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CRITICAL REVIEW



Rethinking vacancy within the urbanization process: towards a new research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Vacant land and property have periodically been the focus of urban research but remain undertheorized. However, a recent resurgence of scholarly interest has reinvigorated the topic and offers an opportune moment to critically advance theorization. The paper positions vacant land and property – normatively characterized as “surplus”, “waste”, or “empty” space – as active, lively, and contested within urbanization and urban political processes. It proceeds in three parts. First, it shows how vacant land and property have historically constituted a lacuna in urban research, variously conceptualized as *passive within urbanization* or *active outside urbanization*. Second, it summarizes how recent work on, and *intersecting with*, vacancy has begun to fill these conceptual and empirical gaps. Finally, the paper concludes with a heuristic of *producing* vacancy, *maintaining* vacancy, and *removing* vacancy to outline a research agenda that positions vacant land and property as central to the analysis of urbanization, urban politics, and urban governance.

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Introduction

The place of vacancy within urbanization poses fundamental epistemological challenges. Although vacancy has been periodically centered in urban research, it “is rarely understood as a process in its own right” (Dimitrakou, 2022, p. 998). Often used to signify the absence of development, vacancy is neither easily identifiable nor singular, and the dichotomy of “in use”/“not in use” is inadequate in accounting for its diverse uses even when nominally “empty” (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). In the period since the 2008 global financial crisis (hereafter, GFC), however, urban vacancy, in a variety of forms, became more visible and politicized and has become a growing topic of concern within urban geography.

Vacant and unfinished developments stemming from property bubbles became the “new urban ruins” central to narratives of “crisis” (Kitchin et al., 2014), while stalled development in cities opened possibilities for temporary urbanism (Ferreri, 2021). The

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immediate wave of housing and anti-austerity activism legitimized squatting (Di Felicianantonio, 2017), and the “paradox” of widespread vacancy and rising homelessness made vacancy a key feature of housing movement campaigns (Noterman, 2021). Within this context, a range of actors have sought to intervene in, and made competing claims on, vacant land and property. Bottom-up initiatives have claimed vacant land and property for use as cultural space (Martin et al., 2020), urban gardening (McClintock, 2021), squatted housing (García-Lamarca, 2017), and alternative social centers (Di Felicianantonio, 2017). Policy actors have looked to temporary use and design-led strategies to incentivize the re-use of vacant spaces during the property downturn while paving the way for future investment (Madanipour, 2018). Meanwhile, market actors have sought to reconnect vacant land and property to the property-finance nexus via strategies to resolve “distressed debt” (O’Callaghan et al., 2018) as well as a growing repertoire of approaches to governing vacancy that selectively manage limited access, for example through temporary use or property guardianship arrangements, while protecting against more radical claims on these spaces (Ferreri et al., 2017; Tonkiss, 2013).

This growing importance of vacant land and property as a vector of policy intervention, market reengineering, and political antagonism, has resulted in the emergence of several innovative, disparate, strands of scholarly work. This nascent research framework has, in a variety of ways, sought to account for the role that vacant land and property have played, and might play, in the cities that have emerged in the post-crisis period. Moreover, other work focusing on a range of related research questions has treated vacancy as an active and constituent component in urban processes. In doing so, new research *on*, and *intersecting with*, vacancy has started to fill lacune in existing theorizations and pose new critical questions. Taken together, it makes a strong case for an urban research agenda that places vacancy at its center, which this paper seeks to advance.

I focus here on Global North contexts, rather than attempting to make a case for a universal understanding of vacancy. This choice is based on two factors. First, the Global North focus reflects the temporal and geographical emphasis of new literature on vacancy in following the impacts and aftermath of the GFC. For Western European and North American cities, this trajectory has involved forms of austerity urbanism coupled with the expansion of financialized urban development (Fields, 2022) as well as, arguably, the growth of a new urban precariat (Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019). In contrast, the urban majority of Global South cities “even before the 2008 crash ... was and remains trapped in precarious [employment] ... [and] city-building is predominantly an organic and quasi-state affair” (Simone and Pieterse, 2018, pp. 37–39). Thus, the dynamics underpinning the new visibility and politicization of vacancy in some Global North cities does not neatly map onto forms, and associated politics, of “permanent impermanence” (Andres et al., 2021) characterizing Global South cities. Second, albeit with some variation, Global North contexts share more regulated development systems and formalized property regimes (Blomley, 2016; Slater, 2021). Global South cities have been defined by various forms of self-construction and overall land markets are less tightly, or at least differentially, regulated in urban peripheries (Caldeira, 2017; Schmid et al., 2018). Here vacancy takes on different characteristics in that it exists within systems of more pervasive informalization of both urban life and urbanization. I therefore limit the scope of this review to Europe and North America.

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, it shows how vacant land and property have historically constituted a partial lacuna in urban research, variously conceptualized as *passive within urbanization* or *active outside urbanization*. Second, it briefly summarizes how recent work *on*, and *intersecting with*, vacancy has begun to fill these conceptual and empirical gaps. Finally, drawing together these insights, the paper concludes with a heuristic of *producing* vacancy, *maintaining* vacancy, and *removing* vacancy to outline a research agenda that positions vacant land and property as central to the analysis of urbanization, urban politics, and urban governance.

