

# From Terrain Vague to Vague Farm: Cultivating Urban Vacant Land through Practices of Commoning

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*Terrain Vague*  
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urban commons  
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## Introduction

In contemporary cities, there is a noticeable presence of ambiguous and undefined open spaces, lacking specific functions and economic productivity, which appear abandoned and uncontrolled, awaiting future developments. These spaces, defined for example as *Terrain Vague*, *Vacant Land* or *Urban Voids*, can be understood as the results or waste of increasingly invasive and rapid urbanisation processes, extending to new scales of influence. A com-

plexity captured by the theory of *Planetary urbanization* (Brenner & Schmid, 2011) for example, which not only challenges the traditional dichotomy between urban and non-urban—nowadays obsolete—but also conceives of urbanised territory at a larger scale, as part of regional landscapes and ecologies. These are shaped by spatial arrangements that influence ecological and ecosystemic structures, biodiversity (Clément, 2022), as well as the planning, functions, and flows of hu-

*Different strands of scientific literature use various terminologies to refer to types of urban spaces without productive function, abandoned and legally uncontrolled. These include at least the following three: “Terrain Vague”, “vacant lot”, and “urban voids”. Although different, they all similarly evoke spaces where emptiness prevails over fullness and is in a perpetual state of suspension. These spaces, because of their characteristics and their temporary complete availability, are used daily by different communities, spontaneously and informally, through different*

appropriations and uses, and by nature, where species not allowed elsewhere and in the absence of human control find refuge, unusual encounters can occur. Over the last twenty years, a series of projects, activities and practices have begun to emerge in these spaces, such as especially recent park and garden projects in Europe, that retain or incorporate spontaneous vegetation, undefined functions, and a wild aesthetic, reflecting a growing interest in and new appreciation of these spaces, particularly among landscape architects. Among these types of projects and initiatives, those that we will define here as *Vague Farm*, undoubtedly stand out. By this term, we refer to projects and initiatives that, while mainly based on the creation and management of urban garden and activities related to agriculture and local food production, also aim to preserve some of the informal and spontaneous characteristics of the previous *Terrain Vague*. This paper proposes a first attempt at defining *Vague Farms*, through the analysis of five case studies intentionally chosen from different European cities, to show the simultaneous emergence of these practices. To achieve this, it proposes:

- i) a brief theoretical introduction to *Terrain Vague* and its relationship

- with agriculture and communing (theoretical background);
- ii) a reading of these community urban gardens projects through the lenses of *Urban Commons* (observed experiences and results);
- iii) a proposal of a definition of *vague farms* projects and their characteristics (discussion).

man life (Forman, 1995). *Terrain Vague* spaces, although often conceived as waste, hold significant intrinsic value for the local community and can reactivate regeneration processes and *communing* from participation and bottom-up perspective: “Spaces discarded by productive logic but valuable for local communities” (Perrone and Russo 2019, p. 13).

In fact, because of their characteristics and their temporary availability, these spaces are used daily by different communities, spontaneously and informally, through different appropriations and uses, and by nature, where species not allowed elsewhere and in the absence of human control could find refuge, and unusual encounters can occur. Among the many activities carried out daily and spontaneously in *Terrain Vague* spaces, one of the most frequent is undoubtedly agriculture, for two reasons: on the one hand because it is often linked to the origin, history and traditions of these spaces; on the other hand, since it does not necessitate buildings or fixed structures, but rather offers a pleasant op-

portunity for socializing outdoors, urban farming provides the potential to grow food and vegetables. In essence, it can serve as a relatively straightforward and cost-effective means of harnessing the potential of such spaces. One of the most complex challenges concerning *Terrain Vague* spaces lies in how to intervene with projects, plans, or formal activities while preserving something of the nature or characteristics of *Terrain Vague*, as Solà-Morales already observed in the first definition of these spaces:

“How can architecture act in *Terrain Vague* without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason? Undoubtedly, through attention to continuity: not the continuity of the planned, efficient, and legitimated city, but of the flows, the energies, the rhythms established by the passing of time and the loss of limits” (1995, p. 123).

The ambiguity lies in designing a formal intervention without debasing, distorting or completely erasing the values and potential of *Terrain Vague* spaces. How can one plan, delimit, and shape something that by its nature is vague, indeterminate, and continually changing?

Over the last twenty years, a series of projects, activities and practices have begun to emerge in these spaces which, although often originating from more informal contexts, have begun processes of formalization and relations with institutions and local authorities (Gandy, 2013a; Hou, 2010; Kamvasinou, 2006, 2020; Mariani & Barron, 2014; Zetti & Rossi, 2018). This has led to

the formation of associations and to the implementation of formal designed projects, sometimes also with the aim of securing funds and guarantees for the management of the space. It is important to emphasize that any *Terrain Vague*, upon undergoing a designed, formal, and institutional intervention aimed at altering its original state, theoretically and practically ceases to exist as a *Terrain Vague*. This is because such interventions inherently change the space’s status, eliminating its abandonment, lack of function, and suspended state. However, the novelty of these projects lies precisely in their ability to transition from a state of informality and spontaneity to one of formalization and structure, while still preserving some of the essence of the original *Terrain Vague* spaces. Consequently, we sought projects and practices in these spaces that, while transforming and discontinuing their previous *Terrain Vague* status, also preserve, maintain, or draw inspiration from some of the principles and essence of *Terrain Vague* as defined previously. Amongst these types of practices, we focused on five projects and practices (observed experiences) that were primarily based on agriculture or farming, and thus spatially focused on the implementation, management and maintenance of an urban community garden or farm.

