

ISLAND AS A SOCIO-SPATIAL THEORY: REFRAMING IGNORED URBAN REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the Island as a new socio-spatial theory to examine ignored urban spaces and populations in the era of globalization. Dominant process-oriented paradigms emphasize open-endedness and interconnectedness; however, these approaches often fail to capture localized phenomena that exist in distinct spatial and cultural forms and are detached from the planetary scale. By revisiting and interrogating the notion of an island, this study redefines the term beyond its conventional geographic constraints and develops a flexible theoretical construct to capture the dynamic interplay between isolation and connectivity. This conceptualization of island challenges the prevailing assumption that urban space must be integrated into a global network. Instead, the Island theory offers a lens through which one can appreciate the heterogeneity of urban landscapes—a perspective that is essential for addressing the complexity of modern cities. The theory is developed around three core dimensions: the identity of islands, the fluidity of their borders, and their capacity to evoke sublime aesthetics. Specifically, identity refers to the unique character and intrinsic value of isolated spaces; border highlights the dynamic thresholds that demarcate these areas; and aesthetics addresses the capacity of such spaces to inspire transformative sensory experiences. The investigation and exhibition project Urban Under Space serves as a research tool as well as a representative case of the Island theory, illustrating how infrastructural voids possess uncertain identities, fluid borders, and compelling aesthetic potential. This example reinforces the theory's capacity to interpret both spatial marginality and cultural complexity within contemporary urban conditions, highlighting the need for continued research into these often neglected urban phenomena.

Keywords

Island Theory, Socio-Spatial Analysis, Urban Void, Urban Under Space, Planetary Urbanization

1 INTRODUCTION

Based on the interrogation of existing spatial theory on the ignored urban realities, this research identifies and reconceptualizes Island as a speculative and analytical tool, a cultural medium without fixed scale rather than a physical or geographical entity, and a new socio-spatial theory capable of criticizing the overwhelming process-oriented discussion on urban and built environment. The conceptual analysis yields a multifaceted understanding of the Island as a socio-spatial theory, articulated through three principal dimensions: identity, border, and aesthetics. These dimensions are deeply interrelated, each shedding light on different aspects of how isolated urban spaces can be understood and valued.

In understanding the identity of island, this study draws on historical and literary accounts—from early utopian models, such as Thomas More's depiction of idealized island communities (Davis, 1983), to modern descriptions of uncharted or mysterious spaces (Baldacchino, 2007). The analysis turns to the notion of "sensual borders"—boundaries that are not defined solely by physical demarcation but by a host of relational, temporal, and experiential factors. Insights from urban studies, particularly the discussions on mega-structures, terrain vague and urban voids (Frampton, 1999; De Sola Morales, 2013; Lopez-Pineiro, 2020), inform this exploration. Drawing on classical texts by Kant (1764) and Burke (1844), as well as contemporary interpretations by Llewellyn and Riding (2013) and Meyer and Saunders (1998), the study elucidates how the Island metaphor can evoke a rich palette of aesthetic responses that challenge conventional dichotomies of beauty and ugliness.

This manuscript advances the Island as a socio-spatial theory that redefines the overlooked elements of urban reality. By articulating a framework grounded in the dimensions of identity, border, and aesthetics, the study provides a compelling counterpoint to dominant process-oriented urban theories. While significant work remains in translating this conceptual framework into empirical research and practical applications, the Island theory offers a valuable lens for rethinking urban space in an era of relentless global change.

2 REVIEWS

2.1 Current Status of the Ignored Urban Realities

As Mies van der Rohe declared and Charles Waldheim quoted, "There are, in fact, no cities anymore. It goes on like a forest (Waldheim, 2016)". In contemporary urban studies, the discourse has frequently celebrated the city as an interconnected fluid network, evoking powerful metaphors such as the city being like a forest. Such imagery, initially popularized by influential architects and urbanists, suggests an ever-expanding urban mass in which boundaries blur and connectivity reigns supreme. Yet, as landscape ecologists may remind us, a forest is not a uniform expanse but a dynamic assembly of diverse species, energies, and ecological niches. This discrepancy reveals a fundamental shortcoming in prevailing urban theories: the propensity to emphasize large-scale processes and flows at the expense of acknowledging the isolated, nuanced, and often ignored realities within urban systems.

These ignored urban realities, as identified in this essay, emerge precisely because dominant urban paradigms—anchored in macro-scale connectivity, global systems, and universal process—systematically marginalize the micro-scale entities. They may be the result of historical neglect, deliberate design choices, or socio-economic marginalization; regardless of their origins, these voids represent opportunities for rethinking how urban environments are structured and experienced. They manifest not only in physical spatial forms—urban voids, abandoned sites, or ambiguous spaces that resist abstraction and definition—but also in the discriminated sub-culture, abandoned social routines, or the lived experiences of people whose social, cultural, or mental realities are sidelined and excluded in the overarching frameworks by dominant ideologies.

