

Crossing views on the field: a commoning experience on an urban wasteland

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Abstract

The study of urban wastelands as specific forms of interstices engages researchers to intersect disciplines, knowledge and positionings on the border between ecological and social dynamics. The Interfriches network - carried by an interdisciplinary collective - was created in 2019 to bring together human, social and environmental scientists and practitioners on the common object of urban wastelands. Involving architects, geographers, urban planners, ecologists, sociologists, politicians, artists, it seeks to reflect on the role of wastelands in the making of the city in different contexts. Based on a workshop on a third place (i.e. a place of social bonding, emancipation and collective initiatives) in the suburban Paris, this paper puts collective methodological questioning into dialogue. What does an interdisciplinary workshop including collective surveys allow to capture about an occupied urban wasteland? We aim to make a reflexive analysis of the frameworks and limits of this commoning experience.

Keywords

Urban wastelands; interdisciplinarity; interstice; commoning; collective fieldwork

Introduction

Urban wastelands and interstices are the product of complex economic, political and social processes that characterize the urban fabric (Silva, 2017; Brighenti, 2016). Such gaps of urban planning are the place for “out of frame” practices as well as opportunities for passer-by to reinstate the place to the urban realm (Tonnelat, 2008). More and more wastelands are used in urban tactics and third-place making for both innovative policy (Andres and Gresillon, 2013; Fabian and Samson, 2018) and market-driven planning (Colomb, 2012). To capture the growing complexity of such dynamics, some scholars also express the necessity for the social sciences to give more attention to the naturalness of urban wastelands (Gandy, 2016; Jorgensen and Tylcote, 2007). On the whole, the literature in urban studies hardly finds a unified vision of urban interstice that would lead to a trans-disciplinary research model (Phelps and Silva, 2018). Formed in 2019, Interfriches is a network which brings

together researchers and practitioners working on wastelands’ role in the urban environment. By using the alternative form of the dialogue, this paper aims to elucidate some of the challenges inherent to a collective and interdisciplinary study of a wasteland that was invested by actors of tactical urbanism¹. In fact, in November 2019, the Interfriches network organized a workshop on a third place called “Vive les Groupes”² managed by an association (Yes We Camp) specialized in temporary occupations of urban interstices. Since 2017, the civic group is investing a former wasteland in Nanterre, in the western suburbs of Paris.

1 - Tactical urbanism can be defined as short-term change in the built environment at a local scale. It implies low-tech and low-investment practices and seeks to develop social capital and civic engagement.

2 - “Long life The Groupes” (translated from French)

The four sequences reconstitute the collective thinking of the Interfriches network. The following scene presents how the organizing committee has to write the synthesis of the workshop after it was held. This dialogue takes place in the meeting room of a research center. Three protagonists get in and set up around a table. Among them are Henri L., geographer and urbanist, Rachel C., ecologist and Ester H., political scientist and urban planner³. The references are mentioned in the replicas and each will be developed in footnotes.

Sequence 1: Starting off the feedbacks about the workshop on “Vive Les Groues”

Ester: Hello everyone! Now that the workshop has been in full swing, I suggest that we take a moment to assess these two days of collective research on “Vive les Groues”.

Rachel: It's none too soon we find time to start working on this report.

Henri: It's true that we have a lot of things to do for this review, and a lot of material to process. I would say that this workshop was a success for the Interfriches network. We brought together researchers and professionals from different disciplinary fields: architecture, planning, ecology, landscape, sociology, urbanism... and they were able to immerse themselves in the reality of this wasteland and its specific context.

Ester: Though, the results are vast and partial so much the reflections were numerous and multiple... It's going to be challenging for us to synthesize.

Rachel: It's a pity that the question of vegetation and ecology was so quickly evicted from the workshop, that we will deal with that later...

Henri: (*nodding*) Mm... beyond the two introductory walks that we carried out in the wasteland's neighborhood, the

3 - The authors have deliberately chosen each character's name in function of their own disciplinary anchors and they forced the line in order to highlight the importance of compartmentalization in the construction of knowledge.

objective was to leave the participants free to discuss and develop the points that seemed to be priorities for them. And despite the ecological orientation of one walking itinerary, the participants oriented the discussion on urban planning issues, which is also understandable given the specificity of the site.