Critical voids in urban vacancy scholarship

Vacant land and property have occupied an ambivalent position within urban scholarship. In one respect, urban research has long been concerned with questions relating to dereliction, blight, vacant housing, underutilized land, fallow spaces, and ruins from a variety of conceptual and methodological positions (Beauregard, 1994; DeSilvey & Edensor, 2013; Huyssen, 1997; Smith, 1979). In another respect, however, vacancy has rarely been the core research focus of, and remains undertheorized within, these diverse literatures. To draw on the categorization used by Beveridge et al. (2022), debates on vacancy have pivoted around two poles: one viewing vacancy as indicators of urban blight and another viewing vacancy as places of unexpected encounter. The former has tied vacancy to urban development processes, but within such framings vacant land and property are treated as a negative state to actively overcome by stimulating redevelopment and reuse. Consequently, we might say that these debates account for vacancy as a *passive feature of urbanization* processes in that they tend to presuppose a growth-oriented model of urban development, of which vacancy is seen as an aberration. The latter has focused on vacancy's transgressive qualities and emancipatory potential. Various literatures on ruins, squatting cultures, and temporary urbanism have advanced a more affirmative view of vacancy, but which is only possible because of vacancy's marginal position vis-à-vis regulated property systems. As Doron (2000) notes, vacancy allows for transgressive forms of use, but often in what is tacitly understood as a temporary affordance. We might say that these debates account for vacancy as an *active feature outside urbanization*, or more precisely existing in suspension from business-as-usual urban development. In this section, I group a variety of literatures under these two poles and summarize how they treat vacancy.

Blight: vacancy as a passive feature of urbanization

The literature examining vacancy's relation to urban development has generally treated it as an unavoidable and transient, but largely passive, feature of the built environment (Gore & Nicholson, 1991). The literature on land development, for example, includes vacancy as a residual problem related to how flows of investment finance shift over property market cycles (Guy & Henneberry, 2000). A related set of literature uses spatial analysis to measure the elasticity of vacancy over time in cities (Newman et al., 2016), while other research has explored the relationship between housing vacancy and house prices through public datasets (Gentili & Hoekstra, 2019). Hwang and Lee (2020, p. 541), in their analysis of 40 years of vacancy research, suggest that "earlier studies

listed multiple terms for urban voids and used them interchangeably without differentiating them” and offer a reclassification into five generalizable categories. In practice, however, generalizability is difficult given plural and potentially place-specific definitions of vacancy (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). The problem of definition is, in part, related to the considerable diversity in public and private datasets on vacancy, which can fail to distinguish between short-term, seasonal, and long-term vacancy, and between various categories of vacancy (Stokes & O’Callaghan, 2021). But the problem is also ideological in that “the assumption of growth dominates urban scholarship and the pursuit of growth is virtually expected of urban practitioners” (Hackworth, 2014, p. 6). New use/development are constructed as inherently positive outcomes for currently vacant land and property, often without considering the nature of reuse.

The academic planning literature, likewise, tends to reproduce the association of vacancy with blight. From one perspective, planning literature situates vacancy as a residual outcome of property market cycles, which may also be mobilized as a “powerful planning tool, a sort of “reboot button” ... to bring about economic growth”, if and when shifting definitions of “vacant” land and property allow for this (Freire Trigo, 2020, p. 262). A subset of literature has focused on the phenomenon of “shrinking cities” experiencing population and economic decline, with a particular focus on Europe (notably Germany), North America (notably the Rust Belt), and Japan (Hackworth, 2014). Vacancy has been a prominent outcome of shrinkage and research has focused on how municipal governments have sought to manage decline via the removal of vacant properties (Gribat, 2021; Hackworth, 2016). As noted by Hackworth (2014, p. 7), however, it is often unclear “what exactly constitutes a “growth agenda” and how it differs from a “decline agenda”—either on a practical or scholarly level”. Therefore, while the planning literature on shrinking cities often revolves around efforts to resolve vacancy, it reproduces discourses of blight that cast vacancy as a problem to be removed to allow for “smarter” shrinkage and/or new growth. Vacancy is treated as *passive space*, which is assumed to be simply “not in use”. This is not to imply that vacant land and property is *inert* within urban development or a passive receptacle of forces that shape it. But the analytical silence on extended horizons when land is vacant can, in part, result in the weaponization of blight discourses to justify any, even unequal, redevelopment.

This dialectic is picked up within urban geographical work on gentrification and regeneration, where vacancy has been given more analytical attention. While these questions have remained secondary concerns within frameworks for critically interrogating “successful” redevelopment projects (Kallin, 2021), the conceptual and empirical work on gentrification, and particularly work informed by Smith’s (1979) “rent gap” thesis, has put greater emphasis on vacancy as part of the urbanization of capital. The basic premise of the rent gap thesis is that disinvestment in, and devaluation of, urban land and property is a necessary precondition for new rounds of capital investment and accumulation to occur. In articulating the gap between *actualized ground rent* in a situation of devalorized land and property values and *potential ground rent* should the property be redeveloped, the concept speaks to structural and spatial questions about the movement of capital and implicates a range of stakeholders, notably the state, in creating the conditions for the opening and closing of rent gaps (Slater, 2021). Vacancy is a precondition in that “[g]entrification occurs when the gap is wide enough that developers can *purchase shells*

cheaply ...” (Smith, 1979, p. 545, emphasis added). Challenging Hoyt’s theories on a “land value valley”, one of Smith’s key contributions was to disrupt the mainstream assumption that such vacancy was a natural phenomenon driven by neutral market forces. “The “shells” referred to by Hoyt do not simply “appear” as part of some naturally occurring neighborhood “decay”; they are actively produced by clearing out existing residents via all manner of tactics and legal instruments ...” (Slater, 2021, p. 64). Although this literature sees gentrification and decline “not [as] opposites, alternatives, or choices, but rather *tensions* and *contradictions* in the overall system of capital circulation” (Slater, 2021, p. 69), its focus is on how vacancy relates to core pillars of gentrification: the *displacement* of existing residents and the *functional upgrading* of property/land. As such, empirical and theoretical emphasis has mainly been on how investment flows begin to *transform* vacant spaces into something new.