While the spatial dimensions of ignored urban realities have recently received increased attention from landscape and urban scholars—particularly those focusing on marginalized public spaces (de Solà-Morales, 2013; Lopez-Pineiro, 2020; Desimini, 2013)—several critical gaps remain. First, there is still a lack of a systematic and holistic framework for understanding how these neglected and isolated spatial forms relate to, and are shaped by, the dominant global urbanization discourse. Second, insufficient attention has been paid to the cultural and social dimensions of these spaces: how and why they become abandoned, who utilizes them, and who is excluded, and how their spatial configurations reflect broader

patterns of social injustice. Third, we currently lack a robust analytical tool capable of describing and interpreting the spatial configurations and socio-cultural conditions that define these overlooked urban realities.

2.2 Relevant Literature

Metabolism emerged as a significant architectural movement after World War II, envisioning cities as connected and dynamic organisms subject to continual growth and change (Kurokawa, 1977; Lin, 2010). Concurrently, ecological planning and urban ecology gained prominence, advocating an integrative regional planning approach harmonious with multi-layered natural and social systems (McHarg, 1969; Spirn, 1984; Steiner, 2000). Similar spatial theories in that era have largely gravitated toward process-oriented paradigms, triggering an overarching theoretical trend for the next few decades to imagine the world as open-ended assemblages of energy and resources. Theories such as Landscape Urbanism and Planetary Urbanization privilege the fluidity of flows over the solidity of forms, and posit that urban is not a fixed entity but an ongoing, amorphous process driven by the dynamics of global capital accumulation (Harvey, 1996; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Waldheim, 2016).

Planetary Urbanization has gained influence for the past two decades, with Harvard GSD and ETH two fundamental centers of theoretical research producing projects on emergent urbanization, extended urbanization, and comparative urbanism engaged with global scale¹. It posits that urbanization today operates at a planetary scale driven by global capital accumulation processes. This paradigm argues that traditional urban-rural distinctions no longer adequately describe contemporary spatial patterns, suggesting instead that every space, even those traditionally considered remote or rural, is subsumed within global urbanization processes (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Harvey, 1996). Drawing extensively from Henri Lefebvre's (2003) notion of urban society, Planetary Urbanization highlights the expansive, systemic character of contemporary urban transformation, advocating for a comparative, global perspective to understand complex urban phenomena. Yet, this framework's emphasis on global connectivity and macro-scale analysis has drawn criticism from scholars who argue that the theory tends to homogenize urban experiences and diminishes the recognition of distinct local contexts and micro-scale differences (Angelo & Goh, 2021). This theory explicitly embraced dynamic, open-ended systems as preferable to rigidly defined, traditional urban typologies, resonating strongly with late-20th-century systems thinking and ecological frameworks.

Landscape Urbanism, popularized notably by landscape architects and urbanists, emerged at the turn of the millennium as a major theoretical framework that reimagined urban design around ecological and infrastructural processes rather than traditional built forms. Advocates of Landscape Urbanism argued that landscape, broadly understood as a system of ecological flows and infrastructures, could serve as the primary medium of urban ordering, capable of addressing complex urban issues such as ecological degradation, climate change, and sprawling urbanization (Waldheim, 2016). The theory sought to reconceptualize the city as an interconnected network of flows, cycles, and transformations rather than discrete objects or zones (Corner, 2006). However, Landscape Urbanism's commitment to ecological and infrastructural systems often resulted in the marginalization of smaller, contextually specific spaces. As Anita Berrizbeitia critically notes, the field's fascination with large-scale, infrastructural processes frequently overlooks localized human experiences and social realities, reducing complex urban conditions to abstract ecological metaphors (Berrizbeitia, 2016). It resonates with the reign of smooth connectivity and flows over the study of forms in architecture schools since the 80s and continues to influence the design professions (Allen, 2016).

2.3 Questions

To conclude, although the mainstream theories offer valuable insights into the continuous nature of urban transformation, they tend to smooth over the specific, localized phenomena that resist integration into the all-encompassing narrative of interconnected urbanity, leaving a big gap for conceptualizing and addressing the issues of variegated locality and urban social difference through a new lens. This tension between the global and the local, between process and form, raises an epistemological challenge: how can one conceptualize a form that both acknowledges and preserves the distinctiveness of these isolated urban phenomena? In other words, is it possible to develop a theoretical framework that sets the ground

for further research on these unique, often marginal spaces left behind by the expansive urban processes?

