

From Drosscape to Sponge-scape

Abandoned industrial sites are often considered urban nuisances because they are physically unkempt, socially desolate, and economically bleak. They are typically comprised of decaying, blighted buildings overgrown with vegetation. This can make them feel unwelcoming and even unsafe, and can consequently discourage social re-activation. These wastelands, or drosscapes, represent the end of economic production and the termination of industry, which creates considerable barriers to economic re-investment.

Drosscapes can unconsciously form liminal borders between neighborhoods because they interrupt social, economic, and cultural flows, thereby causing hiatuses in the urban landscape. Jane Jacobs refers to such borders as vacuums because they are “zones of low value and dead ends of use” that are barriers to all forms of production. These border vacuums are one of the more formidable breeds of drosscape because their liminality and denial of surrounding flows debilitate their potential for physical activation and social engagement.

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This research seeks to re-conceptualize drosscape borders as urban sponges and to explore how their ephemeral, multifarious activation can be beneficial to the functioning of cities.

First, current approaches to wasteland reprogramming will be assessed in terms of their physical and social implications. Next, drosscape borders will be explored through a Deleuzian lens to develop a mode of understanding and articulation that connects drosscape to this notion of the urban sponge. The paper will culminate by using New Orleans, Louisiana and Lagos, Nigeria to explore how a net of diverse, informal activities can transform drosscape into urban sponges that significantly contribute to the greater urban landscape and culture without socially and economically damaging investment opportunities and built infrastructure.

WHY LUXURY CONDOS AND LANDSCAPE PARKS DON'T ALWAYS WORK

The poor physical condition of liminal Drosscape borders creates challenges for the programming and redevelopment of these sites. These wastelands



carry the baggage of their past both physically and psychologically through visible ruins such as empty warehouses, overgrown train tracks, and other remnants of industrial production. Broken windows, fractured paving, low lighting levels, and damaged utility lines can require significant investment to repair. While these sites can be beautiful in their decay, there is no doubt that these physical qualities are barriers to social activation, productivity, and economic investment. If left abandoned, these sites have a high probability of becoming urban epicenters for blight and crime.

Although the physical condition of these borders can be difficult to remediate, it is in fact their liminality that creates the greatest challenge for their reactivation. Because these sites are in-between, they often lack visual identification with their surroundings, creating a strong psychological awareness of an environmental shift. Most of these areas are low intensity sites; they lack the social and cultural energy of denser urban communities. When social intensity is low but physical density is high, the border can become a barrier because of visual, social, and psychological blockages that can be difficult to overcome. Additionally, when the time comes for remediation, the liminal state begs several questions that are not easily answerable. Who should use the site when there are several social groups with varying cultures, values, and needs adjacent to it? What should the site look like when it is surrounded by several communities, each with their own unique architectural elements? How dense should the site be when the surrounding areas vary in density? How should the site be accessed when some of the neighboring communities have access to vehicles and others do not? Abandoned drosscape borders are often rich with history and allegory but can resemble a tabula rasa because their location 'inbetween' limits their physical and social codification, often causing negotiations and tensions among constituents, stakeholders, and residents.

The liminality of drosscape also brings up the question of ownership. Who will take ownership of site remediation? What stakeholders are involved in the process? Does this process foster pride and ownership or exacerbate social tensions? Each of these questions affect which communities will participate in the remediation process, who will invest—economically, mentally, and emotionally—and ultimately who will cultivate ownership of the site. Disparities in average income levels in the surrounding neighborhoods confound sense of ownership because ownership is often measured by financial investment. The voices of the more affluent community members are often the loudest because of their economic leverage. Liminal drosscape remediation can offer an opportunity to sever the correlation between ownership and economics by equally engaging the surrounding communities.

Any program or use of a liminal border that excludes one of its adjacent social groups reinforces social hierarchy, privatizes the property, and consequently invalidates its liminality. The very essence of liminality is a state of in-betweenness, so if a use favors one group of people over another, there is no longer equilibrium. Borders can be converted into seams by creating frequent invitations for crossing along their edges. The problem with luxury condominiums is that their socioeconomic exclusivity invites only a select

few into the border. There are three subsequent consequences: the border becomes a reflection of status and power, the border reinforces socioeconomic gaps in the urban landscape, and the border becomes a horizontal line of division. When the border is not equally attractive to communities around the full extent of its perimeter, the community who uses it most frequently and intensely will ultimately own it. The site may then become permanently integrated into that community, displacing its liminality.