Where urban geography work informed by political economy has focused more fully on the interim period before redevelopment, it has been via the aforementioned emphasis on shrinking cities. For example, work on Rust Belt cities in the United States has been concerned with vacancy as part of a wider research agenda on decline and depopulation (Hackworth, 2014; 2016). This research suggests that vacancy is a way decline is represented and experienced and responding to vacancy has been a core component of urban policy in these cities. As Hackworth (2016, p. 2203) shows, however, interventions in vacancy such as ad-hoc demolition, “[the] accumulated extent [of which] since 1970 is massive”, remain relatively invisible within growth-oriented mainstream urban policy and research. More recently, work on “development failure” (Gray, 2022; Kallin, 2021) and on the “commodification gap” (Bernt, 2022) has complicated the assumption that cities undergo constant marketization, arguing instead that we need to pay closer attention to how institutional and policy contexts facilitate gentrification. However, popular and critical literatures on urbanization have generally focused on the forward momentum of urban change rather than linger on vacancy.

Encounter: vacancy as active outside urbanization

The literature examining vacancy as a place of unexpected encounter has emphasized its potentially transgressive qualities from the perspective of individual experience (Edensor, 2005), collective urban politics (Vasudevan, 2015), and urban design (Desimini, 2015). In a variety of ways, this work has introduced new methodological and conceptual tools that challenge the view of “emptiness” by documenting the material and discursive engagements occurring in and through vacant sites.

Research on industrial ruination has shown how these sites function as important places of memory as well as urban policy intervention for communities navigating processes of economic and cultural decline (Emery, 2022; Mah, 2012). Research has focused on the use of industrial (Edensor, 2005) and institutional (Lorimer & Murray, 2015) ruins as places of exploration and amenity, emphasizing the affective qualities of ruins as spaces of engagement and documenting the pleasure of immersion in the material of decay (Edensor, 2005; Pohl, 2020). This research has developed conceptual tools and used methods including photography, deep mapping, ethnography, and novel interviewing techniques to draw out the meanings, uses, and associations people have for, and make within, discarded spaces.

Ruins are viewed as disrupting narratives of progress and decline. Yet, as DeSilvey and Edensor (2013, p. 467) note, the critical and political potential of such readings are characterized by “a recurrent tension ... between assertions about the potential for ruins to challenge and critique normative social and material formations and counter-claims about their potential associations with regressive politics and aestheticized passivity”. One way to understand this problem is that urban ruins research is limited in accounting for wider urbanization processes. From a cultural, political, and experiential perspective, ruins have been viewed as “voids” (Huyssen, 1997) that not only fall outside urban development trajectories but also symbolic and political imaginaries and culturally sanctioned uses (Till, 2011). In this sense, the discursive role of urban ruins is tied to their material condition as sites partly outside of formal regulation (Doron, 2000). This produces an unresolved tension. Whereas the political potential of ruins is imagined in an abstract sense, the fate of specific ruins is dependent on experimental use permitted within often temporary conditions of vacancy, which are always bound up in ordinary urban political processes, struggles, and compromises that are not usually paid enough attention in this research (see Till, 2021). Moreover, the ruin is itself an exceptional form of vacancy, one that is already invested with specific cultural meanings and associations (Gordillo, 2014). Ordinary vacant spaces, in contrast, remain associated with blight or simply disappear from analytical view.

The research on squatting is concerned with these less visible forms of vacancy. Squatting is “direct action aimed to satisfy a collective need ... [via] mostly temporary appropriation of abandoned spaces ...” (Martínez, 2013, p. 871). Its focus on meeting immediate housing need and creating counter-cultural spaces necessitates clandestine practices and tends towards appropriating under-the-radar vacancy. As research alludes to, squatters amass considerable expertise and local knowledge concerning vacant property.

Squatters tend to do serious research on the specific legal and economic situation of each, apparently in disuse, building ... Higher proportions of vacancy correlate with several factors apart from the otherwise indispensable activists' wishes: economic crisis and slumping construction, reduction in rental housing stock, privatization of formerly public houses ... etc. Accordingly, the opportunities for squatters seeking a place depend upon these macro dynamics to provide a quantity of effective spaces ready to be squatted. Fortunately for squatters, capitalist urban speculation is based, among other things, on a convenient stock of empty buildings which allows owners to delay works or sales for a certain period of time, while negotiating the better price ... Only if there was a total occupation of the built environment in a given moment, without any loss or waste of owned space, would squatting be impossible. Quite the contrary, that ideal situation never occurs ... (Martínez, 2013, p. 872)

As this quote implies, squatting implicates the role of vacancy in speculative urban development practices and addresses a “variety of claims beyond the material needs of squatters themselves, denouncing housing shortage, land and real estate speculation, and the privatization of the urban environment” (Di Felicianantonio, 2017, p. 716). Furthermore, these actions can at times influence urban renewal policy (Holm & Kuhn, 2011). However, despite these insights, the literature has mostly emphasized the autonomous urban-social-movement aspects (Martínez, 2013). As such, while squatting research points to the dynamic relationship between vacancy and urban development and alludes to squatters' in-depth knowledge of vacancy processes at the local level,

this is not its core concern. Squatting praxis sees vacancy as a structural outcome of capitalist urbanization, but also operates on a pragmatic basis seeing some occupations as inherently temporary allowances created by gaps in development. And, indeed, where temporary occupations are given some regularized status, these outcomes are viewed ambivalently in terms of perceived loss or autonomous status (Holm & Kuhn, 2011). Squatting research frames the political economic tension around vacancy as generative but is more concerned with the forms and fate of the autonomous spaces this enables.

