

Vacancy: Design Strategies for the Birmingham, Alabama

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Cultural progression from the industrial age to the information age and from urban living to suburban living has left vacant landscapes within our urban centers. These voids and interstitial vacancies, often disconnected from the fabric of the city, represent a laboratory for exploring contemporary issues of urbanism. Architecture theorist, Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, in the essay "Terrain Vague" suggests that these sites represent "where the city is no longer" and that their representation offers a counterpoint to the typical urban experience.¹

These conditions and other post-industrial sites within the urban environments of North America are providing inspiration for designers. Whether it is the ruins of industrial facilities or abandoned land, architects, planners and political leaders have viewed these spaces as opportunities for re-envisioning the city. Birmingham, Alabama is no exception, large tracts of former industrial land, known as the Railroad Reservation, is currently the focus of a new vision for the city with a great central park. However, the extensive collection of vacant land within downtown represents a complexity that challenges conventional architectural and urban design practice. For 130 years the city has struggled with its urban form, identity and its place in the agrarian landscape of the south. The urban landscape of downtown Birmingham is a strange combination of urban episodes within a gridded framework of vacant buildings, parking lots, and abandoned land. These voids and vacancies within the urban landscape are clear reminders of the city's turbulent past and reflect the industrial development and morphology of the city. This paper will explore

the development of the city and its morphology into an indeterminate urban form and how urban design vision is balanced against the realism of its terrain vague and social context.

A strategic location at the foothills of the Appalachians, this linear landscape of ridges and valleys provided the ideal grounds for the founding of the industrial city. These long ridges were rich in the natural resources of coal, iron ore and limestone, the key ingredients of the steel making process and supposedly, the only such place on earth where all three raw materials are located within a 30-mile radius. These foundations began over 500 million years ago as volcanic sediment deposits on a shallow inland sea. The geological collision of the American and African continents "heaved up deposits that had accumulated in the inland seabed, causing them to fold and buckle in spasms of mountain building".²



Fig. 1. Birmingham's Railroad Reservation

In the mid 1800's this undulating landscape of raw materials became attractive to

southern agribusiness leaders lead by railroad engineer John Milner. Milner had surveyed the area for its rich mineral resources prior to the civil war and had convinced his group that "mining and manufacturing were entirely consistent with the interest of large landholders and slave owners and that the use of slave labor in industrial installations constituted the South's best weapon in competing with northern interests".³ The civil war and the 13th amendment demoralized this position; however this attitude became the basic foundation of Birmingham's beginning. In 1871, at the point at which two rail lines converge (the southern line: east/west and the L & N line: north/south) in the valley of red mountain would mark the point that Milner would layout his vision of the southern industrial city.⁴ The simple grid of the city was established from the orientation of the tracks and would accommodate rapid growth. So rapid, in fact, that Birmingham became known as the "magic city". This rapid growth by the iron industries was particularly brutal and in many ways a continuation of the southern agrarian past: with "the systematic subjugation of its black citizens".⁵ Southern industrialist created these conditions with the support of corrupt labor unions, political leaders and the Ku Klux Klan. The Civil Rights Movement was initiated in the blast furnaces, foundries and mines and ultimately reached its climax in the streets of Birmingham.

While the Civil Rights era will forever be a significant mark on the downtown palimpsest, its urban decomposition began decades earlier with the buyout of Birmingham's Steel industry by U.S. Steel. With the approval of President Roosevelt, U.S. Steel purchased a majority of Birmingham's (TCl) steel stock holdings. Instead of becoming the largest steel-making center, this acquisition regulated steel pricing such that Birmingham could not compete with its northern counterparts.⁶

In the mid 1930's several publications referenced downtown Birmingham with its vacant lots as "The City of Perpetual Promise" and as "not so much areas of despair as shares in promise".⁷ Seventy-five years later this state of purgatory could be written in much the same way. In the book *Non-Places*, author Marc Augé, in discussing the role of history and its relationship to experience, states "history is on our heels, following us like our

shadows, like death".⁸ Perhaps this is true of Birmingham. In much the same way the violent geologic collisions unfolded the potential of this city, over 100 years of questionable politics, industrial competition, racial conflicts and a steady decline in population have left an uncanny urban expression. This indeterminable urbanism is characterized not by architectural form and spatial composition, but by vacant land and large quantities of paved parking surfaces.



Fig. 2. Figure Ground of Downtown Birmingham

Solá-Morales uses the term *terrain vague* to describe these vacant spatial conditions of the city and the representation of the city through photography. He explores the ability of photography to influence perception about architecture and the city. The photographic image of these spaces is the "vehicle for information that makes us aware of the built and human reality that is the modern metropolis".⁹ These images offer a counterpoint to the typical urban experience and expose the existence of the often-overlooked vacancies. "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, of expectation.”¹⁰ The “otherness” of this condition allows for new ways to think, see and speculate on its transformation.¹¹ For Birmingham, the vacant spaces are not exceptions to the urban condition, but are so excessive as to constitute entire blocks and zones. The grid of the city claims these spaces as part of its large urban territory revealing the downtown as an ambiguous spatial experience. The experience is commonplace to the 80,000 people that commute in to downtown everyday. With fewer than 1,000 choosing to make downtown home, Birmingham has become much like an office park with activity only from morning to early evening, and only during the work week.



