

# NEW GEOGRAPHIES

## 10 Fallow

Fallow

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I  
A dialectic of devaluation and renewal today produces profound and varied transformations in both built and unbuilt environments. Global economic restructuring has led to the decline and abandonment of urban environments in shrinking cities but has also engendered new forms of social relations and new modes of self-organization.<sup>1</sup> In other locations, vacant, underused, or foreclosed properties emerge as loci of tension in processes of transformation, as activism and insurrection rise in opposition to speculative capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The programmed obsolescence of buildings produces erasures in built environments that rack communities with cultural loss, while also offering the possibility for more progressive forms of social and ecological relations.<sup>3</sup> Areas of industrial decline may become sites of effervescent biological productivity, as plant-based remediation detoxifies soil polluted through industrial exploitation.<sup>4</sup> Vibrant manifestations of the devaluation-renewal dialectic are also evident if we extend our gaze beyond the city, to a broader geographic scale. We find, for instance, that land abandoned by large-scale logging and agriculture has become a key focal point in an expanded project of biodiversity protection that emphasizes industrial hinterlands rather than pristine natural areas.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, despite mainstream representations of coastal retreat as a politically unfeasible response to sea-level rise, many seaside residents are self-organizing to promote retreat as a basis for greater community resilience.<sup>6</sup> Many other examples could be enumerated here, but the preceding are sufficient to highlight the contemporary interplay between proliferating contexts of decline and corresponding efforts to recapture neglected and marginal spaces to restore social, ecological, or economic capacity.

This issue of *New Geographies* (NG10) seeks to open a conversation exploring this set of issues, and in particular, the tension central to this dialectic: the hinge between devaluation and revaluation.

This hinge is both process and condition. As a process, forces of transformation unfurl at different scales and across diverse geographies, producing variegated social and ecological effects. As a condition, the moment of pause—of fallowness—is replete with potential to forge new social and ecological relations. How can we, as designers and members of allied disciplines, intervene to bend vectors of transformation toward more just modes of social or ecological organization? Beyond traditional project proposals that perpetuate the status quo, can design thinking engage the heavy work of analysis required to reveal the operations that structure these moments and spaces, to instead offer proposals that redraw political and cultural horizons? As agents deeply enmeshed within the forces producing these transformations, designers and planners are implicated in shaping the future of these challenging contexts.

Against this backdrop, NG10 borrows the term “fallow” as a metaphor to examine this critical juncture in cycles of devaluing and revaluing built and unbuilt environments. In agriculture, fallowing is understood as a process of restoring latent ecological capacity through periodic idleness. NG10 proposes to extend this concept to a much broader spectrum of conditions, including many that are not immediately associated with crop rotation, but which are inscribed in diverse forms of devalorization and revalorization associated with geographies of industrial capitalism. Lack of productivity in urban contexts, for instance, is often described in such negative terms as abandonment, marginality, or wasteland, circumstances often produced through industrial exploitation.<sup>7</sup> What insights might be gleaned from viewing the dynamics that shape sociospatial and socioecological relations in this and other contexts by instead using fallow as a lens? Rather than assume a strict binary of fecund or barren, the texts assembled in this volume critically reflect on the sites, strategies, scales, and imaginaries of the devalued, the dormant, and the wasted, and explore revalorization in all its forms: cultural, ecological, economic, and social.

We are not the first to propose the concept of fallow be applied to non-agrarian contexts. Franz Oswald and Peter Baccini, for example, use it in a short passage in their book *Netzstadt: Designing the Urban* (2003). Here they gloss the problem of “vacant and decaying” buildings as “fallow resources to preserve and enhance the quality of city life” without unpacking how fallow resources emerge or what their broader position might be in the built environment.<sup>8</sup> Studio Basel mobilizes it more specifically in *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait* (2006) to explore the situation of formerly industrial alpine zones under conditions of accelerated contemporary urbanization.<sup>9</sup> And the edited volume *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* (2013) is closely aligned with such ideas, albeit without explicitly using the term. Invoking the work of Catalan architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales, editors Patrick Barron and Manuela Mariani present a group of essays that recast spaces in cities often considered marginal in a more positive light, claiming them as complex and dynamic sites of engagement for planning and design.<sup>10</sup> In an epoch increasingly defined by a skein of human activity that stretches across the planet, where built and unbuilt environments are subjected to the machinations of speculative

capital, and where the appropriation and instrumentalization of space is everywhere imminent, now it is critical to further analytical work on this fundamental moment in the transformation of the environment.<sup>11</sup>

In his work on industrial agriculture, geographer Tony Weis helps to broaden the relevance of fallowness beyond questions of soil fertility by demonstrating how crop rotation techniques allow for alternative uses. For example, substituting cultivation for livestock grazing can enhance restorative processes through the production of manure.<sup>12</sup> In a closely related analysis, Weis shows that the temporal deceleration of fallowing increases the possibility for crop diversity and, importantly, can energize the reemergence of small farming communities that form more ecologically viable models of agrarian production than those associated with industrial farming systems.<sup>13</sup> That is, in addition to its ecological healing capacity, the process of fallowing may also influence social organization in potentially progressive ways. Beyond its circumscribed origins within agricultural production, today we propose building on these insights to further expand the concept of fallow to contexts of economic production and the built environment.