Whereas squatting research foregrounds contestation between squatters and property owners and/or the state, temporary urbanism emphasizes the possibility of collaboration. Temporary, marginal, and political uses of vacant buildings and land have been heralded for their capacity to foreground use values that challenge normative development agendas and foster novel collaborative processes of planning (Colomb, 2012; Ferreri, 2021). In Berlin, for example, the city's "voids and expanses of wasteland in the city had been integral to this sense of possibility" (Beveridge et al., 2022, p. 283) that was tapped into by the turn to temporary urbanism. Early site-specific experiments were negotiated through individual agreements with property owners as well as through squatting. Over time, the visibility and perceived success of these initiatives led to high-profile projects explicitly designed as temporary use, and temporary urbanist ideals were subsequently harnessed in Berlin's urban development policies and official city branding (Colomb, 2012). Research has considered temporary urbanism in terms of its capacity to transform the use value of vacant land and property and to reorient planning to be more responsive to vacancy. However, with notable exceptions (e.g. Andres & Golubchikov, 2016) until recently this research has focused on specific case studies and moments of political antagonism, thus eliding longer-term trajectories. As Ferreri (2021, p. 29) notes, "the central assumption shared by all proponents of temporary urbanism is that it is better to use vacant spaces such as empty shops, even if temporarily, than to let them lay empty". But as the critical literature has challenged this.

On the one hand, by existing in the spatial and temporal margins of more routine urban configurations, pop-ups expose cracks in those systems and offer alternatives. However, by the same token, pop-ups close up those gaps by occupying them, posing a distraction from sites where dominant systems have broken down and precluding practices that might use those cracks more radically (Harris, 2015, p. 597)

Overall then, a rich and diverse body of scholarship has progressed from an understanding that vacant land and property often exists as liminal space that escapes strict forms of social and spatial control. These literatures have shown how vacant spaces act as affective sites of memory (ruins), as a core contradiction within capitalist urbanization and exploitable resource (squatting), and as a fulcrum through which urban use and planning could be reimagined (temporary urbanism). However, the literature on unexpected encounter foregrounds vacancy against the backdrop of urbanization without fully thinking through the relationality this suggests. Thus, they fall short of conceptualizing vacancy's multiple roles in processes of urban transformation.

Urban vacancy in the post-crisis context

The prevalence and political visibility of new forms of urban vacancy following the 2008 GFC prompted renewed research interest and raised more complicated empirical and

conceptual questions. This has included new research *on*, and *intersecting with*, vacancy. While disparate, the creative potential suggested by this nascent literature highlights the potential for more dynamic, relational conceptualizations that foreground vacancy's role in capitalist urbanization. In this section, I offer a thematic summary of recent work.

New ruins

The ruins created by the GFC demonstrated an intensification of boom–bust cycles and popularized a new type of ruin, reflected in vast landscapes of vacant and unfinished developments. The strange combination of “new and derelict” structures led Kitchin et al. (2014) to define them as “new ruins”, a “neoliberal topography” characterized by an abandoned future rather than an abandoned past. By conceptualizing *how* such spaces functioned as ruins, these studies opened new questions on how ruins are *produced* (see O'Callaghan & Di Felicianantonio, 2021). New work raised questions about incompleteness (Arboleda, 2023) and the fluid temporalities of both development and ruination. Brito-Henriques et al. (2019), for example, use the Matinha Gasworks site in Lisbon to explore the relationality between processes of ruination and development over time. Pohl (2020; 2022) draws on geographical and psychoanalytical theory to examine how ruins in Detroit and Bangkok function as collective, and changing, “rem(a)inder[s] of loss”. This understanding of ruination as a subjective and ongoing process is reflected in Gordillo's (2014) distinction between “ruin” and “rubble”. While the former is a Western construct dependent on a particular narrative construction of progress and decline, the latter seeks to account for a multiplicity of historical meanings, contemporary uses, and future possibilities invested in nominally empty sites.

An analogous body of work has conceptualized abandonment as an active and ongoing process in which life and survival continue for residents of places normatively viewed as “ruined” (Dawney, 2020; Safransky, 2018). Dawney (2020) draws on new theories of ruin to explore ongoing practices of inhabitation in the former Soviet town of Visaginas, Lithuania, emphasizing ruin not as a fixed state but as a liminality enabling and constraining possible forms of life. Emery (2022) employs a similarly fluid critical lens to the ruins of Miners' Welfare institutions in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. Importantly, such work has shifted the register of abandonment and decline from a melancholic frame to more complex articulations of political agency.

