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Urban loseabilities: the unequal conditions of loss in a former military town in Germany

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Abstract. Urban spaces disappear in many ways – through abandonment, demolition, decay, and displacement. Yet not all disappearances register as losses. This paper proposes the concept of *loseability* to examine the prior conditions that determine which urban spaces, buildings, and relationships come to be recognized as valuable enough to be mourned when they are gone. Drawing on social theories of loss and Butler's notion of grievability and extending these frameworks beyond the human to encompass buildings, atmospheres, and ways of inhabiting the world, loseability offers an analytical lens attentive to the power-laden, normative, and relational conditions structuring urban loss. The concept is developed through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2024 and 2025 at the former Joint Headquarters Rheindahlen (JHQ) – a self-contained garrison city of up to 12 000 inhabitants, abandoned since 2013 and suspended between decay, securitization, and contested futures – in Mönchengladbach, Germany. Drawing on semi-structured and ethnographic interviews with 35 interlocutors, participant observation, go-alongs, and media monitoring, this paper shows how competing frameworks sort urban presences into the loseable and the already-lost, producing graded and deeply unequal geographies of mourning. While local residents inscribe enduring value onto JHQ's material remains, planners and bureaucrats frame the same structures as worthless debris, and the site's refugee population is rendered effectively unloseable. These findings point toward a critical geography of urban loseabilities applicable beyond sites conventionally labelled "lost" or "shrinking", and open productive directions for further research into the politics of urban disappearance across diverse spatial and cultural contexts.

1 Introduction

"Here in Rheindahlen, I can show you houses that are [...] in worse condition than those that are standing empty there. It's a disgrace!", said Oskar,[1] his voice shaking with anger. We were sitting in the plain meeting room of the local welfare association in Rheindahlen (a district in the west of Mönchengladbach, Germany). A local society – named after one of Germany's largest abandoned settlements, Joint Headquarters (JHQ) Rheindahlen – has been meeting here regularly over the past 3 years. From there, it is only a 15 min bike ride to the empty buildings Oskar was referring to (see Fig. 1).

Currently, dense summer foliage envelopes the abandoned red-brick buildings. Bushes invade houses where no human lives. Traffic signs show no-parking zones, yet not a single car disturbs the silence. A large fence and a warning sign from the Federal Agency for Real Estate Tasks warn people not to venture further, albeit without success (see Fig. 2). Local residents sometimes frequent the area, sharing tips on how to sneak onto the premises unnoticed by the security company (see Fig. 3). They were not the only ones: urbexers advertise the area as "one of the biggest lost places of Germany" or a "real ghost town", conveying the territory's general sense of uncanniness (https://lostplace-map.com/

[1]All informants' names have been changed. All translations of interviews and German-language sources were conducted by the authors.



Figure 1. Empty buildings of JHQ. Photo by authors.



Figure 2. Fence and warning sign. Photo by authors.

verlassenes-nato-hauptquartier-rheindahlen/, last access: 28 January 2026). This strange landscape is still named after its main political function from 1954 to 2013, when it served as the headquarters of various units of the British army forces and NATO. Everyone still knows it by the name JHQ.

JHQ Rheindahlen (see Fig. 4) was established in the early 1950s with remarkable speed. Its main construction phase (1952–1954) involved clearing approximately 380 hectares of the Rheindahlen forest. Built to house the combined military command of British and NATO forces in Western Europe, the site accommodated up to 12 000 people across 2000 buildings connected by 36 km of roads bearing British names such as Queens Avenue and Londonderry Drive. Not least because of its size, the site is often called a "city within a city" (Stadtarchiv Mönchengladbach, 2025:7): three churches, four schools, a theatre, a cinema, a shopping centre, a fire station, an open-air pool, and over 20 sports facilities gave it the texture of a small town, one formally registered as a neighbourhood (*Stadtteil*) within Mönchengladbach's western district. Yet the British military presence was not confined to the main compound. Soldiers, their families, and civilian personnel also lived in adjacent neighbourhoods, making military uniforms and right-hand drive vehicles a common sight in everyday urban life. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the headquarters were progressively dissolved, and the site was formally returned to the Federal Republic of Germany in July 2013.



Figure 3. Gaps in the fence leading to the site of the former Joint Headquarters (JHQ) Rheindahlen. Photo by authors.

Since then, the largest part of the compound (approx. 230 ha) has been in a state of "surveilled decay":[2] reclaimed by vegetation, cut off from vital utilities, and under constant observation by security personnel and a CCTV system. Smaller parts of the compound have served as refugee accommodation and as training grounds for customs and state police, while the decaying core has occasionally been used for exercises by emergency services and as a film location. Despite the surveillance, it also draws an unofficial crowd of its own: graffiti artists, skateboarders, urban explorers, but also far-right extremists, drug dealers, and copper thieves. Currently, the site's future is taking shape as a "dual use" arrangement between federal and state authorities (Pfarr, 2025, 2026). The city of Mönchengladbach has effectively been pushed to withdraw from planning processes. Federal plans earmark parts of JHQ for Bundeswehr expansion, while state-level plans include a deportation detention centre as well as continued police and customs training, alongside the existing refugee facility. A feasibility study integrates these uses with nature conservation and wind energy generation. Construction is not due to begin for several years – leaving JHQ suspended between security infrastruc-

[2] Małgorzata Popiołek-Roßkamp offered this pointed description during the Roundtable "Studying the Lost and Lostness: Sharing Field Insights and Methodological Reflections" (Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, 23 October 2025).

