

# The Transformation of a noWhere into nowHere: A story about Köpi Wasteland

Belen Zevallos & Cidalia Silva

SRH University Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany | University of Minho, Guimarães,  
Portugal

## *Abstract:*

*This paper reflects on the power of language in the destruction of places that seemingly aim to be renewed. It discloses a concrete story of a research made through a dialogical (Morin [1999] 2008; Bakhtin [1930s] 2001) practice, gathered by two women who are passionate about landscape, making visible social disruptions and in-place-time stories.*

*While trying to discover the impact of the Berlin Wall on the city today, a place was found inside the inner city ring of Berlin: Köpi wasteland, an old military area which used to be a part of the in-between space of the Berlin wall. Through the field work and lived experience of this place, the wasteland label was questioned, becoming clear that not only the name “wasteland” failed to define the specific features and potential of this urban space, but also that this label could have negative consequences on the process of renewal by neglecting what was already happening there.*

*For architects, urban planners and landscape designers, it is important to understand the places where we work and to be accurate in naming them. Naming is understanding, naming is meaning. This inaccuracy of naming places and the problems of limiting the vocabulary used to describe a place reveal the paradox that wastelands confront in their everyday existence. Regarding urban renewal, urban resilience or in general urban discourse the main issue with wastelands is not the lack of program as some may argue, but the lack of knowledge about these spaces, as Secchi (2007) points out. We asked what are these places and what is really happening there?*

*The experience within this place revealed the potential of neglected urban areas (Clement, 1984 & 2003) when inhabitants fully immerse themselves in appropriating them, by making the most with whatever they find there, transforming a space into a place of belonging.*

*This lived time (Till, 2009) gives these landscapes an entirely new value reframing the label: from the now (referring to the temporal influence) and the here (referring to the specificities of the place). Consequently a noWhere becomes a nowHere. Furthermore, we reflect about the relevance of understanding a project-place before the conventional developing phase, and how to bring these nowHere qualities to design process. Thus, the present paper claims the need to be really careful with the labels we use to classify the urban spaces. Words frame the way we perceive and understand places, and consequently change the way we will transform them for better or for worse.*

*Keywords: public spaces; wasteland; field work; urban renewal; urban resilience; urban policies*

## Introduction

The transformation of a noWhere into a nowHere is the result of a research project that questions the labels we use to name places and the way they affect our perception and the design projects we develop for them. Based on a lived time methodology that decodes Köpi wasteland as case of study, the paper is structured as follows: 1) the context of Berlin's wasteland created by the wall is given in the "background"; 2) in "From Wasteland to noWhere" the key-terms are defined; 3) "Köpi wasteland: Is it really a noWhere?" questions the place's label through focusing on its actual features and the role of the appropriation of a place; 4) "Lived time experience" explains the applied methodology; and finally in 5) "From noWhere to nowHere" the potential of this place-method is highlighted.

## Background

For more than 28 years, a wall divided Berlin. The wall transformed from a line in between ideologies to real concrete slabs defining a limited space. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and its subsequent demolition, Germans tried for many years to suppress and forget the division and separation that the structure symbolized. However, there is a paradox about the presence of the Berlin Wall, as it seems to be more present after it was taken down: its "the former death strip remains undeveloped to this day and can be most easily be recognised because of the urban void it left behind."<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is important to realize that the "wall" was not an object but a space, the wall had a space-in-between, the so-called wasteland.

Although the greatest part of the border fortifications, known as the "Berlin Wall" and erected by the GDR<sup>2</sup> all around West Berlin from 13<sup>th</sup> August 1961 onwards, was dismantled in 1990 and 1991,<sup>3</sup> there are still numerous remnants and traces of the Berlin Wall. Segments of the wall and its watch towers are listed and protected as post-WWII heritage site. Moreover, the footprint of the Berlin Wall is extremely diverse, with different roles and shapes, materializing a process of transformation in which the wall became a monument. This transformation has materialized around the city in several fragments of the exposed wall. The wall became a memorial, and this is represented through numerous reminders that can be found on the street paving. The wall became art. For example, parts of the wall have been transformed into the East Side Gallery, where artists have painted murals on the wall remnants. The wall became a forest/green area, where both planted and wild greenery grew in the space in-between. The wall became new constructions; some buildings filled the strip where the wall once was. The wall became a wasteland, and this specific transformation is the focus of this research.