The presence and combination of these characteristics in the observed experiences has led to a proposal for a definition of *Vague Farm*. By this term, we refer to the type of projects and

initiatives that: while mainly based on the creation and management of an urban garden and activities related to agriculture and local food production, at the same time have an approach that aims to preserve some of the informal and spontaneous characteristics of the previous *Terrain Vague*. In the approach of the projects and practices observed, *Terrain Vague* spaces are not conceived merely as empty lots to be filled or cleared, but as sites where existing features and potentials are respected and integrated into new designs, management and functioning. Hence, a pivotal question arises: Can formal projects and practices in these spaces, supported institutionally, effectively achieve their goals while preserving or enhancing the distinct characteristics of *Terrain Vague*?

While public support through funding or land concessions is not a necessary element for the establishment of *Vague Farms*, it can certainly facilitate the realization of these practices and projects. In all the observed cases, public institutions or local authorities played a crucial role in the development and formalization of these practices, albeit with a different approach from the traditional one: instead of imposing top-down strategies and projects, they encouraged and supported the emergence of grassroots initiatives and locally proposed projects. However, public support and the formalization process also come with inherent risks. Public funding or support can be withdrawn for various reasons, or new plans may be developed for *Terrain*

*Vague* spaces to increase their economic productivity or market value.

The concept of *Vague Farms*, that emerges from the intersection of observations of certain emerging practices and the theoretical lenses employed. The definition stems from two sources: first, the observation of five emerging practices selected from five European cities, narrowing the focus at this stage to a limited context; and second, the interpretation and reinterpretation of these practices considering theoretical literature on *Terrain Vague* spaces and *commoning* practices. To outline and deduce this new concept from the experiences, the paper offers: i) a brief theoretical introduction to *Terrain Vague* and its relationship with agriculture, aiming to define the characteristics of these spaces; ii) an examination of five emerging practices through the selected theoretical lenses of Urban Commons; and iii) a proposal for a definition of *Vague Farms* projects and their characteristics, derived from the observation of the implementation and management methods of the practices studied.

A comprehensive analysis of these emerging practices within *Terrain Vague* spaces, alongside their reinterpretation through the lens of *commoning* theory, can enhance our understanding and systematization of these projects. This approach also helps in grasping the transition from *Terrain Vague* spaces to newly cultivated, community-managed areas, culminating in the formulation of a new concept: *Vague Farms*.

## Methodology

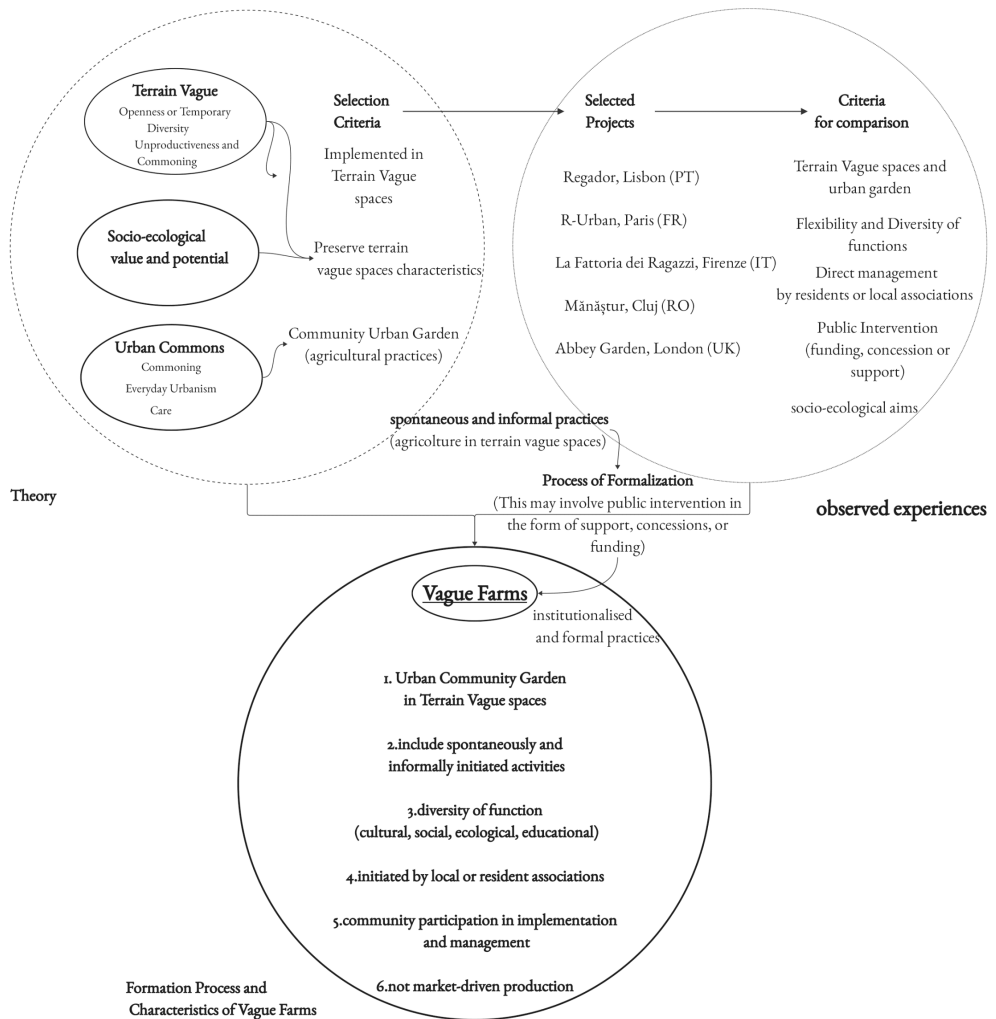
Methodologically, the research consists of a selection, description, and qualitative comparison of five observed experiences of community urban gardens projects implemented in Europe in previously abandoned *Terrain Vague* spaces. This decision was driven by practical reasons, including familiarity with the context and proximity to the projects. The authors also conducted brief exploratory visits to all the projects, except for R-Urban, to observe the novelty of these emerging practices, termed *Vague Farms*, even though they did not engage deeply with participants or conduct interviews.