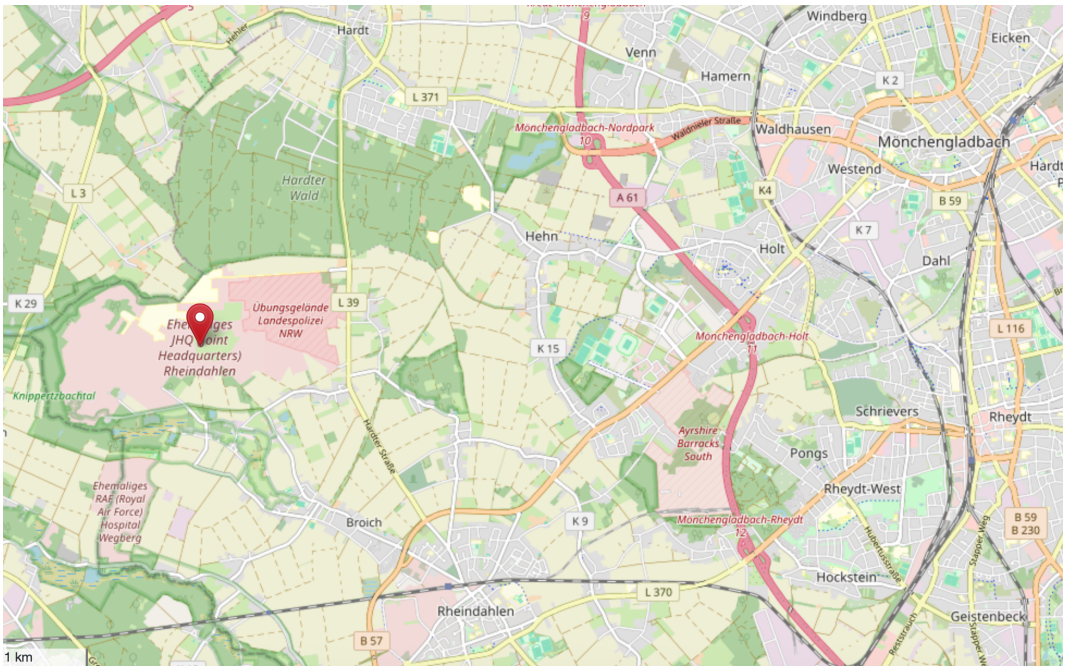


Figure 4. JHQ Rheindahlen and its surrounding area. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, available under the Open Database Licence.

ture, humanitarian functions, and political aspirations (Pfarr, 2025, 2026). Recognized by the Rhineland Regional Council (LVR) as a significant cultural landscape, the site today is neither ruin nor building site, but something more ambiguous: enclosed by fencing, difficult to integrate into the surrounding municipality, but still present in local imaginaries.

Despite its history of de facto occupation and various access limitations,[3] our field research from 2024 and 2025 shows that many residents in Mönchengladbach still feel a sense of ownership over the stories surrounding the former JHQ: "A piece of Rheindahlen", as Gert, a long-term resident of one of the surrounding villages (*Honschaften*), recalled the settlement that was named after its nearest railway station (Fig. 5). Such descriptions underscore the local population's shared sense of belonging and enduring emotional attachments to the former garrison city. Moreover, we found that its material remains carry particular significance for them. It is these remains that Oskar and other residents wish to see preserved to the greatest extent possible. The threat is tangible for demolition looms. Fires, vandalism, and natural decay inflict continuing losses on what Oskar calls "valuable buildings", even as officials, experts, and journalists treat the site as "million tons of construction debris" (Wendler, 2018).

Existing scholarship on urban loss offers valuable resources for understanding the situation at JHQ. Concepts such as "shrinking cities", urban decline, and left-behindedness illuminate the structural conditions under which certain places accumulate losses; ruin studies, in turn,

[3] Access restrictions were tightened after the IRA bombing attacks in the 1980s (Peters, 2023).



Figure 5. Present-day appearance of Mönchengladbach-Rheindahlen railway station. Photo by authors.

emphasize the ontological ubiquity of disappearance, showing how emptiness and decay are woven into the everyday fabric of cities. Yet, taken together, these bodies of literature do not provide adequate tools for examining the unequal sociocultural *conditions* under which losses become possible in the first place – the normative, relational, and power-laden premises that determine which disappearances register as losses at all, and for whom. To address this gap, this article proposes the concept of *loseability*. Inspired by Butler's notion of grievability (Butler, 2010), loseability asks not merely what has been lost, but what society understands as

something that *can* be lost – for only that which is valued can be mourned. For Butler, this is an onto-epistemological question, since any account of what constitutes a loss already rests on normative assumptions about which existences are valued. Extending this insight beyond the human and drawing on social theories of loss (especially Reckwitz, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024; Butler, 2010), as well as geographical scholarship on urban space, we argue that loseability offers a productive lens for a more context-sensitive, power-conscious account of urban loss.

Against this backdrop, this paper asks: *under what conditions do urban spaces, buildings, and relationships become loseable – that is, recognized as valuable enough to be mourned when lost – and whose frameworks of value determine those conditions?* More specifically, we examine how competing frameworks operating at JHQ Rheindahlen sort presences into the loseable and the already-lost, producing graded and deeply unequal geographies of mourning. In doing so, we evaluate how a focus on loseabilities may enrich our understanding of loss in urban geographies more broadly, where losses concern not only human death, but also buildings, relationships, atmospheres, and ways of inhabiting the world. Our empirical data were gathered during two field research stays in Mönchengladbach (June/July 2024 and August 2025), primarily through semi-structured interviews with 35 individuals, complemented by participant observation, go-alongs, and media monitoring. The case of JHQ Rheindahlen proved especially generative: as a site whose material remains are simultaneously cherished by local residents and dismissed as liabilities by planners and bureaucrats, it foregrounds the politically saturated conditions of loseability with particular clarity.