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

An epistemological problem of the urban discourse is whether we prioritize the process or the thing and whether or not it is even possible to separate the process from the things embodied in it (Harvey, 1996). This paper interprets Harvey's concept of the "thing" in the discourse as the realities – the tangible, material, spatial and cultural forms that embody the realities but increasingly overlooked under the dominant process-based frameworks. They are urban blocks, buildings, parks and streets, as well as the users and inhabitants of such spaces and their social, cultural and mental conditions. Contemporary urban discourse frequently operates on the assumption that all urban "things" can, and should, be integrated into a cohesive, interconnected network of processes. However, this study advocates for the existence of a countervailing logic in which certain urban realities are marked by their isolation and distinctiveness.

The primary objective of this study is to reshape the discourse of spatial research by conceptualizing an alternative theory less about process but more about thing, thus to shift the study of contemporary urban process to interpret the ignored urban realities. The new theory should be highly conceptual rather than pragmatic to describe substantial phenomena without being circumscribed to a specific form or scale. It must have a certain level of flexibility and complexity to in terms of space and time fit in different situations while rejecting a one-size-fits-all appearance and characteristics. This reconceptualization has significant implications for how we think about urban regeneration and cultural preservation. By valuing the creative possibilities inherent in isolated spaces, cities may be better equipped to resist the homogenizing pressures of globalization and to foster environments that are as diverse and dynamic as the populations they serve.

The second objective is to advocate for a more important role for the field of landscape architecture to pick up these ignored realities in a global world. For urban planners, embracing the Island framework necessitates a shift away from rigid, formulaic approaches to spatial organization. Instead, it calls for an adaptive methodology that is responsive to the sensory, cultural, and experiential dimensions of urban space, which echoes to the practice of landscape architects. Landscape architects recognize the fluidity of boundaries and the transformative power of isolation, and are comfortable with developing strategies that preserve and even celebrate the unique characteristics of these Islands. Thus, the Island concept not only challenges the status quo of current spatial theory but also pushes landscape architects to take a step forward for policy innovation and design experimentation.

4 METHODS

4.1 Theorization

Islands have long served as potent metaphors bridging geography, imagination, and cultural theory—sites that fundamentally shape philosophical, political, and artistic discourse while possessing a unique capacity to distill complex realities into imaginative frameworks for understanding both real-world conditions and speculative scenarios (Shell, 2015; Staniscia, 2016). Many scholars have explored the notion of urban "islands." From Ignasi de Solà-Morales' seminal essay *Terrain Vague* to more recent works such as Sergio Lopez-Pineiro's *A Glossary of Urban Voids* and *Tokyo Void* by Marieluise Jonas and Heike Rahmann, there has been sustained interest in the ambiguous spaces that punctuate the urban milieu. Similarly, landscape architect Jill Desimini's work focuses on vacancy and land abandonment: alongside a statewide land vacancy-mapping initiative at the University of Connecticut to understand the conditions of those marginal landscapes, her previous research demonstrated how vacancy and short-term interventions shape disinvested landscapes and abandoned land, highlighting the limits and vulnerability of temporary occupation (Desimini, 2015).

However, the Island theory proposed in this research is not a replication of existing studies on urban voids or vacant land. Rather, the Island—as defined here—is a coupling assemblage of spatial configurations and cultural inhabitants. It functions as a socio-spatial theory that seeks to capture ignored urban realities, not through typological land-use categorization but by recognizing the interdependence between space and the lives it shelters. With no fixed definition or pre-determined size or scale, the island can be

employed as an urban imaginative tool—spiritual, ideological, and metaphorical—offering a counterpoint to twentieth-century rationalized, capital-oriented planning often criticized for its “absolute impoverishment of imagination (Corner, 2006).”

The application of the island as a tool of imagination has a long intellectual history. In Francis Bacon’s fictional work *New Atlantis*, the island of Bensalem embodies the ultimate expression of human imagination—isolated yet visionary, serving simultaneously as sanctuary and prison, utopia and dystopia. In Bacon’s narrative, the island is not merely a location but becomes a model for the future: a canvas for humanity’s highest aspirations in science, governance, and civilization. Planning ideas are embedded throughout the story—houses designed for the study of distance, light, and sound, gardens engineered to accelerate plant growth, and controlled breeding experiments that foreshadow biotechnology. This concept of the isolated island has long sparked imaginative possibilities.

Urbanists have likewise employed the island metaphor to rethink city configurations. In many contemporary cities, rapid urbanization and the relentless push toward global connectivity have transformed vast areas into urbanized zones. While such approaches address macro-level dynamics, they often overlook the micro-scale phenomena that enrich and diversify urban life. In *The City in the City—Berlin: A Green Archipelago*, the urban fabric is reimagined as an intricate, immersive system: a constellation of dense “islands” set within a green matrix, promoting a strategy of targeted urban editing rather than traditional, top-down planning approaches (Ungers et al., 2013). This model illustrates how two conceptual frameworks—the connected planetary network and isolated local islands—can complement rather than oppose each other, offering a more inclusive spatial theory.