Ester: Also, I wonder if your observation comes from the elaboration prior to the workshop by our collective and the fact that this area is the PhD fieldwork of one of the organizing members⁴. This discussion is precisely the occasion to clarify what we wish to communicate to the participants, to the actors we met and to the public more generally. It is time to get things straight!

Henri: The first thing that needs to be included in this review is the evolution of the subject during the workshop. After all, the subject emerged from discussions among us about temporary occupations in wastelands, and the question of vegetation was central.

Rachel: We should also emphasize all our choices for the workshop organization, as well as the unexpected aspects of our exploration... the weather for instance. The late fall season and the rainy weather influenced our view of the wasteland and its neighborhood. We were not able to capture the natural and aesthetic landscape that can be seen in spring or summer. In the fall, most of the plant species present were only late-blooming ruderal species, which is less pleasant to study and less representative of the whole potential plant diversity. In addition, we encountered feral nature with primary successions of vegetation, which are often less considered as “natural” areas than areas with grassland vegetation⁵.

Ester: Sure... not to mention the fact that we had a very short time frame. Only one day on the field to understand a temporary occupation site and the associated urban and

4 - Cécile Gauthier is leading her PhD on urban “third places” and her fieldwork is focusing on “Vive les Groues” in Nanterre where the Interfriches network workshop was held.

5 - Brun, Di Pietro & Bonthoux, 2018. Residents' perceptions and valuations of urban wastelands are influenced by vegetation structure, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, Volume 29, 393-403

political issues... A lot to grasp in such a short time. And with a larger proportion of architects and urban planners, it is not surprising that participants focused on what interested them most: the insertion... or let's say the integration of temporary occupation projects in an urban environment undergoing major changes.

Sequence 2: Occupying a transforming neighborhood, what for? The critical moment

Henri (starting with an academic tone): The synthesis also allows us to present at least some elements of the diagnosis of the Groues neighborhood. The wastelands' location gives the subject its full meaning, and especially for Les Groues neighborhood's specificities and the project of the Zone d'aménagement concerté (ZAC)⁶ of the same name. After all, we were in a territory with clear tensions between its past of a small working-class industry and its present integration to the economic dynamics of La Défense the business district and the Greater Paris metropolis. I would say that the ZAC will probably subvert the sociology of the neighborhood and we will shift from an industrial zone with less than 300 inhabitants at the border of three very different municipalities to a middle-class neighborhood connected to the subway and the business center. Well... after all, during the workshop, some neighbors told us that there had only been informal occupations during and after the end of the laundry factory's activity. The temporary occupation "Vive les Groues" was initiated in partnership with the city of Nanterre and the "Paris la Défense" developer⁷. They intend to prefigure the new district and thus it offers new urban uses: participatory and self-construction work sites, gardening, cultural and festive events, collective catering, etc. but they wondered whom these were uses created for. For the inhabitants of the Groues district or to attract the

future middle-class residents? That is a big issue in new urban green developments in neoliberal cities⁸ ...

Ester: Indeed, they asked if Vive les Groues as a third-place marked a break with previous practices of the space, but also with the other possible uses in the neighborhood. Few of the passer-by we met knew the existence third-place or said they feel legitimate to go there. As the participants in the workshop said, it would be necessary to question the "off-ground" character of a legal occupation project agreed with institutional actors.

Henri: Right, this is the critical point of the workshop final discussion. This occupied wasteland is finally a sign of a profound change in the social, material and political composition of the neighborhood.

Rachel: And we could carry the same reflection for the vegetation and I would distinct the feral vegetation in the neighborhood from the "aboveground" vegetation brought by Yes We Camp. After all, the site hosts plantations of *Paulownia tomentosa* - a non-local species - planned for the future stations of the "Grand Paris Express" subway⁹. Plus, they are experimenting the cultivation of cereals on a reconstituted soil, and less focusing on the spontaneous naturalness that developed during the time the wasteland was on standby. Though, it is true that our flash inventory of species on the areas that were not occupied by the association Yes We Camp... I mean interstitial cracks between the different zones and activities proposed by the association. These cracks showed a significant floristic diversity! The pioneer and fallow communities that we observed pointed out a direct link with the uses of the place (ruderal on the places of passage, grassland on the abandoned spaces), unlike the "created" naturalness for this third-place.