The paper is structured as follows. After this introduction to the case study and the paper's central argument, Sect. 2 reviews scholarship on urban loss, asking how it has conceptualized loss with respect to power, norms, and lived experiences and what it leaves undertheorized. Section 3 develops the concept of loseability from social theories of loss, arguing that it logically reorients the study of urban disappearance toward its prior conditions. In Sect. 4, we set out our methodological approach, with particular attention to positionality and the situated character of our fieldwork. Section 5 then reads our empirical material through the lens of loseability, tracing how value emerges in normative and relational terms and how power relations structure frameworks of loss. This brings into view the troubling figure of the "unloseable", those whose disappearance does not register as mournable. The conclusion draws these threads together and sketches the contours of a critical geography of urban loseabilities.

2 Loss in urban space

Existing scholarship on urban losses varies considerably in their conceptualization of loss and the degree to which they attend to voice, scale, and lived experiences. Losses are articulated through a wide range of negatively connoted terms, including abandonment, vacancy, ruins, wasteland, shrinkage, decline, and left-behindedness. At the same time, they are embedded in various representations of uneven urbanity, ranging from cities appearing as "losers" of (post)modernity to losses as part of fragmented or multiple cities (Farías, 2009; Pavoni, 2024). Before defining losses in more detail and explaining how we study losses through the lens of loseability, we review selected strands of literature to situate our approach within them.

A first line of research embeds losses within generalized descriptions of negative urban trajectories. It highlights the differential exposure of cities to losses or, more precisely, what Butler (2010:25) calls a "condition of maximized precariousness".[4] This condition can be felt by local residents as a series of losses running through "a wide spectrum of urban experiences" (Görmar, 2023:1585). Interdisciplinary literature on "shrinking" (e.g. Oswalt, 2005, 2006; Haase et al., 2014; Hollander, 2018), "declining" (e.g. Ryan, 2012), and "left-behind" (Leyshon, 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2021) cities, for instance, points to their current tendency to accumulate losses. Despite geographical differences and inconsistencies in these debates (see Großmann et al., 2013; Haase et al., 2016), taken together, they frame absences predominantly in a negative light, thus recasting them into losses. This is particularly evident in the literature on left-behind places, a concept that has emerged in the Global North as a framework to capture the challenges faced by places that have been negatively impacted by a combination of austerity, globalizing forces, and economic and technological transformations (Görmar et al., 2019; Hendrickson et al., 2018). Aiming to dissect the complex web of discontent spanning these areas, it highlights how economic marginalization fuels the rise in economic nationalism and populism (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Overall, contributions from this strand of literature provide important analytical groundwork for our own approach by showing that the conditions for becoming objects of loss vary across time and space. Yet, some of them operate in a highly technocratic field that can favour what Haraway (1988:579, 580) – critiquing the illusion of disembodied knowledge production – calls a "theory of innocent powers to represent" urban loss, leaving power-laden relationships unchallenged. This is particularly true for literature on "shrinking" and "declining" cities focusing on finding solutions and "best practices" for managing depopulation, emerging va-

[4] For Butler, "precariousness" denotes the fact that persistence is never guaranteed, whereas "precarity" refers to a state of "maximised precariousness" (2010:25) that is socially and politically induced. Applied to cities, this suggests that while all cities exhibit precariousness, only some are particularly precarious in the sense of precarity – that is, losses occur more frequently and more intensely within them.

cancies, and underutilized infrastructures. The goal seems to be the "undoing" of loss, whether by addressing shrinkage, building resilience, or "rightsizing" cities (e.g. Hackworth, 2014; Németh and Hollander, 2016; Pallagst et al., 2017; Bernt et al., 2012; Weaver and Knight, 2018). Only rarely do these debates take into account the effects of geographical reputations or the perspectives of those who suffer from these losses within these urban environments (see Wacquant, 1999, 2008). Earlier contributions on "shrinking cities" have been pointedly criticized for not paying enough attention to context and diverse experiences (see Haase et al., 2016:89, 99). Despite commendable efforts within the field to develop new analytical frameworks (Haase et al., 2016), we posit that structural concerns and high levels of abstraction obscure postmodern questions of power and the situatedness of knowledge, as well as conflicting perceptions, meanings, and values. In a similar vein, Gunko (forthcoming) sharply criticized the masking of "complex struggles" and power asymmetries in discourses on shrinking, declining, and left-behind cities: "If it [the town Ajidzor] is 'left behind,' then why and by whom? If it is 'shrinking' or 'declining,' what is the norm against which these processes are measured, and who determines that norm?".

Where the literature on shrinking, declining, and left-behind cities often treats loss as a problem to be managed, some strands of interdisciplinary ruin studies (e.g. DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013; Edensor, 2005; O'Callaghan and Di Feliciantonio, 2021; Jasper, 2021) take a fundamentally different starting point. They approach disappearance and decay as constitutive features of urban life, rooted in arguments about the city's ontological order. Here, disappearance and loss are framed as intrinsic dimensions of urban life, rather than phenomena confined to geographies deemed "flawed" (Dando, 2009:105). This extends even to "the gleaming neoliberal city" (O'Callaghan and Di Feliciantonio, 2021:2) with its spectacular full, big, and imposing shapes (Gordillo, 2014:81). Contributions from this field show that emptiness and decay are woven into the everyday functioning of cities, revealing their fragility under neoliberalism (O'Callaghan and Di Feliciantonio, 2021; Jasper, 2021). Smaller-scale objects of urban loss are often a major unit of analysis: military remains in Yorkshire (Strange and Walley, 2007), an abandoned railway yard in Berlin (Jasper, 2021), abandoned shipyards in Newcastle upon Tyne (Mah, 2010), or an abandoned train station in Detroit (Pohl, 2021), to give just a few examples. Using the example of the erasure of inner urban wastelands, Jasper (2021), for instance, shows how loss is part of Berlin's everyday fabric, where multiple micro-trajectories and spacetime regimes intersect. These authors complicate the binaries according to which a city is either past or present, is either "lost" or prospers. Instead, they point to disappearance (i.e. in the form of erasure, destruction, abandonment) as a constitutive condition of urbanity. Emphasizing the city as processual and heterogeneous, they challenge the reduction of absences to "bounded, fenced-off place[s]", as dominant sensibilities sometimes suggest (see Gordillo, 2014:7).