The objective is to reach a first attempt at a definition of *Vague Farms*, i.e. emerging formal community urban garden projects, implemented and formalized with the support of public institutions but always initiated and proposed by residents and grassroots associations, with the participation of architects and specialist, whose approach aims to preserve some of the characteristics, informal activities and values that existed before the intervention, enhancing the set of informal knowledge and practices of the community.

These observed experiences, which are entirely designed and managed by the community, were chosen based on three criteria: i) they are relatively recent urban community garden projects in European cities; ii) they are located in spaces that were previously *Terrain Vague*; iii) they aim to preserve some of the fundamental char-

acteristics of these former *Terrain Vague* spaces (such as community and spontaneous uses, direct management by users diversity, flexibility, and non-profit purposes).

In the central section of the article, a brief description and a concise comparison of the five observed experiences are provided. This comparison is based on both the three project selection criteria and the comparison criteria chosen to explore differences and similarities in practice: i) physical space condition and duration; ii) initiatives, project, and management by residents and users; iii) support and role of the public. Subsequently, the results are presented, focusing on the criteria described in the different projects. These results are discussed and analysed through the lens of urban commons theory to better understand the conception, creation, and management of the described experiences. However, the information gathered for writing this article was obtained through the study of articles, web pages, and document analysis; the visits provided a quick overview of the projects. In fact, the choice of projects is intended to be purely illustrative and aimed at a preliminary formulation of a definition. For these reasons, the definition remains open to future new examples and projects that may identify with these practices. Furthermore, an important future development of the research could be to verify and test the validity of the definition in contexts outside of Europe, worldwide. An extensive discussion on the validity or



**Diagram illustrating the methodology and the logic used in the research for proposing a definition of Vague Farms. The diagram demonstrates how the criteria for selecting experiences were derived from theory, and how these experiences, observed according to the comparison criteria, contribute to the first attempt at proposing a definition of Vague Farms and their characteristics**

Source: Image of the authors

Fig.1

differences in definitions and these spaces in specific contexts is undoubtedly necessary but would require a separate study.

### **Theoretical Background**

The uncertain and vague nature of *Terrain Vague* spaces and the difficulty of framing them in any category of urban space is reported and many authors have proposed different definitions and terms to describe and define these spaces. For example, *Terrain Vague* (Lévesque, 2001; Mariani & Barron, 2014; Solà-Morales, 1995), *Vacant land* (Bowman & Pagano, 2004), *Urban Voids* (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020), *Wastelands* (Gandy, 2013), *Brownfield* (Berger, 2006; Gandy, 2022), *Third Landscape* (Clément, 2022). These various definitions refer to the same type of spaces, and therefore do not differ in their physical description; rather, they represent the perspectives of different disciplines, or the visions, viewpoints, nuances, or interpretations of different authors. In fact, these spaces are the subject of interest and cross-fertilization of research from different branches of knowledge and disciplines, each with its own point of view: architecture, urbanism, economics, geography, sociology, art, environmental science, and many others. For example, the most widely used definitions of *Urban Voids* and *Vacant Land*, considered the most neutral and generic, also reveal an interpretation of these spaces: *Urban Voids*, by judging the absence of buildings or constructed space as emptiness, reflects a perspective primarily tied

to architecture and urban design; *Vacant Land*, the term most commonly used across various disciplines, represents a productive and functional view of the city, linked to planning, building laws and regulations, and urban economics, focusing on the absence of productive functions and their causes while overlooking, for instance, informal uses or ecological value. Instead, the concept of the *Third Landscape* (Clément, 2022) has focused attention on the value of these spaces and their importance for the ecosystem and for evolution. Above all, from the point of view of biodiversity and the presence of rare species, which has led to an increasing reevaluation of these spaces from an environmental and ecological point of view. This was reflected in the change of terminology from terms with a negative connotation, such as *Brownfields* and *Wastelands*, which describe these spaces by highlighting their origin, such as leftover spaces resulting from large-scale urbanization processes, or their previous activities and their status as derelict land, often as a consequence of industrial functions, to other terms that tend to emphasize their value, as well as a growing literature on the ecological value of these spaces (Gandy, 2013; 2022; McPhearson et al., 2013). We could define these spaces as open and abandoned spaces, in a state of neglect or vacancy, out of the control and productive circuits of the city, yet spontaneously used and appropriated daily by different communities for various informal and spontaneous activities, and by

nature, which grows spontaneously and out of human control, offering refuge for species not permitted elsewhere and for unprecedented encounters and mixes. These spaces offer an unprecedented and rare intersection of social and ecological interests (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020).

Among these definitions, the authors prioritize the definition of *Terrain Vague* (Solà-Morales, 1995), because it is the first definition to conceive the void in a positive way, as a possibility and potential, charging these spaces with a great cultural, artistic and creative value, as well as for the fact that it has highlighted certain points that we consider essential and relevant in the definition of these spaces and for the contemporary debate. One of the main characteristics of the *Terrain Vague* is diversity: diversity of functions and diversity of actors and species. Indeed, due to the absence of human control, these spaces are extremely rich in biodiversity (Brito-Henriques et al., 2019; Gandy, 2022; Soares et al., 2017; Clément, 2022).