This is the foundation of Island theory: an alternative framework that suggests infinite possibilities and imagination for future planning and design. It offers a perspective attuned to local complexities and the nuanced dynamics that are often isolated and marginalized. Island theory is both an imaginative tool and a tool of imagination—a critical lens through which to understand the overlooked dimensions of urban landscapes and their human occupants.

4.2 Mapping as a Method for Reconceptualizing the Island

It is within this context that the concept of the Island emerges and becomes the central theoretical construct in this research. Geographically, an island is typically defined as a tract of land surrounded by water and conceived as being smaller than a continent. However, this definition proves problematic: the relative sizes of islands and continents are not inherently fixed, and the distinction between them is often based on arbitrary cultural assumptions rather than objective criteria. In practice, the concept of the island has been culturally deployed as a comparative tool to signify “smallness,” yet this interpretation fails under closer scrutiny. Australia provides a compelling example of this definitional ambiguity. While commonly classified as the smallest continent, with an area of approximately 7.6 million km², geologically it can also be regarded as the largest island on Earth². Such cases expose the limitations of predefining island strictly by size and scale, underscoring the need for a more imaginative and relational framework for understanding the island condition.

To address this challenge, mapping is employed in this research not merely as a representational tool but as a critical method for reconceptualizing the island. Buckminster Fuller’s 1942 *Dymaxion Map* offers a useful precedent in this regard. By reorienting the world through a novel projection system, Fuller positioned all landmasses at the center, referring to them collectively as “one island in one ocean.” This interpretation adheres to conventional notions of islands as land isolated by water. However, Fuller’s projection was inherently flexible and open for further manipulation: in a mapping experiment, when the figure-ground reversed after several steps, the oceans were gradually relocated at the center, with land forming the surrounding boundary—eventually rendering the combined one ocean the “island” (Figure 1).

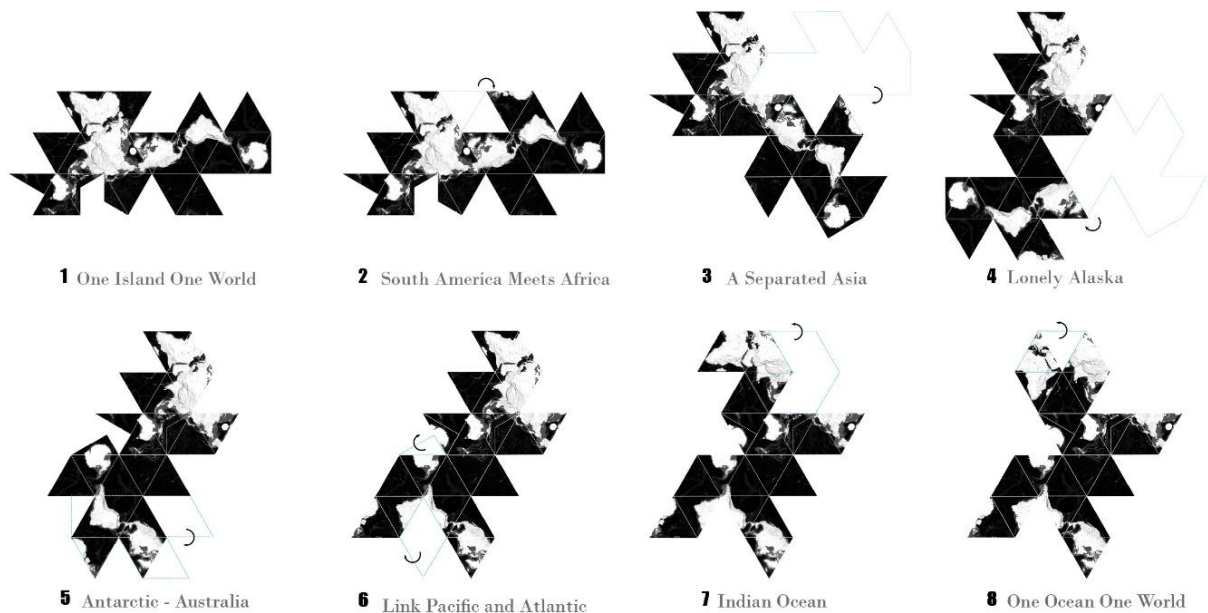


Figure 1. Mapping Experiment: One Ocean One World (2017). Mapping diagrams by the author.