6 - A ZAC in the French legislation of urban planning is a long-term public operation of development of an urban land led by a public institution (municipality, region...). A ZAC project is based on a preliminary phase of environmental impact study and consultation with the public (inhabitants or users).

7 - Paris La Défense is the public development institution and authority for the Defense Seine Arche area where is located the neighborhood "les Groues".

8 - Holden, M., About C., Doussard, C., Rochard, H., Airas, A., Poiroux, A., 2021. Off-cycle: Comparing model sustainable neighbourhoods in France and Canada, *City*, in press, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2021.1988346

9 - The Grand Paris Express is a metropolitan project of an express subway (200 km) linking the suburbs of Paris. It is part of a broader economic and social development project for the Paris region.



Figure 1. Picture of the “Vive les Goues” project in the Groues neighborhood. Photo: Pierre-Yves Brunaud, 2019.

Ester: You are right. But this is what you found and not what the workshop participants found themselves. Also, the term “off-ground” must also be qualified with respect to the situation and dynamics of the so-called “neighborhood”: we must say that the inhabitants seemed to be absent from the site during our survey. This suggests that this third-place leaves little room for a strong inhabitant appropriation during weekdays. And we must say that Yes We Camp discourse didn’t claim a strong local identity of this place. That is what the participants also highlighted. On the whole, it is like local residents are silently undergoing these everyday transformations, coping with shovels and trucks going back and forth.

Henri (clearing his throat): Ester, I hear your political stand. I would say it is quite striking to see how the professional practices of temporary occupation that were intended to

be specific to this interstice, have become opportunities where the project leaders seem to stick their representations and practices on a neighborhood in order to make themselves the main occupants, leaving little room for inhabitant appropriation of the place, as one participant said (*Henri reads a paper*):

“It is a kind of paradox that we feel with the wasteland’s occupation. We say to ourselves that we are going to make do with what is already there, but in the end, what we observe are the same mechanisms that we see elsewhere. That is to say: earth fill that is added in the ground, sometimes excavations that are made... In any case, we are really in a system of transfer from the outside that comes and goes but we are not in a process that starts from the place and tries to build with it.”



Figure 2. Picture of the fragmented neighborhood. Photo: Pierre-Yves Brunaud, 2019.

Henri: At the same time, these are professionals who settle in the place, who participate in creating dynamics for a new neighborhood by opening cafés, by offering places for active participation, if only for some inhabitants... just like Paul, one of them who participated to our workshop, “out of curiosity” as he said.

Ester (taking in her turn an academic tone): You know, this is the core of this notion of “aboveground” as developed by the participants. There is both a parachuting of these professionals and an attempt to connect with the social environment of the neighborhood in the project. At the same time, Yes We Camp lacks material and financial support from local public actors, and they need time to establish themselves in the district. Can we really say that this type of occupation participates in the involuntary eviction of inhabitants and users, as if it were part of a gentrification process?

Rachel: It’s really difficult to assert that this is gentrification, at the moment. If we ask the question of a shift with existing uses, remember what Paul told us: he had the feeling that there was nothing in the neighborhood and that it was “a bit of a dump here”, like a permanent construction site. In the end, some residents found in this wasteland’s occupation a place to live in. We cannot generalize. I am thinking of other projects such as R-Urban which has generated new commons around education, manufacturing, collective gardening, nearby, in Colombes¹⁰.