One of the main references for this research was the work of Sandra Pauquet,<sup>4</sup> who studies a site named "Ost Strand" (East Beach). Pauquet sets out clearly the "already happened" in an abandoned military wasteland. Deciphering the hidden meanings of the place, she reveals the geographical super-imposed layers. These layers, although linked together, are distinct elements, defined by Pauquet as: Biotope, Sociotope, Tempotope and Architope. She claims that there is a

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<sup>1</sup> Stiftung Berliner Mauer, *Memorial landscape Berlin wall*, Focus Points, accessed 24 July 2018, < <http://berlin-wall-map.com/> >

<sup>2</sup> The German Democratic Republic (GDR; in German: Deutsche Demokratische or DDR), informally known in English as East Germany, was a state within the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War period. From 1949 to 1990, it governed a region of Germany, which was occupied by Soviet forces at the end of the Second World War—the Soviet Occupation Zone of the Potsdam Agreement, bordering on the east by the Oder-Neisse line. The Soviet zone surrounded West Berlin, but did not include it; as a result, West Berlin remained outside the control of the GDR.

<sup>3</sup> The documentation of the border and landscape of memory from remnants of the wall strip was compiled between 2001 and 2003 by the Department of Conservation of the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus, commissioned by the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development and the State Conservation Agency of Berlin.

<sup>4</sup> S. Pauquet, *Towards a new public space*, "A+T — in common III", collective spaces, 27, 19, 2006 pp.10-29

new form of public space, open to spontaneous change and non-exclusive appropriation, stating that traditional public spaces are no longer capable of keeping up with the current pace of urban evolution. It is within this context of the Berlin Wall's wastelands that this research is integrated and it is from this interrogation that the possibility for a new perception of the potential of these spaces is opened up.

### **From Wasteland to noWhere**

In the article, "Reds Create Wasteland along Berlin Wall", in the Daily American newspaper, 1963,<sup>5</sup> the author explains the reason and impact of the construction of the so-called wasteland. This article highlights that the wasteland was created with the construction of the wall; "A military area was created at the border, a wasteland across which East and West Berliners could not even wave at each other." This was a strong barrier that not only separated families but also had a strong influence on both the memories and the dynamics of the city. Moving to the present date, it is a fact that "[p]erhaps no other European capital has such an unattractive wasteland at its heart, but it has become too accepted by Berliners to be removed."<sup>6</sup> Looking at the news article from 1963 and this more contemporary reference, we became interested in the Berlin Wall's wasteland and the meaning or potential of it. We became interested in the question of how it could be possible that - even though after all these years have passed - some of these areas retain the same "wasteland" label. We wanted to question whether these places have remained the same over time.

For the purpose of this work it was necessary to understand and define the concept of "wasteland". "Waste is what is worthless or unused for human purpose. It is a lessening of something without useful result; it is a loss and abandonment, decline, separation and death. It is spent and valueless material left after some act of production or consumption, but can also refer to any used thing: garbage, trash, junk, impurity and dirt. There are wasted things, wasted lands, wasted time and wasted lives."<sup>7</sup> In the context of the Berlin Wall, as can be read in the 1963 news article, previously referred to above, a wasteland is considered a "long dead zone", a "prohibited border zone", a "no man's land".