This cartographic inversion challenges conventional geographic definitions and exemplifies how mapping can reveal “island stories” hidden within a world view dominated by landmasses. The relationship between ocean garbage gyres and whales is one of those hidden stories. One reason the significance and urgency of the gyres remain underrecognized is the way they are visually represented. In traditional world projections, the gyres appear as small, scattered, floating islands, spatially fragmented and seemingly disconnected. This visual framing suggests isolation and diminishes their perceived importance. However, when viewed through the lens of the One Ocean, One World projection, the oceans are repositioned as a continuous, central entity—effectively a singular, planetary-scale “island.” Within this new cartographic framework, the gyres are no longer peripheral; instead, they appear as interconnected zones shaped by ocean currents and occupying a vast portion of the global surface. When this projection is overlaid with the second map showing global whale habitats and migration routes, the ecological crisis becomes even more pronounced: some critical habitat zones directly overlap with the gyre regions, and several major whale migration corridors pass through these polluted zones (Figure 2).

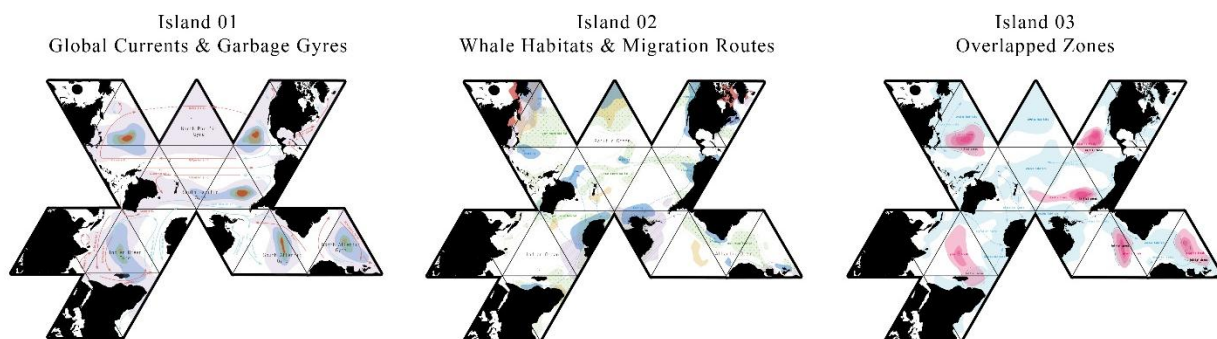


Figure 2. Applying the One Ocean One World Projection: Whale Migration Journey and The Global Gyres (2017). Mapping diagrams by the author.

Within this study, mapping functions as both an analytical and generative method for interrogating scale, boundary conditions, and spatial identity. Although the gyres represent a planetary-scale ecological crisis, their marginalization in public consciousness is partly a result of their perceived remoteness—as distant “islands” far removed from our everyday, land-based experience. Mapping as a research method reorients public attention and reveals long-ignored spatial realities. This case illustrates how the scale-flexibility inherent to the island concept becomes a methodological advantage, enabling the theory to address spatial phenomena ranging from small urban voids to larger, even global configurations. Thus, mapping emerges not only as a tool for visualizing space but also for questioning and reconstructing the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes an “island” within urban theory.

4.3 Experiment through Design and Exhibition

To further examine and operationalize the Island theory, this research employs design experimentation as both a spatial investigation and a public engagement method. Urban Under Space, a public space study project started from spatial investigation in the US and expanded to a publication and exhibition in China, focused on overlooked urban phenomena created by infrastructural development—spaces found beneath bridges, within abandoned underground structures, and along disused corridors or more (Wang & Cai, 2017). These sites exemplify fragmented, marginal urban conditions and serve as fertile ground for testing the theoretical propositions of Island theory. As ignored urban realities in the city, the Urban Under Space challenged the normative definitions of public space by existing in a liminal state, where boundaries are not fixed but fluid (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020).

The research process began with a systematic spatial investigation and documentation of various underutilized sites across different urban contexts. This fieldwork captured key spatial characteristics such as enclosure, materiality, light conditions, accessibility, and patterns of informal occupation. The interplay of light and shadow, combined with the textural contrasts between decay and order, produces a sensory experience that continually redefines the periphery of these under spaces, which resonates with the definition of ignored urban realities: they are not only physical spaces but also social and sensual conditions. This ever-shifting threshold not only separates them from the well-integrated urban core but also protects and reinforces their unique character, echoing Baldacchino’s observation that “islands attract mainlanders in their quest to define boundaries” (Baldacchino, 2007). Building on this investigation, the study then moved into the phase of glossary building and typological analysis, categorizing recurring spatial features and conditions across different spaces. This glossary served as both an analytical tool and a design framework, helping to articulate the spatial logics that make these voids insular and distinct within the broader urban fabric (Figure 3).