Housing and struggles over property

The politics of vacancy is centered in housing movement research. Following the squares movements in 2011, occupation has grown as a core tactic and strategy used by a range of urban social movements (Nic Lochlainn, 2023). In countries like Spain and Italy, the convergence of squatters and wider anti-austerity and housing movements coalesced in actions that legitimized mass squatting (Di Felicianantonio, 2017; García-Lamarca, 2017). Although the largescale occupations have since subsided, occupation remains a common tactic within the repertoire of new housing movements. Research on radical housing movements' use of occupation tactics has emphasized vacant land and property as a site of political antagonism that explicitly foregrounds moments of contestation between use and exchange value (Noterman, 2021), and political subjectification (García-Lamarca, 2017).

As cities have been gripped by a global housing crisis in the years following the GFC, housing activists have called out the seeming contradiction between high vacancy rates and growing evictions and homelessness (Watt, 2016), utilizing strategies like walking tours, posterizing buildings, and social media campaigns to highlight vacancy (Di Felicianantonio & O’Callaghan, 2020) as well as occupations (Roy, 2017). Moreover, driven by precarization and financialization of rental housing (Fields, 2022), narratives contrasting vacancy with growing homelessness and housing insecurity have been mainstreamed in civic campaigns and concerted policy measures. While the housing insecurity/vacancy contradiction is often viewed as a country-specific “paradox” (e.g. Gentili & Hoekstra, 2019), it is better conceived as structural to, if with significant variation, vacancy’s role within urbanization.

A productive point of overlap has been in the conversation between vacancy and critical property theory. Recent scholarship from legal geography (Blomley, 2016) and urban geography influenced by critical race (Safransky, 2018) and postcolonial theory (Blatman-Thomas & Porter, 2019) has sought to challenge normative Western understandings of property, shifting from property as material object to property as “a bundle of negotiated social, political, legal and economic relationships that confer value through exclusion” (Safransky, 2018, p. 502). Critical property theory shows that rights are contingent on the alignment of a set of relations that encompass forms of classification (ownership), communication (boundaries denoting who can use it), and enforcement (property law, e.g. trespass law) (Blomley, 2016), which variously position different participants and their interactions in ways that organize “forms of conditional access” (Blomley, 2020, p. 37). Thus, for Blomley (2020, p. 38), property is a “relational technology”, which is better conceived of as “not an individual entitlement but a social institution that involves multiple people, all with interests in a shared resource”.

While not its core focus, vacancy plays an important role empirically and conceptually in this literature. Blomley (2008, p. 312), for example, shows how the vacant Woodward’s store in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside provided a contested space through which “activists have long (and often successfully) invoked a language of residency, community and permanency” to claim an “urban commons for the poor” against gentrification and displacement. Recent work in the US context has used the contestations over the right to use and inhabit vacant spaces to examine the intertwining of dispossession and abandonment through the lens of property and racial capitalism (Roy, 2017). Noterman (2021), for example, has contrasted Philadelphia activist’ claims to “take back vacant property” with the more technocratic approach to creating a public land bank, arguing that the legal and technical tools employed by the city render many existing community uses invisible. Safransky (2018) has developed a “historical diagnostic” to reevaluate how claims to land justice in Detroit are mobilised via a reappraisal of historic dispossessions and legal exclusions of property. Vacancy is emphasized here as something that is produced through ongoing processes of racialized dispossession, even as it is claimed by communities as a resource for inhabitation. Rather than vacancy being understood as a specific and *observable condition* that property takes, the “relational technology” lens positions vacancy on a *continuum of negotiated forms of access*. This work brings a range of other stakeholders into the analytical frame, opening questions about how conditional forms of access are managed by property law, “unsanctioned” access is protected against by property

owners and the state, and how communities can produce “counterposed property claims that are collective in scope” (Blomley, 2008, p. 316).

Real estate and development processes

Work on the financialization of housing, land, and real estate has pioneered new methodologies – ranging from a close analysis of investors practices and profiles, unpicking the role of “prop-tech” platforms, and processes of valuation (Fields, 2022; Murphy, 2020) – to examine how real estate (including vacant land and property) is assembled, abstracted, and translated into a globally-tradable financial asset. Recently the “assetization” and mobilization of vacant or “underused” “land banks” has begun to be understood as a central dynamic within post-crisis financialization (Ward & Swyngedouw, 2018). Ward (2021, p. 250) shows how “... the creation of liquidity through fictitious capital brings to the fore the credit-driven asset inflation dynamics ...” by connecting the corporate practices of companies managing land assets with their grounded impacts in cities. A key outcome of “financial assets ... follow[ing] their own logics of circulation in financial markets.” (Ward, 2021, p. 254) is that speculation increasingly occurs through land that is, and *remains*, vacant. Christophers (2018) has also implicated the conflict between vacant land’s use and exchange values in his history of land privatization in Britain. He highlights how discourses of vacancy as wasteful are leveled at the public sector to justify privatization, whereas “... it is routinely taken for granted that the private sector *really does need more land* – that the reason it cannot or does not do the things the government wants it to do, such as build more houses, is that it lacks the land required” (Christophers, 2018, p. 168). He further notes,

... it is important, for all sorts of reasons, not to think about land banking only in this “negative” sense, as a passive and dependent outcome of something else that is *not* done. It is important to think of it instead as something that is actively done – in terms, that is to say, of developers consciously, strategically deciding to bank land rather than build on it ... And banked land “works” for developers in other profitable ways, too. Not only does it keep supply below demand, but developers can make money from it by speculating on future changes in its value within what is ... a volatile land market (Christophers, 2018, pp. 300–303)

From another perspective, new work has argued that “... the failure of capitalist production in the urban environment [should] be posed as an essential research question ...” (Gray, 2022, p. 3). As noted already, research has overwhelmingly focused on “successful” gentrification projects and therefore the temporal entry-point has been on the moment of land redevelopment (Kallin, 2021). New research concerning the longstanding failure to deliver regeneration in de-industrialized areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh, despite substantial state-led schemes, has revisited theorizations of the rent gap. As Kallin (2021, p. 615) notes:

[the rent gap] suggests that potential *leads* and realisation *follows*; the idea of higher profit prefigures the making of actual profit. In between those moments (of fantasy first and capitalisation second) agency lies, and this should not be mistaken for the simple passage of time.