Moreover, these spaces lie in a particular continuous condition of suspension, which may be temporary or last several years; for this reason, these spaces are flexible and open to accommodate any kind of possibility, function, event and are temporarily unproductive from a profit or market perspective. Finally, it is important to emphasize the difficulty of the Urban Planning and Architecture design project to intervene in these particular spaces without debasing, erasing or diminishing their value or potential:

“they seem incapable of doing anything other than introducing violent transformations, changing estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete in the realism of efficacy” (Solà-Morales, 1995, p.122).

*Terrain Vague* spaces are linked to agriculture and the rural dimension, for at least two reasons: their origin and their current informal use. Firstly, in fact, the origin of these spaces is linked to the phenomenon of the rapid, uncontrolled, and invasive urbanization of the last century, which exploded and projected the limits of the city outwards, thus ending up completely redefining the boundaries of the city and the difference between urban and rural areas. This aspect, together with the lack or ineffectiveness of plans and visions on a regional scale, has contributed to the creation of residual, fragmented, and functionless areas. Another term used to define these spaces, which is the term used in Germany, is *Brachen* (Gandy, 2011, 2013, 2022); although it is used to define vacant lots, its meaning is of fallow land, i.e. land left fallow to rest and regenerate, and thus recalls an agricultural tradition or past. Additionally, due to urban sprawl that has rapidly reached and invaded rural areas previously outside city boundaries, the origin of these spaces is sometimes related to the *Common Lands* in the United Kingdom or the *Baldios* in Portugal, highlighting their collective and common use history (Travasso, 2022). Additionally, it can be stated that farming, cultivation, and agricultural activities constitute in-



formal practices that are widespread in these abandoned spaces (Iannizzotto, 2023). Several factors contribute to this phenomenon: the scarcity of fertile land in urban areas, the advantageous positioning of certain areas in relation to water sources, and the relatively straightforward and cost-effective nature of food production. It is noteworthy that gardening or agriculture often emerge as the initial or most prevalent activities in these spaces (Afonso & Melo, 2023), reflecting the historical abandonment of agricultural practices (Brito-Henriques & Morgado, 2017).

If these two aspects highlight and reinforce the relationship between *Terrain Vague* spaces and agriculture, it is interesting to note that most of the activities in these spaces, including agricultural practices, whether formal or informal, are often characterized by community management, a strong component of self-organization, and are initiated through spontaneous appropriations and local resident participation.

Due to their characteristics and conditions, *Terrain Vague*, *Vacant Lands* and *Wastelands* are privileged spaces for community activities and *commoning* practices, as well as for the realization of regeneration projects that adopt and include these approaches and participation practices (Belingardi, 2015; Petrescu & Petcou, 2023; Stavrides, 2014; 2016), revealing their nature of suitable spaces for emerging and dissenting possibilities, alternative to speculation. This occurs for at least two reasons: the

first concerns the immediacy and greater availability of these lands, where, due to their state of abandonment, disuse, and condition of unproductiveness (whether temporary or permanent), use prevails over ownership (Belingardi, 2015; Petrescu & Petcou, 2023); the second concerns the possibilities these spaces offer, in fact these spaces can always be conceived as potential *urban commons* (Belingardi, 2015), or potential threshold spaces, meaning spaces of connection and relationship “to be appropriated through practices of commoning” (Stavrides, 2014, p.50) becoming reinvented as common spaces and sites of social interaction, and potential. In fact, *Vague Farms* projects, include in a formal project practices and activities that often already exist in that place, or in other places but are already practiced by the community, according to the principles of the concept of *Everyday Urbanism* (Certeau, 2011; Chase et al., 1999), enhancing the community’s ensemble and sharing of techniques and knowledge. In this sense, these kinds of projects, initiatives and practices can be considered *Urban Commons* (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2018; Foster & Iaione, 2022; Urban Commons Research Collective, 2022) and *Commoning* (Stavrides, 2014, 2016). Indeed, collective urban gardens are often used as examples of urban commons, as in the case of the *Düsseldorfgrün* (Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2018) or others.

Although the topic is controversial and widely debated, with significant resistance to for-

malizing *commoning* practices due to potential risks, as well as reluctance from institutions to recognize and support these initiatives, it is important to note that in certain cases, especially within *Terrain Vague* spaces, institutions can provide support to encourage or formalize these practices without changing the direct management by residents. This can happen because the temporary absence or infeasibility of projects (due to a lack of investors, economic crises, or legal issues), combined with the perception of decay or danger in spaces that are neglected or unmanaged, pushes local authorities to encourage maintenance, use, and management by entrusting (at least temporarily) the management to residents or local non-profit associations at very low costs. This support can be provided in various ways, such as granting permission for the use of abandoned public lands or lots, providing support through resource transfer, infrastructure, and policies that enable residents and local communities to have direct access and management of resources.

A crucial aspect of urban commons practices, which often spontaneously emerges also in activities within *Terrain Vague* spaces, is care, the everyday care of relationships and of the space. The temporary looseness of private property constraints, along with the absence of specific functions, control, and rules, fosters relationships among residents and various communities, encouraging self-organization for the management of the vacant space.

