The Return of the Excessive: Superfluous Landscapes
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As the cities continue to grow, through the addition of more or less controlled enclaves, they develop into highly differentiated, heterogeneous urban fields of centers and that which lies in between. It seems like a mechanism or an unknown natural law is working against the homogenization and “in-formation” of the city for which the urban planning is working. The in-between spaces beyond the urban centers are made up by the part of the material structure of the city that cannot be defined positively and therefore is in excess. These backsides of the city are used and reappropriated as alternative public spaces, accommodating the rituals and meetings of people. As an alternative to the possibilities of a public appearance, offered by the increasingly staged and controlled primary public spaces of the urban centers, the alternative public exists at the backside of the spaces of the primary public and the way that people use the superfluous landscapes is a way of consuming them. These superfluous landscapes almost call for such consumption, just as they deny any idea of the disappearance of the urban heterogeneity. The article tries to understand and describe this through Bataillian ideas of heterogeneity and formlessness. The superfluous landscapes are seen as something that haunts not only the planners but the city itself, as unseen and undeveloped parts of the urban field that has to be understood as a part of an ongoing process of excretion and reappropriation. In the article, these ideas are related to observations of a concrete example—two hills of surplus soil.

Urban Heterogeneity

The continuous growth and expansion of the urban areas has created greater differences within them. Between the built and the unused—between the localities where investment of money and energy is directed toward and the areas in between. It has become increasingly difficult to decide where the city starts and where the country
ends. Studies of the contemporary city reveal that it differs from the metropolis and its representations by being thin, fragmented, and “un-dense” in almost every way (Koolhaas, 1997; Pope, 1996). Large areas of grass, asphalt, or anonymous “green” spread out between the built that, as a tendency, appears to be limited, clustered together in enclaves. Covered inner-city shopping areas, new city centers with opening hours, gated communities, and business parks are characteristic examples of enclaves, but most of the newly built urban substance seems to form autonomous units. In this process, both the enclaves and the areas taken up by the infrastructure necessary to support them become more and more prominent and visible. It seems that when one part of the city has a strong profile as front, then inevitably a back will appear. Parking lots, roads, high-voltage pylons, and waste disposal areas make up a still greater part of the cities. Between the enclaves and their infrastructure, areas left over from the planning and building of the city emerge. Areas that are not usable, not yet used, or already used and later abandoned. These superfluous landscapes have been left over by planning because they are situated outside what the planning institutions traditionally have been able to include and understand as their field of action.

Contemporary cities can be understood as urban fields, which make up a structural heterogeneity of more or less closed centers and that which lies beyond. Beyond the centers, the part of the material structure of the city that cannot be defined positively and therefore is in excess is found. Every time a new part of the city is constructed, every time a new enclave is added to the urban field, the heaps of surplus soil and building debris left over after construction grows. Simultaneously there is an increase in the size and numbers of the areas not used but still included in the urban field because the new infrastructure isolates them and obstructs the access to them. It seems like a mechanism or unknown natural law is working against the homogenization and “in-formation” of the city as matter that urban planning is working for. The concrete matter of the city will always exceed the ambitions and attempts to control and shape it, and it will always have features that cannot be exposed in the representations that planning has to work with. As the cities continue to grow, the persistent attempts to plan and control their transformations and expansion seem less and less likely to succeed. In fact, maybe it is the attempts to try to plan and homogenize them that result in the opposite: an increasingly formless and heterogeneous urban field, strongly differentiated on ever more levels (Nielsen, 2001).

The Return of Excess Matter

Following the idea of Dutch urbanist Rem Koolhaas (1995, p. 509), who described the contemporary urban planner (but it could have been humanity) as Frankenstein and the city as his monster that returned to haunt him, the superfluous landscapes can be seen as something that haunts not only the planners but the city itself. This idea opens a new way of perceiving the superfluous landscapes. They can be seen as something that has been excluded from the primary, ideal, and wanted world, and then later has returned as a sort of obtrusive matter impossible to reject or plan away.

This idea echoes Henry Charles Puech’s understanding of the “Piranesian space” found in the graphic work by baroque architect G. B. Piranesi:

(Beginning with Piranesi), man is definitively overrun by what he creates and what little by little boundlessly destroys him. The obsessional idea of construction, the ordering of
stones or of machines, these human triumphs! Carried to an extreme, open to an infinite vista of nightmares and of multiplied punishments wrought by the automatic law of the vaults, the pillars, the stairways, a multiplication there is no reason to stop (totality, form existing only on a human scale, man is outstripped by the very need for representation that has unleashed this crushing force). (cited in Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 40)

The inbuilt features of his creations overrun mankind, and the superfluous landscapes can be understood as a result of a perception of a material and aesthetic excess in them. A sudden discovery of the terrifying beauty of places that was not intended to be beautiful or even intended to “be” at all.

