

# The Parking Lots of Tallinn:

## An Encounter with Marginal Ecologies

Matthew Gandy

Just a few metres from the Estonian Museum of Architecture in the city of Tallinn there is an ordinary-looking parking lot. A mix of temporary fencing and gravel surfacing near the harbour has produced a purely functional space that is criss-crossed by multiple ruderal ecologies. The idea of ruderal ecologies pulls in several different – if sometimes complementary – directions. A long-established strand encompasses botanical studies of marginal urban and post-industrial spaces from the middle decades of the nineteenth century onwards, which laid the basis for the flourishing of post-war urban ecology in many European cities. The term ‘ruderal’ itself is especially associated with the Sheffield-based botanist J. Philip Grime whose so-called CSR (competitor, stress-tolerator, ruderal) theory identified ruderal plants as those species especially well adapted to repeated forms of ecological disturbance (Grime 1977). From the early 1970s onwards ruderal ecologies have also featured prominently within a variety of cultural interventions, including new forms of nature writing that valorize the unexpected ecological dynamics of marginal or interstitial spaces (see Gandy 2022). More recently, the term ruderal has also been adopted within cultural anthropology to denote a postcolonial sensibility towards urban nature (see Stoetzer 2022).

As we enter the site on a bright morning in early June I am struck by a profusion of flowers growing along the strips of land that separate the parking bays from nearby construction sites. Attempts to flatten the space for cars have also produced small heaps of stony substrate that now support dozens of different species of plants. These linear piles of heaped gravel, with their self-selecting xerophytic planting schemes, are reminiscent of Japanese stone gardens or even landscaping features adopted for the rehabilitation of the Los Angeles river. In the case of a Tallinn car park, however, these spaces are not really intended for humans or non-humans: they are simply valorized voids suitable for the efficient temporary storage of cars. How they happen to look, or what forms of life they contain, are beside the point.

*Parking lot near the Estonian Museum of Architecture, Tallinn. The author and environmental scientist Agáta Marzecová are testing out the Flora Incognita app for the identification of wild plants.*

Photo: Maroš Krivy, 2023.



The economics of running a parking lot clearly do not extend to any kind of aesthetic concerns with landscaping; there is a certain indifference to the vegetal agency of such sites. Indeed, the apparent unusability of these multiple edge spaces poses a set of philosophical challenges for the interpretation of urban space. I am reminded of Gordon Matta-Clark's unfinished project entitled *Fake Estates*, dating from 1973, in which he purchased fifteen 'gutterscapes', including marginal slithers of land adjacent to parking lots, which were periodically auctioned off by the City of New York. Matta-Clark's interest in these places of extreme marginality can be regarded as a kind of experimental investigation into the limits of the urban land market. Curiously, in the early 2000s, in the wake of renewed interest in Matta-Clark's work, there were efforts by

artists and curators to lease the remaining sites as part of a wider reassessment of his artistic legacy. It is in spaces such as car-park edges that we encounter the ecological dimensions to the oscillation between use value and exchange value that underpins the cyclical characteristics of capitalist urbanization. These car-park ecologies are indirectly generated by the perturbations of capital and the material and conceptual edges to exchange value as a kind of porous frontier for perception and futurity. By inculcating a botanical mode of cultural valorization we are highlighting the arbitrary dimensions to aesthetic judgment, as Adorno once highlighted in his ironic contrast between the landscapes of Tuscany and the outskirts of Gelsenkirchen.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adorno 1973 cited in Waldenfels 1985: 179.

As we wander around the site, we are engaging in a form of ecological loitering since our presence bears no relation to its primary purpose. Construction workers nearby steal an occasional glance in our direction. Car owners seem largely oblivious to our presence as they clutch their mobile phones in rapt attention. The blocks of stone and gravel support a rich variety of flowers, like carefully planted rock gardens: bright red poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) contrast with yellow rocket (*Sisymbrium* spp.) and related plants such as field pennycress (*Thlaspi arvense*) and shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), while in places dense patches of the white-flowered common mouse-ear (*Cerastium fontanum*) are interspersed with bright blue speedwell flowers (*Veronica* spp.). A close inspection of more stony areas reveals dense clusters of yellow flowering stonecrop (*Sedum acre*), a plant that is commonly used for green roofs and other kinds of eco-design. Near the centre of a pile of gravel a lone figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*), a species more associated with damp ground, presents something of an ecological puzzle.

These temporary ecologies driven by construction debris, ecological chance and the interweaving of human and non-human temporalities provide an ironic extension to the Estonian Museum of Architecture's 2023 exhibition *Urban stocks: spolia returns*, which considers the analysis of architectural materials as a form of deconstruction of the built environment. Contra the expansive mode of architectural theory à la Rem Koolhaas devoted to reconnecting architectural practice with the wider speculative dynamics of urban form, the *Urban stocks* exhibition highlights a different kind of multisensory architectonic taxonomy oriented towards the origins and properties of various materials. It is in this context that the ecological potential of gravel, stones and rubble takes on special significance.

These marginal spaces form part of the unnoticed ecologies of urban space yet clearly have greater floristic and aesthetic diversity than nearby municipal green spaces that are subjected to a variety of intensive management regimes including mowing, weeding and other attempts to control nature. The spontaneous or non-designed dimensions to parking-lot ecologies hold a closer affinity to 'wilder' ecologies towards the edge of Tallinn, such as the Pääsküla bog with its remnant ecosystem or the overgrown Paljassaare peninsula that has emerged out of abandoned landscapes derived from Cold War fortifications. Walking these parking lots evokes ghostly traces of previous landscapes portrayed in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979), with its oneiric excursions through strange and abandoned Cold War spaces in and around the city. Indeed, Tarkovsky shot much of his film in Tallinn, including sites near the old Rotermann salt storage facility that now houses the Estonian Museum of Architecture. Tarkovsky's depiction of the journey to The Zone – a mysterious destination where our innermost

desires can be realized – remains a luminous presence in what could be described as the collective cultural consciousness of the contemporary city. In cinematic terms, *Stalker* has become recognized as an early example of an emerging late-modern fascination with various kinds of geopolitical or post-industrial ruins but the film also serves as a more polyvalent meditation on time, decay and mortality, including forms of geopolitical haunting that pervade the present moment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Riley (2017) who adopts a hauntological approach à la Derrida for his analysis of *Stalker* in order to decentre overly auterist or neoromanticist modes of interpretation.

These traces of Cold War aesthetics have an eerie resonance with heightened geopolitical tensions in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: the harbour is now increasingly dominated by grey military vessels rather than tourist ferries connecting to Helsinki and other Baltic ports. Meanwhile, the seabirds wheeling overhead are loudly oblivious to the pervasive political unease. The symbolic resonance of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* in the contemporary city is indicated by the Stalker Alley of bars and restaurants located in the nearby Rotermann quarter. The arthouse film has become a distinctive cultural reference point for the ongoing valorization of urban space.<sup>3</sup> But can a mere parking lot become a contemporary manifestation of Tarkovsky's interest in geographies of walking and serendipitous encounters? If such a place can offer some kind of ecological enchantment then what are the wider implications for how we conceptualize space, memory and the incessant agency of nature? Can a neo-Marxian emphasis on oscillating land values fully capture the richness of these unexpected socio-ecological constellations? What are the conceptual implications of slowing down and looking more closely at the intricacies of the non-human urban realm?

<sup>3</sup> On the strange transformations of post-socialist Tallinn, including the use of ecological motifs in speculative urban development, see Krivý 2021.

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