In this study, the word wasteland was considered as a noWhere.<sup>8</sup> The wasteland symbolised a no man's land, an area devoid of life and as such a non-place., hence since its creation this is a "no man's land" a no lived area nor a place but a noWhere. A noWhere can be understood as a "land in abandonment, with no value, where there is nothing happening. An unused area of land that has become barren or overgrown. A bleak, unattractive, and unused or neglected urban or industrial area."<sup>9</sup>

This research has been greatly influenced by the definition of wasteland as a nowhere. We decided to test the label of wasteland as a noWhere and the correspondence between the label and a place's specificities. In order to do this, we needed to find a concrete site. The criteria for selecting it were: a) to be an inner city wasteland and b) a place where label and place seemed disconnected. The Köpi wasteland was selected because after the first visit there, it revealed hints of being a place that has been appropriated and has transformed over time.

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<sup>5</sup> Daily American, 'Reds Create Wasteland along Berlin Wall,' June 23, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> For further information about the wall, its extension and historical details visit Stiftung Berliner Mauer, *Memorial landscape Berlin wall*, accessed 24 July 2018, < <http://berlin-wall-map.com/> >

<sup>7</sup> Traditional interpretation of waste and wasteland, in "wasting away", the book presents a positive perspective of waste that will be discussed in the following work. Book: K. LYNCH, *Wasting away*, Sierra Club Books, 1990

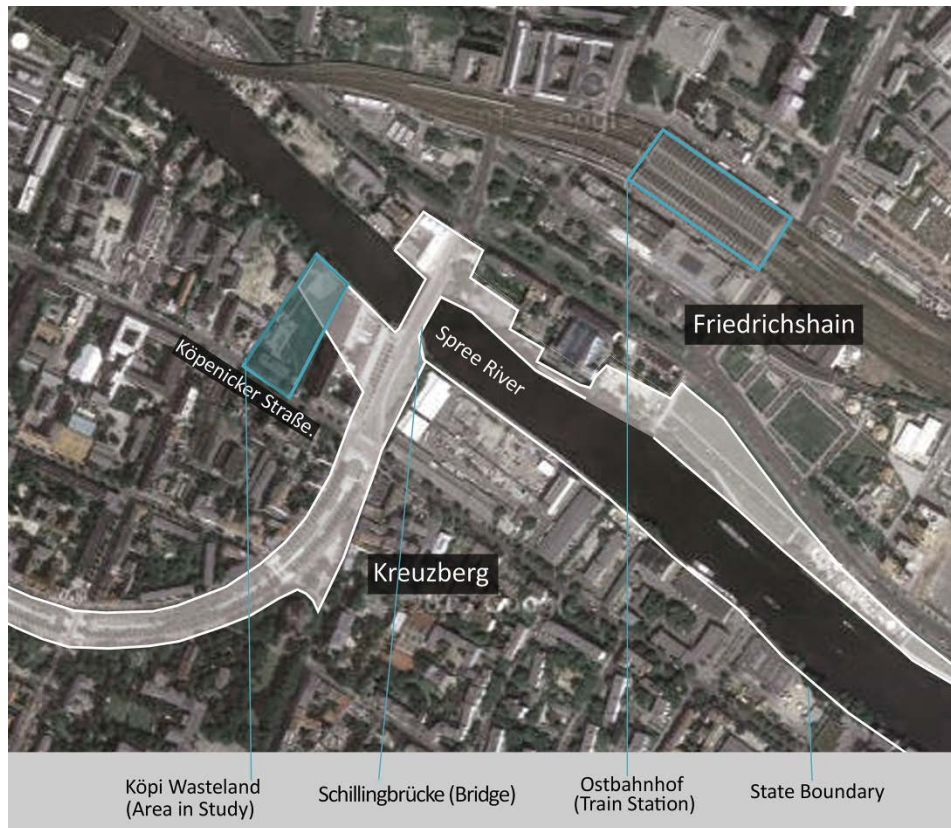
<sup>8</sup> For the development of the research the word "nowhere" is written as noWhere make emphasis of the idea of no place.

<sup>9</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, *wasteland*, accessed 24 July 2018, < <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/wasteland> >

## Köpi wasteland: Is it really a noWhere?

The area we studied, Köpi wasteland, is located southwest of the former main train station in Berlin, see (Fig. 1), known today as Ostbahnhof. It can be found between Köpenicker Straße and the River Spree, adjacent to a demolition and a re-development site (previously the North German ice factory AG) and the Verdi (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft Bundesvorstand, Independent trade Union) office building.