Puech’s description of the Piranesian principle was originally a contribution to Documents, a journal edited by Georges Bataille in 1929 through 1930. Bataille worked from the 1920s until his death in 1962 on what he called a heterology, a way of seeing things that was based in the idea that all systems excrete something, that homogenization has its limits, and that the world has to be understood as having both high and low parts. Bataille’s idea of heterogeneity is that it “is what escapes, or what flows in and through homogeneity. The dissipative, antiproducive, ‘other’, element in the heart of production. Both constitutive and representing radical negativity at the same time” (Diken & Albertsen, 1999, p. 11).

If this Bataillean idea of heterogeneity is transferred to the contemporary city, a deeper understanding of what has up until now been considered only as leftovers develops. The city may then be seen as a simultaneous unity and radical differentiation between the positively defined and controlled centers (architecture/the built enclaves) and the negation of these centers in the material excess.

The uncongested material excess of the city is an inevitable result of the closure that occurs when the city to a still greater extent is conceived and developed as autonomous enclaves or bubbles in a bubble diagram (Koolhaas, 1997). The leftovers of the closure return as the conceptual “monster” needed to reopen the discussion. Understood this way, Bataille’s idea of heterogeneity as a part of the homogenization process provides us with a position from which the superfluous landscapes can be thought.

Urban Excess

Georges Bataille’s thinking was antiidealistic and evolved around the idea that the material side of things always will contradict and counteract human aspirations of the ideal. Philosophically, for Bataille, this worked as an alternative to dialectic thought.
His understanding of “the formless” (l’informe) leads him to conceive the world from a general concept of heterogeneity rather than of homogeneity. Following that, a world of (at least) two sides with both high and low features and practices emerged, a heterogeneous world where the consciousness and knowledge about the segregation- and excretion-processes was central.

Bataille’s heterology, thoughts about the formless, and work on describing the indescribable can be used to get closer to an understanding of superfluous landscapes. Thinking with Bataille, the focus on the urban field can be shifted from its high part, the enclaves, to its low part, the excess spaces of wasted material and land.

The superfluous landscapes do not in any way express or represent any ideal of how the city should look. The necessary and the practical result in the unforeseen and so new urban phenomena, like deserted asphalt plains or strange garbage mountains, emerge. When left over not only by planning but also by their primary users (e.g., the construction companies or the car owners), these structures become something else than what they started out to be. The disinterested Piranesian perception reveals them as superfluous landscapes. These landscapes occur when no meaningful or productive use is made of a concrete area, space, or surface. In that way the idea of them as heterogeneous derives not only from a structural perception of them but also from their temporary character and continuous transformations.

The superfluous landscape is not a stable entity; rather, it must be considered as part of an ongoing transformation process on a material level. During the course of time, the unseen and undeveloped parts of the urban field are incorporated into the known, planned, and controlled side of the city. The landscapes are territorialized or, maybe more precisely, reterritorialized. The vacant lots are being developed and built on, the garbage dumps converted into parks, and the abandoned industrial sites recycled. The area that has remained undeveloped because it is isolated by the infrastructure can be superfluous in many years; whereas the parking lot only is a superfluous surface during the hours, it does not serve its purpose as infrastructure for a store or an institution. In such a context, not only the superfluous landscapes but also the urban field as such can be understood as an interconnected series of processes: a process of wasting, reappropriation, and consumption of urban matter and space.

These transformations make up an interesting problem for urban theory. Not only does this reappropriation and reuse mean that new urban prototypes emerge (e.g., the garbage park). Describing and categorizing the superfluous urban matter in this way, as prototypes initially, is a way of appropriating them into the high field, an activity that is facilitating their conceptual disappearance as “other places.” In that way it is possible, on a conceptual level, to think and describe heterogeneity and the superfluous landscapes away, whereas at a concrete material level they would be impossible to get rid of. They would continue to haunt even after their conceptualization because of their size and their structural inevitableness. On a material level, it is the actual use of them and the material processes that change them.

Georges Bataille was from the very beginning of his work on the heterology aware of the conflict or paradox in describing and theorizing heterogeneity, the paradox of putting a form round the formless. In the dictionary that was a part of the journal Documents, one of the first articles published was L’informe by Bataille:

Formless: A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus “formless” is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its
form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what it is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only “formless” amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit. (cited in Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 5)

Showing and naming the superfluous landscapes can be a way of bringing them “down in the world.” To work with these phenomena dismantles fixed concepts like a parking lot, waste deposit, or vacant lot and the urban forms they designate by pointing to the fact that they are something else too. At the same time it is important to insist on the singularity of the different phenomena, to keep the work grounded in concrete situations and materials.