Any remediation of drosscape that is permanent and inflexible limits the openness afforded by liminality. Drosscape provides infinite variation to the rhythm of the city because its identity is autonomous from its surrounding neighborhoods. These sites are urban chameleons—they can be a moment of stillness between bustling neighborhoods or an active hub for sociocultural production in the city. While landscape parks certainly afford more flexibility and spontaneity than luxury condos, they are still limited by the fact that they can require significant infrastructure to realize. The High Line in New York City is a very successful public space transformed from the former elevated New York Central Railroad, however it took ten years to develop and the construction costs exceeded \$1.5 million. While the park may have flexible and diverse programming, it took a considerable amount of time and money to activate this dead space. Additionally, attracting investors to remediate this space is a significant challenge and only likely given the right circumstances. Is it possible to activate drosscapes immediately with little or no permanent remediation? How can drosscape be socially, culturally, and economically productive without being abandoned to lucrative parking lots?

DROSSCAPE, DELEUZE + SPONGES

In order to create a framework for using drosscape borders as transitional, flexible spaces, they first must be freed of their fixity. The following section explores how Deleuzian theory can redefine the border as an urban sponge and create new modes for its articulation and activation.

A liminal border can be freed of its fixity by re-conceptualizing it through Deleuze's concept of the "body without organs" (BwO). Like the BwO, the Drosscape liminal zone is ultimately a relationship of complex parts. These components accumulate from surrounding areas and have varying degrees of influence on the border. Some are tangible, physical parts, while others are social, economic, and cultural flows. The irregular speed, direction, rhythm, and course of these flows are exacerbated at the border where they are forced to cohabit, overlap, and intercept each other. The active accumulation of these flows at the border creates a complex, multidimensional system that is in a constant state of flux.

If drosscape is experienced as a "body without organs," each of the surrounding neighborhoods can be understood as an "organic body." The organic body is composed of parts that stand in definite relation to each other while the BwO is opposed to the organization of the organs, or parts. The neighborhood chooses structure and confinement while drosscapes favor free-flowing transformation. The drosscape undergoes an infinite





01

Figure 1: The porous and flexible nature of sponges combined with their ability to both absorb and release water offers a conceptual framework for how to approach urban Drosscape.

process of negotiating the flows that transcend it, which enables its openness and receptivity. Neighborhoods, on the other hand, do not require the same negotiation because they have permanent programs and institutions, such as schools, commercial spaces, and civic buildings.

As a body without organs, drosscape has the potential to offer openings and spaces in the urban landscape that are respites from the more rigidly organized neighborhoods. In this light, a liminal border can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional field of experience where bodies, or neighborhoods, overlap and intermingle as opposed to a one-dimensional plane separating two bodies. This field must be universally penetrable so that it is equally accessible to all of the surrounding bodies. It must also be elastic so that it is able to change and adapt. In this framework, drosscape is essentially a soft, connective tissue among neighborhoods that can infinitely expand and contract in tandem with the forces and flows of the urban milieu.

HOW DROSSCAPE ARE LIKE SPONGES

While the idea of neighborhoods as “bodies” can be likened to Kevin Lynch’s five-element structural approach to urbanism, the drosscape as a “body without organs” assumes a sponge-like condition within cities. Sponges are lightweight, porous skeletons that are constantly morphing, expanding, and contracting. Similarly, drosscape borders are yielding, penetrable, and receptive to all of the surrounding communities and their residents. The urban sponge offers new possibilities for physical, social, and cultural experience because it is essentially a fluid and transformative amalgamation of flows from the surrounding communities. The same way that a sponge is able to both absorb and release water, the drosscape sponge absorbs and releases flows. The urban sponge does not exclude adjacent social groups nor does it reinforce social hierarchy. Instead, it maintains social and cultural equilibrium by maintaining an attitude of openness to its surroundings. This not only creates an endless array of experiences and possibilities within this site, but it also encourages and facilitates the mutual exchange of ideas, culture, and economy between neighborhoods.

For urban sponges to effectively absorb and release flows, they must be spatially “smooth.” Smooth space offers a respite from the organization of the Deleuzian body by creating an open field in which urbanites can permanently create and re-create their milieu. According to Deleuze and Guattari, smooth space is characterized by qualitative, subjective experiences guided by those who occupy it. The openness of smooth space allows the urbanite to be creative, innovative, and assertive. Consequently, smooth space fosters a deep connection and engagement between urbanites and their environments.