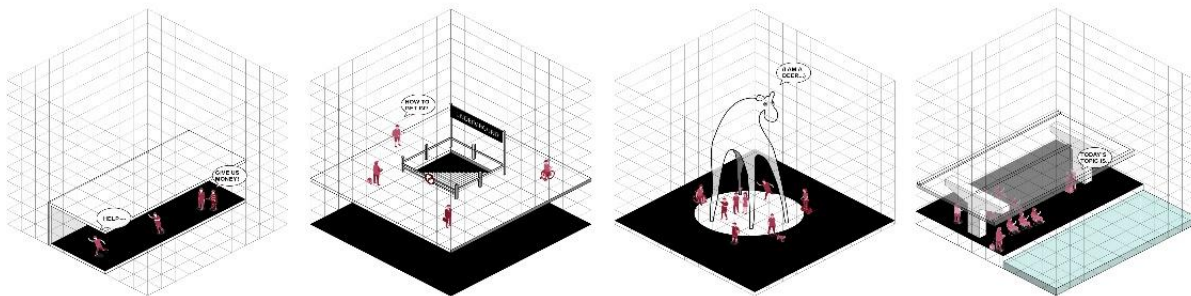


Figure 3. Urban Under Space Prototype Study (2018). Diagrams by Gandong Cai and Yujia Wang.

The research culminated in a public exhibition in Shenzhen, where a curated selection of Urban Under Spaces was physically and visually reinstalled within a gallery setting. The exhibition includes printed images from photographers who documented the everyday under-space life in different cities, mappings showing the field research in several US cities done by the authors, and interactive installations that help visitors engage with the Urban Under Space theme. Through the exhibition, visitors were invited to experience and navigate these real-world “islands”. The aesthetic dimension of Urban Under Space is rich

with transformative potential, and the latent beauty in these overlooked spaces lies in their capacity to evoke both melancholy and hope (Wang & Cai, 2017). The exhibition format enabled the research to simulate, observe, and analyze how the public perceives, engages with, and interprets these spaces when detached from their original urban contexts (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. An Exhibition of the Urban Under Space Research (2018). Photo by Gandong Cai and Yujia Wang.



Figure 5. People Interacting with the Exhibition (2018). Photos by Gandong Cai and Yujia Wang.

This iterative process—from field investigation and typological analysis to exhibition design and audience engagement—served as a form of methodological experimentation. It allowed the Island theory to be tested, refined, and evaluated in both theoretical and experiential terms. By translating underrecognized urban conditions into curatorial and design language, the project interrogates how such spaces operate as spatial and cultural islands within the larger urban system, and how design-based research methods can advance socio-spatial theorization.

5 RESULTS: THE THREE ASPECTS OF THE ISLAND THEORY

5.1 Identity: The Enigma of Terra Incognita

The notion of identity within the Island framework is closely tied to the idea of terra incognita—the unknown and uncharted territory that has long fascinated explorers and thinkers alike. The image of an island, by its very nature, evokes a sense of mystery and elusiveness. Baldacchino noted that the “mainlanders” who have never set foot on an island are always captivated by its mystery and driven by a desire to capture its finite boundary (Baldacchino, 2007). This inherent mystery endows the island with a dual character: on one hand, it is a tangible space with physical limits; on the other, it is an elusive realm that exists partly in the realm of imagination. Historically, the idea of the island has also been associated with conceptual visions. Thomas More’s early conceptualization of an idealized island community (Davis, 1983) suggests that islands can serve as models for rethinking social, cultural, and political organization.

Yet, unlike utopian constructs that offer a blueprint for perfection, the Island as reconceived in this study is defined by its relational identity. The term *Terrain Vague* was first used by Morales to refer to the empty, abandoned space providing an alternative to the planned, efficient, and legitimized city (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). The Island’s character is not self-evident but emerges in contrast to the surrounding landscape. Rather than conforming to pre-established norms or models, an Island’s identity is forged through its isolation—a condition that both separates it from and connects it to a larger, often homogenized, urban fabric.

This duality became particularly evident through the Urban Under Space project. The glossary-building and typological analysis revealed how the overlooked spaces develop distinct identities shaped by their physical detachment and unique patterns of occupation. Similarly, the One Ocean One World mapping further illustrates how spatial identity can shift when representation changes. By repositioning the ocean as a central, continuous entity, the project demonstrates how cartographic reframing can focus attention on previously overlooked issues such as the ocean garbage gyres crisis, making its scale and urgency legible. Together, these methods highlight how Island identity is not a fixed attribute but a relational and representational construct.

5.2 Border: The Fluidity of Sensual Demarcations

A central insight emerging from the analysis is that the boundaries of an island are not rigid, fixed lines, but rather fluid, dynamic interfaces characterized by what can be described as “sensual borders.” Traditional urban planning often relies on clearly defined demarcations—physical barriers, administrative boundaries, or infrastructural delineations—to organize space. In contrast, the Island concept foregrounds the idea that boundaries can be ephemeral, shifting in response to social practices, cultural narratives, and temporal dynamics.