The work on development failure shifts the focus to what happens during periods when development is “stalled”. Reflecting on the period between the GFC and a recent

resurgence of development activity in Edinburgh's waterfront, Kallin (2021, p. 625) highlights how as land was "... being held *intentionally* empty ... all the while, that powerful relation between realized ground rent and potential ground rent was rolling along, ownership changed, plans changed, and dreams of what could be possible were slowly forged from the shadows of crisis". Crucial during such interim periods is the role of the state in filling the "state subsidy gap" (Gray, 2022) to de-risk development for potentially profitable future private investment. This suggests an increasingly fraught dynamic around "the extent [to which] financialisation ... has undermined this statecraft function of gentrification" (Ward, 2021, p. 2) and whereby the state must play an increasingly interventionist, facilitative, role in private development. The work on development failure foregrounds the discursive as well as material role that vacant land and property plays in this fraught dynamic. Vacancy is a means to inscribe territorial stigma to further devolourization and as cipher to launch future development visions (Kallin, 2021). Importantly, however, its discursive role is comparatively invisible during periods when development is stalled. In stretching out the analytical focus, development failure research can be seen as part of an emerging political economy of vacancy.

Planning and governance

New research has begun to focus on urban vacancy as a site of governance and more subtle market interventions and reengineering. This has included how vacancy is targeted in resolving the spatial impacts of property and debt bubbles (O'Callaghan et al., 2018) and the mainstreaming of temporary urbanism (Martin et al., 2020). The popularity of temporary urbanism exploded as a response to widespread vacancy and stalled property markets resulting from the GFC. However, while the post-crash period saw a celebration of the possibilities of vacant spaces "... the loose use is subservient to the sanctioned one" (Desimini, 2015, p. 282) and alternative uses have given way to a return of highly commercial uses in many cities. The critical literature on temporary urbanism situated the phenomenon conjuncturally (as a response to specific crisis conditions) and longitudinally (analyzing the trajectory of temporary use projects over time to assess their outcomes for different stakeholders). This literature critiqued the outcomes of temporary urbanist projects on those grounds, showing them as furthering gentrification agendas and deepening the precarity of vulnerable groups (Madanipour, 2018). Research has also emphasized the often-voluntary labor and everyday practices "that go into the creation, maintenance and use of a building" in temporary urban contexts (Andres & Kraftl, 2021, p. 10) and how temporary projects produce alternative forms of non-commercial value (Harris, 2015).

Mara Ferreri's (2021, p. 11) work on London is exemplary in treating temporary urbanism as "a *form* of doing urbanism through ephemeral and short-lived projects ... [mainstreamed] as an answer to the effects of a global recession ... [that] has since become a celebrated while also problematic urban practice at a time of austerity". In taking a longitudinal approach, Ferreri's work has been able to ask questions around how spaces become vacant, how their vacancy becomes an opportunity for alternative as well as entrepreneurial experiments, and how some uses get sanctioned on a temporary or "permanent" basis while others get confined to what "could have happened". Firth et al. (2017, p. 2) employed the creative methodology of "uchronian mapping" as a way

“representing possible uses (of temporarily vacant land) that could disrupt or at least challenge linear understandings of urban development”. Their approach to mapping “the multiple and contradictory visions and hopes that are mobilized by the act of occupying a vacant space” (Firth et al., 2017, pp. 2–3) works against the amnesia produced under the presumption of growth and the invisibility of vacancy during interim periods. An emerging literature has also begun to uncover a range of less visible interventions in vacant land and property at various scales of governance. For example, research on property guardianship (Ferreri et al., 2017), the production of vacancy through eviction technologies (Baker, 2021; Seymour & Akers, 2021) or green gentrification (McClintock, 2021) has demonstrated that multiple actors intervene to shape the visibility of, access to, and potentialities of vacant land and property.

Research on the governance of vacancy has overlapped with literature on slow planning (Moore-Cherry & Bonnin, 2020; Raco et al., 2018). Emerging in response to the trends in “fast policy” (Peck & Theodore, 2015), an analytical focus on slow planning seeks to capture greater complexity of property markets’ development and investment horizons. Fast policy narrowly frames temporalities of land transformation, while hiding other moments in these temporalities when land is made vacant, kept off market, policed, and out of sight ahead of revalorization (c.f. Christophers, 2018). For example, development interests actively manage the visibility, access to and competing claims on vacant landbanks, using ownership to push for developer-favorable changes to planning regulations and policy (Waldron, 2019). In this way, tracking the roles, strategies, and practices of state and market actors in the *governance of vacant land and property* also allows us to identify and critically analyze *significant facets of urban governance* that take place outside of the narrow and predictable temporalities of “fast” development.