The Flow of the Superfluous Landscapes

In their book *Formless—A Users Guide* (1997), art historians Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss used the heterology of Bataille as a point of departure for describing parts of 20th-century art independently of conventional modernist classifications and art history schools. The alternative art history of Bois and Krauss is based on four concepts derived from Bataille’s heterology: horizontality, base materialism, pulse, and entropy. These four concepts can meaningfully be used for changing the perspective on the urban field, from the front to the back of the constructions, and to further understand and describe the flow or transformation processes of the superfluous landscapes.

As concrete reference I use here two hills of surplus soil from construction in the city of Aarhus in Denmark. (Images of these hills make up the other part of this article.) The depositing of excess material originally changed a locality from being a field to an industrial waste deposit. As these sites have grown into hills and seriously differentiated the otherwise flat local topography, people have started to use them. The hills have become very significant visual features, and they offer a view of the urban field (in a conventional understanding as well as an insight into the sometimes hidden heterogeneous structure of the
field of enclaves, infrastructure, and superfluous landscapes). They are used as terrain for walking, mountain biking, running, horseback riding, sledging, bonfires, and New Year’s Eve celebrations. The city administration has developed one of them (the one not being used as a waste deposit anymore) into an official recreational area, which means a gradual change of the users from “urban explorers” to families. Strangeness moves toward familiarity. Like nature, through a series of territorializations the waste has developed into a part of the known, planned, and controlled city, as a consumption of a material and topographical excess. Understood in line of the four concepts, these prototypes can be described:

*Base materialism* designates the material in an unidealized form. The heterology of Bataille describes such materialism where the raw matter is sacred without being idealized. In this understanding, matter is something that exists for nothing and that cannot be used productively or invested abstractly. Bataille wrote of *Materialism* in the *Documents* dictionary:

> The time has come, when employing the word materialism, to assign to it the meaning of a direct interpretation, excluding all idealism, of raw phenomena, and not of a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis elaborated under the sign of religious ties. (cited in Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 53)

The superfluous hills are urban elements that appear in all places where human activity, consumption, and construction are going on. They normally function as waste deposits of unwanted and unusable material like surplus soil, building debris, household garbage, and industrial waste like slag or cinder. The surplus soil belongs to the excessive part of the city because it is raw, unrefined matter. Matter that has not been formed or “in-formed” creates places not designed but only planned on a very basic level by deciding to put something on a certain locality. In Aarhus the surplus material has resulted in formless mountains that because of their strangeness and distinctive materiality dominates the visual space and attracts the contemporary urbanite passing by. In spite of the fact that initially no one wants them (neither planners nor the urban dwellers), they appear as very significant horizontal markers that planners and the urban dwellers have to relate to. Unintentionally the hills become very attractive because of the sheer quantity of material.

*Horizontality* designates the pre- or nonarchitectonic space, the space where the material in no way has been erected or organized but exclusively is influenced by the force of gravity and the ongoing processes within the material itself. Even if, as in Aarhus, the garbage or waste materials are piled together to create a distinctive iden-
tity as a hill, it is at the same time a flowing out, a horizontal movement that results in a local lifting of the horizon.

The horizontal is also connected to the question of mass. The mass not organized hierarchically is characterized by extension and impossibility of the general view (The Tower of Babel fell down!). The new urban monuments like the superfluous hills but also the oil tanks, container stacks, airports, highways, and all the monumental parking lots do not grow monolithically into the sky—they repeat themselves and extend horizontally. (Horizontality thereby connects to the issue of haunting via the question of reproduction that is central—initially wanted and later feared in Mary Shelley’s [1831/1994] Frankenstein tale.)

Pulse designates the temporal extension and is connected to what has been described as horizontality. The pulse is the seemingly endless repetition of the same. As opposed to the controlled and designed interiors of the urban enclaves in which any event has to be unique and original, time in the superfluous urban landscapes is perceived as extension. Differences in these landscapes are primarily identified through bodily movement as opposed to the events in the staged primary public space that gives primacy to the visual. The experience is structured by repetition, the rhythmic and recurrent encounter with the basic material and structural forms that is caused by the horizontal and scattered character—like the high voltage masts passing the superfluous hills in Aarhus, the repetition of the same tracks and marks from the earth-moving machines, or the reoccurrence of similar piles of soil or waste.