Ester: There are obvious tensions around this temporary occupation that is a sort of catalyst for a future ZAC which is still undefined, and a dynamic that goes beyond this

¹⁰ - Petrescu, D., Petcou, C., Baibarac, C., 2016. Co-producing commons-based resilience: lessons from R-Urban, *Building Research & Information*, 44:7, 717-736, DOI: 10.1080/09613218.2016.1214891

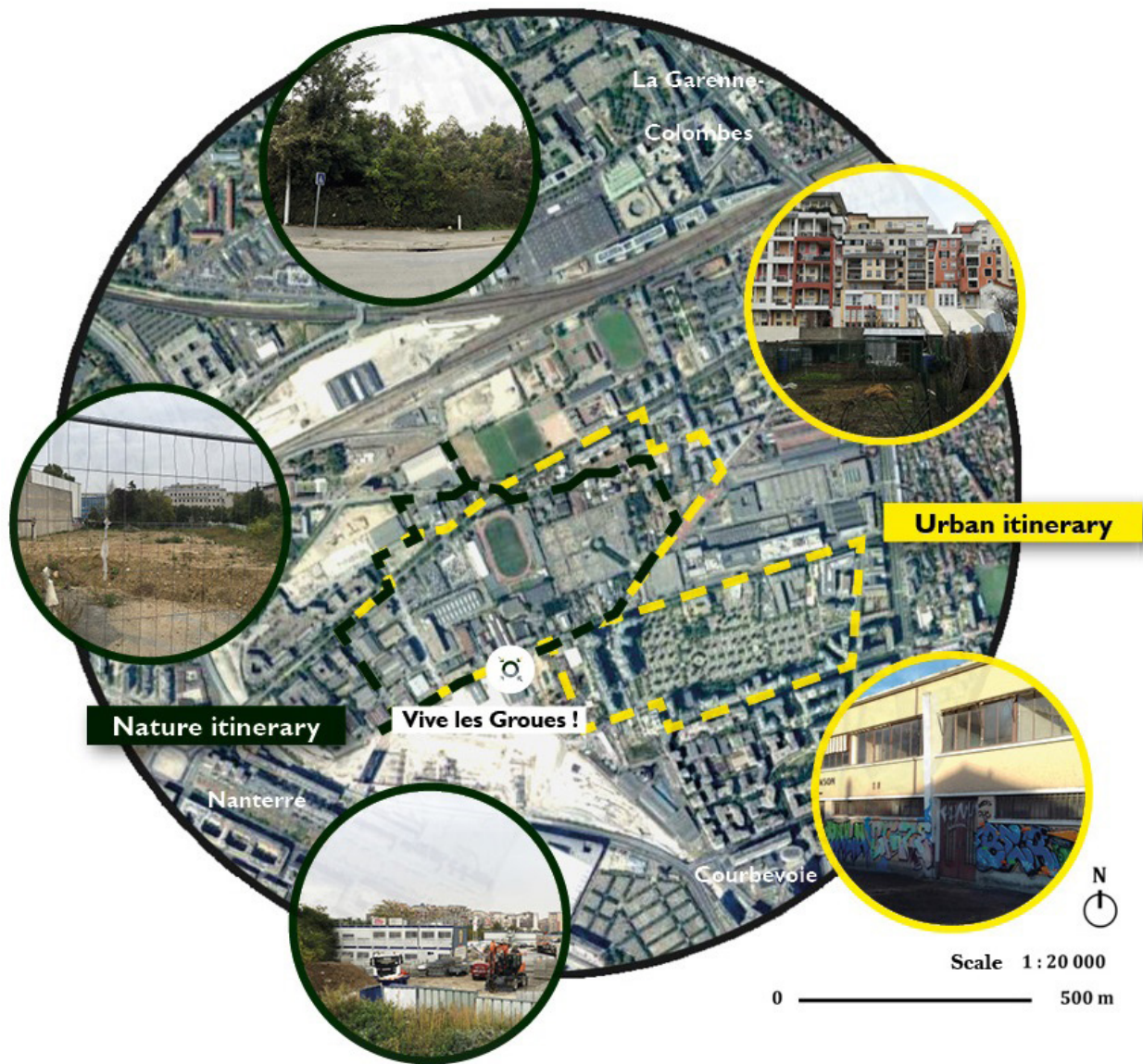


Figure 3. Courses of the two walking itinerary made by the participants during the workshop in the Groues neighborhood. Interfriches network, 2020

framework. All these dimensions are very discrete and they emerged by capillarity during the workshop.