At the same time, this body of literature suggests that loss is not only ontological. Rather, it is also shaped by perspective and normative frameworks. Scholars associating ruins with creativity, freedom, and promise, for instance, have been criticized for marginalizing experiences of loss (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013:475). Moreover, we can draw on the criticism against notions of "waste" (Jasper, 2021; Edensor, 2005) to further illustrate how different frameworks assessing the quality of relationships between humans and nonhuman elements determine the production of loss. In his influential analysis of industrial ruins, Edensor (2005), for example, has indicated the contested nature of ruined sites in the city. Abstract space strips ruins of their qualitative value, transforming them into interchangeable entities. Within this power-laden frame, the destruction of ruins can be encountered, but they do not necessarily impose affects or an ethical demand for protection. Loss and suffering are undermined. Yet, this frame does not determine all aspects of the city. Edensor (2005:8) can be read as locating this limitation in the form of material leftovers and spatial practices that imbue them with qualitative values and meanings (2005:8). Consequently, at least to those who feel drawn to the possibilities they offer, ruins are indeed what we later call loseable.

Drawing these discussions together, two limitations emerge from the existing literature that directly motivate our approach. The literature on shrinking, declining, and left-behind cities provides important groundwork by mapping the unequal conditions under which urban losses arise. However, technocratic trends leave power relations and situated experiences undertheorized. Ruin studies correct this imbalance by attending to ontological diversity, lived experience, and competing frameworks yet stop short of systematically theorizing what makes something loseable in the first place – that is, the prior conditions under which something can qualify as an object of loss at all. It is precisely this gap that the concept of loseability is designed to address. The next section therefore turns to social theories of loss in order to develop loseability as an analytical framework capable of accounting for the unequal, contested, and power-laden conditions under which urban losses are produced.

3 From loss to loseabilities

We propose loseability as a lens that enriches research on loss by shifting focus to the circumstances that render losses possible. Understanding loseability therefore requires first considering how loss itself has been conceptualized. Although rarely addressed as an explicit concept, loss has always been a concern in the social sciences. This is evident in early analyses of social inequalities (Rousseau, 2008 [1755]) that point to the uneven distribution of losses in society as well as in cultural critiques identifying deficits within modern

society (Weber, 2011 [1919]; Simmel, 1996; Sennett, 2004 [1986]; Heidegger, 1967 [1927]; Benjamin, 2021 [1936]). However, there was a lack of tools for a systematic analysis of losses warranting a "sociology of loss", which Reckwitz recently sought to remedy (2024:16). As the first comprehensive social theory of the subject, Reckwitz's book has served as a starting point for many other works, including those by geographers (e.g. Kornherr, 2025; Küttel, 2024).

Drawing on Reckwitz (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024), we understand loss as a socially marked form of disappearance that is "often associated with negative affects" (Reckwitz, 2021:3). This definition rests on a distinction that also underpins our analysis: losses are not synonymous with the inevitable disappearances that come with a transient world. One of the key achievements of Reckwitz (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024) is his insistence that losses *are made*. They are a special kind of disappearance, namely one that is both affectively charged and socially signified. The social marking of absences as loss takes place through specific practices Reckwitz calls "doing loss". "Doing loss" manifests itself in many forms, including ritualized practices such as funerals or discursive formations that cultivate particular narratives around loss. Crucially, losses are made through being voiced, felt, and performed by subjects who have internalized sociocultural knowledge about what constitutes a loss (Reckwitz, 2024:41). From this angle, losses are never a purely individual matter and "very much there" (Zupančič, 2006:157).

These findings provide fertile ground for empirical studies that can significantly supplement Reckwitz's theoretical contributions. However, as Dilger (2025:103) notes, two aspects tend to receive comparatively less attention in Reckwitz's macro-observations of losses in Western modernity (Reckwitz, 2024): first, the diversity of individual and collective practices of loss, which are embodied and experienced in different ways; second, their location in power relations, social hierarchies, and inequalities. Furthermore, geographers may also observe that Reckwitz's emphasis on epochal distinctions leaves less room for a sustained engagement with spatial and scalar multiplicities. The notion of loseability, based on Butler's notion of grievability (2010), promises to address these dimensions. Butler (2010), originally writing in the context of war reporting, raised the simple yet fundamental question: why are certain deaths regarded as meaningful and widely mourned while others are not? This distinction, they argued, facilitates the destruction of living beings, as those whose lives are not recognized as grievable can be destroyed without social consequence. Butler approached this phenomenon with an onto-epistemology of loss, showing that any inquiry into what constitutes loss is preceded by normative assumptions about valuable existence.

In continuation with the intervention of Butler (2010), the concept of loseability shifts attention from loss to the power-laden conditions under which losses emerge – what we may call the "conditions of doing loss". It tempers the sense of activity and agency implied by the notion of "doing loss", asking why something can or cannot qualify as an object of loss in the first place. Thereby it opens the epistemological black box of why something or someone "is not recognized by recognition" (Butler, 2010:5) – the disappearances that never quite register as losses. More concretely, and in Butler's terms, loseability is the question of what society apprehends as a life that matters, for only "lives of value" can be lost and legitimately mourned. It presupposes an analysis of what society "value[s] highly, how things come to be valued and how values vary over space and time" (Barnett et al., 2016). Only things that were appreciated or "owned" can be lost. Reckwitz (2022, 2023) has also derived this from Freud (1917): in order for a loss to occur, there must have been an emotional bond in the past.