In fact, *Urban Commons* rely on daily activities of care, practices and spontaneous care that often already exist in everyday life. This includes a wide range of material and immaterial actions, primarily based on social relationships, which may include, for example, cleaning, management, maintenance, social relationships among commoners, as well as relationships with the external community (Belingardi, 2015; Gabauer et al., 2021), that leads to a form of management that does not aim for profit but rather the good management of resources, the strengthening of relations, and the improvement of the quality of life and urban spaces. We have discussed how, due to their characteristics and status, *Terrain Vague* spaces can be privileged areas for the implementation of commoning practices. It is useful to recall that among these activities, community gardens are one of the most common and evident examples of urban commons in the literature: “Many urban community gardens in the world are functioning—sometimes only temporarily—as urban commons: they are collectively managed assets, using land and tools in common beyond property rules, and offering space for (re)production and socialization to city dwellers who act as commoners” (Urban Commons Research Collective 2022, p.59). Moreover, although there is not an extensive specific literature on community urban gardens in *Terrain Vague* spaces, there is a rich literature and tradition on community urban agriculture. It is plausible to think that the first spac-

es to be occupied and cultivated were indeed urban voids. Particularly in times of crisis, from the medieval period to World War II, community urban agriculture was a widespread activity in European cities. It primarily took place in vacant spaces designated for this purpose or in abandoned, unused areas incentivized by urban policies in derelict areas of cities (Belingardi, 2015). The rediscovery of this activity and the emergence of contemporary community gardens, now widespread and common in many cities, from municipal urban gardens assigned to individual residents (Parques Hortícolas in Lisbon, Orti Comunalì in Bologna), to community gardens managed by associations or residents (Mudchute Park and Farm in London), and even gardens managed by communities and social centers (Vall de Can Masdeu, Barcelona), likely began in New York at the end of the 1970s. This followed the occupation of vacant, uncultivated lots or lots filled with rubble because of the economic crisis (Belingardi, 2015).

## Observed Experiences

### Regador, Lisbon (PT)

The *Regador* association in Lisbon, assembled during the period of restrictions due to the pandemic, was formed by a group of residents with the desire to recover a slower and more communitarian lifestyle, and with the objective of recovering, learning, sharing, and experimenting with agricultural techniques in the city. After creating and experimenting with two dif-

ferent urban gardens, a vertical garden on the walls of a building and a garden in the space of a library, the association obtained public funding, through the Lisbon Municipality's BIP/ZIP competition, to transform an abandoned and waste-filled space into a community urban garden. The project to create, manage and share a community garden in the center of the city of Lisbon, with social, environmental, cultural, and experimental objectives, started in 2021 and is currently in its third year of activity and funding. In fact, the project has managed to win the same funding competition for three years with three different activities: the first year, for the creation of the actual garden; the second year for the creation and management of renewable energy, for energy autonomy; and the third year for a school of agriculture and educational activities with schools. The space, owned by the Lisbon municipality and now under the management of the association, was a small abandoned vacant lot, used as a landfill, filled with debris and remnants from construction sites and old buildings. The project is not limited to activities related to agriculture, but since its conception it has proposed to use the space for cultural activities (festivals, cinema, concerts) and activities related to the world of cooking and food. Education plays a pivotal role, especially in imparting knowledge advocated by seasoned members. This knowledge is shared, learned through experimentation, and importantly, disseminated to all, including children and young adults,



## Regador, Lisbon, 2023

Source: Image of the authors  
Fig. 2

through courses on sustainable agriculture, food and health, culinary skills, and renewable energy. Apart from public funding, the conception, creation, cultivation, and management of the garden are entirely autonomous tasks handled by the association and the community, which convenes every Saturday morning. Participation is open to all and does not incur any costs (Barbedo, 2024; Magalhães, 2023; Madeira, 2021; Figueiredo Costa, 2023; André, 2021).

### **R-Urban, Paris (FR)**

R-Urban is a participatory strategy, conceived by Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, based on the creation of a series of interconnected and inter-

dependent local hubs, each with its own specific function, but which together form a community-managed local network that can manage flow cycles (production, recycling, waste) and influence various aspects of community life (social, ecological, economic, cultural), with the aim of strengthening the local resilience of neighborhoods. This strategy, conceived as a replicable model, is then implemented in specific local contexts, thus enabling the creation of an international network of the realities created with this strategy. Although initially conceived and coordinated by practitioners and researchers, the aim is that the network can later be managed entirely on a local basis by the communi-

ty. The strategy was first implemented in Colombes, a suburban town near Paris, with the involvement of associations, local communities, and municipalities. One of the three hubs planned for Colombes is *Agrocitè*, conceived as a community farm for urban agriculture. The site chosen for the hub was a large abandoned vacant lot that existed between tall residential buildings in a densely populated area. The *Agrocitè* hub consists of an urban community garden, an area for activities related to agriculture and nature, but also available for cultural events, and a building, designed and constructed with community participation, built to host events for education and dissemination of knowledge and techniques related to agriculture and for experimentation. The project ran from 2011 to 2017 when, due to a change in management, the Municipality decided to sell the land for the construction of a car park, amidst protests from the architects and the community. However, as a strong community had formed around this project, which had participated in the various processes and learned construction and farming techniques, with the help of the population the hub structure was dismantled, transported, and rebuilt on another site. The forced, sudden and unexpected conclusion of the experience prompted the architects and researchers to conduct various experiments to calculate the value produced by the process, socially, economically and ecologically, from some of the benefits of the project, such as: green

space, waste recycling, food production, rain-water harvesting, training in agricultural and construction techniques, and so on (Petcou & Petrescu, 2015, 2020; Petrescu et al., 2021; Petrescu & Petcou, 2023).

