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Urban Management and the Misunderstanding of Urban Voids: A Critical Review of Treating Landscape as an Instrument of Intervention

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Abstract

In contemporary urban design and landscape architecture literature, urban voids are often characterized as problematic, inefficient spaces that disrupt the physical and perceptual coherence of the city. Over the past two decades, alongside the rise of discourses such as urban regeneration and sustainable development, a dominant approach has emerged that redefines these spaces not merely as crises but as "potential opportunities" for enhancing urban landscape quality. Adopting a critical stance, this paper argues that such a conceptual shift is neither self-evident nor neutral; rather, it constitutes part of the dominant discourse of urban management which, by foregrounding landscape interventions, constrains fundamental critique of the processes that produce urban voids and the spatial power mechanisms involved. The central argument is that the prevailing focus on landscape projects frequently reduces a structural and multi-layered issue to an aesthetic and manageable level, and through a form of depoliticization of space, removes the origins of urban void production—such as dominant urban development logics, land policies, and institutional mechanisms—from the realm of critique. Within this framework, the urban landscape is diminished from a platform for critical engagement with crisis to an instrument for managing and containing its consequences. By rereading urban voids as critical indicators of disruption within the city's spatial and managerial systems, the article emphasizes that improving landscape quality can be meaningful and sustainable only when it is directly linked to critiquing the processes that generate urban voids, and when it moves beyond purely beautification-oriented approaches.

Keywords: Urban Voids, Urban Landscape, Urban Management, Power Discourse, Depoliticization of Space.

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Is the conception of urban voids as "opportunities for enhancing landscape quality" itself not a sign of urban management's misunderstanding of the nature of these spaces one that, by shifting the problem from the reasons behind the production of gaps to the ways of exploiting them, generates project oriented, short term, and non critical responses?

Extended Abstract

This article critically examines the dominant understanding of urban voids in contemporary urban management and landscape practice, particularly in rapidly transforming metropolises such as Tehran. Accelerated growth, uneven development, project-oriented planning, and economic pressures have produced a wide range of abandoned, underused, and residual spaces that disrupt not only the city's physical continuity but also its perceptual, social, and experiential coherence.

While classical approaches largely framed urban voids as signs of decay, inefficiency, or planning failure, recent regeneration discourses have redefined them as potential opportunities for intervention and landscape-led improvement. The article argues that this conceptual shift reflects less a deeper understanding of urban voids than a specific mode of crisis management in urban governance—one that prioritizes managing consequences and improving the city's image rather than critically interrogating the logics that produce these spaces.

Adopting a critical perspective, the article conceptualizes urban voids as structural rather than exceptional phenomena. They are understood as predictable outcomes of dominant spatial production logics shaped by land policies, capital accumulation, project-driven development, and unequal resource allocation. Labeling voids as "opportunities" is therefore not neutral; it is a discursive mechanism that shifts attention from why voids are produced to how they can be exploited, rendering structural inequalities and power relations politically invisible.

Within this framework, urban landscape, despite its multidimensional potential to engage perception, meaning, lived experience, and power becomes reduced to an aesthetic and managerial tool. Landscape interventions are frequently confined to beautification, visual coherence, and measurable indicators, leading to a depoliticization of space in which conflict, exclusion, and contradiction are concealed rather than confronted.

The article proposes an alternative reading of urban voids as critical signs of disruption in the spatial and managerial order of the city. Rather than problems to be solved, urban voids are framed as opportunities for understanding the contradictions of urban development and power. Meaningful and sustainable landscape improvement, it concludes, is possible only when directly linked to a critical examination of the processes that produce urban voids, beyond short-term, project-oriented, and purely aesthetic approaches.

Urban management, by redefining urban voids as "opportunities for enhancing landscape quality," reduces a structural issue to short-term, beautification-oriented landscape projects. This shift marginalizes questions about the causes of void production and leads to a "depoliticization of space," meaning the concealment of conflicts rather than a critical engagement with their underlying roots.

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