The Situationist movement of the 1960s is a precursor to the notion of urban sponge because it promoted replacing structured urbanism with the concept of the *dérive*, a process through which the urbanite might wander in search of meaningful experiences. Like the BwO, the Situationist concept of urbanism dismisses organization. For example, in “New Babylon,” Constant Nieuwenhuys creates an urban labyrinth consisting of volumes

and planes that extend around the world facilitating disorientation. In Archigram's "Instant City," the city arrives via airship when needed for a social event and then quickly packs up and vanishes at the event's conclusion. In Superstudio's "Supersurface," the world is a smooth space in which the urban nomad is free to continuously re-create his environment. Each of these projects illustrates how smooth space can offer expanded opportunities for meaningful, subjective experiences that exceed those possible within structured environments.

FROM DROSSCAPE TO SPONGE-SPACE

For liminal drosscape borders to be activated as urban sponges, these sites must engage the Situationist principles of social improvisation and ephemerality. It is important to acknowledge how many "desolate" sites in our cities are already teeming with activity. This activity validates these otherwise empty areas, creating a type of ephemeral urbanscape. New Orleans, Louisiana and Lagos, Nigeria are two uniquely different cities that are each meaningful examples of what these activities look like and how the "net" of these activities—though invisible to our current obsession with built infrastructure—can truly transform our cities.

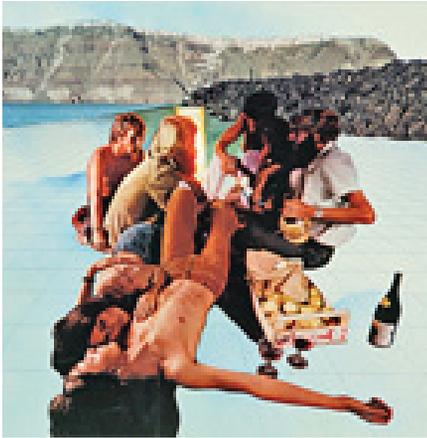
The street culture of New Orleans is so richly engaging because much of it stems from the informal improvisation that happens within the city's more rigid urban structure. For example, in addition to being a vehicular thoroughfare, the street is a bustling venue for cultural performance, commerce, spectating, and social exchange. From the Mardi Gras parades and second lines to the brass bands, human statues, and acrobatic performers, streets throughout the city abound with activities that appeal to visitors and residents alike. In residential areas, streets and sidewalks are places for crawfish boils and block parties. People linger on porches and in front of corner stores to be more connected to the street. The street is also an informal marketplace. Jackson Square, located in the heart of the French Quarter, is a park and plaza that has become an informal market where artists sell their work by showcasing it on the Square's fence enclosure. Meanwhile, fortunetellers set up tables with candles and incense for tarot card readings. Similarly, vendors set up tables along the sidewalks of Canal Street to sell trinkets, perfumes, and other knickknacks. While the streets of New Orleans are organized according to a larger urban planning framework, the informal social and cultural activities happening within them are the spontaneous creations of the urban residents themselves. These activities require little or no infrastructure—only tables brought by artisans or props brought by performers—and have a considerable impact on the overall quality of life in the city.

In addition to its exhilarating street life, New Orleans is also a city where activity happens at urban drosscape borders and edges. The annual Mirliton Festival attracts hundreds of people to the post-industrial urban edge of the Bywater neighborhood. The venue is set on a gravel lot pockmarked with unkempt grasses and weeds. It requires minimal equipment, the essentials including trucks, tents, generators, tables and chairs—all of which are brought specifically for the event. Similarly, the annual Fringe Festival,



03

Figure 2: In Constant Nieuwenhuys' illustration of New Babylon, he captures the qualitative essence of smooth space.



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Figure 3: Superstudio's "Supersurface" illustrates how smooth space enables the urban nomad to be creative, innovative, and assertive. Smooth space is essential for transforming liminal Drosscape borders into urban sponges that act as connective tissues in the urban milieu.