Rachel: So, would we need a driving force such as more residents for the neighborhood anchoring to be more effective also in the workshop?

Ester: Maybe...

Rachel: And what about our own anchor in this place? This was also the way we restituted the survey: I'm thinking about a participant who made a video to show the presence of different palisades around the wastelands and abandoned lots as forms of partitions of the neighborhood. This worked like a narration. They named it as "the forms of fragmentation and sedimentation of the urban landscape"; the images were a proof of that. There is thus a strong link between aesthetics - or let's say our common sensitive ex-



Figure 4. Picture of the collective experience on the bridge. Photo: Pierre-Yves Brunaud, 2019

periences - and the construction of our common knowledge of and on the place. This is what a great thinker like Dewey would say, I guess¹¹.

Sequence 3: The collective inquiry, hybridizing fieldwork practices

Henri: The workshop would have been completely different in another context. It is also important to emphasize that the time of the morning walks, was intended to present this very particular context to the participants. It would be good to recall the two itineraries that we did (*Henri shows the following diagram*), one more focused on the neighborhood's history and the changing urbanism and the other looked at the vegetation and the overgrowth of the neighborhood's plots.

Rachel: Yes, absolutely. That said, I also see other factors explaining the orientation of our results: the lack of variety of the participants' profiles - a majority of architects-urban planners, plus the thematic split of our walking itineraries (figure 3) - even if our path overlap - or the non-definition of a common and transversal problematic that we could have been submitted to the participants of the workshop.

Ester: The collective survey was an immersive practice that allowed us to be confronted with the same realities, without smoothing our perceptions or interpretations. Where the urban planner sees a ZAC and questions the wastelands through the uses, their actors and their insertion in the urban fabric, the ecologist identifies the plants and tries to understand the reasons of their distribution and the landscape architect looks at the gardening and development practices of the wasteland.

11 - Dewey, J., 1934. *Art as Experience*, New York: Minton, Balch & Company

Henri: Yeah, this workshop is above all a collective experience. By writing the report of our workshop, we will look for the highlights and synergies, the perceptions that caught the attention of most participants during the discussions. We were forced to join our disparate experiences and our modes of attention to what questions the occupied wasteland: its plants, its buildings, the discourses of its project leaders... All these signs to which we must confront our interpretations.

Ester: I'd say fortunately, there was a photographer to accompany this collective work. The pictures were a driving force in the development of our collective view: they are both a product of the workshop and a support for deepening our thoughts. It is finally a staging of the collective and of the production of several researchers. In fact, it was like these visual productions, photos, drawings and montages had participated in the construction of the collective thought.

Rachel: Of course, the results of the collective survey do not claim to be representative. Moreover, if we managed to forge a common culture of the field, it is mainly thanks to the research work carried out before the workshop by us, the organizers. A one-day territorial immersion was not sufficient for any sociologist or anthropologist who intend to analyze a place... For that, it might have been necessary to consider several field sessions. Though if we return to the objectives that we had set ourselves at the beginning of this workshop, we wanted to work on an interdisciplinary methodology for the study of urban wastelands. However, unlike other workshops of the "Interfriches" network, this one started with fieldwork. Thus, the inductive approach has led the participants to focus on the *wasteland place* and the micro-local issues of the field rather than the *wasteland object* and its more theoretical questions.

Ester: I follow you on this last point, we were once again in an "interstitial" position, halfway between a posture of facilitator, speaker, expert but also, sometimes, part of the participants of our workshop. Then, this hybrid participative conduct of a collective investigation around the wasteland takes all its sense...

Henri: If I follow your reasoning, this position of in-between is found as well through our collective object of study, in the materiality of our field of investigation as well as in our postures of interdisciplinary collective!