What, then, constitutes this emotional bond? While Reckwitz (2024:19) accounts for it by the extent to which lost objects, subjects, or relationships were bound up with one's sense of self, geographers would further suggest that identity and emotions rely on spatial relationships, routines, and experiences (see Küttel, 2024:330; Pini et al., 2010:564). The key contribution of Butler (2010) in this context lies in their insistence that affective orientations are political: they are not a priori to the frameworks that structure the normative significance and therefore loseability of others. In short, practices and narratives of loss are also tied to changing and hierarchized regimes of evaluation, shaping the intensities and affective registers with which relationships are experienced.

These considerations already offer promising avenues for examining losses in relational, affective, process-oriented, and semantic terms. At the same time, we argue that they must be freed of their anthropocentrism, for both Butler (2010) and Freud (1917) were primarily concerned with the loss of human life. Losses do not only depend on hierarchical relationships between people. While sociologists have often reduced the idea of interrelationships to humans, theories of space have extended them to include relationships between things and humans (Löw, 2016:xiv). It is precisely this extension that makes loseability productive for urban geographers. A particularly compelling illustration is offered by sociologist Marris's often overlooked contribution on "slum clearance" in Lagos (Marris, 1993 [1974]). By showing how losses rely on qualitative values attributed to different spaces in the city and how these values are tied to specific epistemic positions and normative frames, it exemplifies loseability without explicitly adopting this framework. Local residents relate to their former neighbourhood in central Lagos as a source of identity and belonging, in contrast to the lack of similar attachments to their new settlement. Simultaneously, urban planners foster negative connotations of the "slum" as a symbol of "economic backwardness", "poverty", and "social disorder" (Marris, 1993 [1974]:55, 56). The resulting devaluation of the former neighbourhood renders it unloseable, making it difficult to recognize its destruction and the resulting relocation as losses worthy of mourning. What is loseable

for some is "modernization", "reform", or "progress" for others (Marris, 1993 [1974]:44, 54).

By underscoring that losses are both socially and materially produced, loseability enables an understanding of losses as expressions of power relations and, ultimately, of hierarchies conditioning the very possibility of loss. The example from Lagos highlights that these hierarchical assessments can have tangible consequences: shaping our ethical orientations, they determine which spaces are regarded as worthy of preservation and which may be legitimately erased. There is a form of power embedded in the conditions that distribute the capacity to become lost unequally, recognizing some disrupted relationships as losses while leaving others unacknowledged because they were never deemed loseable. In sum, loseability conceptualizes the prior conditions under which certain entities have the capacity to become lost or not. In a narrower sense, it highlights how ruptured relationships come to matter – or not. Approaches that foreground loseability must therefore examine how sociospatial relations and institutions are structured by processes of (de-)valorization.

These processes are ontologically and epistemologically conditioned: they are preceded by positive geographies – questions of what is, or what we imagine has been, such as specific infrastructures, aesthetics, and atmospheres. Simultaneously, they are conditioned by normative frameworks that render some phenomena valuable while relegating others to obscurity. In this paper, we refer to these epistemic and qualitative differences – the coexistence of divergent valuations of the same urban space – as multiplicity. The analysis that follows builds on the idea of loseability as the power-laden conditions structuring what can and cannot become lost, thereby enacting a multiple urban geography. Before turning to our findings, we first account for our methodological choices and the empirical material informing our analysis.

4 Researching JHQ Rheindahlen

Our methodological design matches our theoretical ideas presented in the previous two sections.[5] In particular, we assume that the conditions to become lost (loseability) are contingent on multiplicity, especially different perceptions and normative frameworks shaping affective responses. To engage this multiplicity, we turned to traditional anthropological methods, which are particularly suited to capture emic perspectives and achieve contextual depth. Empirical data were gathered during two field research stays in Mönchengladbach (June/July 2024 as well as August 2025), primarily through semi-structured interviews with 35 individuals (one-to-one and group).[6] To account for different forms of knowledge, eight interviews were conducted following the methodology of expert interviews (Meuser and Nagel, 2009), while the majority were more akin to ethnographic interviews, with considerable overlaps between the two approaches. In addition, we conducted numerous informal conversations and participant observation, recorded in a field diary. These included meetings with the JHQ Rheindahlen association, local hobby historians, and chance encounters during bicycle rides. Cycling around the premises of JHQ functioned as a mode of embodied inquiry into the infrastructural connections, spatial shifts, and distances that characterize the "city within a city" (see Sect. 2).

Multiplicity is also reflected in our selection of research participants. These represent a wide range of perspectives in terms of class, language (German/English, standard/dialect), gender, and spatial relations (especially proximity to JHQ). However, two relevant biases remained; with the exception of two participants who are in their 40s, the sample was composed primarily of individuals of retirement age and was almost exclusively *white* (except for one individual). This was not intentional but likely resulted from a combination of limited fieldwork time, access to data, and the recruitment methods employed.[7] We have incorporated an awareness of biases within our data, particularly their *whiteness*, into our interpretation (see Sect. 5). This was motivated by our observation that positionality has often been overlooked in studies of loss – with concrete consequences for what gets counted as a loss and whose experience shapes the analysis. Pohl (2021), for example, writing about Detroit's role as a "place of loss" (Pohl, 2021:26), does not mention that the city had the highest Black population in the country (82.2 %) before the percentage fell to 77.2 % in 2023 and that well-paid "growth jobs" are given disproportionately to *white* workers (Neavling, 2023). Hence, asking "whose loss?" and "from whose perspective was it a 'City of the American Dream'?" (Pohl, 2021:26) seems more than justified. Inspired by the notion of loseability, our fieldwork was therefore especially guided by questions concerning the normative worth of people, objects, places, and spaces that have disappeared: what did our participants value about what has disappeared, and why?