Fig. 1 – Former course of the Wall 2012, (B. Zevallos, 2013).



As the border installations crossed the River Spree, the border was secured by especially wide border strips with additional barriers, patrol boats, and beds of nails ("underwater mats" of steel). Describing (Fig. 1) starting from the right, the hinterland security wall began at the old, vacant and by now neglected industrial area of Friedrichshain parallel to the River Spree. It crossed the river at the Schillingbrücke bridge, before it turned west. Here, the hinterland security wall and the fence of the perimeter defence merged into one wall without any transition. This was because of its particular spatial situation. That is, due to its proximity to the river, the river was used as the border.

Although the majority of installations, barriers and obstacles have been removed, some remnants and traces are left of the former border crossing. Some of the past traces are present, although sometimes transformed into something else; like compost, the wasted leftovers created something new.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This refers to the process of compostation and the ability of compost to generate something new and useful out of waste and refuse. See K. Saltzman, *Composting*. In *Ethnologia Europaea* Vol. 35, e-publikation, Størrelse, 2007.p. 65

Fig. 2 – A couple sits on Köpi hill, (B. Zevallos, 2013).



At Köpi wasteland (Fig. 2) a couple sits on a hill of debris. This hill sits in concrete flooring, a scar of a previous industrial construction from the 90s. At the left side of this image we see the 1914 Ice Factory with recently sprayed graffiti, the new Media Industry can be seen in the background and the wild flora and military streetlight in between these buildings act as a reminder of the previous existence of the Berlin Wall.

Berlin, as a shifting urban landscape, opens a new perspective upon this unconscious opposition between space and place, site and project. In this research, we were able to map and explain a couple of mechanisms that we consider the main place making factors as Hornecker defines: “Whereas space refers to the structural, geometrical qualities of a physical environment, place is the notion that includes the dimensions of lived experience, interaction and use of a space by its inhabitants.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is considered that this lived experience, this interaction and use of a space can be summarized as appropriation, considering this as one of the main factors that reflects the transformation of space. This topic is one of the main focal points of this work. To “appropriate” doesn’t simply mean to utilize, but also to modify and form. Simultaneously, this leads to the transformation of the space and of the individual. Both are changed by the process of appropriation. “the more somebody is personally able to influence its environment the more involved and attentive he becomes, and also the more likely he will be to give them his love and care.”<sup>12</sup> There is a relation between the transformation of a place and its sense of belonging. As Lars from Köpi Squat<sup>13</sup> told us, “This is our beach, it has been like this for years”.<sup>14</sup> As they use the area and make it their own, the place has changed, it is constantly becoming something else.

According to Cidália Silva, “the territory exists in places that compose it and, the formation of a place is made by forces acting at multiple scales, often invisible in the location of the place.”<sup>15</sup> The combination of these forces, such as economic interests, legal regulations, history, natural and manmade topography, and infrastructure together with human and non-human micro actors (including animals, time, machines and even organizations) constitute the basic circumstances for transformation. Each of the spaces we focused on at Köpi - the Berlin Wall (in its creation and destruction); the neighbouring squatted house; the surrounding community; and the Ice Factory

<sup>11</sup> E. Hornecker, *From Space and Place – Setting The Stage For Social Interaction*, Interact Lab Workshop, Dept. of Informatics. University of Sussex. Falmer, Brighton.