### **La Fattoria dei Ragazzi, Firenze (IT)**

In Florence, a series of projects aimed at redeveloping and regenerating peri-urban areas and areas near the river proposed the creation of agricultural areas or multifunctional agricultural parks (Poli, 2016); while a whole series of bottom-up initiatives proposed the redevelopment and management of abandoned and unproductive communal areas, rethinking them as community urban agriculture and managing them as common goods, in fact calling them *Terra Bene Comune*, such as the cases of *Orto del Malcantone* and *Terre di Lastra Bene Comune*. A complete and detailed overview of these initiatives and many others is available thanks to the *3scapes* research, mapping, and platform, which includes both a map and a graph showing the relationships (Perrone et al., 2022). Very recently, in 2023, the Municipality of Florence allocated funds for the redevelopment and reopening of the Fattoria dei Ragazzi, a farmland with an old farmhouse located in the Isoletto district of Florence, with the aim of improving education and outreach on agriculture, raising public awareness on environmental and food sustainability issues, and educating the youngest children on these topics. The

farmhouse, dating back to the nineteenth century, had long been managed by the association *I Nonni della Fattoria*, established following a protest movement to safeguard the land and farmhouse from urban transformations in the 1980s. In 2023, following public investment, the space was redeveloped, enlarged, and reopened to the community, with various events and activities: the space features the farmhouse, with spaces for wine production and old tools and utensils; and the land, with a farm with animals and a collective vegetable garden, managed by the *Ricciorto* association. The association, which started out on a small private plot, is now housed in the space of the farm, where, in addition to activities related to agriculture and the vegetable garden, it carries out activities related to food education, social dinners, workshops on farming and beekeeping techniques, bread production, education on wild plants, acroyoga (Di Maria, 2022; Costanzo, 2023).

### **Mănăştur, Cluj (RO)**

*La Terenuri*, a large area of the Mănăştur neighbourhood in Cluj, had been used since the 1970s as a logistical and material collection site for the construction of the large residential buildings built around it. Mănăştur, before being chosen as the preferred site of urbanization and expansion of the city of Cluj, was an agricultural village. While the entire neighborhood was densely built with high residential buildings, which replaced the low agricultural houses, the *ter-*

*enuri* area continued to be used as a site for storing materials and organizing construction sites until 1989; afterwards, due to the interruption of construction work, it remained essentially a *Terrain Vague*, until today: “a vacant area on the district fringes, informally used by the residents in an individualistic manner, as a playground, a leisure spot or for urban gardening” (Medeşan & Panait, 2016, p.207). Due to the area’s agricultural past, the inhabitants’ habits, and the availability of the large undeveloped space between the buildings, the inhabitants spontaneously and informally started to create community gardens and vegetable gardens, managed entirely by the community (Baibarac-Duignan & Medeşan, 2023; Medeşan & Panait, 2016). Also as a result of the growing pressure of speculation, the risk of investments in the area that would wipe out the undeveloped areas, and with the intention of strengthening the area’s sense of community, around 2012 and 2013, a series of initiatives called *La Terenuri – Common Area* in Mănăştur, part of a larger European project called *Landscape Choreography*, including events, mapping, public space design and temporary activities, always involving the population and in line with the project objectives:

“the project set out to reactivate and enhance the local cultural and urban practices, so as to create contacts between the various groups and communities which use the area and to put forward a methodology whereby its residents can reappropriate even more their proximal space, turn it into a place used in common and defend it together, in case of danger” (Medeşan & Panait, 2016, p. 207).

### Abbey Garden, London (UK)

As reported by Kamvasinou, in London, following the economic crisis in the period between 2008 and 2010, a series of initiatives and activities located in *Terrain Vague* spaces or vacant and abandoned lots began to emerge. These initiatives, which began with a temporary and ephemeral character, aimed at re-evaluating the potential of these spaces, showed an interesting intersection of bottom-up initiatives and state or municipal funding and authorization, and new links between the community and private interests, challenging traditional dichotomies such as temporary and long-term vision, and bottom-up and top-down. Among these initiatives, some included agriculture, such as *Abbey Garden*, a community garden and public space, started around 2008 and still active. The space was a vacant lot, the result of various demolitions and with the ruins of an old monastery, it was polluted because it had been used as a dumping ground over time. In 2008, a local association was created to manage the garden, and funds were allocated to commission two artists to design and create the garden. The garden, created to be temporary but still functioning today, receives regular funding and, in addition to the great merit of having cleaned up and regenerated the polluted area previously classified as derelict land, it is also a public space; therefore, it is always open and accessible to all, and regularly holds gardening activities, agricultural workshops, and markets for the sale of local products (Kamvasinou, 2014; 2018; 2020).

### Results

All the observed initiatives took place in abandoned, unused, and functionless spaces, including derelict land, such as a landfill in the case of Regador. These spaces emerged for various reasons: some were remnants of urbanization processes and plans, left vacant and without specific functions, as seen in the cases of R-Urban and Cluj; others were spaces awaiting future use, resulting from unrealized plans and projects, like Regador, or awaiting change due to shifts in the context or in the management, as in Florence; still others were the result of demolitions, with archaeological heritage, left without future plans following the 2008 crisis as Abbey Garden in London. In all these cases, these *Terrain Vague* spaces, due to their immediate availability, lack of competing uses, and the absence of rental or leasing costs, presented a unique opportunity within the urban context. They enabled the initiation of urban agriculture practices, managed directly by residents at minimal cost, and the exploration of alternative agricultural and management models distinct from private or municipal agricultural plots.

Another commonality across these observed practices is their origin in the direct initiatives and proposals of residents or local associations, who maintained control over both the space and the agricultural activities. In the cases of Regador, Abbey Garden, Fattoria dei Ragazzi, and R-Urban, residents and local associations submitted proposals to local authorities for the re-



habilitation and community management of previously abandoned or neglected spaces. In Cluj, such practices emerged spontaneously and informally among residents immediately after the neighbourhood's construction.

