the value of vagueness within redevelopment?

The investigation in this thesis makes an attempt to re-envision this strategy by taking a look at breaking down the notion of what could be considered architecture and what could be considered un-architecture and where a line might lie between the two.

The architecture, with its conceptual footprint guided by the network of chosen desire paths, is ultimately defined by the forces acting upon it from multiple directions. In this case it is the forces of encroaching development from the nearby UW Tacoma campus and the Hilltop neighborhood. To respond to this redevelopment encroachment the architecture along the street edge of the proposed re-envisioned strategy takes the form of the vernacular house, echoing the scale of single family homes present in the vicinity around the study area and further North and South along Tacoma Avenue and Fawcett Avenue. The vernacular house, with its rigidly recognizable and easily comprehended appearance distinguishes itself as unambiguous. The proposal discussed here does

not advocate for placing single family homes on the site. Instead, the recognizable form is used as an articulation strategy to break down the street facing facade of what could otherwise be a more monotonous large block massing form. The decision to mimic the unambiguity of the vernacular house was a deliberate one to respond to the site's current position as a place between time. At one end of the timeline the vernacular home articulation calls to the site's historic past when single family homes were present. At the other end of the timeline the choice to use the geometric form of the vernacular house as a means to break down an otherwise large monotonous massing calls to the site's future as a place where redevelopment could occur but occurs differently than that of redevelopment typical to what encroaches upon it.

Moving inward from the street edge toward the center of the block the recognizable characteristic of the architecture begins to blur into something less characteristically recognizable, forming an edge