<sup>12</sup> Journal article: H. Hertzberger, *Architecture for the people*, “A +U-Architecture and Urbanism”, 1977:03, Japan, 1977, pp. 134-137

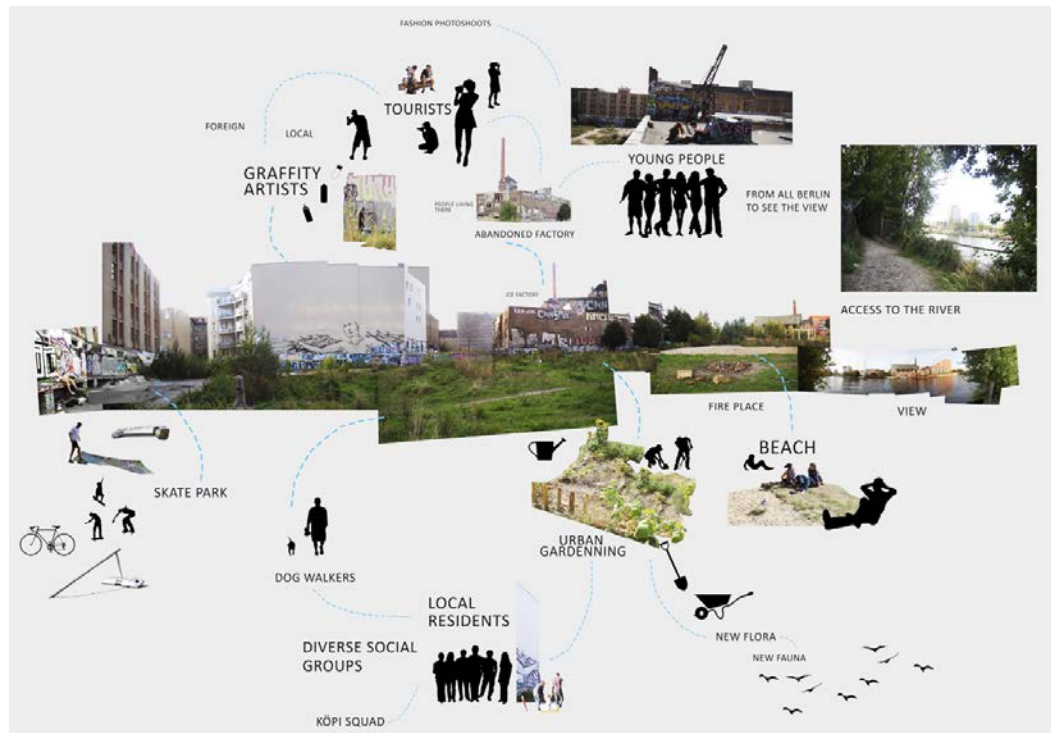
<sup>13</sup> Köpi Squat (also Köpi) is a 1990 occupied and 1991 legalized house in the Köpenicker Straße 137 it is used as an autonomous housing project and a cultural center.

<sup>14</sup> B. Zevallos, *Lars from Köpi Squat*, Field Notes, 04.05.13.4pm

<sup>15</sup> C. Silva, *Território Ficcional*, *Jornal dos Arquitectos - Publicação Trimestral da Ordem dos Arquitectos*, 2008, 231, pp. 34-37.

– showed signs of the creation of different dynamics that evolve and affect the place in different ways, as Fig. 3 shows. From this, we might agree that through a process of transformation, involving both natural and cultural processes, the remnants and leftovers have been turned into a landscape with entirely new value.

Fig. 3 – Diagram of Köpi Dynamics, (B. Zevallos, 2013).



### Lived time experience as methodology

In order to study the two main factors in the noWhere, time and appropriation, it was necessary to develop a specific methodology. Using the lived experience as a tool, Köpi was analysed through regular visits and interviews. We questioned how people use the space and what the area means to them? Furthermore, the answers found *in situ* were confronted with the “facts”, such as state development plans and historical background information of the area in study. This was a practical method as it involved physically being at Köpi, rather than studying it from a distance. In official maps, Köpi appears as an industrial unused area, an “urban wasteland”<sup>16</sup> and is also part of a developing project called Media Spree.<sup>17</sup> Our study aims to answer the question whether labelling Köpi as “urban wasteland” is adequate and to interrogate what the place actually is.