Entropy designates the condition of similarity or dedifferentiation and the inevitable movement toward a still higher level of disorganization that any physical system describes. Because almost no energy, resources, or intention is invested in them (after their construction), the superfluous landscapes of the contemporary city metaphorically move toward a state of the totally undifferentiated. This condition of both chaos and standstill leads to a emptying out and destabi-
lization of meaning—and a situation of radical openness, conceptually as well as concretely perceived. But the dynamics of decay assures that the superfluous landscapes never stay the same, like the surplus soil in Aarhus that even though it is piled in giant formation by bulldozers will move from vertical to horizontal formations after the machines stop. Entropy is what makes us know what was before and what is after; it gives time a direction. In the superfluous landscapes, time is experienced directly as a change in the material structure, which makes them different from the urban enclaves modeled after the theme park and in which the time always is the same and the decay is withheld by large investments of energy.

Excess Space as Public Space

Outside the staged, homogenized enclaves and public spaces of the urban field, on mountains of excess soil, over isolated but not built on leftovers of cultural landscape, on empty parking lots, under highway bridges, or on large grass plains, the unexpected and inevitable results of urban planning—people meet other people. The superfluous landscapes can be understood as alternative public spaces. Public spaces because they are accessible for all, and alternative because the activities that take place there (e.g., skating, alcoholism, skateboarding, rappelling, graffiti painting, bonfires, horsebackriding, prostitution, jogging, creative driving and parking, motocross, camping, tai-chi, skiing, and walking) are different from the ones taking place in the primary public space in the urban enclaves.

The alternative public life is lived at the backside of the spaces of the primary public life. In the designed spaces, the primary public life is framed in a controlled, themed, and scripted event space, with the mall and theme park as the dominant models of new urban developments (Crawford, 1992). Outside of this and the territory of the surveillance cameras, but still inside the overall setting of the consumer society and the general need for identity construction, the alternative public life unfolds. The way that people use the superfluous landscapes is a way of consuming them. This consumption is a part of their transformation process, and the understanding of the way they are used (and not used) is central to the conception of them as excessive.

Where the primary public life describes the activation of the individual through consumption of services and entertainment or through shopping after necessities and lifestyle products, the alternative public of the superfluous landscapes to a large extent is defined by individuals or small or large subcultural groups practicing activities difficult to integrate inside the controlled semipublic spaces. Activities like hanging out outside organized hangouts or urban sports like skateboarding are obvious examples of how an alternative public life can be a consumption of space and material circumstances rather than of commodities and staged events.

Consumption of the Excess Material

Georges Bataille developed a general economy in his book *The Accursed Share* (1991). It is a study of how energy is distributed on Earth and how the life of humans on Earth can be understood in relation to this. Bataille’s basic idea is that the Earth as a system produces more material, more plants, more animals, and more humans than
needed. The Sun as a eternal source of energy causes this continuous growth. But the constant supply of energy combined with the restricted space of the Earth generates a pressure. Nature itself regulates this pressure; organisms eat each other, natural disasters occur, and so forth. But it is, said Bataille, also possible for Man to consciously be a part of this regulation or consumption of the excess material and energy—the spending of the excessive. The problem for Bataille was then that

man’s disregard for the material basis of his life causes him to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. (p. 21)

Bataille observes how humanity has not been conscious of the necessity of the unproductive loss of the excessive, and that when we believe that we can completely control the matter of the Earth and make purposeful use of it, the loss will be in the form of wars and other catastrophes. The rational systems turn back on humanity when they are not aware of the fact that there is no absolute end to constructions and systems, and that the seemingly rational systems and constructions always have a dark side:

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically. (p. 21)

The regulations of a specific economy result in what Bataille considers as tragic catastrophes. If the produced excess was spent or given away, then the possibility of avoiding the destruction of wars, for instance, is present. The completely useless and disinterested spending of the material excess is a necessity but also a possibility (see Figure 6).

The consumption of the superfluous landscapes can, in a much more specific and much less dramatic perspective, be understood in this line of thought as a necessary spending of the waste products of the contemporary city and urban development. When the material excess of the urban development cannot be homogenized or brought to proper use inside the existing urban system by the specific economy of planning, then it must be spent when it
returns as unwanted and unused material resource. It must be consumed as an urban space but with no productive or rational objectives.

The superfluous landscapes almost call for such consumption, just as they deny any idea of the disappearance of the urban heterogeneity. So the idea here is to voluntarily let oneself get overrun by the developments that lead to the massive constructions transforming and extending the city, as well as by the unforeseen spaces and situations that these constructions result in.

References


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