Overall, we classify participants in three groups. The first and largest group is defined as "residents" (or locals): current inhabitants of the settlements surrounding JHQ within the city of Mönchengladbach. The second group consists of former residents, meaning people who lived on the territory of JHQ Rheindahlen itself before it was closed, some of whom

[5] As this paper introduces the concept of loseability, it draws on selected material from JHQ Rheindahlen; see Lapina-Kratasiuk et al. (2026) and Zaporozhets et al. (2026) for a more detailed account.

[6] Most participated individually; six interviews were conducted with married couples and three with groups of friends or neighbours.

[7] Participants were recruited via Facebook, city archive contacts, public posters, village chat groups, word of mouth, and snowball sampling.

have remained in Mönchengladbach, while others have since moved elsewhere. The third group consists of enthusiasts: individuals who demonstrate a deep personal engagement with the topic, as indicated by membership in local societies concerned with JHQ's future, involvement in online communities, or grassroots historical research. These categories partially overlap, as several enthusiasts also have prior experience living within JHQ. One additional participant fell outside these three groups – a woman who grew up in a settlement adjacent to JHQ for German civilians employed at the base but now lives outside Mönchengladbach. Her biography is nonetheless so closely intertwined with JHQ that she warranted separate consideration: she worked there alongside her family in various capacities and later married a British soldier.

Being gender-balanced and including many residents who currently live close to the site, some only a few metres from the fence, our sample complements the material presented by the Stadtarchiv Mönchengladbach (Büschges, 2023; Stadtarchiv Mönchengladbach, 2025), which is more limited in both respects. The choice to turn residence, and in particular proximity to JHQ, into a major inclusion criterion stems from two assumptions. First, emotions of loss emerge in spatial relationships, a point also recently made by Küttel (2024:330). These spatial relationships, routines, and habits, we believe, are intertwined with the normative assessments deeming something as loseable. Secondly, geographical location and spatial experiences are central to our informants' positionality (Rose, 1997). Our data provide support for this thesis: direct sensory impressions and everyday experiences of abandonment, for instance, figured more prominently in interviews and informal conversations with people who live near the fences. At the same time, this result was influenced by the location of the interviews, which mostly took place in the interviewees' homes, where the immediate proximity to JHQ provided environmental cues for spontaneous emotions and thoughts. Traditional sit-down interviews were therefore complemented by two go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003) conducted along the fences of JHQ and through a settlement specifically built for the German workforce employed there. The go-along walks as well as numerous observations during group meetings, village events, and bicycle tours in the vicinity of JHQ served the additional purpose of capturing not only spoken accounts, but also local practices, such as instances of trespassing. These practices, we found, embody relations of belonging and care that define loseability in the landscape while at the same time resisting competing regimes of perception that seek to suppress or deny it.

By expanding the diversity of existing data despite their remaining limitations in terms of age and differently racialized positions, we aimed to bring potential conflicts and power asymmetries inherent to loseability into view: what is experienced as a loss by some may not register as mournful to others or may not figure into their narratives and imaginations at all. Hence, operationalizing the concept of loseability does not merely involve asking who mourns what, where, and why (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012:336), but also the more difficult task of detecting what stays outside the frame and why (Butler, 2010:7–8). These dimensions of loseability – the subjects, objects, and relationships whose loss remains apprehensible yet unrecognized from particular epistemological positions – proved far more difficult to capture. This was all the more challenging given that the site is fully enclosed, and we were unable to obtain official permission to access it. Nevertheless, we are confident that our in-depth interviews, go-alongs, and media monitoring offer an adequate basis for uncovering losses that are not quite losses. Addressing the multiplicity embedded in loseability therefore extends beyond reflexively acknowledging differences among our subjects and the partiality of their knowledge: it offers tools to analyse processes of uneven valorization in interlocking networks of power, space, knowledge, and position. In the next chapter, we illustrate this approach through our data on JHQ Rheindahlen.

5 Loseabilities of JHQ Rheindahlen

Our analysis highlights the many ways in which JHQ is imbued with value and overwhelmingly positive affect, rendering it loseable. Martin, a member of the local JHQ society, summarized the emotional tenor across all interviews: "Everyone longs for the former JHQ." The sentence captures JHQ as a "strange form of relationality", namely one that "is felt as something gone or missing. It impinges upon us as a loss, an aching for something that was once part of us and is no longer there" (Rose et al., 2021:17). Through our field data, we highlight that what "is no longer here" (JHQ Rheindahlen) is normatively framed and experienced as a painful loss by our participants precisely because they deem it valuable (and thus loseable). In his description of the original settlement, Martin, for instance, chose the image of an *oasis*, reflecting the generally positive perception of JHQ. As an oasis, it is characterized by abundance, vitality, and conditions generally conducive to human life, an assessment echoing the many listings of infrastructures during interviews.

> Iris: There was a school, a library, a hospital, two churches.
>
> Beate: Everything was there. [...] A swimming pool!
>
> Jörg: Rheindahlen on the weekend. The post office. Back then, we still had a post office in Rheindahlen.

Though they may sound mundane, these lists serve to highlight the many opportunities JHQ once offered. Their frequent repetition in interviews shows that JHQ was cherished by our research participants, aligning with our earlier claim (see Sect. 3) that the experiences and practices of loss

are contingent on evaluations of worth. In the following, we clarify how these evaluations, and therefore losses, emerge in the specific context of our field site. We first examine their relational embedding in existing hierarchies of values and then their entanglement with power relations that privilege certain presences as loseable while consigning others to symbolic erasure.