The lived time<sup>18</sup> methodology has been used in theory, such as that of Michel de Certeau,<sup>19</sup> Andre Corboz, James Corner and Herman Hertzberger. According to James Corner, the experiences of space cannot be separated from the events that happen in it .... [The space] is remade continuously every time it is encountered by different people; every time is represented

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix “Topographische Karte 1:10000”, City Hall plan of industrial areas <http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de>

<sup>17</sup> Media Spree, as one of the largest property investment projects in Berlin, aims to establish telecommunication and media companies along a section of the banks of the river Spree as well as to implement an urban renewal of the surrounding area. Unused real estate is to be converted into office buildings, lofts, hotels, and other new structures. See <http://www.ms-versenken.org/> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediaspree.buildings\\_lofts\\_hotels\\_and\\_other\\_new\\_structures](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediaspree.buildings_lofts_hotels_and_other_new_structures).

<sup>18</sup>C. F. Silva, *Mean Time: seven ways to look at time through mobility*, in E. Araújo, R. Ribeiro, P. Andrade & R. Costa (eds.), *Viver em | a mobilidade: rumo a novas culturas de tempo, espaço e distância*. Livro de atas, CECS, 2018, pp. 50-52

<sup>19</sup> M. de Certeau, *La Invencción de lo cotidiano*, Universidad Iberoamericana, 1996, pp. 229

through another medium every time its surroundings change, every time new affiliations are forged.”<sup>20</sup> We used this methodology – lived-time methodology – as a way of understanding the space through the lived experience of the people and by the events that intervene(d) on it. As we understand that appropriation changes additionally in accordance to the seasons, it was necessary to study the sample during a time interval (between February and October) in order to witness the changes it undergoes. The developed method keeps track of these changes and maps them. The method seeks to understand and explain “what is already happening”, deciphering the meanings of a place by questioning the operation of the users. In practical terms, this research was cemented by an interaction through time and the discovering of “the everyday” of the place, as de Certeau describes. The aim was to find and select the themes and elements that define the place beyond its preconceptions.

The field notes, an essential part of this research, were transcripts, comments, and impressions taken in the place based on observation and interviews with the community inhabiting the place. As the lived experience needed to be both translated and described, other media was required such as photographs and drawings (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – Köpi studied through lived time experience methodology, (B. Zevallos, 2013).



