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An interview with Matthew Gandy

Cristian Silva

CS: What initially caught your attention in relation to interstitial landscapes, and why?

MG: I can trace my curiosity back to childhood experiences of growing up in inner London with its fascinating mix of bombsites, canals, and abandoned buildings. There were many unusual or anomalous spaces, some of which had been produced by the legacy of war, but many others created by a combination of de-industrialization, demographic decline, and official neglect. These ostensibly 'empty spaces' were full of life, especially in summer with vibrant carpets of distinctive plants such as rosebay willowherb (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*), and of course children played in these spaces since they were often located in those parts of the city with limited access to parks or playgrounds. More recently my interest in marginal spaces was rekindled by a research fellowship held in Berlin in the early 2000s that reconnected me to these kinds of unusual spaces and in particular to the *Brachen* that have become a particular source of fascination. (Fig_01)¹

CS: You have been researching on interstitial spaces from different angles. Reflecting on your research, what would you say these spaces are (or how would you define them), and what are their values for the understanding of cities?

MG: As a working definition, I would define interstitial spaces as sites that exist in contradistinction or tension with capitalist land markets. They are sites that unsettle the spatial order of the capitalist city although they have often been generated by contradictory dimensions to capitalist urbanization. In certain ways they may present problems of integration through their size, shape, or physical characteristics. We could also include sites of post-industrial toxicity as well as void spaces produced through violence or geo-political upheaval. The rich and complex etymology for such spaces – shared across many languages – is testament to their varied origins and meanings. It is perhaps the unfixed nature of such spaces which makes them such an interesting entry point for urban research.

CS: What type of imagination(s) do interstitial spaces evoke or stimulate for you?

MG: A lot of my geographical writing is stimulated by direct contact with places, spaces, and also cultural events such as exhibitions or art installations. In methodological terms, I have been developing the idea of the *ecological ethnography* as a kind of sustained interaction with specific sites that can form the basis of a larger argument about the production and meaning of urban space. I am especially interested in how the aesthetic and scientific dimensions of marginal sites can intersect at both a practical and theoretical level. I have also been working on the concept of the *ecological imaginary*, drawing on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, Slavoj Žižek, and other scholars, as a way of weaving

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Matthew Gandy is Professor of Geography at the University of Cambridge and is a cultural, urban, and environmental geographer with particular interests in landscape, infrastructure, and more recently biodiversity. His books include *Concrete and clay: reworking nature in New York City* (MIT Press, 2002), *Moth* (Reaktion, 2016), and *The fabric of space: water, modernity, and the urban imagination* (MIT Press, 2014). His most recent book *Natura urbana: ecological constellations in urban space* (The MIT Press, 2022) is winner of a 2023 John Brinckerhoff Jackson Prize awarded by the Foundation for Landscape Studies and UVA School of Architecture. He is currently writing a book about the intersections between biodiversity and urban epidemiology.

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¹ Figure 01 : A wasteland or Brache on the Chausseestraße, Berlin (2007). Photo: Matthew Gandy.

together different strands of collective cultural meaning in relation to both extant and imaginary spaces. How, in other words, can we envisage alternative environmental futures? It is through such spaces that we can begin to imagine alternative socio-ecological constellations.

CS: What elements of interstitial spaces stimulate your imagination and perception? Is it their emptiness? Their abandonment?

MG: I think it is a combination of factors that interests me. In some ways these sites can be considered to be open-air experiments where a variety of spontaneous socio-ecological dynamics can be observed, from the chance arrival of seeds to unexpected forms of human use. And, of course, none of these sites are truly 'empty', in the sense that they soon become a hub of life and activity. Additionally, these sites present a stratigraphy of traces and memories that can be explored in a variety of ways. In analytical terms, I am especially interested in the intersections between aesthetics, ecology, and history, which artists such as Maria Thereza Alves have explored in their work through the analysis of urban soils or other substrates that contain traces of global history.

CS: Do interstitial spaces lead you to look back (to the past)? Or forward (to the future)? Or both? Are these places of memory or imagination?

MG: Interstitial spaces offer a double temporality since they contain traces of the past – especially in terms of their varied soils, substrates, and topographies – but they also serve as portents of the future, as reflected in emerging or unexpected urban ecologies. Since many of these spaces have been erased, however, they sometimes persist only in our memory or imagination, or in some cases through accidental archives such as photographs and other material or digital traces.

CS: What examples of interstitial spaces are the most interesting for you, and why?

MG: One interstitial landscape in particular, on the site of the former Berlin Wall in Chausseestraße, was a longstanding focus of my work before its replacement with a luxury housing development. This was the site that stimulated me to radically extend my previous work on landscape and infrastructure to include different facets of urban nature such as botany, entomology, and other fields. The site served as a kind of creative puzzle that challenged my existing conceptual framework for the analysis of capitalist urbanization.

CS: In your approach to 'entropy by design' you elaborate on the tensions between wild (spontaneous) and manicured urban nature. This is a clear (and provocative) contrast between design and ecological traditions. In some way, it also resonates with Sennett and Sendra's 'infrastructures for disorder'² in the sense of introducing conditions for the unplanned use of the public realm. Do you think that architecture and other design disciplines have such power (and/or knowledge) to introduce entropy? If so, do you think that interstitial spaces can contribute to this?