A research agenda for rethinking urban vacancy

The significant array of new work *on*, and *intersecting with*, vacancy over the last decade and a half has quickly advanced conceptual and empirical understandings. However, these insights are spread across diverse research foci and conceptual approaches, and there have been limited interventions that bring them into conversation (e.g. Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; OCallaghan & Di Felicianantonio, 2021). In this final section, I propose heuristic for advancing a research agenda that extends these analyses through three lenses *producing vacancy*, *maintaining vacancy*, and *removing vacancy*.

Producing vacancy

We can think about how vacancy is *produced* on several geographical scales, as well as conceptual levels of abstraction. Existing work has already examined the production of vacancy at site level (Firth et al., 2017; Safransky, 2018), local area (Kallin, 2021), and urban scale (Seymour & Akers, 2021). These approaches identify the importance of financial instruments, property law, and planning to produce vacancy in different contexts. By shifting away from the “negative” view of vacancy to consider it as actively produced and doing work for various stakeholders (Christophers, 2018), research could look critically at how specific sites become vacant. At a structural level, furthering the research agenda on development failure can pose questions about how urban policy and planning

systems *themselves produce conditions for vacancy*, rather than vacancy *indicating their failure*. At a foundational level, a framework drawing vacancy into discussion with critical property studies could consider vacant land and property as emerging from property regimes, which they un- and re-make on a continual basis (Roy, 2017). Considered from this basis, we can conceive of “vacancy” as the *right to leave property unused*.

This framework opens critical research questions concerning how the construction and evolution of property rights in specific contexts allow for certain forms of vacancy to be produced and protected by legal sanction. Further research could advance place-based archaeologies of vacancy/property as a relational technology in several ways. It could combine discourse analysis with legal geographies to understand how property rights confer rights to leave property vacant in specific ways. This research could also take a historical and relational approach that seeks to understand how conflicts between property rights and vacancy are resolved during moments when vacancy and ancillary tropes (e.g. dereliction, abandonment) are identified as prominent urban problems. The current paradox identified by housing activists around vacancy/homelessness (Watt, 2016) offers a guide here. Research could analyze how vacancy has been discursively framed at different moments (e.g. as dereliction, underutilization, or surplus property) and in relation to different urban policy challenges, which in turn establish specific understandings of “vacancy” and lead to policy interventions. Moreover, shifting property rights to leave unused could be explored via qualitative interviews with experts in property law, planning/policy/politics, as well as squatters, activists, and local communities, to reflect on how political tensions between property rights and the “problem” of vacancy are navigated in situated contexts. These methods could be used to reveal more active, dynamic, understandings of vacancy. An approach to thinking about *producing* vacancy would, firstly, bring a range of new stakeholders into the analytical frame and show how their actions reproduce vacancy over time. Secondly, such an expanded approach to thinking about vacancy as an active process could help re-evaluate its role in shaping wider urban processes related to land development, planning, and political struggles.

Maintaining vacancy

The idea of *maintaining* vacancy might seem counterintuitive, but it is consistent with several recent innovations in the literature. Vacant land and property are maintained on a material level via owners managing security and risk (Bennett, 2021; Pohl, 2020), as a financial asset (Ward & Swyngedouw, 2018), and as a discursive possibility via managing competing claims on use (O’Callaghan et al., 2018). A research agenda to understand how vacancy is maintained centers vacant land and property within contemporary development politics and urban political struggles. We can think about *maintaining* vacancy as operating at the interface of political-economic tensions between use and exchange value. Research could deploy an approach to “mapping” and “tracking” to document and work across the dynamics of use and exchange value creation in vacant land and property, particularly to tease out the tensions between the temporalities of financialization and development agendas (Kallin, 2021).

To examine the use/exchange dynamics, research could draw on the approaches used in the land financialization literature and those used in development failure

work. The close attention to developmental discourses, shifting planning policies, and the role of the state, operationalized in the development failure literature, provides a framework for interrogating vacancy within an area-based context. Whereas the approach to site biographies in the temporary urbanism literature (Firth et al., 2017) links this with finer grain details on specific parcels of vacant land and property in terms of both development paths taken and not taken. Approaching mapping as a transitory, contingent, and relational method (Kitchin & Dodge, 2007), research could trace and visualize vacant land's uses over time and use "deep mapping" (Bodenhamer et al., 2015) to layer information about case sites. These relational mappings ostensibly provide site histories but are also present-oriented in that they help explain use/development potential and limitations in the current conjuncture. By combining "deep mapping" with detailed qualitative research on case sites, research could *identify and temporalize multiple changing forms of use (value)* on "vacant" sites. Furthermore, as well as moments of use, such a method could identify and analyze the strategies which market actors use to manage vacant land and property by making it (in)visible at different stages in planning and development temporalities. For example, examining how absent owners monitor and police access to vacant land and property and decide on when to intervene in cases of squatting (McArdle, 2022). These mappings could be brought into dialogue with a close tracking of company, land registry, planning permission, and property transaction data, using housing and property data assemblages (Dalton, 2020) to unpack how vacant land's translation, abstraction, and trading as a financial asset is central to urban development. Research could draw on the analysis of property data assemblages to *identify and temporalize changing forms of exchange (value)* (through, e.g. financial valuations, land zoning, and ownership patterns) (Nic Lochlainn, 2021). This approach could address questions of how development actors manage their strategic land banks as both financial and material concerns, for example by "releasing" vacant land for development at the appropriate time. Bringing these literatures and timelines together offers a means to conceptualize a framework for researching vacant land and property as *active within urbanization*, showing how vacancy evolves through shifting forms of use and exchange value and produces wider use and exchange values in urban space.