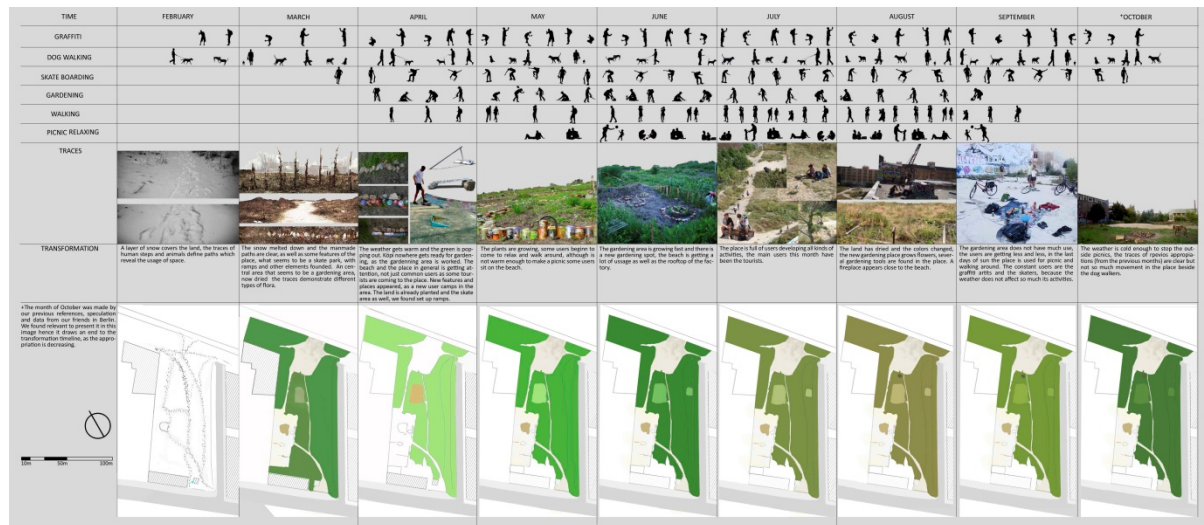
### From noWhere to nowHere

While mapping and questioning our findings, we found several dynamics that define and transform Köpi. What in winter seemed to be simply random areas, as time went on, these areas took on a new meaning. More precisely it was possible to see the change of the dynamics across the different seasons by comparing the first plans (made in winter) with the programmatic plan (made in summer). All of this proves how important the analysis of a place through a lived

<sup>20</sup> J. CORNER, *The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention*, 1999, pp. 213-233

experience is and the traces left as time passes by. (Fig 5) shows the evolution of the plans, from the beginning to the end of the research.

Fig. 5 – Appropriation and transformation of Köpi during the nine months of fieldwork (B. Zevallos, 2013).



Ian White notes that “landscapes are the result of attitudes as well as actions, and they are the product of changes through time”.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned before this process depends on the events, interventions and the sense of belonging of people, both the individual and the community; from the now (referring to the temporal influence) in the here (referring to the specificities of the place), we saw the shifting of the noWhere to the nowHere. By so doing, we expose the paradox that some areas called wastelands confront in their everyday existence. As demonstrated before, Köpi wasteland is a relevant example of the potential nowHere places have for the contemporary city. Being an exception to the conventional public spaces, Köpi reveals its multitude of meanings and transformations: as skate parks, playgrounds, urban gardening spots, hiding-places and even areas for temporary occupation, places prove their own necessity, they adapt to the unexpected users and their desires.

The results of this study teach a lesson on how the traditional interpretations of public space are unable to follow the heartbeat of today's rapidly changing city. The traditional interpretation of public space understands space mainly in terms of formal places that are designed by public spaces, such as fixed benches in parks, gardens with fences, delimited pedestrian zones, and so on. As shown in this research, it is necessary to draw attention to the possibility of a more open concept of public space, acknowledging the existence of places beyond established conceptions, where the uncertain and spontaneous (can) take place. Köpi nowHere shows how the (un)certain, (un)defined and (un)stable generate an ongoing project.

To better understand what makes this place enjoyable, free, and a catalyst of spontaneous appropriation, the term Biophilia reveals its accuracy within this context. Edward O. Wilson introduced this hypothesis in his book *Biophilia*. He suggests that there is an innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes, stating that “[t]he natural [wild] world is the refuge of the spirit, remote, richer even than human imagination.”<sup>22</sup> This can explain the enjoyment of nowHere places: undesigned, unplanned and uncontrolled. These are the wildest habitats in the city. As Kevin Lynch argues, there is something special in these places, which makes them spontaneous. In his book “Wasting away”, Lynch refers to several aspects that make these spaces vital, by highlighting “the importance of “wasted spaces” in the city for children to play, for

<sup>21</sup> I. White, *Landscape and History Since 1500*, Reaktion Books, 2002, p.7

<sup>22</sup> E. Wilson, *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984 p. 146



adaptability to future uses, for the survival of other species.”<sup>23</sup> He argues that these are open to multiplicity, giving freedom and continuity, as such: “In abandoned places, the release from the sense of immediate human purpose allows freer action, as well as free mental construction.”<sup>24</sup> This free mental construction is actual in Köpi nowHere, as almost any activity is allowed there. The only thing we could expect was the unexpected: the place showed an enormous potential of free appropriation.