5.1 Loseability as relational worth

Our data indicate that normative evaluations of JHQ must be situated within their specific context. Descriptions of the settlement's infrastructural abundance – as the one offered by Iris, Beate, and Jörg – often contrasted with portrayals of neighbouring settlements, thereby contextualizing the value ascribed to the former JHQ.

> Jörg: Coming from a village – Mönchengladbach is nothing more than a large village – and then you come to London or Paris. It's completely different. It's lively, there's something to see on every corner. ...
>
> Mara: ... And it was always like that at JHQ.

According to Jörg and his friends, JHQ's appeal was comparable to spectacular European capitals such as Paris and London, while the rest of Mönchengladbach, and by extension its citizens, was positioned on the margins of urban modernity. Other residents, too, evoked the lost worth of JHQ through comparisons with places that were less able to meet their desires. To speak with Martin's metaphor, the appeal of an oasis derives from its *placement* within a context that is perceived as less. Klaus, for instance, remembers regularly playing football at JHQ as a child, as lawns were scarce outside the grounds. Claudia, who lives in a neighbouring village, mentioned the "exotic" food and thrift shop, noting how unusual they were in the area at the time. On a more abstract level, residents of a nearby village remembered JHQ as a lively environment marked by an "international flair" and relationships of care in contrast to their own community's tightly controlled social environment. Hence, memories of JHQ were frequently elevated alongside a concurrent devaluation of the surrounding areas, which occupied a lower position within prevailing perceptual hierarchies.

In other words, these observations shared by our interviewees evoke loseable experiences and textures rooted not only in JHQ's distinctiveness, but also in its relational positioning. JHQ's former accessibility facilitated these forms of positive engagement that are now utterly inaccessible. In contrast to other military settlements of the occupying powers in postwar Germany, JHQ was open to the public.

> David: They only sealed it off when the Irish Republican Army started bombing in ... what in the [...] late '80s or whenever. But before that, it was completely open, and it was a *Stadtteil*.

However, the neighbourhood's "openness" alone cannot explain why JHQ has emerged as an object of loss. Our data show that for many local German-speaking citizens, the old JHQ was not solely a "non-place" (Augé, 2012 [1992]) passageway connecting Rheindahlen in the south and the village of Hardt in the north, a meaningless waiting room to get to the next village. It harboured "places to go to": places of leisure, places of work, places of adventure. Both for English- and German-speaking participants, JHQ provided shared spatial reference points, most notably the swimming pool, which was mentioned frequently. These sites still inhabit a special place in their memories, which still tie people to the original community and geography, albeit in idealized form.

Places, such as the swimming pool of JHQ and the abandoned town as a whole, do not become objects of loss solely by virtue of their practical use. Following the emphasis of Butler (2010) on hierarchies of value, we suggest that they also emerge as significant destinations through internalized hierarchies of significance – such as determinations of what constitutes a worthy experience, shaping JHQ's loseability. The site's perceived global integration and sensory affordances, for instance, rank highly within the hierarchy of surrounding neighbourhoods today. This surfaced in the fond retelling of stories about royal visits, sights of uniforms and large military vehicles, unfamiliar tastes, and a distinctive atmosphere that felt both exotic and exciting. These normative descriptions of JHQ are intertwined with our participants' self-understanding as citizens of marginalized spaces (Jörg's remark "nothing more than a large village"). They reveal underlying power relations, be it between the rural and the urban, major metropolitan areas and financially weak, small towns or between external stakeholders and the local population. These power relations are the subject of the next subsection.

5.2 (Un)loseability entangled in power relations

Rather than criticizing the restrictions on access to JHQ infrastructures or portraying themselves as second-class citizens, German spokespersons tended to emphasize the privileges that benefited them: "We were *allowed* to use the swimming pool, too" (Magdalena, the authors' emphasis). By enacting these privileges in practice (e.g. by swimming in the JHQ pool), our interlocutors re-appropriated the city's space, thereby affirming their identity and sense of belonging to infrastructures that had not been built for them. Thus, what they mourn today is not only the city as a material and symbolic presence, but the place they used to inhabit in this space. In other words, their former position was rendered loseable through engagement with infrastructures of JHQ, while the infrastructures of JHQ likewise became susceptible to loss because they held value for their own lives.

Against this backdrop, we believe that local residents' contemporary acts of trespassing are more than mere "ruin

porn" (Lyons, 2018; Pohl, 2021); they signal JHQ's residual loseability, as residents re-inscribe value to its remains through discourse and practice, indicating that not all is lost. Here, the normative dimension of loseability becomes evident once again, as this perspective defies the dominant framing of JHQ. The latter limits recognition of losses through processes of devaluation: although the land has become a projection screen for future visions, the crumbling buildings are regarded as a burden rather than an asset. As the city's conversion officer, for instance, remarked,

> Actually, large sections of the building should have been demolished long ago [. . .] It is, of course, extremely frustrating when a property like this is situated in such a valuable landscape area and there is, in fact, an urgent need to restore the site to what it once was – namely nature and landscape [. . .], yet this fails because the existing buildings are not being demolished.