Sequence 4: Experimenting commoning through the disciplinary interstice

Ester: Some scholars acknowledge that difficulties to practice interdisciplinarity are highly linked to the study of urban environments. Indeed, urban environments still tend to divide work and knowledge between natural, social sciences and the technical sphere¹² whereas those fields are and should be strongly complementary. In retrospect, it is really difficult to remember the role played by each specific participant, his or her point of view, or the weight of his or her disciplinary perspective in the elaboration of the collective survey. The representations of some participants took precedence over others, because of their greater disciplinary representativeness, their academic status or even their charisma which gave them a position of "knowing person". For the participants, the objective was then to agree and express visions from different backgrounds, and certain presuppositions about the neighborhood in question.

Rachel: Ok Ester, but there were several moments of confrontation that forced us to compromise. It must be said, however, that the reading of the wasteland through the prism of the game of actors alike this idea of "aboveground" has prevailed over the rest. The analysis of the flora gradually faded away, the political game between the actors overshadowed the present nature of this district.

Henri: That's right, and I recognize the ecologist speaking. We had the tools to bring the two topics together, in my opinion, through a localized political ecology or territorial socio-ecological approach.

Rachel: I agree! Some disciplines and approaches have been left out...

¹² - Petts, J., Owens, S., Bulkeley, H., 2008. Crossing boundaries: Interdisciplinarity in the context of urban environments, *Geoforum*, Volume 39, Issue 2, 593-601

Ester: We can also see it in another way: we more or less adopted an inductive approach in the end. We let the field “speak” and it is the socio-political issues that came out more strongly. This is not insignificant, since it is a field composed of a complex system of actors with diverse and varied interests. A collective of surveyors is just the same.

Henri (adjusting his glasses): Finally, if we come back to this key word of interstice... This idea of “standing between”¹³ describes well a position but says a few about the ecological materiality of the places we have crossed. The third-place “Vive les Groues” is a developed and partially maintained wasteland in an interstice situation between different municipal territories, between a small abandoned office building, a suburban street marked by its worker past, garages, warehouses, buildings of the tertiary sector and now even a shisha bar...

Rachel: In another perspective, by making the interstice the support of a collective experience, we were also in a position of disciplinary interstice, that is to say in a contact zone, even a *friction* zone between our research backgrounds; which is what Bruno Latour understands by “hybridization”¹⁴ as a very concrete collective practice of research aiming to put in relation and integrate knowledge in a scientific production.

Ester: Yes, this workshop and the collective survey allowed us to develop a shared knowledge of the places and showed us the challenges to take up in order to form our scientific community. That seems to be a great path of conclusion.

Conclusion

The workshop on the third-place “Vive les Groues” has put the emphasis on the hybrid practices that an urban wasteland offers for public-private developers, professionalized civic actors and a multidisciplinary group of researchers. The elements of discussion that ran through the entirety of the exchanges between participants show the enrichment and the challenges of a shared research work that blurs disciplinary boundaries. This fictional dialogue intended to reconstitute the diverse and sometimes diverging perspectives raised by a collective fieldwork experience on a common ground. The staging of the dialogue also reflects the role of oral communication between members of a group in the thought process and, finally, the constitution of a scientific community around a shared object of study. Similar findings on collective intelligence insist on compositional, interactional and definitional convergence between group members as well as the necessity of tensions for bridging knowledge in grounded-theory (Woolley and Fuchs, 2011).

Through an experimental and itinerant approach, the commoning experience have encouraged the crossing of opinions of researchers from various disciplines and backgrounds, practitioners and professionals. However, when it comes to the consistency of the results obtained, some limitations must be considered. One explanation lies in the professional and disciplinary profiles of the participants of the workshop. If a diversity of profiles was obtained, the important proportion of urban planners and architects among the participants necessarily oriented the reflections of the collective. From this point of view, the objective of crossing ecological sciences with social and political sciences was not achieved. Wastelands as social-ecological systems can be characterized by their “in-betweenness” allowing creative social and research experiments.

13 - Brighenti, A.M. (Ed.), 2013. *Urban Interstices: The Aesthetics and the Politics of the In-between* (1st ed.), Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315548807>

14 - Blok, A., & Jensen, T.E., 2011. *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, Routledge, London, 208 p.

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Conflict of Interests and ethics

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