Figure 4: Constant Nieuwenhuys' depiction of Amsterdam demonstrates the superimposition of urban structure and urban sponge.

which showcases live theater and dance performances across several neighborhoods, locates its headquarters along the corridor at Press Street. The openness and flexibility of this space enables event coordinators to arrange ticket booths, information tables, food, seating, and games for children, and it allows a large amount of space for parking. Because the site is highly visible and receives a fair amount of through traffic, it helps attract more people to the venue. Additionally, because Press Street is an urban border, the main Fringe tent is thereby centrally located between the two neighborhoods where the majority of the shows take place. On an average day, the desolate buildings, lots, and large gravel piles along this industrial corridor are jungle gyms for children, backdrops for photographers, a space for dog walkers, and sometimes a location for film preparation and production. The loading docks at these buildings are often used for group gatherings or even as rehearsal spaces for marching bands. The brass instruments and drums can be heard throughout the neighborhood and are iconic symbols of the approaching Carnival season. Food trucks are also starting to congregate at large, abandoned commercial lots and neighborhood edges. These types of activities are perhaps most visible in areas that have a large degree of openness and receptivity that encourages residents to engage in and own the place-making process. While it is easy to write off these Drosscape sites as urban wastelands, upon closer investigation, these areas often act as flexible urban sponges that contribute to the city's unique culture and charm.

Although Lagos, Nigeria is a radically different city than New Orleans, it too demonstrates the importance of sponge-like spaces in all types of urban environments. Its highly improvisational, creative culture exists in a context without strict urban planning or even clear city boundaries. On the surface, Lagos appears to be a very weak and dilapidated city. The living conditions for many are abhorrent. Only a small fraction of homes connects to sewers, causing sewage to overflow into the streets, neighborhoods are prone to severe flooding during the rainy season, a blanket of smog envelops the entire city, and mega traffic jams intensify the city's already overcrowded population. A large proportion of the residents are infected with malaria and many claim that Lagos is the most dangerous city in the world. Nevertheless, Lagos is renowned for its diverse inhabitants whose combined ingenuity and resourcefulness has made a productive living environment out of a city that is otherwise considered a slum. There is a sense of place, ownership, and belonging, which keeps people hopeful for the future.

Lagos is a city rich with Sponge-scapes. These areas exist where cement block factories, mechanic shops, and beauty salons organically sprout and infill drosscapes beneath highway overpasses; where the spaces inside highway cloverleaves fill with parked cars or are used by laborers for rolling, repairing, and storing barrels; and where markets arise alongside bottleneaking traffic jams. Lagos is said to have a "spirit of improvisation and enterprise" because of places like the Alaba Market, which began as a makeshift roadside marketplace and now has more than 50,000 merchants with an annual income of \$2 billion. Over time, the market's "free-for-all" plan has begun to self-organize into three sectors—lighting, electrical materials,

and appliances—and it has even sparked new building typologies for trade and storage. The market, as well as these other activities, demonstrate the creativity, drive, and self-sufficiency found in residents' self-help efforts as they find a way to embrace an environment whose infrastructure is severely lacking. These activities also illustrate the natural inclination of people to make productive use of drosscape when it is presented to them.

CONCLUSION

New Orleans and Lagos offer many lessons for drosscape remediation and urban transformation. The irony lies in the fact that the real transformation is not achieved through multi-million dollar investments, extensive infrastructure, or exclusive programming. The transformation is achieved in allowing drosscapes to exist as urban sponges in the city. As we see in both New Orleans and Lagos, much cultural activity occurs in these sponge-like urban areas because it is these sites that allow for creativity, flexibility, and impermanence. By sustaining drosscape instead of using new construction to erase it, an open, malleable space is provided that then gives residents the opportunity to be place-makers, regardless of social background, income level, and race. As they create and re-create their environment through various social events, cultural activities, and entrepreneurial endeavors, they in turn develop more meaningful connections to their immediate milieu, the larger city, and each other.

The lessons from New Orleans and Lagos ultimately lead us to the formation of a new type of urbanism that simultaneously values permanent physical form and the social spontaneity and ingenuity that drosscapes afford. This type of urbanism exists *within* the structured urbanism that Lynch has already established for us. Cities need organization, but cities also need sponges to provide smooth space in which deep, meaningful subjective experiences can be cultivated. These experiences can instill an invaluable sense of ownership and empowerment among residents. It is the superimposition of the two notions—structure and sponges—that creates harmony and balance in the urban landscape and opens the city up to spontaneity, improvisation, and discovery that otherwise would not exist. ♦

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