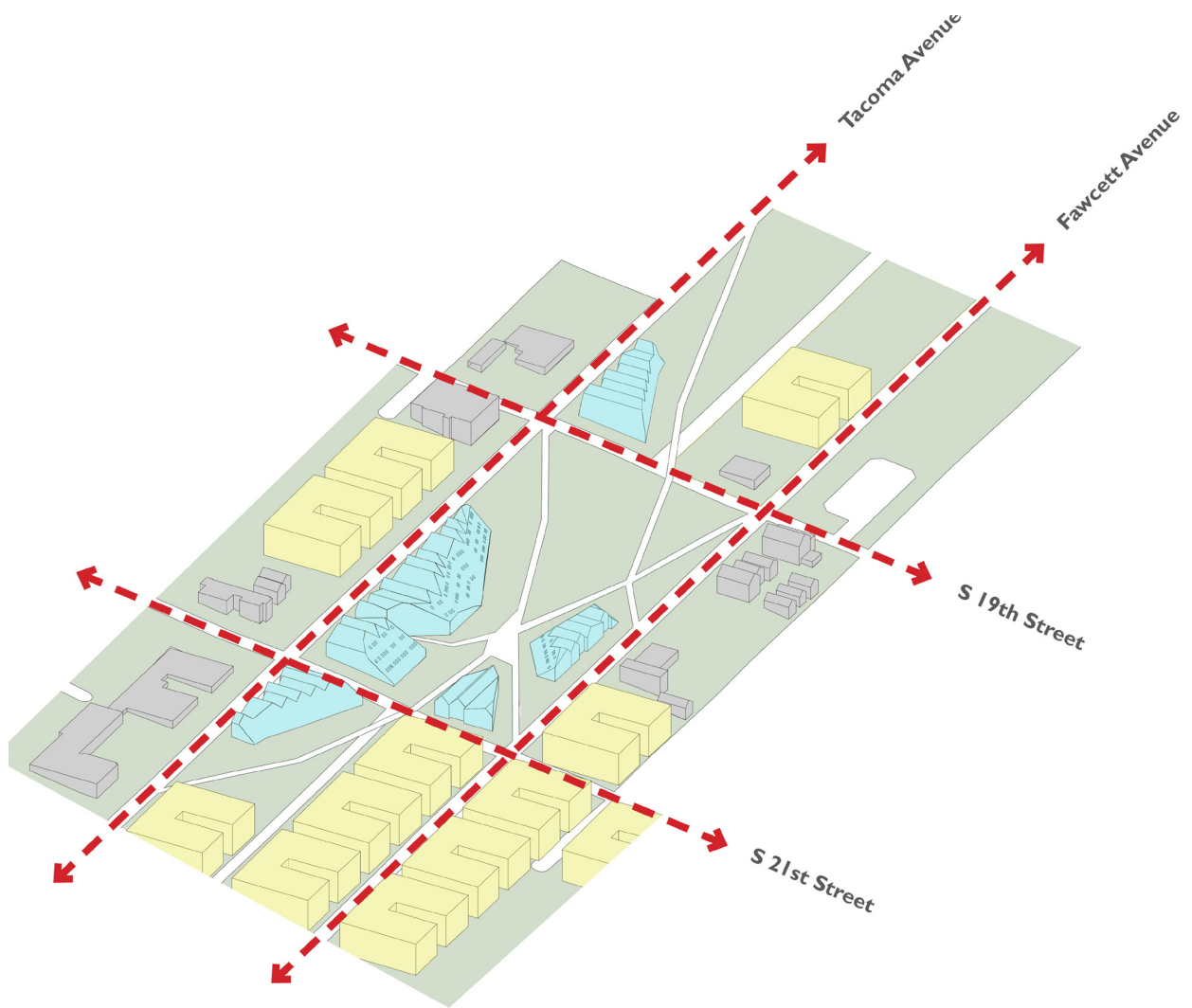


Figure 5.3 yellow massing represents potential typical infill. blue massing re-envision this and responds to desire paths

condition in direct contrast to that of the street facing edge condition. This new blurred edge breaks down the unambiguous geometry of the vernacular home and gradually diminishes it into an edge outlining a theoretically ambiguous un-architecture. Unambiguous street facing facades fronting Tacoma Avenue and Fawcett Avenue degrade and give way to a place of possibility in the space in-between - this space is the un-architecture. It is the resultant force of the collision between imminent redevelopment and a desire for maintained ambiguity. It is the place that can be any place. It is the place that can be for anyone. And it is the place that can persist through time in vagueness and ambiguity.