The notion of a sensual border emphasizes that an island’s periphery is not solely determined by physical factors. Instead, it is constituted by a range of attributes, including the level of maintenance, patterns of accessibility, and the intensity of social or cultural activity. Urban voids—those abandoned or underutilized spaces that emerge as unintended byproducts of economic development—often exhibit borders that are as much about perception as they are about measurable dimensions (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). These voids, as Lopez-Pineiro states, may lack formal physical barriers, yet their characteristics—disrepair, inaccessibility, and a sense of neglect—establish them as distinct from the more orderly, well-integrated urban areas.

Moreover, the concept of border in the Island framework challenges the dominant narrative of globalization. In an era characterized by the incessant drive toward interconnectedness, local particularities risk being subsumed under a homogenized global order. However, islands demonstrate that

even in a hyper-connected world, pockets of isolation persist, as the local is not annihilated or destroyed by globalization but reflects back onto the world stage and operates symbiotically with globalization (Roudometof, 2016). Their sensual borders resist complete assimilation, allowing these spaces to retain a measure of autonomy and individuality. This resistance to total integration is not necessarily a matter of physical fortification but rather one of cultural and experiential differentiation. The Island's border, then, functions as both a point of separation and a site of negotiation—a threshold where the local meets the global, the familiar confronts the unfamiliar.

The Urban Under Space project captured how the perceived boundaries of spaces fluctuated—changing with time, weather conditions, maintenance cycles, and patterns of informal occupation. Similarly, the One Ocean One World challenged conventional cartographic borders by repositioning peripheral oceanic zones as central, thus reframing how spatial boundaries are perceived at a global scale. Both methods reinforce the argument that Island borders are not solely cartographic or physical, but sensory and socially negotiated thresholds.

5.3 Aesthetics: The Sublime as Collective Imagination

Beyond the dimensions of identity and border, the Island concept is also deeply rooted in aesthetic considerations. Rather than viewing islands merely as spatial anomalies or neglected fragments of urban landscape, this study posits that they are imbued with a distinct aesthetic quality—one that invites a reconfiguration of traditional ideas about beauty and ugliness. The aesthetic dimension of the Island is best understood through the notion of the sublime, a concept that has been a cornerstone of aesthetic theory.

Sublime originates from the Latin terms *sub*, meaning below or up to, and *limen*, the limit, boundary, or threshold (Llewellyn & Riding, 2013). In a philosophical context, it refers to an experience that transcends conventional perceptions of beauty. While Kant delimited the positive context of the sublime from the word “pleasant” and neutralized it to a broader concept of cognitive excitement, Burke articulated the sublime as a higher and more powerful—yet potentially destructive—form of effect, strong enough to exceed human will and control (Kant, 1764; Burke, 1844). It is an aesthetic response that emerges from encountering something that is simultaneously alluring and overwhelming—a quality often ascribed to the isolated, enigmatic nature of islands. As noted by the Llewellyn group, the term “sublime” captures the paradoxical interplay between attraction and repulsion, between familiarity and strangeness. Islands, with their uncharted boundaries and elusive identities, naturally evoke such complex aesthetic reactions. Their physical isolation, when paired with the imaginative potential they harbor, allows them to serve as powerful symbols of both loss and possibility.

It was further argued by landscape architects that the sublime arises when the tangible solidity of *terra firma* is disrupted by the intangible allure of *terra incognita*—the realm of the unknown (Meyer & Saunders, 1998). In this light, islands challenge conventional urban aesthetics by offering a form of beauty that was not appreciated before. They celebrate ambiguity, imperfection, and the transformative power of isolation. The aesthetic agency of Island extends beyond mere visual appeal; it encompasses a broader cultural imagination. Island, as a metaphor, encourages an appreciation of difference and diversity in the urban landscape. This reorientation of aesthetic values is particularly significant in contemporary urban life: abandoned sites, disordered urban wilderness, devastated or naturally degraded areas, or the disorganized social life. It suggests that the creative potential of urban spaces lies not in their uniformity but in their ability to harbor unexpected forms of life, culture, and expression.

This dynamic was made visible in the Urban Under Space exhibition, where design installation was used to recreate the spatial qualities of urban voids within a controlled gallery environment. The intentional curation of sensory contrasts—light and shadow, order and decay—invited visitors to confront the rawness and ambiguity of these spaces firsthand. Through this immersive experience, the exhibition translated the aesthetic dimension of the Island into a collective act of imagination, prompting visitors to reassess their understanding of beauty, value, and neglect in the urban landscape.