Key aspects shared by all the observed cases include direct management by residents and local associations, a diversity of functions, and the absence of profit-driven goals. These spaces are managed by local groups or associations, open to new members, who oversee the space, organize events, manage resources, and carry out agricultural activities. This management process involves continuous negotiation of individual interests and capacities. Notably, in the cases of R-Urban and Cluj, the initiatives of the residents were supported by architects, urban planners, and other professionals, who aimed

not to impose a project but to offer skills in service of the community.

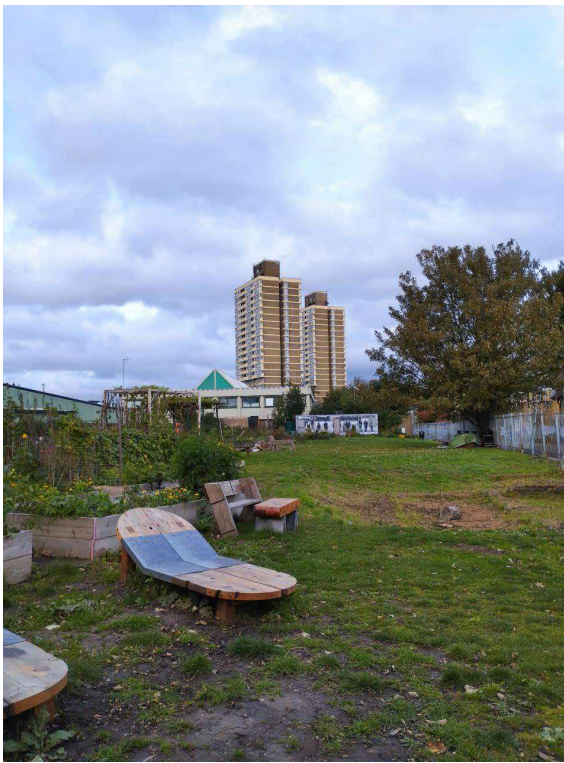
These practices are not profit-oriented and do not focus on market sales of cultivated products. Instead, urban agriculture in these spaces serves as a vehicle for strengthening community ties, hosting cultural events, workshops, and facilitating the sharing of knowledge. The educational and knowledge-sharing aspects are particularly prominent, with activities designed to enhance both individual and community capacities, such as school tours at Regador, workshops on self-construction and agricultural techniques at R-Urban and Abbey Garden, and workshops and yoga classes at Fattoria dei Ragazzi. Even in projects with public funding, it is important to note that such support is primarily allocated for management costs (e.g., water), ma-



## Abbey Garden, London, 2023

Source: Image of the authors

Fig. 4



terial purchases, or funding workshops and events, rather than providing profit or full compensation for managers and participants. The management of these spaces relies heavily on voluntary work. This aspect is crucial to understanding that the creation, maintenance, and activities in these spaces are not driven by paid employees or salaries, but rather by the everyday care and commitment of those who use, manage, and inhabit these spaces. Urban farming and community gardens require significant care and upkeep, particularly during the summer, and since they are not based on paid labour, they depend on the dedication, willingness, and organization of residents and the community, achieved through continuous self-organization, task redistribution, and ongoing knowledge-sharing and learning.

This reliance on community involvement, which

effectively positions these initiatives as alternatives to the market system, makes it difficult to generalize these practices. They are highly dependent on the people involved, the dynamics of the community, and the strength of local relationships, all of which are subject to change. The most complex and contentious aspect of these practices is the process of formalization and the involvement or support of public institutions. This article examines only those experiences that, while temporary or ephemeral, were formalized through public support. Public institutions and local authorities, though not directly involved in the daily management of these spaces, played a crucial role in the formalization process. This was done through various means: granting and authorizing the temporary or long-term use of public land, encouraging temporary and ephemeral uses for the regeneration of

spaces via new legislative tools (as in London), and providing financial and material support (as in the cases of Regador and R-Urban). However, public support also presents risks, as seen in the case of R-Urban, which was forced to vacate the space due to municipal plans to build a parking lot.

While the formalization of these practices brings certain challenges and risks, it also helps to protect them from the inherent instability of *Terrain Vague* spaces. These spaces, being abandoned and in a state of flux, are particularly vulnerable to rapid changes driven by investments, plans, and projects, which can threaten both the informal and formal practices that have taken root there.

### **Discussion: Towards a definition of Vague Farm**

In an article published in 2006 called “Vague Parks”, Krystallia Kamvasinou collected various landscape architecture projects, designed and implemented in *Terrain Vague* spaces, which included some of the fundamental aspects of these spaces, thereby shifting the approach to designing public urban gardens. With the aim of laying the groundwork for a future, more comprehensive study and systematization of formal projects and practices in *Terrain Vague* spaces, this paper has gathered and observed the selected experiences, which have led to the formulation of the new definition of *Vague Farms*. With this term, we refer to intervention projects

in spaces that were previously *Terrain Vague*, which are primarily based on agriculture but also preserve, maintain, and enhance some of the characteristics of the former *Terrain Vague*, such as diversity, community uses, flexibility, and the absence of market-driven goals. The definition of *Vague Farms* directly emerges from the intersection of observation of the selected experiences, understanding how practices of community urban agriculture and farming can emerge in these spaces, with the theory on the potential of *Terrain Vague* spaces, urban commons, and care practices. By accepting the three points of the previous *Terrain Vague* definition, we can identify these original aspects in the implemented projects: i) Diversity and Continuity; ii) Openness; iii) Unproductiveness and practises of Commoning.