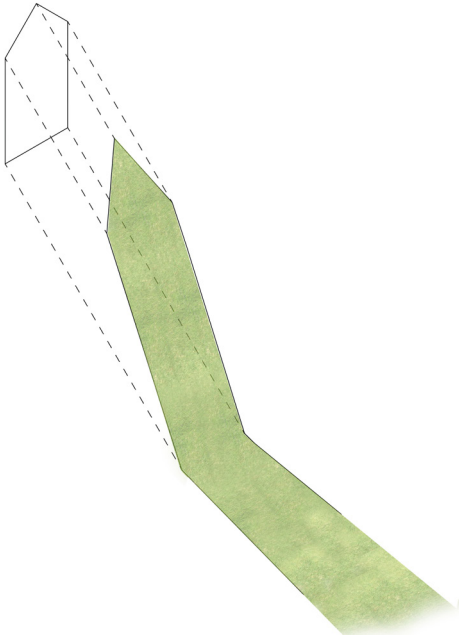


Figure 5.4 the blurring edge

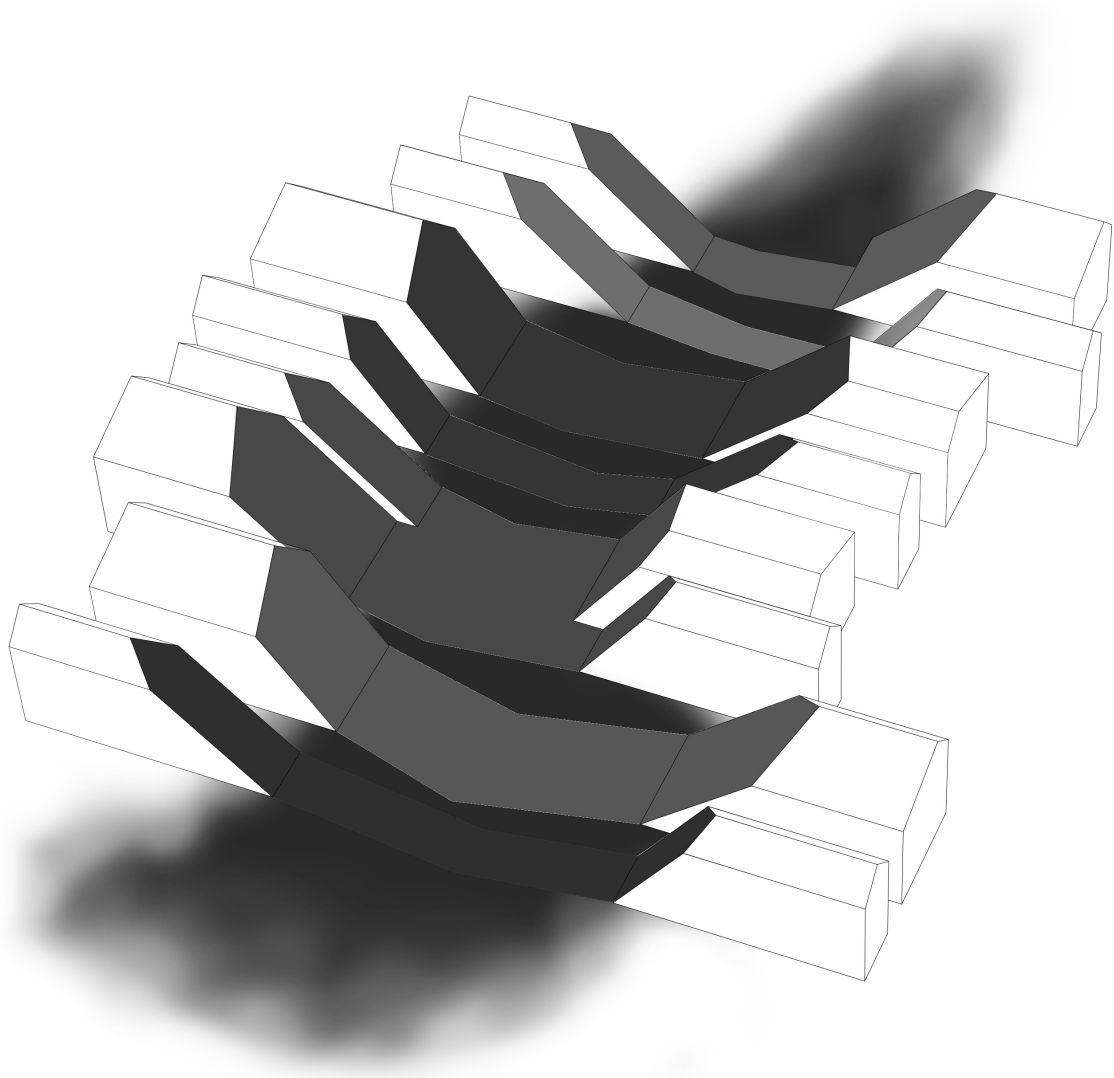


Figure 5.5 undefined interstice

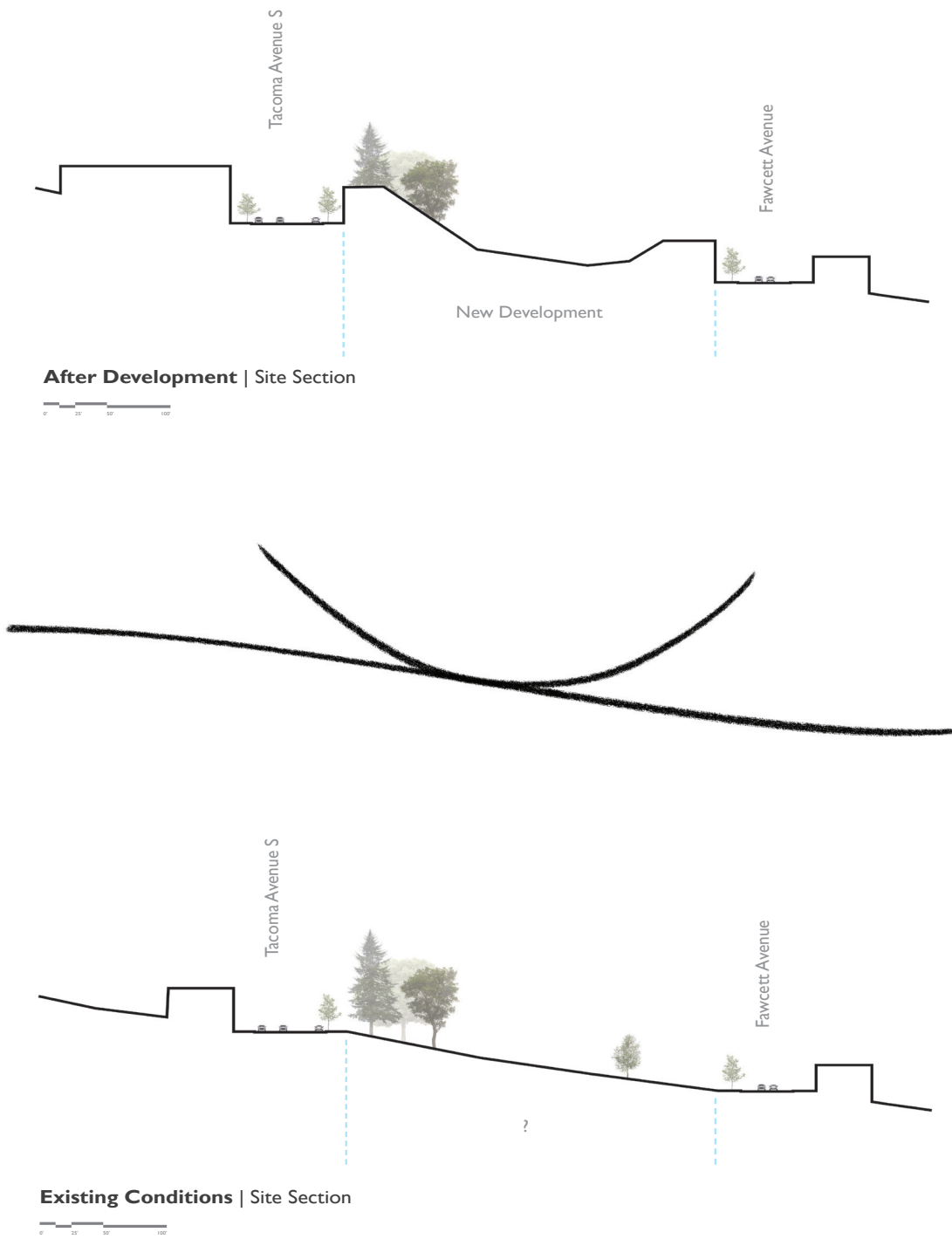


Figure 5.6 section views looking facing North.
 After Development (Above), Conceptual Sketch (Center), Existing Conditions (Bottom)



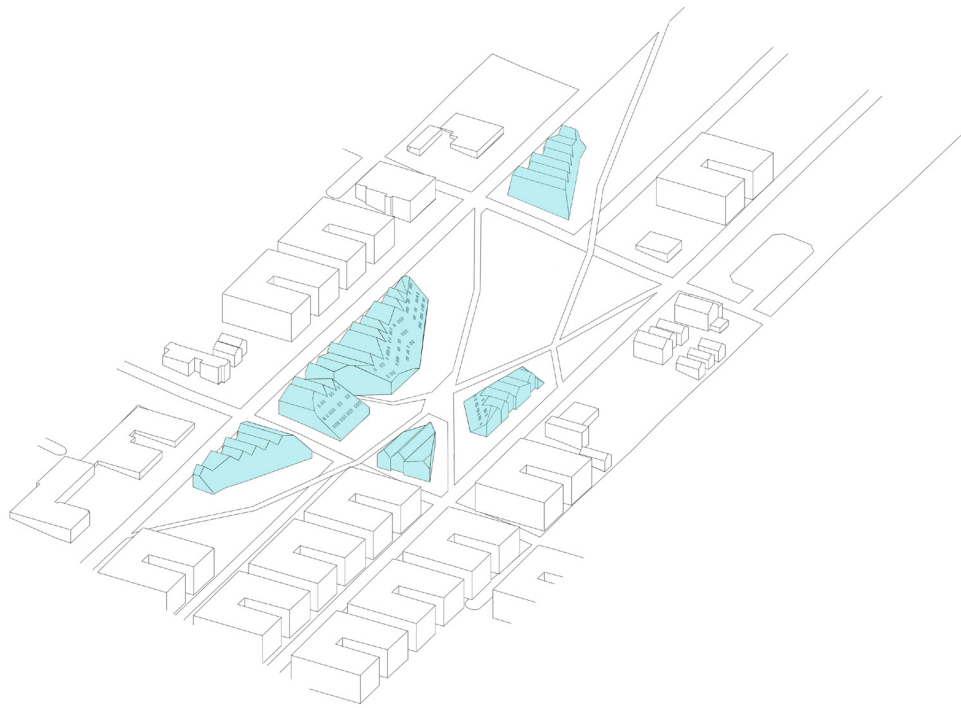
Figure 5.6 view of Un-architectural space

The adjacency of architecture and un-architecture serve to reiterate one another. While the massing of the architecture holds itself unambiguously at the street edge it collapses in on itself from both sides of the block into the center and into the un-architecture.

Standing on the sidewalk at Tacoma Avenue or Fawcett Avenue the buildings have an opportunity to blend into their surrounding context and form a sensitive yet active street wall along with other potential infill blocks. But breaks in the street wall and seamless connections from the corners of the site and at mid-block offer open access to desire paths and to places of possibility. What this space, this un-architecture, becomes as a result of this is entirely dependent upon who is present and why they are there.

6 Conclusion

While not a literal manifestation of what a built architecture in a re-developing urban context could look like aesthetically, this investigation into a re-envisioned strategy for new development on un-utilized urban land can serve as a representation of how a built architecture could function and maintain the possibility of potential. It recognizes the value of emptiness by the duality ambiguous space and unambiguous space can have with one another.



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