Fig. 3. Surface Map: Parking Lots, Open Space

There are three characteristics to this city at the urban scale that contribute to this prevalent state of vacancy. First, the grid, a smart and effective layout for the railroad and iron foundries located within the city is typically 300 feet by 400 feet. This is an industrial scaled grid, one that makes the city difficult to walk, and also makes it difficult to develop viable housing. Typologically speaking, there is either too much space between buildings when they are lined up along the periphery, or the buildings sit too far back to hold the street edge. It is not the residential grid (200') of Manhattan, nor the pedestrian grid of Portland, Oregon.

Successful housing in the downtown is typically converted warehouses, the typical loft housing for young professionals and urban retirees. The lack of housing perpetuates the vacancy problem by discouraging the development of other programmatic amenities; particularly educational facilities. A sentiment echoed by many Birmingham residents is that one decides they either want to have children, or live downtown, suggesting the two lifestyles are exclusive.

The second characteristic encouraging vacancy is that the downtown is separated from the suburbs by a clear boundary. On three sides it is surrounded by raised interstate. To the south, Red Mountain is steep enough that it is only passable in two locations. These conditions make for a ruthless and distinct boundary for the city. To the east and west, this infrastructural boundary is wide, capable of being driven but certainly not conducive to pedestrian travel. Suburbs and neighborhoods, like Elyton and Avondale, are isolated and separated from downtown by these elements. To the north, the raised interstate becomes a canopy for parking fields, and is only permeable at the axis connecting Linn Park to the Convention Center. Whereas some urban models have quilted zones of residential and commercial activity, like Boston or Atlanta, or stacked zones of activity, like Manhattan; Birmingham is separate and distinct. One passes through a threshold when entering the city.

The third characteristic is the division of the downtown into north and south across the railroad reservation. This wide swath of green, almost 800 feet in some areas, discourages pedestrian movement and requires passing through tunnels under the existing railroad. It is a second threshold condition in the city. The state of vacancy in the downtown starts at the edges, along the interstate, and moves through the city along the railroad.

Within this urban structure there are five distinguishable urban patterns in the Greater Business District. These conditions have emerged at different times, and represent different ideas about the potential shape of the city. Three are isolated in the Northern

half of downtown, and the other two are isolated in the Southern half of downtown. Three of these conditions represent models of urbanism that were never fully embraced by the rest of the city. The other two models are internally successful and viable; however they challenge some of the basic principles of urban design and are programmatically determinate. They are the Civic Center (central business district), the 20th Street spine, the Civil Rights district, the Hospital district and Five Points. The Hospital district and Five Points are connected through an association with the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB).

The Civic Center is located around Linn Park, a traditional green city square with a fountain in the middle, and public art pieces announcing its proximity to the city hall, the public library, the courthouse, museum, and city jail. Here the image of civic life is available and, during the week, convincing. 20th Street acts as an armature of the city connecting the Civic Center with the University of Alabama in Birmingham. The intersection of first avenue north and 20th street offers the second prevalent urban condition. Referred to as the "heaviest corner on earth", this intersection has four 15 story buildings on relatively small footprints. Infill commercial buildings move in all four directions from this intersection for several blocks. The heights of the buildings reflect the city's aspirations and speedy development at the turn of the century. It is unclear if they were designed to mark the importance of this intersection, the economic heart of the city, or if they were intended to set the height of future development. The Civil Rights District, the third distinct condition, is marked by object buildings within green spaces and adjacent to parking lots. Both the Civil Rights museum and the Sixteenth Street Baptist church create an edge around Kelly Ingram Park. However many buildings that served as the backdrop to the marches and protests in the 1960s have disappeared. This part of the city is most similar to the suburbs in terms of its character and density.

The last two conditions are made viable by an association with the University of Alabama in Birmingham. Five Points is a circular space popular with UAB students and the center of nightlife in the downtown area. As the name implies, a series of streets radiate from this intersection. Because it is located at the base

of Red Mountain, the break from the grid is made possible by the change in topography. Student housing is located nearby, and this area is alive with pedestrians and occupied long into the evening. Finally the last urban condition is the hospital district (UAB), which consists of buildings that cover entire urban blocks. Walkways connect these buildings above the streets in an extensive interior network. This hospital system is internationally recognized for research and medical advancement, and is the only section of the city that can be categorized as a twenty four hour district. Currently UAB is re-envisioning its campus, not with the mega-building strategy, but by closing streets and creating a pastoral green campus as its new growth strategy. Between these prevalent urban conditions is everything else; the car dealerships, the open parking fields, the vacant industrial warehouses and vacant land.