Experts and media accounts frequently assert that the building fabric is structurally deficient, fails to comply with contemporary standards, and is superfluous to the city's present-day demands (see Jüngermann, 2008). In other words, it is declared unloseable. This finding echoes our reading of Marris (1993 [1974]), which underlines the coexistence of conflicting frameworks: some value relations and acknowledge their disappearance as a loss, while others devalue them, thereby delegitimizing residents' mourning. Here, loseability gives way to its logical opposite: the question of what is unmournable because it is deemed insignificant, worthless, dispensable, or replaceable. For politicians and bureaucrats, clearing JHQ's piles of rubble would indeed be a welcome relief. Their removal is costly but would open up space for something more politically worthy: whereas Mönchengladbach's conversion officer spoke of renaturalization in June 2024 ("nature and landscape" in the quote above), new plans foresee an immigration detention facility, an initial reception centre for refugees, new barracks for the German Bundeswehr, and a training ground for law enforcement agencies (Pfarr, 2025). But from the residents' perspective, too, some aspects of JHQ's existence – both past and present – are inherently unloseable. They fall outside the frame. Their disappearance can be noticed but is not recognized as a loss. Their removal is accepted without resistance or even welcomed.

For instance, many residents now feel a sense of relief if anything as the disruptions of aircraft noise and bombings have faded. The accommodation of refugees on part of the site is perceived as a new source of nuisance. As some interviewees realized during interviews, the framing of these more recent arrivals differs starkly from that of the British, exposing its racist underpinnings and the *whiteness* of their gaze. Rather than being depicted as international, refugees are represented as violent, unruly, sexist, and mentally ill. A dangerous foundation is being laid for their unmournability.

> Iris: I know a part-time cook who used to work there; she said she'd never go back – some of them behave terribly there [in the refugee camp in JHQ].
>
> [. . .]
>
> Mara: It's just that so much negative momentum has now been drawn into the situation [of the present JHQ] as well – with the constant presence of the police, the constant arrival of the ambulance service, and women who have to be moved out because they don't feel safe there.

To summarize, our material serves as an excellent example of how qualitative differences and conflicting frames fundamentally underpin the notion of loseability. Losses, affects, and claims for maintenance or destruction are structured by normative evaluations, as well as through the shifting ways in which we inhabit the world in daily practices. These insights underscore the potential of loseability to address the politics of loss within urban multiplicities; contrary to the images of an internally homogeneous "lost city", JHQ comprises overlapping experiences of closeness and distance, attachment and detachment – each bearing significantly on how the lost is felt and narrated. Further research will reveal which objects, people, and conditions will perhaps forever remain below the threshold of loss.

6 Conclusion: towards a critical geography of urban loseabilities

This paper sets out to address a gap that existing scholarship on urban loss has left largely unexamined: not what has been lost, but what could be lost in the first place. Concepts such as shrinking cities, urban decline, and left-behindedness map the structural conditions under which places accumulate losses, while ruin studies attend to the ontological ubiquity of disappearance in urban life. Yet neither framework systematically interrogates the prior, power-laden conditions that determine which disappearances register as losses at all – and for whom. It is precisely this gap that the concept of loseability is designed to fill. Inspired by the notion of Butler (2010) and developed in dialogue with social theories of loss, loseability reorients the study of urban disappearance toward its logically prior conditions: the normative, relational, and affective frameworks that render some presences valuable enough to be mourned while consigning others to unrecognized erasure. Extending Butler beyond the human, we have argued that loseability offers a productive lens for a more context-sensitive, politically grounded account of urban loss. It attends to multiplicity, competing frameworks of value, and the deeply unequal geographies of mourning they produce.

Our empirical material on JHQ Rheindahlen demonstrates the concept's analytical purchase. The former garrison city is overwhelmingly experienced as loseable by local residents,

whose affective attachments are rooted in relational worth: JHQ's value was constituted not in isolation but through its positioning within a perceived hierarchy of places, in which Mönchengladbach occupied the margins of urban modernity. Yet this shared sense of loss is far from uniform. Power relations fracture the field of loseability in significant ways. The same bureaucratic and expert frameworks that frame JHQ's buildings as structural liabilities and construction debris effectively render them unloseable, delegitimizing residents' mourning as nostalgic or naive. More troublingly, the site's refugee population occupies a position of near-total unloseability: framed through racialized logics that contrast sharply with the romanticized memory of British military presence, their disappearance does not register as mournable within the dominant narratives we encountered. These findings illustrate that loseability is not merely a question of perspective. It is a deeply political condition that distributes the capacity for mourning unequally, along lines of "race", class, expertise, and power.

Three implications follow for a critical geography of urban loseabilities. First, loseability offers a productive complement to existing frameworks for studying negative urban trajectories. By integrating questions of perception, value, and normative framing as underlying causes, it enables a more contextually grounded analysis – one that asks not only where losses accumulate, but whose losses count. Second, the concept foregrounds power relations as constitutive of loss rather than merely contextual to it. A theory of graded loseability – in which urban environments are characterized by disparities in the status, value, and mourning-worthiness of their presences – offers a more diverse political vocabulary for urban studies than the language of shrinkage or decline. Third, and methodologically, our experience suggests that tracing loseability requires approaches that can capture not only what is voiced but what falls outside the frame: ethnographic interviews, go-alongs, and sustained fieldwork proved essential for allowing the silences and absences to surface that define unloseability as much as loss itself.

The concept's potential extends well beyond sites conventionally labelled lost, shrinking, or post-crisis. Any urban environment characterized by competing frameworks of value – which is to say, any city – generates its own geography of loseabilities. Future research might productively apply the lens to processes of gentrification, infrastructure demolition, or climate-driven displacement, where the question of whose losses matter is no less urgent and no less contested. At JHQ Rheindahlen itself, much remains unresolved: the site's future is still being negotiated, its buildings continue to decay, and the threshold between the loseable and the already-lost shifts with each political decision. What our research has shown is that this threshold is never neutral; it is always an expression of different actors and always worth examining.

Code and data availability. The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations. The data contain information that could compromise the privacy and anonymity of research participants. Requests for further information may be directed to the authors.

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