Uses and appropriations of Ruins and Vacant land

João Sarmento, June 6th 2019, Lisbon

I am going to talk about the methodology we used in the fourth phase of the project

4 stages:

To make a Genealogy, a Catalogue, study the dynamics and interactions of the study cases.

‘Genealogy’ attempts to build or reconstruct a simple chronology of the site. It is achieved using two main types of research actions. The first one is using archival work (municipal, private, associative archives), recovering, whenever possible, visual materials which allow for a dynamic reading of the case study. It should include information such as relevant construction dates (start, abandonment, and so on), and may also include aerial photography, images from Google Earth, city plans, photographs, drawings and other project plans. The second one refers to informal conversations with former users of the site (factory workers for instance) and neighbours, and intends to recuperate information related to their memories and experiences of the site. For each case a variable perimeter around the site should be established that defines who the neighbours are.

‘Catalogue’ tries to construct a virtual collection of materials that includes photographic and video records made in loco, in order to build a digital archive for future use. This collection of materials should focus on objects which have apparently been moved after the abandonment of the construction phase. Evidence of squatting or other temporary uses—mattresses, blankets, food packages, syringes, bottles, packs of cigarettes, condoms—may help to capture the appropriations in place. The degradation of materials of the site should be registered as well, as broken glasses, forced doors, graffiti walls also suggest important uses.

‘Dynamics’ focuses on the experiences, rhythms and daily appropriations on site, and is registered through multiple visits during a long period of time. Ideally fieldwork should include seasonal visits and a weekly calendar comprising weekdays and weekends. When possible the survey of ‘dynamics’ should include daily and nocturnal visits. Within the NoVOID project, and taking into consideration financial and human resources, we established a minimum of 10 visits to each of the sites. Each visit should last at least 30 min.

‘Interactions’—the last part of the methodology—refers to the attempt to capture some of the social interfaces on site, through a variety of methodologies that range from informal conversations, interviews and focus groups with users. The principal idea is to establish the multiple relationships that people have with these sites and the feelings and emotions they attached to them: from fear of or indifference towards abandoned spaces, repulsive feelings related to degradation, to happiness resulting from quiet and tranquil spaces. It may include people who walk their dogs on vacant land, people who make detours not to cross degraded spaces, or children playing and exploring through rubble.
Because the collected materials had a strong visual dimension, the data was analysed through four main processes of graphic representation. **Mapping, Decoding, Stratifying, and Spatializing** were used in order to understand the complex nuances of the human appropriations on a temporal and spatial dimension.

**Mapping** began by identifying and locating traces of human appropriations, through objects, materials or alterations found on site. This process consisted of an ‘archaeological’ survey, represented by overlapping to the initial plan, a virtual grid that selectively unveils the analysed areas (through aerial photography), complemented with in situ geotagged photographs.

**Decoding** is a process inspired in archival studies, and that based on observations made in situ built a collection of photographs and video recordings that were organized chronologically in a Field Notebook. We went through this collection of fragments in a process of selection, regrouping and reordering, in a completely uncommitted relationship with its spatial and temporal condition. Dissociating these two moments - the collection at the beginning and the selection, regrouping and reordering later on - provided re-readings and helped to build an imaginary of the performances. When detecting affinities between images, the reorganization of these collected fragments resulted in a new composition that helped to create narratives about the secret life of these spaces.
We name **Stratification** to a process connected to spatial planning in the sense that it relates to rational mapping overlay of different periods with the aim of understanding the occupation of the territory over time. This analysis allows us to look at permanencies and volatilities. Here we also study the circumstances of specific cases, such as surrounding physical structures.

**Spatializing** is a process influenced by Anthropology of Space. It attempts to identify a part of complex spatial relations systems of social and cultural relations that exist in ruins and empty spaces. Often imperceptible, this gaze allowed us to trace these relationships, and to understand the numerous activities that are established over time, at several scales. They contain various mobilities, and rhythmic and arrhythmic movements. What binds ruins to human and non-human actors in a hinterland that varies from the proximity up to a few kilometers is key to understand contemporary urban life and lives of in the ruins.