MG: I have been drawn to this question especially through the ideas of the French horticulturalist and landscape designer Gilles Clément, whose work I first encountered at an exhibition in Montréal. Clément's focus on the *garden-in-movement* presents a direct challenge to tightly controlled types of municipal landscapes by incorporating aspects of aesthetic and ecological uncertainty. (Fig. 02)³ This is not a simple form of 'non-design' but rather an attempt to guide the spontaneous ecological dynamics of urban space in interesting and unexpected ways. In my research on parks I have noted in particular the role of edge effects between different mowing regimes to allow wilder elements of urban nature to flourish alongside more frequently cut zones where people can relax and have picnics and so on. Through the use of these interesting edges it is possible to communicate sophisticated

2 Sendra, P. (2016). Infrastructures for disorder. Applying Sennett's notion of disorder to the public space of social housing neighbourhoods. *Journal of Urban Design*, 21(3), 335-352.

3 Figure 02 : An "edge" effect in Gilles Clément's design for Parc Henri Matisse, Lille (2011). Photo: Matthew Gandy.

ecological ideas to a broader public audience and alter aesthetic expectations about how public spaces should be managed. The intentional inclusion of forms of ecological spontaneity in urban space clearly has resonance in the social and cultural realm. The emphasis here is on 'steering' or 'guiding' public space rather than a narrow focus on forms of control.

CS: In your edited book *Urban constellations* (2011), as well as in your essay 'Interstitial landscapes: reflections on a Berlin corner' – you highlight the emerging ecologies and associated science of urban interstices. Would you say that these ecologies are helpful to 'sabotage' existing design traditions and introduce forms of entropy?

MG: I think the Berlin case is very interesting in terms of the post-war development of urban ecology and in particular the emergence of the 'Berlin school' as a distinctive approach to the study of novel ecosystems. Beyond a series of specific scientific advances, however, the legacy of the Berlin school is important in three further ways: first, the practice of urban botany in Berlin marked a departure from the ideological formations associated with nativist approaches to vegetation science; second, the twin role of urban ecologists as scientists and advocates for the protection of vulnerable urban sites with high levels of biodiversity marks a critical interface between urban ecology and the politics of land use planning; and third, the aesthetic fascination with interstitial spaces, or *Brachen*, has been incorporated into a series of innovative park designs in the city. (Fig. 03)⁴

CS: What new epistemological angles for the study of cities (and the built environment) do interstitial spaces suggest to you?

MG: The study of interstitial spaces invites a wider reflection on the types of methods as well as analytical frameworks that can be used for the study of cities and wider processes of urbanization. Two epistemological approaches that interest me in particular are *ecological ethnographies* and *forensic ecologies*. I use the term ecological ethnography to emphasize the embodied and affective dimensions to sustained interaction with a specific site which might extend to various practices such as the use of walking transects, close forms of observation, or the recording of soundscapes. Unlike multispecies ethnography, however, I have sought to retain some kind of conceptual synthesis with urban political ecology, collective forms of human agency, and the structural dimensions to the production of urban space. With forensic ecology I have sought to combine insights from the fields of forensic architecture and forensic entomology to examine threats to specific sites. I am interested in the role of organisms as sensors for different levels of ecological vulnerability as well as the wider role of citizen science and other collaborative methods for tracking systemic forms of environmental threat such as climate change, epidemiological risk, and the loss of biodiversity.

CS: From a different perspective, what can planning, design, and other applied disciplines introduce to the understanding of interstitial spaces?

MG: A key question here concerns the degree of engagement with the urban process. When we look at the legacy of progressive figures in the history of planning and design, there is evidence of a deep appreciation of the complexities of capitalist urbanization. An influential figure in my own work is the contribution of Martin Wagner to Weimar era Berlin, where he understood the necessity of better access to urban nature as part of a wider conceptualization of work, housing, and leisure under modernity.

CS: What other types of interstitial spaces are interesting for you?

MG: I would like to mention two other types of interstitial spaces that have been a focus of interest in my recent work. One is the realm of *saproxyllic ecologies* associated with old trees that can harbour huge numbers of rare invertebrates, including many extraordinary insect mimics such as flies that

⁴ Figure 03 : Design as ecological mimicry in Park am Gleisdreieck, Berlin (2018). Photo: Matthew Gandy.

resemble bees or moths that resemble wasps. In an urban context, however, old or 'veteran' trees are under immense threat from neo-liberal efforts to simplify space in order to make the maintenance of streets or other spaces cheaper (and more profitable) along with the spectre of insurance claims in relation to tree roots, falling branches, or other hazards. My other example is that of *ecological decay*, where degraded ecosystems can produce specific forms of epidemiological threat. In my work on zoonotic urbanization, for example, I am interested in the role of degraded urban wetlands in harbouring insect vectors for disease in situations where many of the natural predators for mosquito larvae such as fish or amphibians have been much diminished or even eliminated.

CS: What other aspects of urban interstitiality can be further explored?

MG: Building on my point about zoonotic urbanization, I think it is important for studies of interstitial spaces to be extended to the cities of the global South. In my work on Chennai, southern India, for example, I am interested in exploring post-colonial discourses that relate to forms of socio-spatial marginality. The very idea of the wasteland or *peramboke* (to use the interesting Tamil term that has no direct English equivalent) is connected with colonial histories of land use and the designation of non-productive land. In a contemporary context, however, the idea of the *peramboke* has been appropriated as part of a cultural and political lexicon for creativity and resistance. (Fig. 04)⁵

CS: Thank you very much for sharing your knowledge with us.

⁵ Figure 04 : Ecology decay in the disappearing Pallikaranai wetlands, Chennai (2019). Photo: Matthew Gandy.