First, the observed experiences are not mono-functional, but instead, they accommodate a variety of functions, practices, and types of activities. While they primarily focus on agriculture and animal farming, they also function as venues for education, social interaction, cultural events, sports, and health activities. This multifaceted approach challenges the monocultural and market-driven urban development paradigm, thereby preserving and integrating the diverse range of activities once present in the *Terrain Vague*. Furthermore, in their farming practices, these projects apply and experiment with different farming and experimental agriculture techniques, other than monocul-

ture, thus experimenting with rotations, coexistence of different plant and animal species, and using spontaneous vegetation, plants that are considered weeds or infesting. Very often, these projects are set up as a continuation or enhancement of already existing agricultural practices, either in that same place in a formal way, or previously practiced by the same people in other places, in a spatial, social and cultural continuity.

Secondly, these spaces do not impose fixed structures or constructions, modifying the space in an irreversible and unambiguous way; on the contrary, linked to the diversity of functions and events, these spaces provide for a high rate of flexibility and openness, to cope with community changes, different types of events or community desires, showing themselves to be extremely resilient spaces. Finally, in none of these projects is the main objective the production of food for sale at the market, for profit or mere money gain. On the contrary, agriculture is conceived as a social and community activity, whose objective is to inform and educate on sustainable practices and agriculture, local food production, and the strengthening of community and neighbourhood social ties and relations. This is reflected in the goals and practices of these spaces, which do not aim to produce, sell or make a profit from the agriculture practices, but rather aim at strengthening social and community practices, sharing and learning knowledge, and developing a sus-

tainable knowledge and vision of agriculture, food and urban life. Furthermore, in these projects the conception, creation and management have a considerable level of bottom-up participation, starting with local communities. In this sense, the *Vague Farms* projects do not impose a top-down strategy, disregarding local potential and especially what happens spontaneously, but on the contrary seem to start from the valorisation and formalisation of already existing spontaneous practices, approaching the approach of *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase et al., 1999). Moreover, the management of the resources, space and people involved, starts from below and is organized directly by communities and citizens, is not for profit or subject to market-driven management, and has always social and educational objectives related to an alternative vision of agriculture, food production and consumption in cities, making these projects managed as *Urban Commons* (Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2018) through practices of *Commoning* (Stavrvides, 2016). Finally, the creation and management of these spaces is always bottom-up, with no pre-established and fixed hierarchies, but on the contrary, the management is entrusted entirely to the community and citizens, who organize themselves, make decisions, and manage the space, making these *commoning* practices.

## Conclusions

Over the past twenty years, alongside growing



## Informal farming in Terrain Vague space, Lisbon, 2023

Source: Image of the authors

Fig.5

academic and professional interest from various disciplines in *Terrain Vague* spaces, there has been a noticeable emergence of practices, activities, and formal projects within these spaces that adopt an innovative approach. These projects aim to preserve and enhance certain characteristics of *Terrain Vague* spaces while operating within a formal and structured context, thereby shifting the traditional design conception of these areas.

Although these projects are often published and disseminated, and despite the extensive academic literature on the potential of *Terrain Vague* spaces, there has perhaps been insufficient exploration of the relationship between *Terrain Vague* spaces and urban gardens, as well as the systematization of innovative practices and projects in these areas. This article seeks to

contribute modestly to this direction, offering a draft—a preliminary attempt to analyse and study the strategies needed to lay the groundwork for the systematic study of these spaces. In the future, further research, analysis, and systematization will be necessary to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework.

With this intention, after outlining the fundamental characteristics of *Terrain Vague* and their connection to agriculture, we sought out and collected implemented projects and formal practices within spaces formerly categorized as *Terrain Vague*, selected based on criteria derived from the academic literature on *Terrain Vague* spaces. These initiatives focus on establishing community urban gardens and engaging in agricultural and animal farming practices, while simultaneously retaining certain original charac-



## Regador, Lisbon, 2024

Source: Image of the authors

Fig.6

teristics inherent to *Terrain Vague* spaces. From the intersection of the observation of the selected practices and the theoretical literature on the potential of *Terrain Vague* spaces and *commoning* practices, it has been possible to derive and outline an initial definition of *Vague Farms*. The primary objective was to highlight the emergence of projects and practices that, despite contextual differences as previously discussed, share common characteristics, outlining the characteristics for an initial definition of *Vague Farms*: they establish urban gardens and engage in farming and animal husbandry within abandoned spaces, i.e., *Terrain Vague* areas; they integrate existing local practices, activities, and knowledge; they initiate grassroots initiatives involving community participation in project creation and management; they main-

tain flexibility and host diverse activities, avoiding monocultural approaches; their focus is not on market-driven production or profit, but rather on strengthening community bonds, promoting sustainable farming practices, fostering cultural and social activities, and educating on food culture. Indeed, these projects extend beyond mere food production to encompass a broad range of social, ecological, educational, and cultural impacts. After describing the projects, we endeavoured to propose a definition of *Vague Farms* projects, outlining the transition from *Terrain Vague* to *Vague Farms* by offering an initial definition grounded in the perspectives of everyday urbanism and urban commons theory. Future research should aim to delve deeper into these projects through comparative analysis to explore various contexts, differences,

similarities, and particularly the strategies employed in their implementation and community involvement. Furthermore, a comprehensive and detailed examination of the social and ecological impacts of these projects and practices is crucial to addressing urban challenges and achieving sustainable development goals in the future. We believe that these spaces hold considerable ecological and social value, as extensively documented and debated in academic literature. Through innovative practices that both enhance and preserve this potential—exemplified by the *Vague Farms* discussed in this article, which embody *commoning* practices—these spaces can make a substantial contribution to achieving goals and addressing urban challenges in the future.

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