Removing vacancy

While *removing* vacancy has traditionally been the main analytical focus of urban research, some questions remain underexplored regarding vacancy's role in urbanization processes. As noted, new work on the governance of vacancy has shown how different stakeholders articulate the "challenge and opportunity" in fundamentally different, oppositional, ways (O'Callaghan et al., 2018), while research on property guardianship (Ferreri et al., 2017) and new mechanisms of temporary use leases (Tonkiss, 2013) suggest how market actors are increasingly seeking to manage vacancy. Centering vacant land and property as both a site of urban governance and as a key factor in the wider *governance of the urban* can develop "a stronger set of *temporal imaginaries and outlooks*" (Raco et al., 2018, p. 15).

Research could extend this work in three ways. First, urban policy and its framing of and intervention in the problem of vacant land and property currently lacks a systematic

overview of what “active land management” approaches achieve. Reframing questions on vacancy away from the presumption for development, research could focus on how vacancy and dereliction are mobilized as a *rationale* for urban regeneration, how planning instruments and policy programs are tuned to respond to the challenges of “unlocking” vacant land and property for redevelopment, and the outcomes of these responses. Second, the literature on squatting and radical housing politics (García-Lamarca, 2017; Noterman, 2021) as well as temporary urbanism (Colomb, 2012) offer approaches to contextualize temporary, marginal, and political uses in relation to wider urban political claims. Such claims can operate between the urban, neighborhood, and site-specific context, whereby individual occupations may be shut down but their claims to vacancy persist in some form (McArdle, 2022). Combining the insights of this work with those on subtle market interventions in vacancy, research could focus on the question of how, and under what conditions, temporary uses come to an end. By putting political claims on vacancy in dialogue with strategies to maintain and govern vacancy, we can see how contestations over vacancy shape possible urban futures. Finally, research could interrogate the growing tension between financialization and the statecraft of gentrification (Ward, 2021) and how this tension is mediated by planning and property law. Research could analyze legal disputes over planning permissions through this lens, utilizing Blomley’s (2020) concept of multiple stakeholders in property to analyze power relations. A concomitant focus on the analysis of case law where property rights have been challenged, upheld, or overturned based on the “common good” could be used to assess what potential futures are ruled in or out for vacant land and property, while analysis of direct-action could assess their impact. Such a methodological approach would generate both empirical (policy and legal interventions) and conceptual (theorizing vacant land and property as a space of urban governance) insights.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the role played by vacant land and property in urbanization processes has historically constituted a lacuna in urban geography, but a range of new research *on*, and *intersecting with*, vacancy have advanced a range of exciting new directions. In contrast to “successful” redevelopment projects, vacant land and property – though significant in shaping use and exchange value, political imaginaries, and governance priorities around use of and access to urban space – can be largely invisible, appearing substantially only through processes of land transformation that herald vacancy’s *disappearance*. Alternatively, work on vacancy as a site of encounter challenges the view of emptiness by documenting the material and discursive engagements occurring in and through vacant land and property. However, in focusing on exceptional forms of vacancy (ruins), social movement practices (squatting), or forms of alternative use that are only given urban space in what Ferreri (2021, p. 164) calls “chunks of time”, this work in different ways treats vacancy as *active space outside*, or in suspension of, business-as-usual urban development and, therefore, does not fully account for its relationality in urbanization.

Recent urban geographical has significantly expanded empirical and conceptual understandings in three ways. The first is a shift from seeing vacancy as a material thing to seeing it as a relational process. This shift is reflected across several strands of

literature, ranging from the focus on how ruins are made and unmade (Pohl, 2022), to how sites are made vacant prior to temporary use experiments (Ferreri, 2021), and on the ambivalence between supposedly empty housing and inhabitation (Dimitrakou, 2022). The second is a greater emphasis on the politics of vacancy. Research has focused on how vacancy is produced, for example by eviction (Seymour & Akers, 2021), how supposedly vacant land and property is inhabited (Safransky, 2018), and how power dynamics including planning (McClintock, 2021; Noterman, 2021) and property law (Blomley, 2020) are mobilized to remove certain users and uses to support redevelopment in the name of “removing” vacancy. The third is a more nuanced approach to temporalities of vacancy. Research has followed the boom–bust cycles of cities after the GFC to explore how vacancy is rebooted (O’Callaghan et al., 2018), extended the longitudinal and comparative focus of temporary urbanism to reveal processes of change (Ferreri, 2021; Martin et al., 2020), and advanced deeper temporal engagements with development failure to re-evaluate the role of public and private stakeholders in planning and development (Kallin, 2021; Raco et al., 2018).

My aim here has been to build on, and synthesize, the insights of this body of work. While vacancy has become a topic of concern across diverse literatures, it has not always been the primary conceptual lens. However, as I argue here, there is significant scope for an approach that places vacancy as the center of the analysis of urbanization, urban politics, and urban governance. In the service of this aim, I have offered a heuristic of *producing*, *maintaining*, and *removing* vacancy to capture the relational role that vacancy plays within these processes. These frames are intended to be overlapping rather than discrete. By framing them as specific research agendas, however, my aim is to identify and highlight methodological and conceptual pathways to expand the analysis of vacancy within urbanization processes.

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