From its etymological root, fallow has accumulated various meanings and can be used as both verb and adjective to describe different aspects and dynamics of agricultural land use.<sup>14</sup> In our expanded field, fallowing (*v.*) is a concomitant phase in the process of both producing and demolishing built and unbuilt environments. Fallowness (*adj.*) as a condition within the production process—a state of pause—becomes a field of potential, a moment or site in which human and nonhuman actors have the opportunity to rework those relations that structure their environments. Here new strategies emerge, countering many modes of dispossession with new organizational capacities and biological richness.

## II

NG10 brings together academics and practitioners to engage concepts of fallow in speculative and creative ways. The texts collected here help to build the analytical potential of the term, suggest possible strategies for its practice, and also probe its limits. To provide coherence, this volume is organized into the following four thematic groupings: the concept of fallow in modernity; rhythms and processes of fallowing in the capitalist built environment; conditions of fallowness in relation to constructed boundaries between human and nonhuman nature; and lastly, spatiotemporal scales of fallowness that create alternative means for social interaction and organization.

The first series of texts explores concepts of fallow in modernity by bringing into focus how the meaning of the word is tied to a broader political economy and evolves in relation to dynamics of land enclosure and land use under capitalism. A historical analysis by **Matthew Gandy** considers fallow as an evolving set of concrete social-ecological relations, highlighting the conceptual shift from ecological restoration to a fix for overproduction under the pressure of capitalism. **Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago** uses processes of enclosure in England and the United States to show how the practice of fallowing was eventually replaced by an ideology of improvement that

disparaged idleness and inactivity. Beyond the Euro-American context, **Jane M. Jacobs** and **Stephen Cairns** develop a comparative analysis of land use in Western and Asian economies that complicates our understanding of the logics of capitalist enclosure and highlights the need for context-sensitive analyses of fallow.

Pursuing the idea that fallowing has certain rhythmic qualities, the second group of essays engages how specific processes of creation and destruction in capitalist urbanization produce varied conditions of fallowness. Framing this discussion in rich theoretical terms, **Mazen Labban** mobilizes the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to articulate a powerful analysis of the built environment in a perpetual state of building up and dissolving along several simultaneous modes of circulation and wasting. **Nathan Sayre** notes the complex and contradictory relation between climate change and the devaluation of the built environment in the temporal scales of climate impacts. He argues that the spatial pattern of uneven geographical devaluation is magnified by a feedback loop attributable to the securitization and financialization of risk. Linking the speed of transportation systems to a specific spatial form of fallowness, **Benedikt Boucsein** and **Eirini Kasioumi** claim “noise landscapes”—those sites absorbing the externalities of air travel—as prime areas for designers to experiment with novel forms of social and ecological revalorization. In his case study of Detroit, **Michael R. J. Koscielniak** suggests *decline-as-urbanization* as a concept more attuned to the wide-ranging processes of dispossession and uneven development than can be found in certain inherited frameworks of urbanization. **Wade Shepard** contextualizes the ongoing development of Cyberjaya, Malaysia, within a broader cohort of Asian cities undergoing rounds of speculative urban development, where boosters navigate the fraught process of building tabula rasa in projects that oscillate in potential from dizzying exuberance to next ghost city. Finally, in arguing that periods of rest or dormancy do not necessarily lead to recovery, regeneration, or future value through occupation, **Christopher Marcinkoski** identifies a limit of the fallow metaphor when analyzing contemporary land speculation in Africa.

A conversation with **Peter L. Galison** serves as an interlude, weaving together the thematic foci of NG10. In this wide-ranging discussion, Galison considers the deep temporality of nuclear waste storage as a paradigmatic problem of modernity, and the waste-wilderness as a complex landscape of temporary human occupation and novel ecological configuration.

The third set of texts explores the border between fallowness, wildness, and conservation. Here various authors highlight the dynamic—yet continually negotiated and socially constructed—boundaries that demarcate humans and nature, valued and valueless, productive and unproductive, and near and distant. Building on his influential studies of planetary ecology, **Erle Ellis** asks what fallow means in the Anthropocene and encourages us to consider grand land management projects to rebuild biodiversity and ecological value in light of ongoing human transformation of the biosphere. At a much smaller scale, **Jill Desimini** explores the threshold between fallow and wild, where the layered use values in overgrown spaces become productive opportunities

for planners and designers. Taking a landscape conservation approach to postindustrial landscapes, **Caitlin DeSilvey** invites us to consider the hybrid quality of fallowed sites, where constructed boundaries between the built and unbuilt are thickened through purposeful human action or inaction.<sup>15</sup> **Benjamin R. Cohen** argues that beyond physical boundaries, creating and maintaining temporal separation is critical to fallowing operations, as it is the rhythmic spatiotemporal interlocking of activity and rest that holds generative capacity for designers and planners. Dissolving the binary boundary between waste and renewal, in his view of postindustrial landscapes, **Thomas Sieverts** proposes reading the “city as a special landscape,” where permaculture forms the basis of a sustainable future. Lastly, **Nicole Bennett** analyzes the capacity of photography to collapse spatial and temporal boundaries of remote geographies through representational strategies of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, as its depictions have evolved from stable and distant to dynamic and urgent, no longer contained by its isolation.