Although appropriation is evidently influenced by several factors, we found the main physical characteristics that allowed this to happen could be grouped into three main concepts: Free (dom) Space, Unfinished and In transition. The concept Free (dom) Space is depicted by its availability, vacancy, its openness and seeming “emptiness”. It was unfinished in the sense that Köpi is an incomplete place, allowing people to intervene on it freely, as everyone has the chance to transform it. As Herman Hertzberger explains: “The sense of incompleteness, free choice options that stimulate occupants to bring their own color to it.”<sup>25</sup> It is in transition, since it is constantly changing, this place-project is an ongoing process of becoming something else. A project constantly being made never becomes obsolete. Köpi shows how time passes by, as this transformation is materially visible. There is no “controlling force” trying to keep things in the same way; there is no permanence but inconstancy. These three factors describe a nowHere that allows for a variety of usage, encouraging the development of the sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

The topic of wastelands and what to do with them is relevant in current urbanism and the collective reclamation of public space. Wastelands can appear everywhere in cities in the form of vacant parking lots, abandoned cars, or depleted slums. These wastelands can be places where discarded ways of life survive and where things begin. Pope’s research<sup>26</sup> argues against filling these voids. He promotes further speculation about why these voids are being created and what we can learn from them. One needs to “find ways to better understand and represent the voids, vacancies, inefficiencies, and fragments of landscape left over from development.”<sup>27</sup> As referred to previously, this depends on the understanding of a doubt the possibility of proposing a project for a space without knowing what is happening there. This is one of the issues that many cities confront nowadays. Projects with the aim of “developing” take labels, such as wasteland, as misnomers in order to implement their new architectural objects with a purely real estate agenda. Oftentimes, when promising to develop an area, we see a rupture of the socio-cultural dynamics of a city and the right to free public space.

In 2007, Secchi wrote an article<sup>28</sup> in which he aimed to give a response to the problem of wastelands by seeing it as an opportunity to create a new constructed landscape within the urban region. He claims for the need of new vocabulary and definitions for the contemporary urban space while stating that the problem with the empty urban spaces is the lack of program. Concurring with Secchi, we argue that there is a lack of vocabulary and as a consequence, there is a lack of understanding. As demonstrated in this work, there is a need to explore these areas as well as to create new vocabulary that is accurate with the specific characteristics of the areas. This has been done in this work through the shift of the noWhere concept into the concept of nowHere.

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<sup>23</sup> K. Lynch, *Wasting away*, Sierra Club Books, 1990, p.53

<sup>24</sup> K. Lynch, *Wasting away*, Sierra Club Books, 1990, p.25.

<sup>25</sup> H. Hertzberger, *Architecture for the people*, A +U-Architecture and Urbanism, 1977:03, Japan, 1977, p.138

<sup>26</sup> A. Pope, *Ladders*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, especially 178-83

<sup>27</sup> A. Berger, *Drosscape: Wasting Land Urban America*, Princeton Architectural Press, May 3, 2007, p.33

<sup>28</sup> B.SECCHI, *Wasted and Reclaimed Landscapes - Rethinking and Redesigning the Urban Landscape*, Places, 2007, 19, 1, pp. 6-11.

By identifying the wasteland misnomer, our research reveals a “hidden project” with several qualities and positive characteristics that can be applied to contemporary design processes, while taking into account the previous traces of a place to develop a future project. As Philip Christou claims, “the procedure of understanding, revealing, and making apparent the existing material presences of the site becomes for us 80% of the design project.”<sup>29</sup> If we had not taken our time to really understand the place, we would still be thinking about this place as a nowhere, a wasteland. By having an enormous potential for appropriation, Köpi nowHere teaches a lesson to urban planners and architects. It demonstrates a continuous time related project that answers to the infinite needs of its users because of the place’s inherent uncertainty.

Although starting with a specific example, Köpi - a footprint of the Berlin Wall -, we created a process of continuous questioning, reflection, and representation that can be used elsewhere. We advocate for a lived experience time-related methodology and an intervention encouraging new interpretations of “place”. By claiming for the accuracy of vocabulary, we aim to move beyond the constraints of architecture to become an ethical practice that is engaged with people and time, as it addresses the potential for appropriation of places and the role of places in creating a welcoming society. If this had been the case, Köpi could still today be alive as a collective space for freedom. Sadly, it is not.

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