Fig. 4. The Center of Birmingham

This interstitial urban condition presents a fundamental shift in the design approach to Birmingham. Typical formal models of urban design typologies that utilize infill mixed-use development can't address the larger fundamental problem of vacancy. In 2004, the City of Birmingham commissioned a master plan for the city from Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The proposals all rely upon a very optimistic economic vision of the city, 3,000 new residential occupants every year, an influx of business and commerce, as well as exponential growth of UAB and the hospital district from the southern half of the city. The reality of limited commercial and

residential demand and its long-term unpredictability might suggest a flexible strategy and approach to this condition. In his essay *Terra Fluxus* James Corner suggest that “formal determinism of modern and new urbanism planning fail because of their presumption that spatial order can control history and process”. His point is that “future urbanism must derive less from an understanding of form and more from an understanding of process – how things work in space and time”.¹² This idea of “performance”, explored by Corner represents the city “as a flexible system of growth and change which can easily merge back into the landscape, appearing as a performance by actors on common ground only when needed, a temporary, dissipative efflorescence”.¹³



Fig. 5. Birmingham's Railroad Reservation

At the center of this city is the railroad reservation. Originally, set aside for industrial zones along the railroad, the reservation today is primarily abandoned. The homeless population of Birmingham utilizes this space with tents pitched in the heart of downtown, shipping containers as housing, and a cultural and social exchange occurring that is not always complicit with our ideas about a civil society. The railroad reservation is currently a grassroots effort to convert the roughly 75 acres into an urban park that could act as a catalyst for urban revitalization. This space represents an opportunity to initiate immediate action that addresses the longer-term realities of Birmingham based on ideas of performance and deterritorialization. One could argue that Birmingham suffers from too much urban territory, or at least too many isolated ideas about urban form. In his essay “Landscaping”,

Corner reflects on the reversal of traditional architectural approaches toward urbanization and building to those of un-building, removal and erasure. He specifically is discussing the de-populated urban areas of Detroit. These blighted areas would be closed down, voided and left to nature and should be empty of representation and program. The spaces are “not simply the left-over results of desertion but rather of construction: they are intentionally *set up* and staged as open grounds for wholly indeterminate futures”. “Thus, rather than ‘fixing’ the city through architecture, or ‘architecturalizing’ the city in order to discipline its spaces, both perspectives of power, the work of deterritorialization simply establishes the condition for the processes of urbanization to perform and unfold in more dynamic ways.” Corner argues that the “scraped” ground then becomes an empty field of absence that accommodates multiple interpretations and possibilities.¹⁴ For Corner these spaces are “prepared grounds,” flexible and open, allowing the “ad hoc emergence” of “performative social patterns and group alliances that eventually colonize these surfaces in provisional yet deeply significant ways”.¹⁵

While this strategy will initiate immediate action on the landscape of downtown Birmingham, it questions the urbanism of a new Birmingham. The idea of the terrain vague allows us to see the city of Birmingham as a series of sites that are “where the city is no longer”. The idea is not to propose that the city be allowed to reestablish its presence, but to suggest that the city cannot reestablish its original presence. It is not capable of reestablishing an urban form that it never really acquired. The ideas presented by Corner allow us to understand that the processes of un-building, removal and erasure can set the stage for future uses, activities and interpretations. Should parts of the city be forcibly abandoned, allowed to re-grow and become thick with local plants and trees? Should the hydrology of the greater city create zones of water within the downtown where nothing is allowed to be built? What we are left with is the question of what constitutes the “not-city”. This is what Birmingham is slowly becoming. Do we fight the emergence of this “not-city” condition or do we encourage and accelerate this condition? Inevitably the

image of the city as proposed by municipal leaders and master planners is associated with development and the accumulation of capital. To suggest that a city should ignore its ability to generate economic opportunities is not sensible. However, it would be reasonable to argue that there may be a vision for Birmingham that accepts vacancy as a potential design strategy, as opposed to the inevitable representation of urban failure.

Endnotes

¹ Sola-Morales, Ignasi de, "Terrain Vague", in Anyplace, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 120.

² Lewis, W. David, 1994. *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District, an Industrial Epic*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 8.

³ Lewis, 33.

⁴ Lewis, 33.

⁵ McWhorter, Diane, 2001. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 33.

⁶ Lewis, 292.

⁷ Mcworther, 33-49.

⁸ Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso Books, 27.

⁹ Solá-Morales, 118.

¹⁰ Solá-Morales, 120.

¹¹ Daskalakis, Georgia and Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, ed. 2001. *Stalking Detroit*. Barcelona: ACTAR.

¹² Corner, James, "Landscraping", in *Stalking Detroit*, edited by Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2001), 122-125.

¹³ Shane, David Grahame, *Recombinant Urbanism: Conceptual Modeling in Architecture, Urban Design and City Theory*. West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 296.

¹⁴ Corner, James, "Landscraping", 122-125.

¹⁵ Shane, David Grahame, "The Emergence of Landscape Urbanism" in *Harvard Design Magazine*, #19. (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design) 2-8.