Whether uncovered through intimate and personal forms of knowledge production or emerging through more collective experimentation, the final group of texts explores the relationship between fallowness, social interaction, and organization at a variety of spatiotemporal scales. **Austin Zwick** confronts the transhistorical “othering” of Appalachia with a more complex reading of the region as caught between processes of economic restructuring and environmental degradation on one hand, and the desire to protect close social bonds and a connection to the land on the other. At the scale of the city, the interdisciplinary design practice **Urban-Think Tank** reconsiders the third dimension of buildings within the broader phenomenon of vertical sprawl—emptied towers that have been delinked from the market—as rich zones holding potential for alternative and flexible community planning practices, social relations, and forms of urbanity.<sup>16</sup> In an intimate narrative, **Keith Brower Brown** revisits the closed airport *Tempelhofer Feld* in Berlin, which holds a present yet distant memory that is recovered through storytelling (a neglected cultural practice revalorized here), to reveal a site vibrating with his family’s history.

## III

In agricultural practices, fallowing requires time to restore fertility; it is a key dimension. And time emerges as an important component of the structure and function of fallowness when extending the metaphor to the conditions explored in NG10. Recurring throughout the essays in this volume is the idea that fallowness—slowness or rest as a source of regenerative potential—is often discordant with broader processes of capitalist development. Under an ideology of improvement that guides land use decisions, there is no place for idle or inactive space. Other texts, however, view removing land from circulation as the ultimate expression of modernity. The question of time is raised in still another way here. Whether through rapid devaluation from environmental ruptures wrought by climate change, or the deep state of suspended animation necessitated by nuclear waste storage, the waste products of capitalist modernity play a significant role in both the form and duration of the devaluation-renewal dialectic at the heart

of fallowing. In contrast, whether by conscious decision or benign neglect, fallowing has also been absorbed into the ideology of improvement which now incorporates unbuilding, wasting, and dispossession. Here it is essential to recognize that devaluation may (paradoxically) serve as an accumulation strategy. But it is equally important to note that alternative forms of social organization and ecological relations have been able to thrive in these same spaces of disinvestment. It is in these places—at moments in between devaluation and revaluation—where new boundaries can be drawn between humans and nature, and new social vectors initiated. This is the challenge for designers and planners.

As the varied contours that constitute the terrain of *fallow* come into focus, we see that it is neither wasted nor idle. Rather, fallow introduces a new epistemology that transcends binary schemes. It is gravid with potential; thick with accreted memory; layered with debris and toxins; governed by rule regimes and altered through legislation; and evolved through cultural attitudes toward nature and productivity. All of these characteristics play a role in its latency and future potential, as the spatiotemporal effects of fallowing are solidified within the political economy. We urge designers and planners to embrace fallowness and to insert themselves into its processes more thoughtfully, to explore new modes and methods of practice, and to chart a course for a more just future through this challenging contemporary condition.

1

Kimberley Kinder, *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

2

Andy Merrifield, *The New Urban Question* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 32.

3

Daniel Abramson, *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

4

Kate Kennen and Niall Kirkwood, eds., *Phyto: Principles and Resources for Site Remediation and Landscape Design* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5–6.

5

See the Rewilding Institute website for an overview of the rewilding concept: <https://rewilding.org/about-tri/vision/>. For a discussion of the economic dynamics leading to abandoned farmland in Europe and the potential for rewilding as a land management strategy there, see Laetitia M. Navarro and Henrique M. Pereira, "Rewilding Abandoned Landscapes in Europe," *Ecosystems* 15.6 (September 2012): 900; and Rachelle McKnight, "Rewilding the European Landscape: An Unconventional Approach to Land Management," *City Wild* 8 (Spring 2014).

6

Liz Koslov, "The Case for Retreat," *Public Culture* 28.8 (2016): 359–87.

7

For an extensive collection of references to how a lack of productivity is described negatively in the literature, see Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron, eds., *Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3–4.

8

Franz Oswald, Peter Baccini, and Mark Michaeli, *Netzstadt: Designing the Urban* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003), 23.

9

Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron, and Christian Schmid, *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait*, ed. ETH Studio Basel, Institut Stadt der Gegenwart (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005). In particular, see "Book 3: Materials for an Urbanistic Project, Alpine Fallow Lands," 929–1006.

10

Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron, *Terrian Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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See, for example, literatures on the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Planetary Urbanization.

12

Tony Weis, *The Ecological Hoofprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 54.

13

Tony Weis, *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 167.

14

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "fallow," <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67874?result=5&rskey=lalcVt&>.

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"Unbuilding: Process and Preservation" is excerpted from Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Copyright 2017 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota. Used by permission of the University of Minnesota Press.

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This text builds on previous work on Torre David. See the Urban-Think Tank website, <http://u-tt.com/project/torre-david/>; and Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, eds., *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013).