6 DISCUSSION

Yet, the Island theory is not without its challenges. One of the primary limitations of this framework is its inherently conceptual nature. While the theory offers a compelling narrative for understanding urban isolation, operationalizing it within empirical research or practical planning contexts may prove difficult. The fluidity of the dimensions—identity, border, and aesthetics—means that measuring or mapping these qualities requires innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary collaboration. Future research should aim to develop robust indicators and case studies that can validate and refine the theoretical propositions advanced here. Moreover, the Island concept raises questions about the politics of space. Any attempt to incorporate the Island framework into urban policy must be accompanied by a critical analysis of the power dynamics and structural forces that give rise to isolation in the first place. In other words, while the Island may serve as a potent metaphor for resilience and creativity, it must also be understood within the context of the material and political conditions that shape urban life.

In reflecting on these challenges, it is clear that the Island as a socio-spatial theory offers both conceptual richness and practical promise. It invites us to rethink our understanding of urban space and suggests that the value of a city lies not only in its grand narratives of connectivity and progress but also in its capacity to harbor spaces of isolation, mystery, and wonder. These Islands, far from being anomalies to be eradicated, are integral to the urban fabric. They remind us that cities are living, evolving entities characterized by both unity and diversity, by both coherence and fragmentation. Embracing this complexity is essential for developing urban environments that are not only efficient and interconnected but also rich in meaning, culture, and human experience.

7 CONCLUSION

This study employs a critical, conceptual analysis that synthesizes diverse strands of spatial theory and analysis. The methodological approach is primarily theoretical, involving an extensive review of the literature of urban studies and critical theory. It reviews existing paradigms that have dominated urban studies over the past decades with a critical analysis of the process-oriented theories that prioritize large-scale flows and networked connectivity. The analysis reveals that, while such theories successfully capture the dynamism of contemporary urbanization, they invariably overlook the small-scale “islands” that persist within—and often outside—the dominant urban framework. By interrogating the traditional definition of an island, the research opens the door to a reimagining of the Island as a metaphor that can be applied to urban spaces irrespective of their physical dimensions. The redefinition of the Island as a socio-spatial theory presented in this study offers a nuanced lens for the overlooked and isolated phenomena within contemporary urban landscapes.

First, the essay examines the identity of the Island, drawing upon historical notions of terra incognita and early utopian models. Here, the Island is portrayed as an enigmatic and uncharted space whose identity is shaped as much by its isolation as by its contrast with the surrounding urban environment. The concept of identity, as explored in this paper, reveals that Islands are not merely peripheral spaces but are charged with a complex interplay between the known and the unknown. Their identity is constructed through a dynamic relationship with the surrounding environment, a relationship that imbues them with a character that is both enigmatic and evocative. Second, the study explores the notion of borders. Unlike traditional urban forms characterized by sharply defined boundaries, Islands exhibit borders that are fluid, dynamic, and, in many cases, sensual rather than rigid. This rethinking of spatial demarcation challenges the binary logic that has long governed urban planning. The examination of borders demonstrates that isolation is not simply a matter of physical separation but is also defined by fluid, sensory, and cultural dimensions. These sensual borders disrupt the binary logic of inclusion and exclusion, allowing for a more sophisticated understanding of urban marginality. Third, the essay investigates the aesthetic dimension of the Island, focusing on its capacity to evoke wonder and collective imagination. Drawing on classical notions of the sublime, this analysis considers how Islands inspire creative reinterpretations of beauty in the urban context. The invocation of the sublime, with its roots in classical aesthetic thought, repositions the Island not as an object of neglect but as a source of creative inspiration.

Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate that the Island concept holds significant promise as a theoretical tool. By integrating considerations of identity, border, and aesthetics, the framework not only

deepens our understanding of urban heterogeneity but could also point toward practical implications for urban design, planning, and policy-making. The reimagined Island theory aspires to capture the subtle interplay between isolation and integration that defines many contemporary urban spaces—a dynamic that is all too often obscured by dominant, process-oriented narratives. In an era marked by the pressures of globalization and homogenization, the Island emerges as a powerful metaphor for the preservation of local distinctiveness and the cultivation of imaginative urban practices.

Endnotes

1 Urban Theory Lab was firstly established by Neil Brenner at the GSD. After Brenner left the GSD, the Urban Theory Lab is relocated to Chicago University where Brenner is now teaching at.

2 The distinction between an island and a continent remains a subject of ongoing debate among geographers and the general public. While Australia is widely recognized as the smallest continent, its geological features—its isolation and expansive landmass—also qualify it as the largest island. This inherent ambiguity highlights the fluidity of geographic classifications and is one reason why the topic continues to fascinate scholars and enthusiasts alike. For further discussion on this subject, see Britannica's article on Australia's dual classification as both an island and a continent: <https://www.britannica.com/story/is-australia-an-island>.

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